



Read our CEO **Jonny Wilkinson's** regular column in The Northern Advocate

"A Different Light"

A Different Light – 12th May 2024 – “Terrorist and Extremist Groups have decided that vulnerable and Disable people are fair game”

I used to think disabled people had a free pass in certain areas. I thought we benefited from some sort of unwritten societal codes. That we were safe from attacks from various quarters, such as, for example politicians. Well Penny Simmonds the ex-Minister of Disability Issues certainly broke that code last month, when she dog whistled the disabled community by accusing us of spending Individualised Funding on lottery tickets, smokes and grog.

There is a new attack, a new threat and this one is particularly ominous and pernicious. Apparently terrorist groups are targeting people with Intellectual Disabilities or on the Autism Spectrum in an attempt to radicalise them to commit heinous and violent crimes in their communities.

Apparently there are literally thousands of pods of people trolling social media looking for individuals who are marginalised and isolated in society, who may be susceptible to influence from extremist groups. Unfortunately, some disabled people fit that profile. The extremist's goal is to coerce these susceptible people into committing acts of violent terrorism. Over the past month in Australia there has been three widely publicised incidents of stabbings. One was at a church where the suspect is believed to have been influenced by people who put him through a process of radicalisation through social media. A macabre article in the Australian Associated Press on the 19th April, published *“A teenage boy facing a possible life term in prison for terrorism over the stabbing of a bishop has shown behaviour consistent with mental illness or intellectual disability, his lawyer has said.”*

This is in line with research that was conducted in the UK. An excerpt says *“The risks associated with online radicalisation have increased, and in response, the UK Government's White Paper, Online Harms (HM Government, 2019) highlights the risk of terrorist groups using the Internet to spread propaganda designed to radicalise vulnerable people. People with learning disabilities may have particular vulnerabilities to such risks such as having few support mechanisms, a tendency to acquiesce, misinterpreting social cues and often a need for friendships that can make them potential victims”*.

Explore Wellbeing which is a specialist wellbeing company owned by NZ Health Group, the biggest disability support provider in New Zealand, decided to front foot it and educate the disabled community on how to identify disabled people who are being targeted by extremist groups. Explore NZ, in partnership with Carers NZ and Autism NZ, have developed a resource ***Know The Signs***. This resource provides carers, families, whānau and friends with essential information to help them recognise the signs that a person they care for, support, or know, may have been targeted. It provides advice about what they can do to stop it from happening and how they can safely report it they have concerns. This resource can be downloaded from <https://explorewellbeing.org.nz/>

So, no disabled people are not getting a free pass. Terrorist and extremist groups have decided that vulnerable and disabled people are fair game. Society can be measured on how it protects their most vulnerable and evil prevails when good people let it happen. If you know of people who are at risk of this unwanted influence use this resource to support them.

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