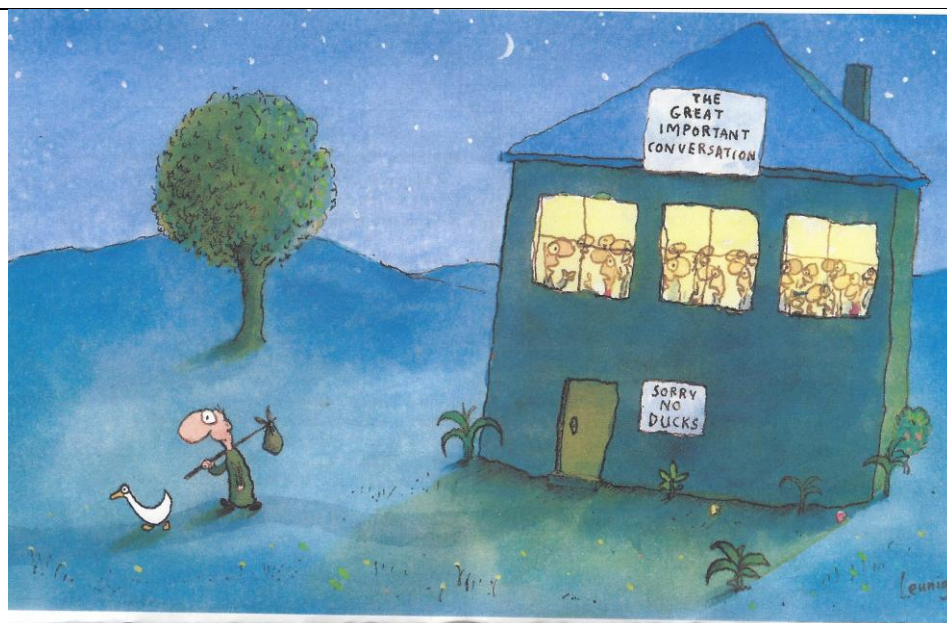

COMMENT



Great Important Conversations Deny Public Input

Abuse, neglect and violence have been occurring in Victoria's disability sector for many years. Victoria's Public Advocate has said it is "systemic". She says that what has been revealed to date is only "the tip of the iceberg". The government has acknowledged this scourge by establishing a parliamentary inquiry. The Family and Development Committee are currently conducting this. In addition to a call for written submissions, part of the process has included three sessions of personal presentations to the committee.

Despite the inquiry addressing what is occurring at the grassroots of disability, the Committee, Chaired by the Member for Bendigo, Maree Edwards, has not considered it necessary to hear from those who best know the grass roots. Once again the inside running has been given to the usual suspects and so-called experts. Individuals including the Public Advocate, the Disability Services Commissioner, the Ombudsman and representatives of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Community Visitors and one advocacy organisation.

Despite some of these individuals and entities having been part of the failed disability system for years and despite some having failed their oversight responsibilities, the parliamentary committee has still seen fit to rely on their testimony. By contrast, the committee has denied families of people with disabilities and those who engage in the sector as unpaid family advocates and commentators the opportunity to present.

Notably, some of these people are critical of the so-called safeguarding system. They are critical of the Disability Services Commissioner for failing to undertake any investigations into abuse, neglect and violence, even though he has the legal power to do so. They are critical of the Public Advocate and her Community Visitors for road blocking families who seek to represent their family members. They are critical of DHHS for having failed to adequately monitor the performance of services funded through the public purse. For having allowed, for example, the Yooralla Board to continue, even in the face of the abuse and rapes proven to have occurred in that organisation - No standing down, just more reviews.

In other words a public inquiry, funded through the public purse, has ignored and denied personal representations to it by members of the public. It is unfortunate, but true, there is very much a divide in the disability sector.

On one side of the divide are the powerful few, who in part because of their high sounding titles are automatically assumed to be more knowledgeable. Therefore, they are the ones called on to participate in the "great important conversations".

The other side of the divide are those who, like Leunig's ducks are denied entry to the great and important conversation. They are fed a few crumbs, told by the committee their written submissions will be considered as evidence - but they will not be invited into the phase one conversations. No guarantees of course they will be heard during stage two later in the year. The submissions of those given the opportunity to be heard in public will also inform the inquiry. What is the difference?

As long as the politicians continue to call on the usual suspects, some of whom have been shown not to have always acted in accordance with their mandated obligations, individuals with power, responsibility and influence will continue to avoid scrutiny.

Rather than challenge their own failures, many of these usual suspects blame the 'system' or an alleged lack of money and resources. By the current parliamentary inquiry denying opportunity for the 'little people' to present, the protective web surrounding the power brokers will be maintained.

The protective web must be broken. Time is long past where the system should be blamed for the failure of individuals and where those individuals are given the inside running. People, not systems perpetrate abuse.

If the Family and Community Development Committee continues to deny the grass roots the opportunity to be heard, the committee will fail its brief. The grass roots will of course not speak of systems issues; they will not speak of money. They will speak of the failure of people to do their jobs. They will speak of the failure of those with the power and the responsibility to address consequences.

The grass roots must now be given the opportunity to be heard in public. They must be allowed to enter the great and important conversations. Otherwise, the fact that it is people who allow abuse, neglect and violence to occur will continue to be excluded from the conversation.

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LISA Comment: One of the key recommendations from the Victorian Ombudsman, in response to their review of Abuse and Neglect, is that government should fund more Advocates. Whereas, this is a bureaucratic, hypocritical, avoidance tool.

Governments fund advocates, and subsequently spend heaps fighting them. The Department of Health and Human Services in Victoria has a similar philosophy with families

Department management advise families to tell direct care staff what they would like for their family member. When staff consequently grumble to management, management say, "*We are the good guys : We are on your side*". So families cop the staff flack, not the management!

Recently, department management tried to get a family to go to a group home staff meeting and outline their service concerns / philosophy, rather than management do what they know they should - "Set monitor and maintain staff work value expectations" - Ensure service delivery (outcomes) properly, consistently and meaningfully equals service intent (care policies, standards and values).

The failure of service provider management to properly and consistently, hands-on, manage the business of ensuring vulnerable people consistently receive safe quality of life support services is one of the main reasons abuse and neglect fester.

Support services throughout a large percentage of the disability field is captive market, where the consumer is left feeling they are lucky to get anything and must never, ever, complain. And such an entrenched culture is likely to change little under the NDIS as most management, and staff will see but a transparent change of funding source – especially in existing group homes.

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**NOTE: We are always interested in feedback and information;
general, specific, good or bad. If you wish anonymously:**

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