**Queenslanders with Disability Network**

**International Day of People with Disability**

**Kevin Cocks AM, Commissioner**

**Tuesday 3 December 2013**

I would like to thank the organisers of today's celebration of International Day of People with Disability for inviting me to speak with you. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land that we gather and meet here today and pay my respects to the Elders past, present and future.

[International Day of People with Disability](http://www.idpwd.com.au/) (IDPwD) is a dedicated day to place a greater emphasis on the abilities and achievements of people living with disability.

Over 650 million people with disability celebrate this day around the world. It provides an opportunity to highlight the contributions people with disability make every day to their communities and to try and make a difference to the lives of four million Australians with disability.

This year is a significant milestone with a global celebration of 21 years of raising awareness and promoting an understanding of people with a disability. International Day of People with Disability provides us with an opportunity to reflect and celebrate what has happened in the past.

I think it is important to celebrate the leadership that people with disability have provided throughout history to contribute to the dismantling of structural discrimination. It also provides us an opportunity to think about what else needs to be done to ensure that people with disability everyday lives are enriched.

Firstly, I will give you a potted history throughout time and then briefly talk about some remarkable Australians with disability and their recent contributions to making Australia a more inclusive and welcoming place to live.

* 600 BC First Discrimination legislation based on use of language (India)
* 355 BC Aristotle said those "born deaf become senseless and incapable of reason"
* 1500 Girolamo Cardano (1501-1576) was the first physician to recognise the ability of the deaf to reason
* 1616 Bonifacio published a treatise discussing sign language, "Of The Art of Signs"
* 1829 Louis Braille invents the raised point alphabet that has come to be known as Braille
* **Ed Roberts** Born Jan. 23, 1939, in California and died on March 14, 1995

Ed Roberts was starting a self-help movement that would radicalize how people with disabilities perceived themselves. He did it for himself and then began laying the groundwork for the rest of us. He was known as the 'Father of the Independent Living Movement'. Independence and rehabilitation have not been the same since, and will never return to the archaic notions which perceived people with disabilities as passive recipients of charity, unable to self-direct their lives.

* **Angus Downie** in 1968 the inaugural young Australian of the year. Angus was a journalist and was awarded this honour because of his writings. Angus contributed in many ways to the disability movement in Australia however his greatest legacy was a significant contribution accessible transport in Australia.

Angus produced the landmark report, Target 2015 – A Vision for the Future: Access to transport in Australia for All Australians, for the federal Government’s Disability Advisory Council of Australia. This report ultimately lead to the development of the accessible transport standards.

* **Dr Christopher Newell** who passed away mid-2008 at the age 44 way too early and a great loss to the intellectual, ethical and policy activist that he was and what he represented as a person with disability.

Christopher was a well published author his last book written with his close friend and academic colleague Gerard Goggin. This book was titled 'Disability in Australia: exposing a social apartheid' / Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell

This book dares to name and explore a hidden blight in society: the routine, daily and oppressive treatment of people with disabilities. Drawing on a wide range of case studies from health and welfare, sport, biotechnology, deinstitutionalisation, political life, and the treatment of refugees, this thoughtful, lively and provocative work puts disability firmly on the agenda. This book shows that disability is central to society, media and culture - a matter of human rights and justice that should concern us all.

“*Too often we think of people with disabilities in terms of being recipients as opposed to having something important to contribute to society ....*” (Christopher Newell in “When Private and Public Meet”, Ch 7 of [“Who Said I Can’t?” Office of the Anti-Discrimination Commissioner 2007](http://www.antidiscrimination.tas.gov.au/Community_projects/who_said_i_cant_2007_Publication)).

* **Erik Leipoldt**, who passed away in November 2012, earned a PhD in philosophy; his thesis explored the views and experiences of Dutch and Australian people with disabilities on the topic of euthanasia. Erik also contributed significantly to the intellectual, ethical and disability activist voice in Australia his concern was particularly around vulnerability and what made people with disabilities vulnerable. He was widely published on issues ranging from euthanasia through to the environment (global warming) and how these policy debates often excluded the voice of people with disabilities and thus heightened their vulnerability.
* **Robert Jones who passed away mid-2013.** Robert was a long standing friend to many people and many community organisations, and had an enormous commitment to achieving equitable outcomes for people with a disability within the built environment. His expertise in access led him to advocate for people with disability in national forums and on government committees at all levels.

