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"A Different Light"

A Different Light - 26 February 2022 - “ Disabled people felt the Government was now really listening to them ”

A protest was held two weeks ago. It didn't involve any poo throwing. There was no spraying police with mysterious chemicals. No using a vehicle as a weapon. No tents. No dancing. Consequently, it received very little media-only two articles that I have seen. It was an online rally that involved over a hundred registered disabled people and many more who watched it as it live streamed online. The rally was about the appointment of a non-disabled person to be the executive director of the establishment unit of the new Ministry of Disability. The new Ministry was announced last year and there was collective excitement across the disabled community in NZ. Disabled people that felt that the government was now really listening to them. We felt that finally we would no longer be the poor relation of Health and that a new era of disabled leadership would preside over the new Ministry of Disability. But no, no, no. Just before Christmas there was a tiny announcement that Senior government official Justine Cornwall was named executive director of the establishment unit. One could argue that this is just the establishment unit and its not going to be the permanent Ministry, not the full enchilada where the CEO of the Ministry will be permanently appointed. But here's the thing; the establishment unit will be setting the standards and policy that will dictate and define the overall culture and kaupapa of the Ministry. Without a person with lived experience of disability, the disabled community is doubtful that the right tone will be set.

A group of disabled leaders have formed a team called Disabled Leadership Now. They use analogies that I have been using for over a decade now; you don't see a man being appointed to run the Ministry of Women's Affairs and you don't see a non-Maori person running Te Puni Kokiri.

There are many differences between the online protest that Disabled Leadership Now ran and the protestors in Wellington. Apart from the scant media coverage, another big difference is that the Disabled Leadership Now protest has clear succinct goals. This stands in stark contrast to the Wellington protestors who have been strongly criticised by veteran activist and protester John Minto for not having well defined goals.

At the online rally it was decided through online polling that the Disabled Leadership Now team will seek an urgent meeting with the Chief Executive of the Ministry of Social Development and the Director General of Health, to discuss the concerns of the disabled community, with a view to reaching consensus on a way forward. Additionally the rally made resolutions to urge MSD and MoH to suspend the current Establishment Unit for 3 months, to get the fundamentals right, including meaningful consultation with disabled people. Also they encourage all arms of Government to provide a written commitment that being a disabled person, with personal, not familial lived experience of disability, will be a key requirement in all job descriptions at the new Ministry. Furthermore, the rally resolved that Disabled Leadership Now make a collective complaint to the United Nations under the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, if other avenues are exhausted without resolution.

Who will be more successful in their protest? The poo slingers or the Disabled Leadership Now team? Time will tell.

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