



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

"A Different Light"

A Different Light – 30th August 2024 – “ The Government are basically saying Disabled People are not up for the job?”

The 80's gave me a taste for what is now regarded as 'retro' music and this week I have been slightly obsessively listening to Public Enemy's song "Fight the Power." Public Enemy changed the hip-hop scene into a vehicle for political expression. "Fight the Power", is a seminal protest anthem blending aggressive beats with politically charged lyrics. It is a call for action.

On Thursday last week the Coalition Government announced plans [to strip Whaikaha, the Ministry of Disabled People, of its responsibility for delivering support services](#), shifting it to the Social Development Ministry. Whaikaha will be downsized into a smaller, standalone department with a focus on advocacy and policy advice. Just two years after its establishment Whaikaha is being massively scaled back following the findings of an independent review. The review, led by Sir Maarten Wevers, found the delivery of support services was inconsistent and hampered by the way Whaikaha had been set up.

When I heard the announcement, I was gobsmacked. I was still in the process of recovering from the announcement in March regarding the restrictions in Flexible Funding. In one announcement Whaikaha the Ministry of Disabled People, has been dismantled. The Ministry is something that disabled people have fought and lobbied for, for decades, wanting our own Ministry that would preside over disability services and advocate for disabled people's rights in New Zealand. Yes, it has had a few teething problems but there is no reason to kick it into touch. Whaikaha was developing a strong sense of disability culture with nearly 40% of its staff identifying as disabled. By shifting the delivery of Disability Support Services to the Ministry of Social Development the Government are basically saying disabled people are not up for the job. By scaling Whaikaha down into a toothless advisory and monitoring entity, it sounds much the same as the Office of Disability Issues which did effect much change over the years. What the difference will be between them? No one seems to know.

This has really sent the disabled movement in New Zealand back decades. Other concerning aspects of the announcement was a pause on the Enabling Good Lives roll out and Indicative budgets and monitoring of Needs Assessment and Service Coordination organisations (NASCs) being reinstated.

Over 30 years ago, Disability Support Services sat in the department of Social Welfare. These were then trundled over to the Ministry of Health and for decades disabled people have felt

like the poor relation of the monolith that is Health, until 2 years ago when we finally got our own Ministry. Now things have gone back 30 years.

The Enabling Good Lives approach attempted to put disabled people and their families in control of the services and supports they needed, which was starting to address the power imbalance between the Needs Assessment and Service Co-ordination (NASC agencies) and disabled people. The announcement has clinically put the power balance back in favour of the NASC giving them the mandate to be gate-keepers and controllers of any supports available.

The decision to strip Whaikaha of Disability Support Services wasn't even in the Independent Review!

Was it a purely political decision to dismantle what the former Government had done? I asked Mojo Mathers, former Green MP the first (and only) DEAF member of Parliament and now Disabled Persons Assembly CEO, what her take on this was. Mojo commented that, *"The downsizing of Whaikaha with no consultation with disabled people has hit our community hard. Disabled people want more choice and control over their lives, not less. Decades of underinvestment in disabled people has led to poorer outcomes for our health and wellbeing. This can be turned around. To do this, Government must engage properly with disabled people going forward."*

Disability supports have been grossly underfunded for decades. It isn't the fault of Whaikaha, the issue is with the fundamental funding model of disability supports in NZ. We need a funding model more similar to ACC, as the disparity between ACC funded disability supports and Whaikaha (now MSD funded supports) is staggering. ACC offers gold plated services in comparison. Australia have had a National Disability Insurance Scheme for years, and while it has had its own issues, it is serving its disabled people well.

I contacted Huhana Hiki an old friend and Disability Rights Lawyer and asked her to give me a comment on last week's announcement of changes to the disability sector. Here are her words:

"In a nutshell, we are back to the 1990's. For how long? I don't know but we can consider this is going to be us for two more years minimum and longer if we don't demand change and stand up against the discriminatory, unethical inequitably designed decisions made around our lives. I know it's hard, believe me I was meant to retire by now and I can't. Why? Because unless we make a strong and collective stand against the abuse we are receiving from this coalition, then we won't get change and we remain invisible. Sometimes we have to do the tough to be heard.

I can't do this alone, a few of us can't do this without ALL of our community standing beside us, with us, All of us"

The Tai Tokerau EGL Leadership Group is organising a protest about these radical draconian changes to our Disability sector on the 11th of October at 12.00 in the Civic Square outside the new WDC building on Rust Avenue. For more information contact tessa@tiaho.org.nz

FIGHT THE POWER!

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

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