



# PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

WEDNESDAY, 20 MAY 1981

## OPENING OF ACROD HOUSE, CANBERRA

This is an occasion both for congratulations and for renewed commitment. This building symbolises a realistic concern for the well-being of disabled persons within the Australian community. I have no doubt that this building will be symbolic of the new hope, and the larger expectations which disabled persons now have.

And let me say how little I like the term "disabled", which is a total misnomer for people who are very able indeed in their various ways. Life now offers a great deal to many people who, in previous generations, were thought to be at best incurable. Too often in the past, and doubtless in some countries even today, the disabled were ignored, or shut away. We are now realising more and more that disabled persons should be treated as having essentially the same rights, needs and aspirations, as other members of our community. And indeed, the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Disabled Persons is an integral part of the Parliamentary Act which will govern the operations of our new Human Rights Commission.

Disabled persons should be encouraged to develop their capacities to the fullest extent. Disabled persons should also be enabled, so far as possible, to live with their families in the general community. Many disabled people are now able to live almost completely normal lives, whereas only a very few years ago, everyone assumed that such people could have none of the satisfactions of a normal life, or an independent life of their own. But now the whole world recognises that the potentiality of disabled people has been greatly underestimated, and that approaches to rehabilitation have been vastly inadequate.

When I had the privilege last year of launching John Hickman's book One Step at a Time, I spoke of the way he coped with the tasks of everyday living, spending a night away from home, cooking a meal for himself, emptying the vacuum cleaner, even hitting Sir Garfield Sobers for six, taking on the bureaucracy, and occasionally winning. It was miraculous that he could do these things, but increasingly, we want disabled persons to be doing them as a matter of course.

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1981 is the International Year of Disabled Persons. Only a decade or so ago, the idea of having such a year would have been unthinkable. We now recognise that disabled persons have a contribution to make to the life of the world. Remarkable changes have occurred in community attitudes in a comparatively short time. Of course, there is still far to go. But I am confident that the activities of this year will be a worthwhile contribution in removing the old ideas and myths. Once it is accepted that the disabled are full members of the family and society, then employment opportunities must be extended, to ensure that the disabled can really participate as full members of society, able to make their own separate contributions. This will give further substance to the theme chosen by the United Nations for the International Year of the Disabled Persons - "Full Participation and Equality". And after this special year, there will be need for consolidation of the gains that have been made, and an appraisal of further directions and further gains which need to be pursued in the years ahead.

Nearly every statement of human objectives in nearly every culture assigns a high value to work as part of the complete life. Work plays an important role in personal self-fulfillment and achievement. Productive employment is, therefore, widely regarded as a crucial component in a rehabilitation programme. Day after day passing by without the challenge of tasks to be performed can be depressing indeed. Mr Watts has told us that it is something like 45 years since the idea of a national body specifically concerned with disabled persons was first discussed. ~~Since that time enormous strides have been made.~~

ACROD House is the culmination of considerable efforts. It will certainly provide a focal point for the organisation at the national level of programmes directed to achieve the full participation and equality of disabled persons in the life of the community. The building provides a wonderful facility. And it is an exemplar of how architects should take account of the particular requirements of the disabled. But of course it cannot substitute for the efforts and the dedication of those who are concerned to bring about in increasing measure the full participation and equality to which I have referred.

This Government has a very strong commitment indeed to the goals of ACROD. I am very pleased about the Government contribution for meeting the cost of this building. We are also proud that over a billion dollars is being spent in this financial year on programmes for the handicapped and the disabled, this is more than double the amount of five years ago, and it is a very considerable increase indeed in real terms. It is money well spent. And let me say that one of the benefits of the policy of financial restraint and responsibility we have consistently followed is that we have been able to do more in areas which we regard as of high priority. Programs for the handicapped and the disabled have this high priority. For not only are these programmes designed to help those who have one of the most legitimate claims of all to make upon the community.

In addition, our programmes help disabled persons to enjoy the satisfactions and independence which are essential to the way of life which we seek for this country, we also seek to help disabled persons to play a more productive role in the community. Our approach is to treat the disabled as individuals who can gain acceptance and employment in their own right, although they may need special training and support so that they can be employed. Assistance to ACROD so that it can have its own headquarters, as a focal point in the national capital, is a tangible bricks and mortar contribution in the International Year of Disabled Persons.

Our other activities are designed to achieve the longer-term objectives related to awareness and employment. A key element in our approach to help the disabled find satisfying work is a national employment strategy for the disabled, which was launched last month. The objective behind the strategy is to place more disabled persons in employment and training, and to ensure that they are given an equal opportunity in the Labour market. Of course, not all disabled persons can find work in the open market, and we will continue to support sheltered workshops as well as rewarding training schemes. The Commonwealth is also looking at its own buildings to ensure that they are accessible to the disabled, both as clients and employees.

I believe that the efforts being made in Australia to make certain that disabled persons are fully involved will enrich the life of our community. All credit to ACROD for what it has done, and all credit to the whole Australian community for its increasing maturity in recognising the rights of the disabled. May this building be the means of wider participation and greater equality in Australia. It gives me great pleasure to open this building, and to unveil this plaque.

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