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## "A Different Light"

### **A Different Light - 6 November 2021 – “Ministry for Disabled People to be established in 2022 ”**

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It's been a long time coming. Disabled advocates, leaders and activists have been asking for this for yonks! Last week the Minister of Disability Issues, Carmel Sepuloni announced that New Zealand will establish a 'Ministry for Disabled People' in July 2022 and introduce a bill to make the country more accessible.

I remember over 20 years ago suggesting a separate entity for disability to the first Minister of Disability Issues, Ruth Dyson. Her emphatic reply was simply “that's just not going to happen”. At the same meeting I asked her why the Government was using a social model to drive cost cutting. My insinuation was the Government of the day was using this model, which conceptualises disability as a result of social constraints which put barriers in the way of disabled people, as opposed to a non-disabling society which promotes “natural supports” that as luck would have it, - cost nothing. Dyson's response was “I don't know what they put in the drinking water in Whangarei but it must be good”. I remember finding her retort somewhat ironic as she had been recently charged with driving while under the influence.

How times have changed. The announcement is proof that tenacious lobbying, speaking out and activism will eventually pay off no matter how long it takes.

There were four components to the announcement. These were the establishment of a Ministry for Disabled People; the nationwide implementation of the Enabling Good Lives (EGL) approach; the introduction of the Accessibility for New Zealanders Bill; and the establishment of an Accessibility Governance Board.

Each component has disabled decision-making, disabled involvement and disabled leadership at its heart. The proof will be in the implementation of these, particularly of the Ministry of Disability whose name is yet to be decided. This change is being celebrated by the disabled community, as a significant milestone, that signals a new paradigm of collaboration between disabled people and government, which sees disabled people taking the lead in co-designing transformational sea changes. Other disability advocacy groups are not so enthralled with the announcements. The Access Alliance has been calling for the establishment of an independent Accessibility entity with the ability to set, update and enforce accessibility standards. Some of it's members feel that the Accessibility Governance Board falls well short of that and will not be able to enforce accessibility standards.

On a personal front we are now installed and ensconced in our new house. Another long awaited change, the result of another co-design. It has accessible features, such internal garage access, (no more shuffling to my car in the rain using a rake as a bespoke walking stick looking like a cross between Charlie Chaplin and a hillbilly). An ensuite accessible bathroom that brings an end to frantic trips to the toilet down the corridor to get to the loo in the middle of the night. There are still tweaks to be made. Final touches to be completed. There is a four-inch curb into the garage that gauges one's car 's nether regions. Then there are our dogs, the Sydney Silky Terrorists. We had invested heavily in the fencing. One of the influencing factors was the containment of the blighters. We thought we had succeeded. This thought was shattered when I heard Lola (one of the dogs) yelping. I looked outside. She had fallen into the pool! How did she get there? We were baffled. Did she go under, though, around, over? It transpires they have a number of Houdini and Alcatraz tricks up their paws; digging, gnawing and contortionism in their quiver of escapism. We've laid bricks under the fences, cobbled together numerous make shift blockades out of barbeques, wheelie-bins and cardboard, lashed netting to the bars to no avail. It's like whack-A-mole or whack-A-Sydney Silky, they just keep getting out there. But we will prevail. We will have the tweaks completed. Big changes will always need fine tuning. I hope the new Ministry of Disability will be led and staffed by disabled people and will have some independence and autonomy. Time will tell.

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