



Read our CEO **Jonny Wilkinson's** regular column in The Northern Advocate

"A Different Light"

A Different Light - 15 August 2020 – “Election chance for Northland’s Disabled to be Heard.”

You’ve no doubt noticed the scarily vivid posters around town. Pitting the pitbull Collins against the angelic Ardern in glossy larger than life, traffic stopping billboards you’d be living under a mushroom not to know that the General Elections are only weeks away now.

Years ago, I often fantasised about the potential of the disabled community voting as a cohesive sector of the New Zealand population. What a powerful force we would be. Back then disabled people made up 20% of the population. Now it’s 24% nationwide - with Northland having the second highest proportion of disabled people in the country at 29%. But guess what –it ain’t that easy. Because, dammit, the disabled community is so very ...diverse -spanning all ages, genders and ethnicities. Sure there are a few key issues that get most disabled people a little riled up. Jobs is a biggie and it always has been. Disabled people are well overrepresented in unemployment stats... and our need to eat and pay rent has not diminished over the years. And two golden oldies that really light the touch paper for most disabled people are equitable access to education and good health services. We really are talking the basics still sadly! Availability of accessible housing continues to be a pressure point up here. Accessible transport is critical, particularly in a region like Northland where the rurality is vast and public transport is light on the ground.

The Election is an opportunity for the disabled community to put their issues in front and centre as a powerful lobby. The current Ministers of Parliament and would be politicians need to front up. How, you ask, can this be done effectively?

As luck would have it, we, at Tiaho Trust, are holding public Meet the Candidates meeting on the 2nd September at Mahitahi Hauora, on Rust Avenue, from 1pm – 3.30pm. We have invited all the standing candidates from the main parties from the Whangarei, Northland and the Tai Tokerau Electorate. We have posed three questions to them – one on education, one on employment and one which hones in on what *they* think the key issues facing the disabled community in Northland. So far we are delighted to have 11 out of the 13 candidates respond that they will front up on the day. So come on - disabled community-

come listen to what the candidates have to say and have an opportunity to ask your questions.

This election is particularly relevant to disabled people because of the referendum on the 'End of Life Bill'. The issue has been hotly debated within the disability community. There is a strong feeling amongst some disabled people that the proposed euthanasia legislation will make disabled people vulnerable to coercion from their families and people around them to end their lives. There is concern that there aren't enough safety guards, checks and balances to ensure this doesn't happen.

Disability Rights Commissioner Paula Tesoriero has emphatically expressed this concern, saying , "The overwhelming concern is that people feel that this type of regime will not provide a choice, but in fact provide a solution, and the solution being inadequate support services to disabled people and inadequate choices. I would far rather, as a country, that we're talking about providing adequate services for disabled people and enabling them to live a good life, than we were debating how to die a good death."

On the other hand there a prominent disabled leader Diversity New Zealand's managing director, Philip Patston, who supports the Bill believes that disabled people have the right to end their life along with other New Zealanders if they fall under the criteria of the proposed Act.

He states "In my opinion, disabled people are currently more at risk from suicide-related harm than if assisted dying were legal.

I believe that conflating the issues of disability discrimination and assisted dying is not useful for either disabled people, or for competent people (disabled or otherwise) who are suffering from a terminal illness, and are seeking the right to choose assistance to die.

As a staunchly active disabled person, I value equally my right to live and my right to choose to end my life in the case of acute suffering. If I were to be in a position where my suffering was intolerable, and assisted dying was available, I would want the right to choose to end my suffering.

We as a society should not deny one right by promoting another. I believe that complex issues such as euthanasia need to be approached on a case-by-case basis, and with love not fear."

Disability and politics isn't straight forward- it's complex. It's worthy of debate and representation at all levels of our democratic process. So see you on the second of September –all welcome!

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