



Our CEO, Gary Williams, reflects on the new Government

The Government was elected in November 2008 and Gary Williams has been reflecting on its impact on disabled people and disability issues. He says...

We have a new Government with a new approach to our issues.

When new Disability Issues Minister Paula Bennett was appointed, DPA met with her and offered to support her, as we had done with her predecessors. Since that time, DPA has tried on numerous occasions to establish a formal relationship with her, but without success. Although the minister appears keen, she has surrounded herself with advisors who are new to disability issues and therefore uninformed about the positive contribution DPA has made to New Zealand.

Fortunately, Tariana Turia is the Associate Minister and we have worked constructively with her before on issues such as the repeal of the Disabled Persons Employment Promotion Act and ensuring our country ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Nevertheless, here is a snapshot of some issues that cause me concern –

- DPA was one of three non-governmental organisations to be invited to the Government's Job Summit. We went because we saw this as a chance to put forward positive ideas that would help disabled people and, hence, the country. Unfortunately, the Summit turned out to be

just about ranking predetermined outcomes rather than an opportunity to contribute constructively.

- According to the 2006 Census, about 440,000 disabled people earn less than \$30,000 a year. Nearly all of these people were ineligible for the much vaunted tax cuts.
- The Minister of ACC has signalled that entitlements to ACC will be cut.
- We have called the new Ministerial Committee on Disability Issues 'window dressing', because we cannot tell how it will make things better for disabled people. We should all be very concerned that our futures rest with a committee that includes a minister who has voted against rights-based legislation such as the NZ Sign Language Act and the Disability (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) Act, which enabled us to ratify the Convention. (See the story on this committee below.)
- The Local Government Minister has advocated that building owners not be prosecuted if they ignore the Building Code when it comes to providing access for disabled people. The logical outcome of this is an environment that becomes increasingly inaccessible to us.

Bearing these points in mind, I'd like to know what this Government hopes to achieve.

Another committee 'without us' is new Government's response to disability report

The Dec 08/Jan 09 issue of *Bites* provided a summary of the scathing report of Parliament's Social Services Committee's inquiry into the quality of care and service provision for people with disabilities. That report said the needs of disabled people were frequently neglected, and its 22 recommendations included setting up an independent Disability Commission, which has for some time been a proposal championed by DPA and is a key element of DPA's *Our Vision 2009-2012*.

In February, the Government announced that its response to this report would be the establishment of a Ministerial Committee on Disability Issues, and more recently revealed that this committee would comprise the Ministers of Finance, Justice, Health, Education and Transport and the Associate Ministers of Education and Disability Issues, with other ministers called in from time to time.

The committee will be chaired by Disability Issues Minister Paula Bennett, who said that "the committee would provide a coherent overall direction for disability issues across government".

"Currently, no group oversees the Government's substantial disability spending channelled through several agencies," she said. "This committee will ensure that disability support works well for disabled people, is distributed fairly, and represents value for money."

However, DPA responded by saying that the committee would not be able to deliver for disabled people unless it listened to them and understood their needs. Ominously, the Government has rejected the proposal for a Disability Commission, calling it a "significant and costly structural change".

"I feel very strongly that it's window dressing," DPA President Wendy Neilson said.

"There is no Minister of Economic Development, who should have been part of that team. Also, as far as I am concerned, we have not been consulted as the advocacy group, and we should have.

"The Government signed up to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which very strongly advocates 'nothing about us without us'.

"To my mind, if they were forming this committee they should have brought on board people with disability who are movers and shakers in the disability sector, to work alongside them."

Neilson said the committee may do valuable work, but at this stage she lacked confidence it would understand the issues disabled people faced. "It's really great that they want to get together and focus on the issues, but they're not saying anything about including people with disability. If you are not a person with a disability you don't understand the lived realities."

Census figures show one in five New Zealanders has some form of disability, a number expected to grow by 60 per cent over the next 40 years as the population ages.

Bennett said decisions on disability services had tended to be based on health and welfare considerations, without regard to other issues. "It may be more cost-effective to build the needs of disabled people into planning stages, rather than retro-fitting later at considerable cost," she said. "One of the committee's first tasks will be to look at disability services provision with a view to giving disabled people greater choice and control over the supports they receive and the lives they lead."

- adapted from Mike Houlihan's story in *The Press*.