

Everybody Counts

 Samaritans
your local **ANGLICARE**
election 2010

Understanding Disability

In 2008 the federal government, fueled by the idealism of social inclusion, commissioned an enquiry into the lives of people with disability and their carers living across Australia.

This was the first national inquiry into the world of disability since the International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981. The 1981 discussions triggered off changes to legislation emphasizing human rights and antidiscrimination and they also led to improved service standards for people with disability at both federal and state level.

Following the revised legislation, many of our institutions have been closed and replaced by group home living for many. In more recent years, state government has developed a 10 year plan called “Stronger Together” designed to enhance quality of life for people living in community and to provide them with further options to community living rather than relying solely on group home accommodation. The reforms have continued over the past 25 years and on the 30th of March 2007, the federal government signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, thereby guaranteeing that we would work to ensure full participation in community life of people with disabilities. So there have been many gains over the past 30 years.

The Rudd labour government took up the challenge of implementing further reform following the signing of the UN convention, promising to develop a National Disability Strategy, a strategy which would recognise people with disability as experts of their own lived experience and would place people with disability and their families at the core of decision making and service planning. And the strategy would guarantee people with disability the same freedoms and responsibilities as anyone else.

It was recognised that full participation would not be achieved without this global commitment to human rights. People with disabilities have particular challenges – they have an impairment; they live in a world which puts up barriers in the form of inaccessible buildings and public transport, a world which fails to adopt modern technologies which can assist community living. And they live on low incomes, due to the lack of suitable work opportunities. The federal inquiry was conducted by the National People with Disabilities and Carer Council and their final report to the federal government was published in 2009. The federal government will use the findings of this report to help prepare the National Disability Strategy, to be released during 2010. However with the recent leadership change, and the looming election, social justice advocates were wondering what would happen to this National Disability Strategy. The report prepared by the national council, which was called

“Shut Out”, was quite confronting to those of us who thought we’d been doing pretty well over the past 30 years. After all, people with disabilities are now more visible, they live longer, we have the Paralympics. So there has certainly been some progress, but the report “Shout Out” was strongly critical of how far we’ve come. The authors suggest that, although people with disabilities are no longer “shut in”, hidden away in large institutions, they still find themselves shut out of buildings, homes, schools, businesses, sports and community groups. People with disability still long for an ordinary life, with the same opportunities as other people. They just want the barriers removed so they can get on with these ordinary lives.

They want more than charity or even good will, they want these barriers to full participation removed. For example:

- ☞ Negative community attitudes need to be changed, this is a major concern.
- ☞ They want to work, some respondents talked of feeling despised for their reliance on pension, yet they weren’t receiving the support they needed to move out of it.
- ☞ They want more control in shaping up support services, after all they do know best about what is needed.
- ☞ Many people felt that funding should go directly to them, so they could purchase their own support services. This would lead to more flexibility, more choice and more dignity.
- ☞ And they wanted access to better trained staff.

So there continues to be much to be done. The report calls for a national insurance scheme, so that all children and adults who have a disability can pay for the support services they need throughout their lives. Such a scheme would be similar to Medicare, with a small percentage taken out of weekly earnings.

Without such a scheme, it is hard to imagine achieving all that the United Nations Convention and the “Shut Out” report are calling for. The recommendation of a national insurance scheme has been referred to the Productivity Commission to exam in detail. Neither side of politics is showing much concern for human rights’ issues at the moment. Social justice advocates are calling for support from the general community to encourage our election candidates to work hard to ensure that a national disability insurance scheme is introduced, for without such a scheme, it appears that any national strategy will not achieve the hoped for results.

People with disabilities in Australia and their carers (families) deserve better and Australia does have the affluence and the resources to ensure that all our citizens enjoy the right to lead ordinary but productive lives. The national disability insurance scheme is the next step and we should support its introduction.