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"A Different Light"

A Different Light – 23rd November 2024 – “ Disabled abuse survivors still face inadequate care”

Last week survivors of abuse in state and faith-based care received a formal apology from the Government. There was a range of apology givers - some were received with positivity, some seemed hollow, and then there was the Attorney General, who was booed, to the point that her apology was inaudible. The whole event was harrowing. The extent of the enquiry and the subsequent report is overwhelming. The magnitude of the abuse was mind boggling and equally mind boggling was the amount cover-ups and denials that went on to protect the perpetrators and to not deal with the obvious atrocities that were going on. Disabled people were overwhelmingly represented in the survivor cohort.

Disabled people have continued to receive inadequate care past 1999, past the period considered by the report. In September 2008, the Social Services Select Committee concluded its inquiry into the quality of care and service provision for disabled people. The inquiry was prompted by concerns raised in the media about two major residential service providers and by more generally expressed dissatisfaction with current service provision. The report from the enquiry covered instances of abuse. One of the report's recommendations was to *“appoint an appropriately funded lead agency with responsibility for disability issues, accountability for the disability sector, and a role monitoring the sector”*. I believe this eventually led to the establishment of Whaikaha Ministry of Disabled People which was effectively dismantled two years later (in August) by the Government.

Another recommendation was *“the introduction of legislative change to strengthen and expand the scope of Government funded advocacy and complaints services for people with disabilities”*. This never eventuated.

Yet, another recommendation that got no traction was to *“ensure that age-appropriate services that provide a good quality of life in ordinary surroundings are made available for younger people with high needs, who are now placed in rest homes inappropriately. We consider this should be achieved within two years”*.

In Northland there are numerous disabled people who are under the age of 65, living in rest homes with long waiting lists for the few age-appropriate residential facilities there are in Northland. To make this dire situation worse the Government has put a freeze on any new referrals of people in residential facilities.

The report from the Royal Enquiry into Abuse, (Whanaketia – Through pain and trauma, from darkness to light), has made 138 recommendations. Prime Minister Luxon has said that the Government’s response could be summarized into three categories, acknowledgement in the form of a formal apology, support (redress) for the survivors, and preventing the abuse from either happening again in state or faith-based Care.

The first item the acknowledgment and formal apology has been delivered. This leaves the two monumental tasks of redress and prevention.

Will apologies be enough to put things right? The simple answer is NO but it’s a start. The real path to restoration will be putting in place the tangible recommendations made in the report. Of course, a fair delivery of redress is of utmost importance and sooner it happens the better.

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