

Kelly Vincent MLC Maiden Speech

13th May, 2010

Legislative Council

Firstly I acknowledge the Kurna people, whose footprints meet our own every time they touch this land, and within whose stories we weave our own. I would also like to acknowledge and congratulate the newly elected members of parliament, in particular Tammy Jennings and Jing Lee. I have already found your strength of mind and spirit, eloquence and kindness to be truly “honourable.”

Sitting here in this chamber as the youngest female, and the first person with a physical disability ever elected into South Australian parliament, is, as you can imagine, not an easy thing to describe. So, I would like to employ one of the basic rules I often use in what I suppose is now my ‘other life’ as a writer: begin at the beginning.

Until recently, I would have said that the beginning of my disability advocacy journey occurred roughly 18 months ago, as I had been struggling to get a new wheelchair for about that long. (I was approved for the wheelchair in January of 2008, but would not sit in it until October of 2009).

During this period, I began speaking at disability related conferences and forums about this experience, and the effect it was having on my body, mind, and life. I would usually just get up on to the stage and ad-lib something, as I am of the view that the last thing the disability sector needs is yet another powerpoint presentation. Through these speeches, I developed something of a small cult following, and, while I really enjoyed doing them, and appreciated the support and increased awareness, it occurred to me that I still didn’t have a new wheelchair.

So, late last year, I turned to my last refuge: Facebook. I began a group called ‘Mission: Kelly’s New Chair,’ on which I placed some of my story, as well as the contact details of the office of the Honourable Jennifer Rankine, Minister for Disabilities.

I began the group thinking that if just 10 or 15 of my friends joined and each sent a letter, then the group would have served its purpose. However, within a few weeks, the group had some 250 members, some in countries such as France, Mexico and America.

Fortunately, I have some varying ability to converse in both French and Spanish, and was soon dedicating as much time as possible to sending out trilingual updates. I believe that, although none of us ever said it, we were all perfectly aware that we were in fact communicating in the universal languages of hope and goodwill. Soon, the letters, emails, and phone calls to Minister Rankine's office were flowing thick and fast, and at times, I would sit in front of my computer and chuckle at the fact that, at the age of 20, I was effectively running a disability rights movement from my bedroom. Such is the power of youth.

Then one day, after I had been speaking at a forum, I switched on my computer to see that the group had gained a new member: Dr Paul Henry Collier, and though I didn't know it at the time, the course of my life was changed forever.

But, as I was saying, I no longer consider this to be the beginning of my journey. This is because, a month or so out from the March 2010 election, my fellow candidate, turned staff member and above all, beloved friend, Sam Paior, pointed to me, and said three words that will stay with me always and forever: 'advocate since birth'. I simply did not realise before I heard Sam say these words, how true they were. I am not just an advocate when I present at forums, or run a Facebook group. I am an advocate every time I point out to the owner of a restaurant that I can't reach the soap in their accessible bathroom. I am an advocate every time I glare disapprovingly at the seemingly able-bodied lady who walks out of the accessible bathroom after I have been waiting to use it for 20 minutes. I was an advocate every time I came home in tears from school because a student made fun of the way I walked. And, most of all, I am an advocate every time I ask this question: 'why is this allowed to happen to people with disabilities?'

Let me suggest a rather disturbing example of what I mean by 'this'.

Some people with a disability wait up to five years, perhaps more, for equipment such as a wheelchair. They may wait fifteen years or more for supported accommodation, unless their primary carer in their current house dies or is forced to abandon them, unable and unwilling to care for them any longer.

A sixteen-year-old girl with burns to 70 percent of her body may, and does, go without the wheelchair she requires to be mobile at school, because the school lost the wheelchair more than a year ago, and have not yet received a replacement.

I am happy to notice that today, a hearing loop has been installed into the public gallery of this Chamber, so that people who are hard of hearing can also participate in our work – in this, the people’s parliament. But it pains me that a deaf person misses out on a large part of presentations in public places, because the building’s hearing loop is out of order, or never installed.

And the list goes on.

If we applied this concept to education, our children would have to wait somewhere between 2 and 5 years for “equipment” - school books and uniforms. Worse still, imagine being unable to offer a child a place in a school until another student dies?

