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"A different Light"

A Different Light - 16th November 2019 – “When You’re Disabled and Put Yourself”

A couple of weeks ago, the Opposition party circulated a discussion document on Social Services to its members. Some people have accused National of using populist benefit bashing rhetoric to garner support. The paper included ideas such as cancelling benefits for solo parents who didn't immunise their kids. The National Party leader, Simon Bridges, said "So if you don't want to vaccinate your child, here's the thing: don't take taxpayers' money."

But here's the thing. It's not only solo parents who don't vaccinate their children; in fact, it's not only poor people who don't vaccinate their children. It seems to be across the board. So why single out solo parents? I feel it is an attempt at making popular soundbites that will resonate with some people. It's not the first time that this tactic has been used. There was Don Brash's infamous Orewa speech in which under the guise of equality, he lauded the idea of distinguishing so-called "race-based" policies that were affirmative for Maori, for example, Maori electorate seats and iwi representation on District Health Boards. He also coined a phrase, the "grievance industry" poking a stick at the Waitangi Tribunal.

The tactic worked as National's popularity surged ahead and Brash nearly made Prime Minister in 2005 but lost to Labour. I bet Simon is looking for a better result in 2020. The new political kid on the block, Christopher Luxon, National Party candidate for Botany, went further in his interview on Radio New Zealand. When asked if the "no job, no pay" policy should be extended to working families too, he said it was a principle that needed to go across all of social and public policy. One could say he's being somewhat more equitable in his approach by including all parents receiving government supports. However, poor people still seem to be targeted. These populist soundbites that target minority groups aren't just the territory of National. New Zealand First's Shane Jones made some fairly outrageous comments last week referring to criticisms that were made by the Indian community about his comments regarding Immigration New Zealand's changes to the partnership visa policy as being a "Bollywood overreaction". It seems to be a well-used tactic in politics to target

minority groups to gain wider support. Disabled people, the largest minority community in New Zealand and worldwide, seems to by and large be left alone in this respect. Is that because disabled people are a social taboo that shouldn't be picked upon? Or is it because we are viewed as irrelevant in the bigger of scheme of things?

Last week, a young woman was not exempt from being targeted because of her disability. She had unwanted sexist and vulgar comments made to her after she posted a photo of herself on Twitter. She was responding to a thread that asked people to state their age and something they can't do. Cherie posted that she was 27 and couldn't cross her legs. When asked why not, she posted her photo showing that she is an amputee with only one leg. The photo went viral and she got inundated with vulgar and offensive comments from men. One of their sentiments she found particularly repulsive was that some of them acted like it's a compliment that they would still be interested in me even though I'm disabled - as though that should be some kind of deal-breaker.

Disabled people want to be recognised for the right reasons but sometimes when you put yourself out there, you can be persecuted by the same ignorant and Neolithic responses that are still commonplace, no matter how often we tell ourselves that society has evolved to be a safe place where people are not subjected to racist and sexist slurs.

Cherie said "I think the more we push for representation of disabled people in the media, fashion and Hollywood, the more accurate our portrayals will be. I am trying to help this by making myself visible and being in the public eye... although I understand the more public I am, the more negative attention I will garner, I think it does more good than bad."

Such is the slings and arrows of social change

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