



Next Steps in Making Australian Communities Liveable for People with Disabilities

Communities in Control Conference
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Presentation by

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*If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the

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Hi everyone and thanks for that generous introduction Rhonda. I'd like to acknowledge Father Joe Caddy from Centacare and Rhonda Galbally, without whom a day like this just couldn't happen. I also understand that Joan Kirner is here, the former Premier of Victoria. It's fantastic to be talking about issues I know that Joan's campaigned on for a long time.

It is a pleasure to be here. I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Wurundjeri people and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present.

I'd also like to say that you're actually meeting in the electorate of Maribyrnong so I'm the local Member of Parliament here too. In fact, I used to be the union organiser at this race track. I've only ever stopped the races here once, and I'm very sorry.

Communities in Control is a great name and I think it's a great vision. You heard this morning from my senior colleague Jenny Macklin about the vital initiatives which we're looking at in a range of areas to do with putting communities back in control.

What I want to do is to talk to you particularly about disability. And if anything was needed to underscore the importance of reframing the debate about disability in Australia it's today's sensationalist attack on people on the Disability Support Pension.

I don't know if you're aware but the *Daily Telegraph* has led a story about someone where the implication was clearly that they were ripping off the system. But what annoys me is that 99.9% of people on the Disability Support Pension do not want to be on that pension. They would rather not have the impairment in their daily struggles. So there's something going on which we all collectively need to unite around. And it's about redefining and reconceptualising disability in our community.

As politicians we often hold ourselves up to be the font of knowledge, but I think we all know that isn't the case. What I see about politics in the future is it reflects what's been happening in the past, that people all too often are ahead of business and ahead of government and ahead of politicians. People in communities are often leading the way in seeking to ensure that communities and people within them have better lives.

That's why it was so interesting to be part of the apology to the stolen generation, which was amazing. For all of the carry on of the political climate of the previous 11 years, you'd have thought that the sky would fall in when an apology was given. You'd have thought that the Government's coffers would be raided, there would be rioting. There were some who were saying that the nature of Australian society would be fundamentally altered if we did make an apology to the stolen generations.

But in fact most people thought the event became bigger than the individuals involved. I thought it was cathartic. It was more like watching the steam rise off the ground after the weather changes for the better. I thought that what we actually saw is that at last Government caught up to where people were at. And I think one of the overwhelming sensations of that day is people actually said, "Why did it take so long? What was the fuss all about at the end of the day?"

The reason why I talk about that is because I actually think it's a very strong metaphor for disability. Why does it take so long to do something about an issue which, once we actually do something about it, people will say, "Why did it take that long?"

I think that's where we are at. We have an opportunity in politics today, and your conference is part of this, to be at one of those, "What was the fuss about?" sort of moments in politics.

I started off talking about newspaper reports about the Disability Support Pension. The inference was that it had doubled since Paul Keating lost to John Howard. At that time there were about 500,000 people receiving the DSP. Now it's somewhere around 728,000 people. And no other statistic in 12 years has moved at that level of increase – a 50% increase – no other demographic statistic of the nation.

But does that mean therefore that we've got a lot more bludgers? Of course it doesn't. What it actually means is that the system of welfare to work has proved to achieve the exact opposite of what its parents used to try and say it would achieve.

You can't run a welfare system which gives people dignity by fear. You can't run a system by coercion. There's a reason why people who are disabled aren't working – it's because the rest of the community won't give them jobs. That's where I think this debate is at.

Brendan O'Connor, the Minister for Employment and Participation, and I are co-hosting a strategy to look at how we get people who are disabled the opportunity to participate in the community. This is where I think it is at. Participation doesn't have to be wearing a tie. It doesn't have to be a 9.00 to 5.00 job, but some form of engagement, in my opinion, in the education system, in the work system. But not so much so that people are off a particular welfare pension, but much rather because what we seek in our society is dignity for all Australians. And work does bestow a style of dignity.

But the problem is there are too many barriers to this. I have to say that as recently as last Wednesday night I was in Coburg with Kelvin Thompson. He's the Member for Wills. We had a forum. There were 45 people there. It wasn't quite the battleship event that this is, Rhonda, but nonetheless it was great. There were lots of people with disabilities, sector workers, carers, people interested in the debate about people with disabilities. It was a community trying to assert some control.

During those two and a half hours, 19 different people made a number of interventions and comments. And it was the best rundown of the issues which face people with a disability that I believe I've received in six months of being in the job.