This is of course unacceptable, even outrageous. The ramifications of a child not having ready access to education, especially in their early years, are potentially greater than any of us can imagine. They may become illiterate, have underdeveloped social skills, and potentially be unable to make as great a contribution to society as they would otherwise be able to. If the disability funding model were applied to education system, there would be a public outcry, followed by a complete overhaul of the system.

And yet this happens in the disability sector. Every. Single. Day.

Perhaps what I have just said will give you a little insight into why I am set back a little when people try to suggest that Dignity for Disability is a ‘single issue’ party-- because disability knows no boundaries. It crosses transport, education, social inclusion, access, and discrimination, for a start. Anyone who needs proof of the wide reach of disability need only look up at the galleries of this chamber and behold all of the special guests who have graced us with their society and audience today. I sincerely thank them all for this. It is a true honour. Disability affects people of all ages, races, genders, classes and religions, in very different ways. And this should be a source of joy and celebration, just as much as it is seen as a difficulty.

One of my favourite authors, Kahlil Gibran, once wrote: ‘Last night, I invented a new pleasure. And as I was giving it the first trial, an angel and a devil came rushing toward my house. They met at my door and fought with each other over the new pleasure, one crying: ‘it is a sin!’ The other: ‘it is a virtue!’”

If only disability could be a pleasure in this sense.

Because although Disability for Disability is not a single issue party, I guess you could say that its 'mission statement', if you will, is actually pretty simple: the idea that there is no such thing as 'one size fits all' in regard to disability--that people with disabilities, are individuals, and, more than that, because of the struggles they have faced and the battles they have fought taking the good and the bad, have turned them into some of the most strong, well-educated and articulate individuals this state has to offer.

I am sometimes asked if the name of the party, Dignity for Disability, implies that people with disabilities do not already have dignity. My response to this is simple: No. In my mind, the word 'dignity' in the name of the party simply means that people with disabilities truly are dignified and intelligent human beings, who are able to make a real and lasting contribution in society, and it is high time that the services and opportunities given to them reflected this.

I was recently also asked whether comments about people with disabilities 'finally having a representative in Parliament' implied that we were somehow ungrateful for the contributions to the disability sector made by members of parliament who have already graced this chamber and this parliament for many years--I would particularly like to acknowledge Minister Jay Weatherill, the Honourable Mr Stephen Wade, Senator Mitch Fifield, and Minister Bill Shorten. These kinds of people, many of whom do not have any direct involvement in the disability sector, by way of being a person with a disability or a carer, family member or friend to a person with a disability, but still work tirelessly and with ineffable passion and dedication, on the basis that improving the lives of people with disabilities is fundamentally a social, economic and, above all, a HUMAN RIGHTS issue, these people are what some in the disability sector refer to as Allies. And as we all know, the purpose of the ally is to work side by side with those they support, not to overtake or be put in place of them.

As I said in reply to the person asking me this (very valid!) question about allies, we at Dignity for Disability acknowledge and applaud the work of these Allies and look forward to being given new reasons to continue applauding them in the future. However, we believe that having Allies in Parliament is quite simply not the same thing as a person, and a party, that has lived, breathed, pure physical and spiritual involvement in disability.

Think for just a moment of Indigenous Australians. I am not for one second suggesting that people with disabilities are comparable with Indigenous Australians in regards to the severity of the hardships they have faced historically. However, if I may be so bold, I would suggest that these two groups are similar in that they are each their own culture, with their own rich histories, languages hardships, and joys, that cannot be understood as clearly, wholly or naturally by 'outsiders'.

Nevertheless, I will be the first to admit that I, and d4d as a party, do not have all the answers. I cannot do this on my own. I would like to take this opportunity to give my heartfelt, spirit-deep thanks to just a few of the people who have helped ensure that while I am travelling this long and winding road, at least I will be doing it without a flat tyre, both literal and metaphorical. To the original members of the party: Sam Paior, Rick Neagle, Ronni Wood, Garry Connor and Michele Thredgold. To Fim Jucha, our volunteer coordinator during the election campaign. To David Holst. To Natasha Stott Despoja and Kate Reynolds for their sage and, pardon the pun, democratic advice, both political and personal. To Ian Gilfillan for much the same reason. To David Winderlich. To Chantel. To Natalie and Nick. To Lucy. To PJ Rose and Alirio Zavarce, who are largely responsible for my becoming an artist, and embracing my disability as a natural part of my art. And to my mother, whose refusal to see her daughter effectively punished by society, not only for being a sensitive soul, but for not being able to use scissors as well as the other children, may well have saved my life before I was even born.

