

The quality of leadership

"Why has the disability movement in Australia failed to effect change as much as the women's rights and gay rights movements?"

By Craig Wallace of PWD on ABC Ramp Up, September 6, 2012

A few years ago towards the end of his life, the late and sorely missed Dr Christopher Newell co-wrote a ripping read called *Disability in Australia: Exposing a social apartheid*, in which he reflected on what he perceived as the failure of the disability movement in Australia.

I never met Chris face to face, but had some enjoyable discussions with him in one of those quirky relationships that evolve on email and the phone and always found his take-no-bulldust approach refreshing.

Chris had opinions, a strong grasp of the facts and wasn't afraid to call it as he saw it. That's quite a combination. In his last manifesto, Chris dared to wonder aloud how the disability movement in Australia had not come further after decades of activism. Why had we not made the same ground as the movements for women's, indigenous and gay and lesbian rights?

While much has changed since 2004 (I wish Chris were alive now to see the activism around the NDIS), it was a good question to ask.

The thing that Chris did not ask outright, however, is whether or not we might partly have ourselves to blame. Yes we-who-have-disabilities-and-cannot-be-blamed-for-naught-by-anyone.

Have we sometimes accepted a lower standard of leadership in disability circles? Have we always been served well by our leaders and done everything that we could to shout, clamour and claw our way into the public mind?

Earlier this year, I was elected Secretary of People with Disability Australia. There was an election and I was opposed. I am glad there was an election and I was opposed. I hope that I will be opposed and vigorously held to account for every position I occupy on behalf of people with disability. Viva democracy!

Yet the reality is not always like this. Consider the access committee which just wants a person with a disability so that they can say they have 'consulted'. And that person stays for years and years despite losing every battle. 'It's not me, they just won't listen', they say. Or people who can't see beyond their own disability. Locking themselves into diagnostic holes better than any doctor could. Or advocates who carp and criticise but never offer ideas or solutions; who always see the hard work at the end of a shovel as someone else's problem.

What about funded organisations that spend their time squabbling with one another rather than representing the people with disabilities and getting on with the real work , such as raising hell to get an NDIS.

ABC Ramp Up Editor Stella Young has written about 'inspiration porn' in which people with disability are congratulated or admired just for doing ordinary things, such as going shopping or toddling up the street. I wonder though, if this also extends to giving the soft touch to those of us within the disability community in leadership positions? Congratulating people just for doing jobs adequately that they are paid to do, or accepting a lower standard just because we have a disability. Well at least they're 'giving it a go' people sigh. In a way this is just as patronising.

We've all been part of this, but I think we realise that it's no longer OK. The time has come to raise the standard and bring out the broom. You know, the scary one with the stiff bristles.

Recently I was involved in a meeting about the Australian Government's Leaders for Tomorrow program, working to develop emerging leaders with a disability. It's shaping up as a good program. We reflected on how people are energised by the NDIS and how much we need young leaders to maintain the momentum.

And we'll need them to be energetic, raucous and professional in equal measure to match up to the other causes seeking attention here in Canberra. We will need them in the mould of Chris Newell and outstanding advocates like Graeme Innes.

And if I'm not a good representative, then I'd like one of them to step up and kick my butt further than a wobbly incumbent NSW backbencher in a marginal seat on polling day.

Craig Wallace works as Marketing Manager for a national organisation and volunteers as the Secretary of People with Disability Australia as well as a member of the Leaders for Tomorrow Advisory Committee. Craig was recently appointed to the Expert Panel in the ACT launch site for the NDIS. Craig has a disability and uses a wheelchair for mobility.

LISA Comment: The key question is, "Why has 'disability' not made similar progress to others, such as gay-rights and women's rights?" Naturally, there are a multitude of reasons, and everyone has an opinion. It is the question of identifying the most relevant of these.

We suggest just four: (a) the general culture of the country towards properly supporting its most vulnerable, (b) the general population has good association with areas seeking government funding - Education, Dental and Aged Care, for example, but not with Disability, (c) there are 'no votes in disability' and, (d) vulnerable people and their families, those doing it tough, remain fragmented as they fear intimidation and the potential of loss of the little they have, if they unite.

The general culture of the country towards 'disability' would be clearly demonstrated with a referendum on increasing the Medicare levy to provide full service entitlement to all with disabilities, as Medicare is for medical services.

The low profile of people with disabilities and their families will remain, whilst they remain fragmented and their organisations spend valuable time squabbling and attempting to compete with each another.

The staff of the various service providers have their 'Unions', the service providers have their peak-bodies, such as NDS. But, people with disabilities and their families have no national body with the resources to properly represent them!

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