In the pivotal Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre case against the State government in 1994, Robert gave evidence. The case became a turning point for all Australians towards obtaining equitable access to buildings. On International Day of People with Disability in 2011 Disability Discrimination Commissioner, Graeme Innes, acknowledged the contribution made by Robert Jones. He was one of two disability community representatives who volunteered their time on the Building Access Policy Committee throughout the development of the draft standards. Mr Innes spoke of Robert’s ‘dedication to making it happen’ and the ‘many significant improvements from which future generations of Australians will benefit’ as a result of his work.

* **Lesley Hall**, retired as chief executive officer for the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations in 2013 and sadly passed away in October 2013. Lesley was a strong feminist and disability activist, For instance, was associated with protest action at the Melbourne Town Hall in the early 1980s. She and a group of other women climbed on stage at the Miss Australia quest to protest against the event, which was an important fundraiser for the charity then known as the Spastic Society. She was a founding member of the Disability Action Forum, a unique organisation of people with disabilities from around Victoria, united on a regional basis—not disability specific—to speak and act on behalf of themselves. And she was instrumental, in 1981, in establishing the state’s first Disability Resource Centre (DRC) in Brunswick. The DRC, according to Margaret Cooper, was a radical and a vital step towards enacting what would become a basic priority for the disability rights movement, that there should be ‘nothing about us without us’. Set up along the lines of the Independent Living Centres that were being established in the United States, where ‘people with disabilities ran their own show’.
* **Rhonda Galbally** is all about social equity. She's made it her life's work. She acquired her disability at 13 months and has been recognised as a leader in many fields throughout her illustrious career. She began her career as a teacher but soon moved into social policy. In the early 80s she became chief executive of the philanthropic Myer Foundation and quickly proved an able CEO, heading to the Australian Commission for the Future, then the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation and the Australian International Health Institute.

As the chair of the National People with Disabilities and Carer Council from 2008-2013 she ran the national consultations that produced the 'Shut Out' report which provided the substance for the National Disability Strategy.

* **Bill Garsden**, who has contributed significantly to the disability movement in Queensland for over 30 years. Bill was a key player in getting the first accessible taxis and transport subsidy scheme in Queensland. Also a key player in providing leadership for the transport lobby group, leadership in advocating for accessible built environments. And most importantly provided significant leadership in lobbying and advocating for QDN.

The atrocities that were committed by the Nazis in World War II are well documented, particularly the murder of over 6 million Jewish people. What is not well-known is the atrocities committed against people who were German citizens and had a disability.

**The Murder of the Handicapped**

Wartime, Adolf Hitler suggested, "was the best time for the elimination of the incurably ill." The physically and mentally handicapped were viewed as "useless" to society, a threat to Aryan genetic purity, and, ultimately, unworthy of life. At the beginning of World War II, individuals who were mentally retarded, physically handicapped, or mentally ill were targeted for murder in what the Nazis called the "T-4," or "euthanasia," program.

**Hitler officially orders end to "euthanasia" killings**

Mounting public criticism of the "euthanasia" killings prompts Adolf Hitler to order the end of the program. Gas chambers in the various "euthanasia" killing centers are dismantled. By this time, between 250,000 – 1 million German and Austrian physically or mentally impaired patients have been killed.

Although the "euthanasia" program officially ended, the killing of physically or mentally impaired people continued in secret in individual cases.

It is important to understand the context in which the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) evolved**. The UDHR is a non-binding declaration adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, partly in response to the barbarism of [World War II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II).

The International Bill of Human Rights includes the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights together with The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) was adopted on 13 December 2006 by the United Nations Gen assembly and it was opened for signature on 30th of March 2007. Australia was one of the first countries to sign up to the CRPD. In 2008 Australia ratified the CRPD. The CRPD was developed because people with disabilities were not having their human rights protected, respected or fulfil.

Eleanor Roosevelt as one of human rights commission members that developed the UDHR. I will end my address with a quote from her that I think sums up the spirit and essence of human rights.

*"Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world."*