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"A Different Light"

A Different Light - 27 March 2021 – “Call for new six-syllable protest in support of disabled people”

There is nothing like a good protest to provoke a feeling of solidarity, whether this involves a march, a sit in, a picket or a chant. I remember Billy Connolly chuckling enthusiastically about how all protests sound the same no matter what the cause, no matter what the language. The universal protest sound is one of unity, discontent and urgency. Sometimes it's the old school four syllables, then three syllables, then five, then one, as in “-what do we want? Blah blah blah, when do we want it? NOW! More recently the chants have become more consolidated down to four salient syllables “Black lives matter.”

The Brits have recently been violently protesting about a Government bill that would give police new powers to restrict protests. Myanmar has endured the brutal repression of pro-democracy protesters by the military coup's security forces. Hong Kong's pro democracy protesters also have been effectively squashed by the Chinese government.

This week Aotearoa has seen one of the first protests from the largest minority in New Zealand. It was on Tuesday and it was named “Te hikoi o te tumanako mo te whanau haua / The journey of Hope for disabled people”, organised by Dr Huhana Hickey a veteran disabled activist and Human Rights Lawyer. It was a organised and interactive event on the grounds of Parliament that invited Ministers to come and hear stories of the plights of disabled people and their hopes for more accessible housing, more employment, equitable health services and a Disability Regulatory Body. Similar events occurred simultaneously in other parts of the country.

The event started off with an opening speech from Dr Hu who spoke about the need to take action. In her words, “We don't need talk anymore, we are no longer children, we are adults, we make our own decisions in lives, let us do that in the lives of all disabled people.”

Then followed Kim Robinson, a Northland Deaf Leader/Advocate, who spoke about why Parliament needs to be accessible to disabled people, followed by a variety other disability activists, advocates and leaders speaking on a mixed bag of topics including discrimination and the Government's immigration policy which excludes disabled people from becoming permanent residents.

Dr Huhana Hickey presented a petition and a box full of stories about the plights of disabled people to the Associate Minister for Social Development and Employment and Minister for Diversity, Inclusion and Ethnic Communities who accepted the box and said the government was committed to improving accessibility

I rang Dr Huahana Hickey to ask her how she felt the hikoi went. Again in her words; "It was fantastic, 200 people turned up in Taranaki, there were 50 in Auckland in Aotea Square and another 100 in Wellington with the entire Green and Maori parties, four Labour MPs and some National Party members. As to what she thinks or hopes will happen as a result of the protest and she said "the petition will be running for another couple of months, and in Spring we will invite everyone and anyone who would like to come to Parliament with us and present the petition to Parliament asking for an official request for a legal Identity to be established led by run by and for disabled people and their whanau. We are looking to have a Regulatory body that has substantial powers."

Wow! A new chant, six syllables, "disabled lives matter. "Bout time!

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