An apology to any of the FACSIA hard working public servants but for pure cutting to the chase these 45 people in Coburg nailed a lot of what I think the key issues are.

So if you're curious about what a new government spokesperson on disability thinks, and if I'm to address the topic of what are the next stages in terms of disability in communities:

Access, both transport and buildings.

The UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and dealing with all of the clauses, and the Treaties Committee has dealt with that issue in Parliament this morning. So the UN Convention is marching forward.

Centrelink. I got asked on the radio today, "How do we find out if there are people cheating?" Then the question went on, "When people get better, what happens?" I said, that's a good thing if you get better. But the point about it is if you've been blind I'm not sure why you need to tell Centrelink every two years, "still not seeing anything". If you're a parent with a child with cerebral

palsy it is, in my opinion, insulting every two years to say “Jack or Jill has still got the same condition”.

There was talk about early intervention. This is something which the Government is right into, from Julia Gillard to Maxine McKew, right across all the portfolios, Jenny Macklin. There was talk about the need for lifelong planning. Why do government departments have such silos which leave people stranded between departments and between levels of government?

Supported accommodation is crucial. If you look at some of the traditional equity groups in no particular order, women, Indigenous Australians, people who live in remote parts of Australia, people from a non-English speaking background, people who are disabled. My group generally come bottom of the league table on every issue. And I'm not trying to have a misery contest. But the point about it is on income, education, housing, the aspects which give you control over your life, people with disabilities are at the bottom of the tables all too frequently.

Other issues: business services, people working in supported wage facilities, the transition to open employment. Why can't people with disabilities, perhaps severe disabilities who work in business services and supported accommodation, why can't they retire? What happens to people when they grow old? The possibility of insurance for catastrophic injury. The rights of disabled motorists. All the issues around the Disability Support Pension.

The Mobility Allowance, the idea that you have a Mobility Allowance. If you go to a supported business service, a supported wage facility, you get a smaller allowance than if you go to open employment. That's lucky that the buses give you the bigger discount.

Young people in nursing homes, getting age-appropriate accommodation. The issue of loneliness. People with disabilities are allowed to have friends.

And it goes to this whole issue of quality of life. A disability policy in the future should start from the statement that all people deserve equal treatment; all people deserve the right to the longest possible life, full of quality. Then what government has to do is have a whole of government approach about disability.

I've been doing a fair bit of work for Jenny Macklin on autism lately. I just look at the clunkiness of what happens. First of all you get your diagnosis. That in itself is pretty big news. Once you've got your diagnosis, then you've got to

get early intervention, and hopefully the Government will be making some comments about greater resources in the next week or two.

Then you go to school, a new department. Fantastic. Then you've got to find a school which is good on integration. Then you've got to work through the definition of the Education Department about what qualifies your child for integration, aid and support. Then you go to the secondary system.

The old fourteenth century Catholic Church – sorry Joe – I'm on our team too! Back then we said the world was flat, just one of the sort of little issues we get over. They worried if you sailed too far you'd fall off the end of the earth. Well that's what happens every time people and disability progress through their life. They do fall off the end of the earth. From diagnosis, early interventions, primary school, secondary school.

Then, heaven forbid, you might actually want to get a job as opposed to just sitting on the banana lounge sipping daiquiris on the Disability Support Pension. Or you might have to be in day care. Or you might actually want to educate yourself further. And so on it goes.

These are big questions. Unless disability is addressing the big questions governed by this view that you're a human being and you want to have a whole life of opportunity, but again to use the fourteenth century analogy they're like those turreted tower cities in northern Italy where families all just build big towers and they never really talk to each other. That's where I think it's at.

But one of the things which we have to look at when we talk about this issue of disability - and some of the issues which I've referred to, of course there's many more - is we've got what I think is the real fundamental bedrock challenge in disability it's this: impairment is a fact of life. As you get older, chances are more of us are going to join the ranks of people with impairment. It's a fact. It's a fact of functioning.

What isn't a fact of life is disability. You might say, "Where's he going with this point?" It's this: you can have an impairment, but it's the society which disables you. And I think this is a very important wake up call for me to understand that point.

When I was given this privilege of working with Rhonda and also working with disability, I thought I'd seen unfair treatment of people in my old job. I thought, "OK, another set of problems. Check the time and wages books. We'll find out

the problem. We'll go to the law and assert what's right and then that's it. End of story. Home for tea."

