



PRIME MINISTER

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HANDICAPPED PERSON OF THE YEAR AWARD

I am honoured to have been asked to present the first Handicapped Person of the Year Award. This is an important award for many reasons -- but above all, it is an important award because by giving public recognition to the achievement of the first winner of the Award it focusses not so much on the handicap but on the capacity -- the capacity to overcome difficulty, the capacity to achieve, the capacity to make a useful contribution to society.

It is beyond doubt that handicapped people have the ability to achieve a great deal in our society but unfortunately, this is not sufficiently widely recognised. In many respects the greatest disability faced by the handicapped is not the physical or mental disability they have to face, but the persistence of some attitudes in others which are both deep-rooted and ill-founded.

There is, in our society, I believe a great deal of care and concern for the handicapped but unfortunately, this all too often goes with the belief that the handicapped cannot achieve a great deal for themselves, or contribute much to the society. There is a tendency to have a stereotype of the "handicapped"; to view the handicapped as an undifferentiated group, rather than as individuals with different needs, ambitions and talents.

Across a wide range of areas there is a subtle and sometimes not so subtle discrimination against the handicapped -- a discrimination which has its origins in ignorance and sometimes fear - a fear of vulnerability to suffering some disability ourselves which leads to a rejection of the disabled. The consequences of this attitude are an attempt to help, but not become too deeply involved; to provide assistance at arm's length; to view the handicapped as helpless and adopt a stance of unthinking paternalism.

At worst there may be an active resistance to the handicapped. For instance the attempt to prevent the placement of facilities for the handicapped in particular areas because such facilities will "spoil the street" or "lower property values". Such attitudes systematically block the strivings of the handicapped for self-realisation and impede their attempts to integrate into the community.

Programmes for the handicapped and public expenditure on income maintenance is important to allow individual talents and abilities to be developed and used to the utmost, and I believe that the record of this Government is second to none in this regard. But even more importantly, we all need to work together and mobilise public opinion to overcome the stereotypes of the handicapped and the discrimination they suffer.

Social attitudes, especially those that are based on unexamined assumptions, are highly resistant to change. The task is thus a difficult, but not an impossible one.

Community attitudes are, I believe, in the process of change -- becoming less discriminatory and more accepting of the handicapped and there is rightly a greater assertiveness among the handicapped. We all need to do our utmost to accelerate this process of change and I believe that this Handicapped Person of the Year Award will take us a further step in this process.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have great pleasure in announcing that the Handicapped Person of the Year Award for 1978 has been won by Mrs. Elizabeth Kosmala.

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