Returning to the matter at hand. It is high time that these 'outsiders' I was just talking about came in. Not only because we could use some more allies, but because there are numerous factors, such as the rate at which our population is aging, the current twenty percent of South Australians who have a disability, the twenty percent who care for a person with a disability, and the 40 percent of carers who have a disability themselves, could, at any second, become 21 and 41 percent. And that figure could include any one of the non-disabled people currently in this chamber.

As a tragic event on March 9th 2010 showed us, you just never know what is going to happen.

The death of Dignity for Disability's late co-founder and President, Dr Paul Collier, was sudden and, in many respects, untimely. It goes without saying that it was a great shock to myself and the party. I once again offer my condolences, support and love to Paul's mother, Wendy Collier, and his sister, Joanne Harvey. I would also like to thank them, because although I sadly did not know Paul long enough to figure out exactly where his intelligence, drive, warmth and charm came from, I have no doubt it had something to do with his upbringing.

I recall a telephone conversation I had with a friend and fellow advocate a day or so after Paul had the brain haemorrhage that would ultimately take his life. After taking ten minutes or so digest the news about Paul, my friend said that he was 'like an older version of us.' I realise now how true and profound this simple statement was.

In his 46 short years, Paul did more than most of us can hope to do in 100. He chose to attend Oxford, not because it was going to be friendly to him and his wheelchair, but because he saw it as being the best place for him from an academic perspective.

He was admitted, and in his time there as a student, took steps to make the university accessible to everyone. Paul organised and ran public rallies and forums on disability issues. And, toward the end of his life, Paul performed an action that at the time seemed, and in some ways still does, seem small. He put my name down as the number two candidate for the Upper House in Dignity for Disability's 2010 election campaign.

Now, I am still trying to figure out how big a place the idea of fate has in this chamber, but I will say that to me, the fact that the person who, for want of a less candle-snuffing expression, would 'take Paul's place' is 21 years of age, disabled and a woman, seems a pretty big coincidence.

I had to laugh when I was recently talking to a friend of mine. He has been backpacking around Europe for over a year now, and so he is not quite au fait with current Australian political happenings.

He said to me as we spoke on Skype--our first conversation since he left the country--:"I was talking to Mum on the phone. She said: 'one of your friends from high school has just been elected into parliament. You'll never guess who!

My friend explained that, without hesitation, and without the knowledge that this person had been elected on a disability platform, he said: "is it Kelly Vincent? It's Kelly, isn't it?" to which his mother only reacted with a shocked nod of the head.

Perhaps there really is a plan for each and every one of us. I sincerely hope so.

There can be no denying that Dignity for Disability's recent election and Paul's death are intricately intertwined. However, like many people with disabilities, I am pretty good at working with what I've got. Yes, the circumstances under which my election came to pass are tragic, even macabre, and very difficult to deal with. But what option do I, and we as a party, have but to embrace this wonderful opportunity and privilege as best as we possibly can in order to achieve the best possible outcome for people with people with disabilities and their networks in South Australia, and to help Dr Paul Collier live on. Because he should. We need him to.

Yes, I suppose I am the quintessential 'accidental politician,' and I unashamedly admit that on my 'bad days' I find myself questioning whether I am deserving of sitting at this previously non-existent custom-made bench, which is, in its own way, a small symbol of just how big this is. I did not earn Paul's votes in the election. I cannot earn a place on this earth in lieu of Paul Collier. But I can earn the respect of both our constituents, and my colleagues. I can earn your trust, and I do not doubt that, more often than not, I will earn your criticism. But I am ready and willing to earn all of these things until people with disabilities, their families and allies do not have to fight for, and ultimately earn, something that is seemingly a birthright to all others: Dignity through Choice.



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