

Ceremonial Closing Public Hearing, Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People With Disability

Commissioner Rhonda Galbally, 15 September 2023

Thank you uncle Alan Madden for your warm welcome to your country, and I want to begin by acknowledging the disability rights movement in Australia.

I want to thank the advocates and disabled people's organisations who fought so hard for so long to ensure that this disability royal commission was established.

And as one of two Commissioners with disability, I also particularly want to thank those disabled people, family members, friends and workers and advocates who so bravely came forward to tell us their stories.

I heard your pain, your rage, your hopelessness, deep sadness for lives lost.

I was frequently told about the tragedy of lost opportunities to lead full lives free from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. I heard, and I learned.

So as we come to the end of the Commission, it's salutary to remember what the disability rights movement began fighting for in Australia back at the beginning.

Fifty years ago, these pioneers fought to establish human rights for people with disabilities to be fully included in the community. And without giving away their ages, I'd like to thank Maurice Corcoran and Lorna Hallahan as senior advisors to the Royal Commission, and people who were around at the beginning.

Fifty years ago, these groups successfully fought for the closing down of institutions. But as a Commissioner I have learned that while these institutions became group homes, many replicated institutional cultures, including restrictive practices.

Fifty years ago the groups fought to close down sheltered workshops. While the names of the workshops changed to "Australian Disability Enterprises", I have learned that wages and conditions remain much the same.

Fifty years ago they fought to integrate disabled children into mainstream schools and for special schools to fully support integration and become resource centres. Instead, I have learned, that now, many mainstream schools are rejecting children with disabilities and pushing them to a growing number of special schools.

As a Commissioner, I have learned that keeping people with disabilities segregated "with their own kind", has proven to be a very difficult ship to turn around. I have been told that mainstream systems and settings are not inclusive and continue to reject children and adults with disabilities.

But I have also been told that there is fear. Fear that disability is contaminating, infecting the lives of the non-disabled community with sights, sounds, behaviours that might disturb and interfere with non-disabled lives.

For example, I have been told that there is fear that having disabled students in mainstream classrooms will be detrimental to the education of non-disabled students and use up too much teacher attention and school resources.

Yet research presented to the Commission shows that this fear does not have any legitimate basis.

I have heard that fear arises when non-disabled people do not have a strong relationship with disabled people, and that this fear can turn into loathing of disability and seeing disabled people as 'other'. I have learned that loathing from fear can then turn into violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of people with disabilities and that this is further reinforced by the practice of keeping disabled people "out of sight and out of mind", often claiming it's for their protection, thus enabling the fear, loathing and discrimination to continue.

I have learned that this is a vicious and insidious cycle creating prejudice in our communities. We have been told that what is needed to stop the prejudice is attitudinal change. Yet the research presented to the Commission shows that attitudinal change campaigns, with advertisements exhorting the community to include disabled people, that that's not enough because the prejudice is too strong.

As a Commissioner I have learned that attitudes change when people with every kind and severity of disability are visible, present and meaningfully participating with non-disabled children and adults, on a day-to-day basis, in every setting in the community, starting with the earliest years.

And I have learned that everyone relating together, disabled and non-disabled, as classmates, neighbours, co-workers, friends and acquaintances, they become a growing group of informal and effective watchdogs calling out violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation because it is visible.

So my hope as a Commissioner is that the voices of disabled people and their allies, will go on to act as the catalyst. They are the necessary catalyst for the transformative actions that are needed for governments and the community to build a truly inclusive Australia.