



*Read our CEO, Jonny Wilkinson's regular column in
The Northern Advocate
"A different Light"*

26th June 2017

Minister of Disabilities trips up over her tweet gaff

"AND DON'T do a harbour bridge!" This was a euphemism I invented in the 80s and have rolled out ever since.

I was meant to be following a friend of mine, Simon, in our cars, to visit his mother on a Sunday afternoon at an address in Auckland that I didn't know.

I secretly had no intention of visiting Simon's mother and every intention of going to an afternoon party I had been invited to.

Travelling over the harbour bridge, I pretended to get stuck on the off-ramp lane into Herne Bay. Hence the term "doing a harbour bridge" when one party agrees with another party to go to a certain event when they have no intention of doing so at all and they take the "off-ramp".



Minister of Disability Issues Nicky Wagner has now re-invented the euphemism when she tweeted, "Busy with disability meetings in Auckland, rather be out on the harbour!" - doing a "harbour bridge" - meaning, "I don't particularly like meeting with people I serve and I'm going to let the Milky Way know".

I was gobsmacked when I heard the news.

It has sparked condemnation from the disability community and a degree of indifference from mainstream media.

On the AM breakfast show fronted by Duncan Garner they ran a poll: "Should Minister Wagner be fired because of her tweet?" with Duncan advocating "No she shouldn't, it was a stupid comment but should she lose her job? No, of course not."

Other mainstream media reporting on the incident started to misquote the tweet by omitting the word "disability", overlooking the reason the tweet caused so much offence in the first place.

One has to take this into the context of the disability world view.

We are a very marginalised section of New Zealand society.

When you ask anyone in the disability community (whether it be individually or collectively) about what is most important to us, the biggest response will always be that we want respect and to be valued by our peers, our community and the wider society.



Any Minister of Disability Issues should understand this fundamental concept, if nothing else.

By publicly shouting out to the world she was busy in disability meetings and she would rather be on the harbour - she was somehow exposing a subconscious disdain for disability.

Would the Minister of Women's Affairs tweet: "I'm busy in a meeting with women's sector today - I'd rather be on the golf course!"

Would the Minister of Finance tweet: "I'm busy in meetings with Chamber of Commerce today - I'd rather be at the gym".

I don't think they would, particularly with a general election less than 100 days away.

When I first heard rumblings of the tweet I automatically thought that she tweeted it on the weekend. I didn't realise it was during the working week.

So why would she make such a gaff?

The Minister of Disability Issues plays an integral role in the sector.

This office is the interface between central government and the disabled population of New Zealand.

The first Minister of Disability Issues was Ruth Dyson, briefly followed by Lianne Dalziel and then Tariana Turia.

The disabled community has been looking at their new minister to see what kind of mark she will make.

The disability community make up 24 per cent of the New Zealand population; a large chunk of any voting constituency, particularly if disabled people chose to vote on disability issues.

Historically, however, they don't seem to vote based on such issues.

Tiaho Trust, as always, will host a "Meet the Candidates" forum so the Northland Disability Community can hear standing politicians talk about what they perceive to be the biggest disability issues in Northland and take questions. This will be held on August 18 at Forum North.

To disabled people and their families in Northland, get involved with the general election, vote on disability issues, and whatever you do don't "harbour bridge" it.

Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability: A Matter of Perception, a Whangarei-based disability advocacy organisation.