

**SPEECH BY BILL SHORTEN
PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY FOR DISABILITIES AND CHILDREN'S
SERVICES**

TO THE

**AUSTRALASIAN SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF INTELLECTUAL
DISABILITY (ASSID) DISABILITY SUPPORT WORKERS CONFERENCE**

UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE, VICTORIA.

WEDNESDAY, 18 NOVEMBER

Before I begin I would like to acknowledge Samuel Murray, Conference Chair and ASSID (Vic) President, for all the work involved in organising an event like this.

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, and pay my respects to their Elders, both past and present.

To work every day with somebody with a physical or an intellectual impairment takes more than courage and reserves of patience.

It takes more than good intentions, and a generalised understanding that inequality in any workplace, in any village or any community of souls, is a bad thing.

It takes a kind of creative sympathy, an empathetic focus, that one finds in the army in wartime, the comrade you must fight alongside, the big battles you need to win.

No-one here will call this easy. No-one here will say their first day at work went swimmingly. No one here has not felt helpless at times, felt that they reached the point where there was nothing more they could do.

No one here has not felt the frustration and anger that comes with fighting the good fight but feeling you are fighting in vain.

But it's part of what we mean by a civilisation, by a fair-go society, that such creative partnerships between those with an impairment and their carers, the disabled and their workplace comrades and managers, are attempted.

40 years ago the majority of people with an intellectual disability were either shut away in institutions or cared for, often in secret and in shame, by their families.

The opportunities for carers to improve the lives of the charges, to work one-on-one the way that carers do now did not exist.

The work that you do is not simple supervision or guardianship, but an effort to connect with a person whose abilities are different to your own and to lift them out of themselves and beyond their impairment.

To be done well this work requires emotional involvement. It can not be mechanised or outsourced. It needs a genuine human connection.

I think it is fair to say that in this society we generally reward people whose jobs require physical or intellectual skills.

What we do not do well is reward people whose job requires similar emotional skills and involvement.

Too often we fall back on the cliché that caring professions are a “vocation”, and that somehow absolves us from paying you properly.

Julia Gillard has announced that the Government will support the Australian Services Union in pushing a major test case on pay

equity for community sector employees under the new Fair Work system.

Under the new Fair Work system, social and community services sector workers - working in the youth, welfare and community sectors - will become covered by the Fair Work Act and a single modern award, rather than the multitude of state and federal laws, awards and instruments that currently apply.

The agreement with the ASU ensures that recent pay rises awarded to social and community services workers in Queensland on pay equity grounds will be maintained in full when those employees transfer to the Fair Work system.

The Fair Work Act 2009 included measures that can make orders providing for pay equity between men and women.

And women make up 87 per cent of workers in the sector.

The Act now refers to a right to equal pay for work of *comparable* value as well as *equal* value. This reflects the approach already taken in many states and territories.

The ASU has advised the Government that it will apply to Fair Work Australia in the near future seeking orders for similar pay increases based on pay equity grounds for social and community sector workers in the other States.

The Rudd Government will work with the ASU to support this claim and provide research to back it up.

I hope that this move will lead to an increase in the pay for people in the disability sector and some overdue recognition of the vital, but too often invisible work that you do.

There are over 580,000 Australians with an intellectual disability.

435,000 are under the age of 65, a higher proportion than most other disabilities.

Over 300,000 have a limitation in the core areas of daily living, often in their ability to communicate.

Like many people with disability, people with an intellectual disability are shut out of the workforce.

These people are trapped in an internal exile within their own country.

The labour force participation rate for those aged in their 20s is around 60%.

For those aged in their 30s it drops to between 34% and 46%, well below the 85% participation by young adults without disability.

People with an intellectual disability tend to drop out of the work force at ages 30–34 years and onwards.

Usually they do not return. And the chief culprit for this is discrimination and prejudice that still exists in workplaces across Australia.

Excellent work is done by Australian Disability Enterprises in finding fulfilling work for people with disability, in particular an intellectual disability.

Since our election we have increased places in ADEs.

We have also made it easier for people on the Disability Support Pension to look for work without being punished for trying to get a job.

Recently a group of the nation's major employers, including ANZ, Woolworths and Coles signed a statement of intent recognising the need to employ more people with disability, and the benefits this would bring.

These are all good steps.

However employment rates are still too low, and too many people with an intellectual disability are condemned to a life of boredom on the fringes of our society.

The most shameful evidence of our failed responsibility to people with an intellectual disability, is their staggeringly high rate of imprisonment.

Research by Susan Hayes of the University of Sydney found that 20 percent of people in the prisons of New South Wales, some 1800 prisoners, had an IQ below 70.

These figures indicate an over-representation of people with intellectual disability in the prison system; they compare with 1 to 2 per cent of the general population.

