



"MEDIA RELEASE"
22.11.2010

ALP FAILS ON CHOICE?

Fifield gets its right!

Media Release: - Monday, 22nd November 2010

Parents have a staggering and ever expanding spectrum of educational choices for their children. That is accepted as parental rights and the norm.

From public schools to private schools, music schools to elite sports schools, religious schools to cultural background schools and even the option of home schooling, it is widely accepted that parents, given the intimate knowledge of the needs, of their child are best placed to select from a plethora of options for the critical choice of an appropriate schooling environment.

There is no doubt that the general consumer would not accept an order to place a child in an inappropriate schooling environment.

Federal Shadow Minister for Disability Mitch FiField must be congratulated for leading the charge and fighting for the right of disability service consumers to have a full spectrum of educational choices available for their children (see attached file)

We will all expect the standard email viral wave of emotive hyperbole from the disability philosophical zealots who believe they know exactly how disability services should be delivered. Such hubris should be ignored as the shrill voices of the vocal minority do not reflect the consumer demands of so many in the disability sector.

Mr Fifield and his party are already acutely aware that the wishes of a broad majority of disability consumers do not match the philosophy that some Wolfensberger zealots of the 80's still demand.

Wolfenberger, whose visionary work was widely respected and became a basis for much disability policy development, left one gaping hole in his theories. He forgot the fundamental right of the consumers, living in a democracy, to make their own personal choices. For those unable to speak for themselves those choices are normally best determined by family. This is a concept of simple common sense given the natural authority of the family and it is clearly in the best interests of those who cannot speak for them self that such voice is recognised ipso facto as the voice of the service consumer.

History shows that using academic research as a pure basis of social policy has been spectacularly unsuccessful across a wide range of social and community issues. It is not long ago that Indigenous children were routinely removed from their parents, that women were considered weak and inferior, that homosexuals were electrocuted as part of a reprogramming

policy and left-handed school children were caned for their stupidity and stubbornness. History will mark very poorly the disability leaders, politicians and academics who believed they have an inalienable right to tell others how they should live their life.

Governments' first responsibility is to meet consumer demand and the consumer demand for a menu of service choices in the disability sector is now being widely recognised.

The ideological dinosaurs of the eighties suffered a significant dent in their dictatorial conceptual demands when the 2006 United Nations Charter on Disability made choice a fundamental right.

The fact that disability service consumers should dictate their own service requirements should surprise no one. Any promotion of essential programs like individualised funding, person centred planning and self managed funding are little but hollow rhetoric unless supported by the unfettered and essential right of consumers to make their own choice.

Some long term disability advocates (many of whom hold significant positions of power in government agencies) and some service providers try to ignore the fundamental right to choose by coining terms like "informed choice" as a euphemism for a few dictating services too many. However the message has started to get through. Federal ALP has failed badly to embrace the concept of choice by not supporting the overwhelming demand for a blind/ deaf specialist education facility in Melbourne.

South Australia leads the nation in many ways in the development of modern, consumer - driven disability options. In 2006 Disability Minister Jay Weatherill showed the vision that may one day make him Premier. Buoyed by an overwhelming response to a genuine community consultation process about accommodation services, Weatherill revamped Disability S.A. philosophy, personnel and culture. Enshrining a culture of choice, he appointed a team of new executives to make consumer demand the driver of disability services. This generational change has been overwhelmingly accepted within the disability sector.

When Monsignor David Cappo delivers the draft "S.A. Disability Social Inclusion Report" in early 2011, any doubt that consumers will not have ongoing available a broad spectrum of services, of their own choosing, will disappear. The dark ages where people were expected to be grateful for a lack of choice in service options are finished in S.A. Choice will no longer be a demand but a right!

There is widespread acknowledgment in S.A. today by people with depth of understanding of people with intellectual disability based on life experience that many people with an intellectual disability are in the main highly social beings that thrive on and delight in the company of people including those like themselves. Most people with an intellectual disability will not enjoy a rewarding career or a family of their own. It therefore follows that the other cornerstone of our own lives - the social network- assumes even greater importance in their lives than in the lives of their non-disabled peers or people with other forms of disability whose ability to communicate is less restricted. While "self anointed disability experts" demanded integration and inclusion in the general community, they disregard the right and need of PWID to make social networks within their own community. The experts espouse a system that no-one in the wider general community would accept: a lack of choice!

Those days are quickly fading and Monsignor Cappo will formalise the last rites!

This year S.A. opened a new specialist "special education school". This school has been an overwhelming success and enrolments are at capacity. Virtually every special disability school in

Adelaide is full, many with waiting lists. Are the consumers wrong? As parents, both with a Diploma of Teaching and a Bachelor of Education and 10 years experience as teachers, our decision to send our daughter to a "special school" was an inspired choice. After thoroughly investigating all options, public and private, specialist and general there was no doubt that such special education support was the best option for our daughter. The results were outstanding. Any philosophical dreamer, who believed that our daughter should have been sacrificed on the altar of educating the community in acceptance, makes suggestions that border on child abuse. Our daughters best interests where the only critical factor.

Michael Kendrick, a major supporter of social valorisation, constantly promotes the role and natural authority of families. This concept is now being embraced by government in S.A.

Federal ALP's failure to embrace the concept of consumer driven choice augers very poorly for those who believe that this federal government will deliver a consumer driven model if and when NDIS becomes a reality.

Mitch FiField has it right!

David Holst
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