



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

"A Different Light"

A Different Light – 21st December 2024 – “Challenges and hope for disability sector ”

Well, my dear readers, here we are at the end of 2024. It's been a year of discontent with the occasional ray of hope. Let's take a look back and see what the year brought us through the lens of 'A Different Light'.

In February I wrote about my history of breaking my ribs in an assortment of unlucky anecdotes. I'm sure some of you would have rolled your eyes and thought "*here come the old war stories*" as the theme continued through the year.

March brought with it a grim proclamation from the Government about restrictions on disability support funding and, in particular, flexible funding. 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 politicians. Well, Penny Simmonds the ex-Minister of Disability Issues certainly broke that code this year when she dog whistled the disabled community by accusing us of spending Individualised funding on lottery tickets, smokes and grog to try and justify the restrictions. Little did I know, there was more to come.

April trotted out another personal war story. Vasculitis. My legs looked terrible. They looked like they had been chewed and befouled by a pack of zombies. My wife was away that day at Auckland University. My daughter was staying over to support me. When I asked her to come over and stay, she replied, "sure Dad so as long as we don't end up in the Emergency Department like the last time I stayed over". She took one look at my legs, took a photo of them and stealthily sent the photo to my wife. Sally rang me straight away and verbally down the phone, frogmarched me to the Emergency Department.

In June I naively wrote about the Government budget, insinuating that the disability sector didn't do too badly. How wrong I was!

In July, I was shocked when I heard that an elected councilor wrote an expletive-laden rant to a neighbouring council in which he asked: "What the f**k are you r*****d, s***** c c****s doing?". These words are so antiquated that some people on X (formally known as Twitter) have asked what the 's' word was, including erstwhile Seven Sharper, Hilary Barry. So, for those of you, who maintain a modern obliviousness like Hilary, the 's' word was 'spastic' and 'r' word was, yes, unbelievably 'retarded'. Personally, I find the word 'spastic' repulsive in a

toe-curling way. Even when it's articulated by a medical professional, I flinch, let alone a local body politician trying to make himself heard.

The month of August was brought to us by the letters W T & F. 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. Enabling Good Lives was put on hold indefinitely. The NASC's were given the mandate to stay within indicative budgets and residential facilities were frozen not just in terms of pricing but in actual numbers of people in them. This took the disability sector backwards 15 years in one foul swoop.

In September, I was excited by the prospect of an accessible Northland, not only because this would go a long way to make our region non-disabling, but by the potential economic benefits to the region. Having a region that is accessibility connected through both transport and infrastructure, would enable us to become a desirable destination for tourists who are seeking an accessible experience. While the Northland Regional Council, the Whangarei District Council and the Far North District Council accepted the strategy, the Kaipara District Council said yeah nah and noted it.

The month of Halloween gifted me yet another "old war story". I nearly gave myself a permanent Halloween costume. I had been fixated on making pulled pork, using Jamie Oliver's one pot wonder pulled pork extravaganza recipe. His first instruction was to turn your oven on to "full whack", which I dutifully did. I then spent the next hour fiddling around making a trivet of onions, apples and sage and rubbing a large pork shoulder roast with spices. By this time the oven was hotter than the Devil's arse. When I attempted to put the roast in the oven I toppled over and nearly did a face plant on the searingly hot oven rack.

In November the formal apologies to the survivors of abuse in state and faith based care, prompted me to do a historical reflection of the treatment of disabled people in care, post 1999. 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.

In December we celebrated the International Day of People with Disabilities with the disabled community strutting their stuff in the Whangarei Xmas parade where we were warmly welcomed and cheered on by the public in the crowded main streets of Whangarei. And so from me to you - thank you to my readers, whether faithful or intermittent- I wish you all an inclusive Christmas and a diverse New Year.

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