

Why People with Disability Lose in the Political Process?

By Jack Frisch

It is often noted that people with disability make up 19% of the population and that such a substantial block of votes should have influence. The proportion of voters with disability is certainly greater than the number of gay and lesbian voters, Aboriginal voters, unemployed voters, rural voters, young voters and aged voters. Yet it seems that the politicians do not listen or care. There is no disability champion in either of the major parties in either the NSW or Commonwealth Parliament. The Party Platforms make only grudging mention of disability. And with a few exceptions, Members of Parliament don't have a clue about the dimension of social isolation and second-class citizenship faced by people with disabilities.

Individual politicians in general "admire" people with visible disability and dismiss people with invisible disability. They "help" "deserving" individuals as much as they can at the individual level. The chances are that 19% of politicians have immediate family members who they view and treat in much the same way as the rest of the community view people with disability - sometimes with dignity, sometimes with fear, sometimes patronisingly, sometimes with frustration, sometimes with love. But that is not good enough.

Ignored?

So why do politicians ignore people with disability even though they make up 19% of the population?

It should first be noted that under our system of voting, politicians are not so much interested in votes, but only in getting just over 50% of the votes in their electorate. And while they are interested in votes, politicians are also interested in re-endorsement by their Party - which means not going out on a limb.

For the demands of the 19% to count electorally, the 19% needs to be such that:

1. they **identify** on the basis of the issue that unites them and
2. they **all** vote **only** on the issue that unites them and
3. they have a focused, common set of easily understood **demands** which will see results during the life of the next Parliament and opposition to which is weak and without influence.

Alternatively, in a Parliament which is almost hung, a significant block in one or two key marginal electorates can have influence.

Disability Identification

Firstly, many of the aged who have a disability do not identify as having a disability, let alone identify politically on the basis of their disability. They see their disability as an inevitable and unfortunate by-product of age about which nobody can do anything about. If they identify as having a disability, they are more likely to have a medical view of disability which makes the problem theirs alone, rather than with a social view which

sees problems as resulting from society's intolerance and lack of acceptance and accommodation.

Secondly, many people with disability do not see their disability as politically relevant - partly because none of the major Parties make disability an issue, partly because most people simply vote like their parents and do not vote on the basis of issues no matter what the issues are, partly because they see their disability in medical terms rather than social terms, and partly because many people either "get on with it and do as best they can" or "brood, whine and accept their fate" without making disability a political issues.

Thirdly, people with different impairments have little basis on which to identify with one another. A person with a visual impairment has nothing in common with a person who is a wheelchair user other than his/her humanity, his/her being categorised by the World Health Organisation and the Australian Bureau of Statistics as "having a disability", and the second-class citizenship conferred by a society which loathes impairment while pretending to "love" people with impairment.

The fact that many people with disability neither identify themselves as having a disability, nor see their disability as politically relevant means that 19% overstates the power of the disability vote.

The Complexity of the Message

Because people with disability have a wide range of impairments, there is a wide range of different needs, and therefore a predisposition to lack focus. People with visual impairment, physical impairment, hearing impairment, psychiatric or intellectual impairment, AIDS etc. have few needs which are common.

To take a simple "lift" example, one person will need low buttons, another will need audio and tactile cues, another will need a highlighted visual cue, another will need pure air, and another is able to use the lift without any modification and therefore has no demand at all. It is not easy to determine a focused disability demand for lifts.

Although the demand for "universal design" is the conceptual demand which people with the wide range of impairments share, this concept is not yet fully understood by either designers or people with disability, let alone producers of goods and services or law-makers. It is not a demand which is easily understood as of sufficient benefit to warrant regulation. It is a demand which sounds expensive and which will be resisted by the business lobby. It is a demand which involves a good deal of education of the public. It is a demand which is long -term and therefore of only marginal interest to politicians who prefer to be able to how the fruits of their effort.

The wide range of disabilities means that it is easy for any opponents to demands of the disability community to play one impairment off against the other, and to use "divide and rule" strategies. And the apparent complexity of any shared universal demand means that a solution will sound expensive, and therefore lead to strong opposition from risk-averse businesses that fear that the costs to them will be greater than the benefit to them.

