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## "A Different Light"

### **A Different Light - 24 October 2020 – “Election 2020 results good for Diversity but Disability voice missing”**

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Last Saturday was what most of us expected- but a bit more so! The 2020 New Zealand Election has been labelled a landslide, a tsunami of red, Labour romping home with a clear majority of 64 seats in Parliament. What is really different in this election has been the increased diversity of the members of Parliament. Over half of Labour's MP's are female, it's a record. Around 10% of the total makeup of Parliament identify as coming from the LGBTQ community. There are many younger MP's in the new guard. The ethnic makeup of Government includes, Cook Islanders, African, Indian, Sri Lankan, Samoan and Mexican. It's the diversity that reflects New Zealand's society. There are some New Zealand firsts and I'm not talking about the Party that have slid into oblivion. We have the first South American MP, the first African MP and first Sri Lankan MP.

Jacinda Ardern's leadership has obviously attracted those from different walks of life to step up and represent their communities. However, there is one minority group who yet again is not represented in the spectrum that is referred to as 'Diversity'. While disabled people are the largest minority group in New Zealand we still don't have any representation in Parliament.

University of Auckland Public Policy Institute director and politics professor Jennifer Curtin was quoted in a Radio New Zealand article, as saying *“for Labour there was now diversity through the list as well as electorate seats”*. She went on to say *“the New Zealand Parliament was still behind when came to including those with disabilities”*. I gave her a ring. I asked her *“What do think could be done to improve disability representation in parliament?”*

She responded *“It's almost like we have a diversity dilemma where parties are so busy trying to select diverse candidates on differences like gender, culture, and ethnicity, that they forget about disability. The practises and processes of the parliament as a building and the culture of the place, the standing orders, traditional processes that was based on Eurocentric ideas was formed in 1850. The overall culture needs to be far more inclusive.”*

*By having disabled members of Parliament and in Cabinet they bring their lived experiences, which by just being there, they are a visible Advocate for their colleagues who would have to work with them and thereby help to create an Inclusive environment. “*

The last disabled MP that was in Parliament was the Green Party's Mojo Mathers when she became NZ's first Deaf member of Parliament in 2011. I remember at the time she had a battle to acquire support to enable her to engage in Parliament proceedings. The Green Party asked the then Speaker of the House, Lockwood Smith to make \$30,000 of extra funding made available for note takers to enable Mojo Mathers to take part in the debating chamber and select committees. The speaker of the house responded that the funding should come out of her Members Support budget given to all MP's to enable them to employ assistance inside and outside of Parliament. After four months of intense debate she finally got the support she was seeking.

In March this year the Bill to fund Disabled Election Candidates passed its final reading. The Bill will establish a fund available for Candidates with disabilities to engage in an election on an equal footing.

Before Mojo Mathers there was Margaret Wilson who had one leg because of a leg amputation due to cancer at the age of 16 years. She was a member of Parliament from 1999 to 2008 and she was Speaker of the House from 2004.

I was heartened to see Whangarei's David Seymour (not the Act Leader) stand as a Candidate in Whangarei for Act. David Seymour was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease in 2017. He is an experienced businessman who had a career in insurance, building and real estate. Seymour is ranked 18<sup>th</sup> on the Act Party list and unfortunately won't make it into parliament this time. Let's hope that the 2023 Elections see more people like David Seymour stand as candidates in the next election to give a voice to the largest minority group in New Zealand.

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