There is little data on this issue available from other states, and no systematic attempt has been made to find out why so many people with an intellectual disability end up in prisons.

I do not believe people with an intellectual disability are genetically predisposed to crime.

I do not think it is right, that in a rich country like Australia prison has become the institution of last resort for such vulnerable people.

As long as this over-representation continues we know that the right supports for people with intellectual disability and their families are not in place.

There is constant and legitimate outrage and frustration about the disproportionate number of indigenous Australians in our criminal justice system.

All I ask is where is the comparable outrage about the number of people with an intellectual disability in our criminal justice system?

We have done a lot of good things in disability since we came to Government.

I know that you can all use the internet to look up our press releases, so I'll keep it brief.

We've ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as well as acceded to the Optional Protocol to the Convention.

In collaboration with the States we developed and from January 1, implemented the National Disability Agreement (NDA). which will add \$5 billion over five years for specialist disability services.

Work has commenced on the provision of around 150 additional supported accommodation places for people with disability, nearly half the total number of places expected to be achieved by June 2012.

More than 6,200 respite places have been achieved, well above the target of 3,400 places.

More than 770 young people with disability have been assisted through suitable and appropriate accommodation.

We have increased Carers Allowances and the Disability Support Pension.

But as all of you would know, this is not enough to fix the structural flaws in the system.

Demand for disability services will grow by 6-7 per cent or more each year until 2020, putting more strain on our current arrangements.

In too many cases we are dealing with a crisis-driven, patchwork of systems which are simply not enough to meet demand.

A child born with an illness can receive medical and hospital treatment under Medicare, if necessary for the rest of its life.

A person injured in a car accident is paid compensation under third-party insurance schemes.

An employee hurt at work is eligible for workers compensation.

But for people who are deaf, blind, autistic, have cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, severe intellectual or many other kinds of disability, there is no system and no safety net.

Services are rationed according to budgets, not to the growing need.

Increasingly people with disabilities are outliving their parents or eking out their youth in single-parent households, factors that are shifting the burden to governments, and rightly so.

The Rudd Government has appointed the Disability Investment Group to look at better ways to fund disability services in Australia, at how we encourage private investment and move to a system that better meets the varying needs of people with disability.

The concept of some kind of disability insurance scheme is developing momentum.

I know it has the support of many in the disability community who feel the current system is barely coping with current demand, let alone the increasing numbers of the next ten years.

I can not stand here today and promise that we will introduce a National Disability Insurance Scheme, as much as you would like to hear that

The Rudd Government is looking at the implications of such a scheme, but there is still much to be done before we can even consider it.

Any insurance system would be complex and difficult to design, and a lot of work needs to be done to determine how it could work.

What we need to do is shift the public debate.

We need to see how we treat disability as both an economic issue and a moral one.

Governments spend \$6 billion a year on disability services (not counting the \$9bn a year spent on the disability support pension)

A better system that intervenes early, that offers support before a problem becomes a crisis, and that gets people into work, and productive and stimulating work, will save us a lot of money.

It will also lead to better and happier lives for people with a disability.

As a society we need to recognise that it is inevitable that profound and serious disabilities will strike many of us, whether through birth, accident, disease or old age.

They are the shafts of fate that are coming for us, ready or not.

The question we need to ask is what is the best way of being prepared, and of giving to all our citizens that peace of mind, that freedom from fear, that measure of hope that is a human right.

The work you do, the small miracles you achieve every day, the dignity your efforts give to people who are often treated as 2nd-class citizens, all require a complementary effort from governments.

The writer E.M. Forster used to have the motto “Only connect”.

It is a motto that defines good people in any walk of life – the good nurse, the good teacher, the good sporting coach. The person who makes a difference and kindles a spark in the life of another.

The ability to cast one’s own worries off and focus, clearly and shrewdly, on the challenges facing a person who cannot move too well, or talk too clearly, or think as fast. The ability to learn as you teach.

It is what is meant on the battlefield by 'comrade', on the shop floor by 'mate', in the town or village by 'true blue'.

It is the ability you have to overcome prejudice and see the humanity of the people you work with and work for.

It is the last prejudice that we as a society must overcome, the feeling that someone who does not look entirely like a family member should be avoided, or put out of sight, or talked to as one talks to a child.

This denial of the humanity of one who is suffering, does huge damage to the lives of people with impairments, often causing more heartache and isolation than the impairment itself.

But it is a prejudice that can be overcome, like learning to swim, or balance on a bicycle, or change gears in a car while learning to drive. It can be done.

And it is a measure of our worth as human beings and as a civilised society that we attempt it, that we walk over and put out

our hand and introduce ourselves and provide a seat at the table for all the people of Australia regardless of their impairment.

The work you do, and the work this conference is doing does make a difference and moves us closer to an Australia where these prejudices, like the institutionalisation of the 50s and 60s, is a thing of history.