Businesses will too easily be able to convince consumers that they will bear the cost of this complex demand, and the consumers will pressure the politicians to resist the demand.

Another complexity in this issue relates to the difference between equity and quality, between equal opportunity and equal treatment, between wanting to be independent and wanting assistance so that we can be independent, participating like everyone else and wanting to participate in our own ways. It is not a simple message. It is a message that people of ill-will can too easily belittle with rhetoric and ridicule.

Geographic Concentration

There are other means of political influence of course. One other means of having influence is through having a block of votes in a few key marginal electorates, where one or two seats might tip the balance of government. Because people with disabilities are by and large spread through the electorate, this is unlikely to be of much use.

Dollars versus Numbers

Although people with disability make up 19% of the population, in the world of economics and politics, the vote is only one factor which politicians listen to.

The other major factor is money. In the world of politics, money allows politicians to run campaigns; it offers lobbyists greater opportunity to network with politicians and to influence voters through advertising campaigns; and it offers ideas status. In the world of commerce, demand is not measured by number of people but by effective purchasing power.

Because people with disabilities have:

- low rate of workforce participation,
- low incomes if they do work (because of disproportionate part-time work, discriminatory wages and decreased promotion opportunities)
- low discretionary disposable income (given the high non-discretionary costs associated with disability) there is less money available for influencing the political process than either their political opponents or most other lobby groups that make calls on government (road users, gays, environmentalists, university students, employed workers, middle class single childless women, etc.). The upshot of these economic factors means that the political influence of people with disabilities is substantially less than their voting power.

How to effect change

The above perhaps offers some insight into why people with disability have not been listened to by politicians - of why there are not enough funds for programs and why there are tight and erratic eligibility criteria for the programs that exist. Hopefully it also offers some insight into how to effect change.

The above suggests that the basic underlying principles to make the costs to politicians not listening greater than the benefits of not listening involve:

- people with disability voting on the basis of having a disability and voting on mass as if that is the **only** thing that matters
- simplifying issues to find the common ground between people with disability and to maintain a disciplined focus with respect to the common ground e.g. individual disability allowance, anti-discrimination laws, disability service standards, universal design principles, having picnics and fun together etc.
- demonstrating over and over and over again the net economic and social benefits of good disability policy and that bad disability policy is economically costly, and that expenditure on good disability policy is an investment, not a drain
- neutralising opposition to good disability policy and promoting ourselves at the grass roots e.g. ringing radio stations, letters to the editor, letters to politicians and local Councillors, joining one of the main political parties, talking to people without disabilities about barriers we face (rather than talking about them only among ourselves), strengthening the local Access Committee, going to Council meetings, etc.
- direct action to show up the miserly, narrow-minded, economically unsound policies of the major political parties e.g. blockading a recalcitrant transport company or a new development site, sitting in at a Government office, making ourselves visible in the Parliamentary gallery.

This is hard work and needs working together. It needs backing up our words with action. It means backing up our words with research. It means talking, protesting, shouting and voting. It means making it painful for politicians and the providers of goods and services to keep ignoring us. It means writing letters and stuffing envelopes for disability advocacy/ political organisations. It means making complaints under the DDA but it also means following up with complaints to marketing departments, Ombudspersons, Departments of Fair Trading, industry associations. It means visiting politicians and telling them what you expect from them and why. It means finding out what other people with disability need and advocating on your behalf in a way which is consistent with their demands as well as your own. It means being reasonable as well as demanding.

But above all, it means that all people with disability need to vote as if disability policy is the only thing that matters! Without this, things will stay as they are!

Sympathetic Politicians (not an oxymoron)

Interestingly enough, sympathetic politicians who support social justice notions want us to raise our voices and make a fuss, and provide them with the material with which they can press our views. They know that the political system is not perfect and works against us. They would like to support us but cannot because they are subject to the constraints of the two-party system and the need for party discipline. They know many of our issues but they need to sell our policies to their sometimes ignorant colleagues. They need us to raise our voice so that they can be heard in their party caucuses. They need to sell the policies inside the party rooms, and the only way they can sell the idea that there is a demand is for us to show how that there is indeed a demand.