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"A Different Light"

A Different Light – 27 August 2022 – “Jonny Wilkinson says it’s time to discuss employment for the disabled”

Have you ever found yourself singing a song either out loud or in your head when something bad had happened to remove and distance yourself from reality? Britney Spear’s “Oops I did it again” floated through my mind last Sunday morning as I managed to go ‘A over T’ over my bedside drawers and land headfirst onto the bathroom tiles. I know, I know, you have heard it all before from me. Tell me about it. Falls seem to be a reoccurring incident for me at the moment. I got an instant lump on my forehead the size of a very large hen’s egg and a graze to boot. A few days later, as I am writing this, I have a pronounced black eye. It reminds me of Frankenfurter’s eye shadow from the Rocky Horror Picture Show. Yet here I am at work. Why? Because I want to be. I am fortunate enough to have a job, unlike 48% of disabled Kiwi’s who are not in work and not because this is a choice.

So when the National leader Christopher Luxon said at his National Party Conference three weeks ago, that people on the Jobseeker Benefit – including those with a disability – would be sanctioned if they didn’t work with a job coach and participate in a job plan under his programme, Welfare that Works, I was somewhat surprised. Firstly, I was surprised that at the National Party (or any other major party) would use the feature “Disability” in any kind of campaign. Usually, we are invisible. Secondly disabled people don’t need a stick or a carrot to get to work, we just require some support and employers with an open mind. After all, employment is the most common way society recognises the value in an individual.

Employment doesn't just bring home the bacon in an economic sense, it brings inclusion, participation, and most of all mana. In times of high unemployment disabled people are the last cab off the rank, the last cohort to be targeted to be assisted into jobs. Usually in times of higher unemployment we still remain invisible. In this context Luxon's Welfare that Works policy has put a welcome focus on the issue of disability and unemployment.

This week the Green Party's, Social Development spokesperson, Ricardo Menéndez March, carried on the media discussion by accusing the Labour government of doing exactly what National is proposing to do with their new welfare policy, that is dealing out sanctions to disabled peoples benefits when they aren't towing the line in seeking work. I find it somewhat refreshing to see disability being used as a political football, especially when it comes to unemployment. It looks like the days are gone when governments just accept that disabled people will be unemployed. The next step is not to focus on carrots and sticks but to focus on practical supports and educating employers and helping employers realise that disabled people can make a valuable addition to their workforce. Don't get me wrong disability and employment can be a complex issue. There needs to be a range of options for people including social enterprises that actively provide opportunities for disabled people.

Taimahi Trust is one such organisation providing training in horticulture and hospitality for young people with disabilities. I am looking forward to going to their fundraising, Wine Quiz & Tasting event on the 14th of September, an occasion not to be missed - I just hope my face is back to normal before then.

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