But the reality is the systemic, entrenched second-class status of people with disability in Australia is obscene, it's real and it's more fundamental than I think most of the problems that I've seen so far. I've met, I believe, thousands of people now with disability, their families, carers, people who've worked in the community. I'm overawed by the commitment, the intelligence and the passion of people with disability and the people who work alongside them.

But what I do find a little odd is that the Australian society at large, we love the little battler doing well, from the Tattsлото winning ticket through to the small business person who becomes a big business person. The battling athlete, beautiful, we love that story of the underdog. Yet here we are, we've got a whole group of people who have underdog status. And somewhere along the line politics hasn't embraced that. The media hasn't embraced it.

Sure, there's the individual stories of triumph and hope and that's fantastic. And it's always difficult. I don't want to give you a story which says I'm a pessimist because I'm not a pessimist. I'm an optimist. But there's no point in exaggerating to ourselves.

And there has been progress made over the last twenty, thirty, forty years. I get all of that. I'm respectful of all of that. Just like the rest of the new government. It didn't come to Canberra one day and say, "We've found this shiny new issue and no-one's ever thought about it before." Clearly people have. All of you have. You wouldn't be here if you hadn't given of your time, your commitment, your careers and far in excess of what you're paid for to be here to do these things.

But I do think that disability is at the bottom of the league table when it comes to fairness and we've got to do something about it. If you couldn't get a job in Australia or if you couldn't get transport or if you couldn't get education, if you couldn't get meaningful and dignified income support, if you couldn't get all these things which we take for granted because of your gender or your skin colour people would say, "This is wrong." It might still happen but when the torch gets exposed, the torch lights on and people say, "This is wrong." The natural generosity of Australian people rises to the fore. They shake their heads and say, "No, this is not right." And that's a legitimate reaction.

But what I've discovered is if you can't access decent education, if you can't access income security, if you can't access home ownership numbers

equivalent to society as a whole, or if you can't access work because you have a mental illness or you have a history of Worker's Comp claims, or because in fact you just have a disability, if these are the reasons why you can't do it, because you have a disability, it doesn't seem to create the same level of anger in the community at large. I'm puzzled by the invisibility of disability.

I do think it's down to a couple of things. And one of them is the cyclical nature of ideas in the history of our society. The whole constant tension in the development of our nation between reform and the status quo. I have a look at the disability movement and it seems to have moved in stops and starts. You get the International Year of People with a Disability, the Disability Discrimination Act, and you do get reforms, good ones. But there's a lot of status quo, if not indeed regression.

Now I think the whole nation, that's the history of the nation full stop. We have periods and decades in our society in history where things get done. That period from Federation to 1914, wow, we nation build. Then of course you have a war, that's an amazing status quo situation. But then again after World War II. There was expansion in the idea of what it is, the imagination and depth of Australia. Again in the time of Whitlam, but we had big periods of status quo in between.

Again with Bob Hawke and Paul Keating and they opened up the economy and that future proofed aspect, a big part of the economy. Then we've had the last eleven years of narcolepsy.

The point about it is reform is not a preordained outcome. Reform doesn't just happen. I do believe Australians are generous. I do believe they're interested in making the world a better place. But if we are reformers, which believe we are in this room, then we have to understand that reform has to be constantly battled for. We can never take it for granted. And this is at the nub of our challenge in disability, to move people from second class status.

A famous American football coach said, "Victory isn't measured in yards. It's measured in inches." Certainly this has to be the case for us in disability, not for where we want to be but for our desperation to fight for everything that we can get. If we do not fight for things then we cannot expect reform to occur.

And I see that this is the real challenge here and this is the challenge which I have for myself in politics here is that let us not do the things which would have been done even if we weren't here. Some things will happen. The

challenge for us is to do things which but for our presence here would not happen. And this “but for” test I think is crucial in politics and it’s crucial in reform. But for our intervention, would this be happening? That to me is what distinguishes great governments from managerial governments.

I think all the signs are there for us to be a great government, but I’d love to see disability as one of those great issues, where if we were all to meet again in ten years time we could look back and say, “Remember that period where things really got going, where we demanded the rights of people with disability, not better rights than anyone else but rather that no-one else should have any better rights than people with disabilities?”

