



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

ADJOURNMENT

International Day of People with Disability

SPEECH

Tuesday, 2 December 2008

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Tuesday, 2 December 2008
Page 93
Questioner
Speaker Boyce, Sen Sue

Source Senate
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Senator BOYCE (Queensland) (11.26 pm)— Tomorrow, 3 December, is International Day of People with Disability. I must admit to feeling somewhat ambivalent about using the term ‘celebrate’ in relation to International Day of People with Disability. On one hand, there is much to celebrate: the great ideas, the resilience, the strength, the patience and the courage from people within the disability community. On the other hand, there is much, in my view, not to celebrate: the attitudes within the community that persist in seeing people with disability as needing and wanting to be ‘fixed’ and the insidious, festering view within state governments and some charitable organisations that ‘Institutions were not all that bad, really; let’s just build some nice new ones and they’ll be better this time!’ In 2008, in Australia and in most parts of the world, people with a disability continue to not have much to celebrate.

The late Reverend Dr Christopher Newell AM was a remarkable man. He was described by the Tasmanian Anglican Church, following his death in June this year, as ‘a humanitarian, an intellectual giant, and a champion of the disabled’. In 2002, he wrote:

... the situation of Australians with disability constitutes an apartheid that knows no name.

Dr Newell, who was himself seriously physically disabled, said the separateness deliberately created by our society for people with a disability made a strong case for using the term ‘disability apartheid’. He said:

Australians with disability have special accommodation, special transport, special access, special everything.

I would add special schools to his list. He said:

... so much of the tragedy in disability is created by a society which needlessly handicaps us.

I think that, in 2008, Australians with a disability continue to experience the same disability apartheid.

The biggest problem that I see in the disability area is not a lack of great ideas. There are plenty of great ideas coming from the disability community. The biggest problem is not even a lack of funding, although there are some serious problems with how those funds are dispersed. The biggest problem is that, most of the time, people in the disability community are talking to themselves. Despite all the consulting by governments,

no-one from outside the disability community is really listening to people with a disability and their families. Certainly, carers of people with a disability received some long-overdue recognition under the Howard-Costello government, but, in many ways, the tone of much carer advocacy that we experience only deepens the wider community’s view of people with a disability as an unrelieved burden.

In fact, in many areas, the Rudd government’s attitudes and those of state Labor governments have made the situation worse. All the loud promises have given the wider community the idea that things are actually happening, and yet very little has been delivered for people with a disability other than re-institutionalisation dressed up as community living.

I was struck earlier this year by the cruelty of this type of counterfeit caring by government when I read a Disability Services Queensland article trumpeting the success of a placement into their own ‘home’ of some young people with a disability. The first counterfeit was the idea that this was the young people’s home, because the article also interviewed the service provider organisation about the negotiations that had gone on for the staff to work in this ‘work site’. I do not know about other senators, but I do not see my views about my home and the views of paid staff about their work site, which might happen to be my home, as having equal status. And, if they do have equal status, it is not my home; it is just somewhere I live.

The second counterfeit about this article was that I knew the story was, at the time of publication, largely untrue. The young people were very dissatisfied with many of the constraints and requirements placed on them by Disability Services Queensland and the service provider. They were not being abused or neglected, but they could not live their life in the way they wanted to in their so-called ‘home’.

The third counterfeit was that I knew this because they had no other formal avenue of complaint except to the instigator of the dissatisfaction, Disability Services Queensland. There is virtually no government funding for individual advocacy organisations in Queensland—or, for that matter, in other parts of Australia—so there was no organisation which might have helped the young people to negotiate better recognition of their needs. The few advocacy organisations that exist cannot hope to meet the need for their services, so

don't bother applying unless you are an extreme case—homeless or being beaten, starved or seriously sexually abused, preferably all four if you want quick service. Funding for one new organisation at Logan, near Brisbane, which was announced recently, will not even begin to fix the unmet need in this area.

The saddest aspect of this magazine story is that it describes 'the best' that can be expected by Australians with a disability. Most people with a disability are denied the right to an ordinary life every day of the week. The disabled are supposed to be satisfied with lives that provide shelter and food but not much else, lives that people without a disability would not be prepared to accept. Occasionally, individual stories of gross neglect and abuse make it into the mainstream media, but the ongoing neglect does not.

In 2006, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners noted that there were about 300,000 people with intellectual disabilities in Australia. They also noted that this is approximately the same number as the Indigenous population of Australia and, as the RACGP pointed out, 'with health outcomes at least as bad'—underdiagnosis, misdiagnosis or no diagnosis. The Howard government introduced Medicare funded annual health assessments for people with intellectual disabilities, and that helped, but there is much, much more that needs to be done. Yet there is no equivalent of the 'closing the gap' program for this sector of our community—and, shamefully for all of us, I believe, there is not even a conversation about the need for one.

When the Rudd government established the National People with Disabilities and Carers Council with 'a major role in the development and monitoring of the planned National Disability Strategy', they did not even include any people with intellectual disability or any family representatives of people with high support needs. The peak body, the National Council on Intellectual Disability, remonstrated in writing to the government, saying:

Individuals—

with an intellectual disability and with high support needs—

and their families continually ... fight against low expectations and against efforts to separate them from their community; in schooling, employment and housing.

... ..

Having a commitment to all people with disability goes beyond rhetoric: it is demonstrated in both small and large actions taken. For people with intellectual disability and families of people with high support needs, there is no point in the Rudd Government having a social inclusion policy if the very Council that is being charged with developing and monitoring this policy for people with disability specifically

excludes them. This says very loudly that social inclusion is only for those who can 'communicate and be like us'. It says that those who are too different are not included!

That is from the National Council on Intellectual Disability.

Now, through the COAG process, the Rudd government is working to turn all services for people with disabilities under 65 over to the state governments, or, as the National Carers Coalition puts it, 'to the failed state and territory managed disability service system'. The federal Labor government has already offered the bribes to the states but without a skerrick of detail of what the states will be expected to do and how—and that is the crucial part: how will the states be held accountable? People with a disability and their families have experienced the tender mercies of the state systems and, on the basis of that past performance or rather lack of performance, they are very frightened. They have no faith in the ability of states to deliver and not to misuse the funding. I urge the Rudd government to develop thoughtful, focused programs that might assist in giving dignity and justice to all— (*Time expired*)