

Speech to the National General Assembly of Local Government

Bill Shorten, Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children's Services

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I think that as the world becomes more globally connected, our politics and our concerns stay stubbornly and properly local.

Indeed in the words of Tip O'Neill, the greatly respected Speaker of the House of Representatives in the USA: all politics are local.

For maybe four or five thousand years humankind has lived in a particular way.

In small groups, in a forest clearing, near a creek or a river, in dwellings built by the men and administered by the women, with shared gardens and places of worship and annual festivals, and a council of elders arbitrating disputes and setting boundaries and rules.

We have practised what is now called local government for millennia in a recognisable way.

The locality is how we define ourselves.

Our town crest, our school colours, our football team, our harvest festival, our ships' blessing, our market day, forms most of how we see ourselves in our childhood and our youth.

It is our brand name, our slogan, our anthem, our war cry, our badge of honour down the years.

And so it is our municipal council is a seat of judgement, a house of deliberation, a source of quiet wisdom, assessing and administering our affairs.

Things specific to our locality are known to them, and judged by them, and by no other arbitrators.

It is the level that is seen as familiar, approachable and responsive.

It deals with issues like planning that arouse strong passions, because they cut to the heart of our concerns about the future of the communities where we were born or have chosen to live.

Local Governments are our jury and our house of peers, our local heroes and our champions when they do the work well, and the foulest villains when they stuff up, as they sometimes do.

It is no accident that Ben Chifley was a shire councillor all his adult life.

A local man who knew full well that the universal always begins with the local, and in the detail of the neighbourhood.

With the footpaths, the storm drains, the public toilets, the kindergarten, the church fete, the charity drive, the reservoir, the sealed road and repaired fences, there came with time the civic vision he lived by, the nation he dreamed and set himself to building.

Local Government is not always glamorous, but it is the level of government closest to the people, supplying many of the basic needs.

The work is never complete, the circumstances alter, the issues multiply, the chronicle of our home town unfurls and rolls on into history, into multicultural, deluge, bushfire, earthquake, war and catastrophic accident.

Shocks and changes that need to be dealt with, in detail, locally, by native sons and daughters who know the territory, can instinctively understand the sensitivities.

In my time as the Parliamentary Secretary for Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction I have seen the work done by local government in reconstruction.

By shires like Murrindindi and Whittlesea.

The Federal and Victorian Government have put huge amounts of funding and effort into rebuilding the bushfire areas.

But local councils have supplied their own irreplaceable knowledge and experience.

They have provided a personal passion and drive to rebuild, that comes from human connections.

They have provided true leadership through their close links with the thousands of people who lost homes, friends or family in those fires.

They have provided something that could simply not be delivered by Canberra.

This has brought home to me the need to co-operate in a way that reflects the strengths of each level of government.

DISABILITY AND DEMOGRAPHICS

I want to talk today about what we are doing in disability, and where I think that local government can make a difference.

The theme of your conference today is “Population, Participation and Productivity”.

I think we are gradually becoming aware of the demographic future of this country, the challenges of an ageing population, and a shrinking workforce.

I believe that demography is destiny.

But I don't think that many people understand the relevance disability has to that story.

Pricewaterhouse Coopers predicts that the number of people with severe or profound disability is projected to double over the next 40 years from 1.4 million to 2.9 million.

At the same time, the ratio of carers will decrease by more than half over the next 50 years, as ageing parents can no longer carry the burden of caring for an adult with disability.

The cost of providing disability services is growing by about 7 per cent each year.

A fractured system that already struggles, despite the extra funding this Government has put into it, will face increasing pressure.

At the same time as we are wondering where we will find our workforce over the next 40 years, only 50 per cent of people under- 65 with disability are in paid work.

DISABILITY AS AN ISSUE

Yet disability is not an issue that gets much attention, but it is one that should be the responsibility of everyone.

There are 2 million Australians with a severe disability or who care for someone with a severe disability.

In many ways they are hidden in plain sight, ignored because we are used to not looking at them.

They are internal exiles in a rich country that should be able to do better.

Many of the things that the rest of the community take for granted. An education, a job, the right to a comfortable retirement, are as distant a possibility as a trip to the moon.

It shouldn't be this way. It doesn't have to be this way.

We are a wealthy enough and compassionate enough country to do things better for people with disability.

Generally speaking, the Australian people are not malicious about disability.

Sympathy is felt, but there is not always matching empathy.

Australians in general don't understand the magnitude of the crisis, nor the level of pain and sorrow that exists.

We need to think differently about disability. We need to realise that disability could happen to us in the blink of an eye.

An impairment is a difficult thing to deal with, but what really disables people is the barriers society puts in the way of people with impairment.

We need to make the needs of people with disability part of everything we do. They should not be an afterthought or an add-on at the end.

ACCESS TO PREMISES

This Government is currently developing its National Disability Strategy.

During consultations for this we have been told that difficulties in physically accessing buildings are still one of the major issues facing people with disability.

The feeling of being physically excluded from public places, whether by poor or outdated design, or a lack, is still a strong emotional issue for people with disability.

To be excluded from a building, a public pool, a streetscape, a library or any other public place simply because it has been built on the assumption that you do not exist is a deeply hurtful feeling.

Imagine the reaction if you put a sign on your offices saying “No Blacks” or “No Women”.

I'd like to suggest a couple of areas where local government can do better and make a difference.

Access to Premises – Planning Approvals

Local Infrastructure –

libraries/toilets/playgrounds/buses/groups/tourism/pools

Disability Advisory Councils

Jobs

ADES