I think this is a very basic and powerful formula. We see even in Question Time in Parliament, the fulcrum of democracy, there’s been two questions on disability by the Government and even one – dare I say it – by the Opposition. That’s great. I mean, we’re not surprised when there are two questions about sport in a week. That’s important. I didn’t even mean that to be funny then! Because I was then going to say we’re not surprised if we talk about the (HMAS) Sydney, which is important, finding that. I’m a little surprised the Opposition is so fixed, the Liberal Party is now the party of low price alcopop. But I can understand that. And FuelWatch, these are issues of the day and they’re important issues.

But what’s been great is that there were two questions in the last week on disability. What are we doing on the UN Convention? Fantastic. What are we doing in supported accommodation? Jenny Macklin took the question. I have to say that each one of us has a role to be a partisan for our point of view. And our point of view has to be one of persistence and consistency about equal rights, equal treatment, empowerment of people with disabilities.

What we need to do is make disability a mainstream issue. I think we can make it and it does come down to that basic test I said before. It ain’t people with disability who have to change. It’s the community that’s got to change their attitudes to people with disability.

We’ve got to do a lot in the workplace. On the radio before when this chap was saying, “Why are there so many people on the DSP?” I said, “Well imagine you’re going for a job interview, would you write down that you suffer episodic or you have episodic mental illness? I don’t know if I would. Would you write down that you’ve been out of work for 10 years, you’re a migrant, you’ve had a Worker’s Comp claim? You get a chance to do some work, would you fill in your whole Worker’s Comp. history if you had to?”

I mean, the point about it is it's attitudes in the workplace we need to change. It's not just the attitudes of employers. It's also the attitude of government. We have fallen away as employers of people with disability. From the mid-'90s to the most recent figures it's halved, the number of people with disabilities working in the Federal Government. How can we give anyone else a lecture if we don't live the dream ourselves?

Now I do think that Australians at large are up for an argument on disability and up for a proposition. But I do think that it's up to us to enable other people. We need new allies in the debate on disability. We need to reach out to business and get them focused not just on charity but get them focused on the fact that people with an impairment are an investment, and that the more you invest in people, the more likely you are to get something out of people, that in fact it's part of living in a complex community.

The future belongs to organisations across the world who cope well with diversity. They're the early adapters. They're the ones who will get in and create opportunities.

At the core of diversity in my opinion is disability. And the more an organisation can have a diverse workforce, including people with impairment, the more likely that organisation in my opinion is to be a successful organisation. And we need to engage. The Federal Government is 25% of the GDP. But the other 70% plus of GDP, the economic activity of Australia, that's the private sector. So we need new allies in disability.

We also need to be a lot clearer in our message. I'm not able to arbitrate every issue of micro-politics in the disability community. Not that these debates aren't important, but that ain't really my role. My role is to be an enabler of the voice of people with disability to be heard. And that's where we move the game forward.

Friends, I know that we can do a lot. But I do believe at the core of a disability strategy rests the goal of forming a national disability strategy, which is what we're working on. It rests at the core of bringing together new allies. It rests upon making the performance. The KPI benchmark I set for the disability debate in Australia is that there is a debate about disability in Australia.

What I believe is important is having disability at the front of the newspapers, not just on heroic mountain climbers who might have an impairment. Not just on the question you might have a few scallywags rorting the system. But

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rather it's just expected that at the centre of our culture, unless disabled people are at the centre of our culture, then we're failing as a culture.

If we don't do well in the Olympics and if Luxembourg pounds us in the swimming pool, it would be terrible. Or if Norway and Scandinavia could beat us at hockey, we'd be very upset. Or cricket. But that's what they do every day when it comes to social inclusion of people with disabilities.

What I want to do is make us as angry as we might be if the Norwegians, the Vikings, robbed us of a close game of whatever. We should be angry that they're robbing us of the title of the best nation on earth for rights of people with a disability.

I think that your conference is a great idea. I cannot believe the number of people here. There's power in numbers. There's power in ideas. But I guess my message to conclude about disability is that each argument, each debate, each great reform in Australia has the time when things are right. I think we're on the edge of a time of reform of disability.

Now, do I think the national mood will automatically say, no worries? No, I think it's there, but I do think that we need to do a lot more to push it through. It's almost as if there's a door which if we have the political will to open the door and go to a new era, then we can. What we have to do in this room is convince everyone else not in this room to respect people with impairment, to give them the opportunities and then people with impairment, they'll do the rest.

Thanks very much.