



PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

FRIDAY 3 AUGUST 1980

ADDRESS AT THE OPENING OF THE WESTHAVEN COMPLEX

It is a pleasure to be here today to open this new village complex for the Westhaven Association. Your association has a distinguished record of service to disabled people in the Dubbo district and the Orana region.

Now, to your hostels, your sheltered workshops, and your farm, can be added this magnificent new complex. It is testimony to your imagination and hard work and to the strength and vigour with which a community organisation such as yours responds to emerging community needs. Of course, governments have an obligation and a role in meeting these needs. But nothing can replace the personal element that is the hallmark of the work of voluntary organisations. And that is why the most productive welfare programmes are the result of partnership between government and the voluntary sector.

It is as a result of this partnership that the village complex is now a reality. The complex is something of a new direction for the association, and is a project of more than local significance.

Because the residents will live here in their own accommodation, with the assistance of a small team of staff, their confidence and capabilities will develop enabling some of them to move out of this complex into other local accommodation.

This is the essence of assistance to those with handicaps - enabling them to become part of a whole community. For far too long our society has tended to regard people with disabilities as if they were a separate class or caste. Barriers have been created by the very phrase "disabled people". It is an unhappy phrase which focuses on what people cannot do, rather than on what they can do. But it is "abilities, not disabilities, that determine a course in life".

That striking statement appears in a remarkable book which it was recently my privilege to launch - One Step at a Time, by Dr. John Hickman. Dr. Hickman, now a distinguished research mathematician at the Australian National University, has severe cerebral palsy. In his book he describes the battle to master activities so many of us take for granted - such as five years to devise a way of sticking stamps on envelopes. But the obstacles he has to overcome are not only physical ones. Perhaps more difficult, are those obstacles created by social attitudes and prejudices.

Dr. Hickman writes:

"Coping with a moderate or severe handicap is quite often very hard work; and the task is made significantly harder by having to deal with people, who, for reasons best known to themselves, refuse to accept you for what you are".

We must face up to the validity of this criticism. Integrating disabled people into the whole community; enabling each person to achieve his or her full potential - these are the tasks of all of us - government, disabled people, voluntary organisations, and the community at large.

Certainly, improved care for the disabled is central to the government's welfare commitment.

Over many years now, we have provided finance to community organisations through the handicapped persons' welfare programme. In this way, the Government has helped the establishment and operation of facilities for handicapped adults and children. Last year the Government provided substantial sums to eligible voluntary organisations under this programme.

We also encourage the development of rehabilitation programmes to assist handicapped people who want so much to play a useful part in the community. Because of our belief in the great need of this type of assistance to be more freely available, the Government in 1977 widened the eligibility criteria for remedial and training programmes.

Where formerly, rehabilitation had been available only to those with a reasonable prospect of employment; in November 1977, this was extended to the mentally and physically handicapped to enable them to live independently in their own homes. From that day onwards, this rehabilitation has been provided free of charge. And last year, the Commonwealth Government made increased provision for this purpose.

Of course, 1981 has been declared by the United Nations as the International Year of Disabled Persons.

Because access to community life is one of the major issues facing people with disabilities, it has been chosen as a major theme in Australia for this international year. Preparations for the year are already well advanced, with the wholehearted support of the Federal Government.

The Minister for Social Security, Senator Dame Margaret Guilfoyle, has been given special responsibility for co-ordinating the Commonwealth's response to the International Year of Disabled Persons, and she has already met with a Council of Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers to discuss plans for the year.

Advisory bodies have been set up to make sure that a wide range of views is heard about what we should be doing - especially the views of the disabled themselves.

Many Commonwealth Government departments have put forward programmes or proposals covering a tremendous variety of themes - for example; design improvements in buildings and motor vehicles; ideas to extend the involvement of disabled people in the arts and other forms of recreation, and the development of a national employment strategy for the handicapped. This would build on existing programmes to prepare disabled people for employment, and to promote their participation in productive work.

The Westhaven complex brings together a blend of ideas and energies which the international year will aim to capture on a larger scale.

It involves disabled people in the design and implementation of the programmes to assist them. It represents a co-operative venture between government and community, and its essence is to provide the fullest participation by disabled people in the life of the general community.

I congratulate you all, on this pioneering commitment to intellectually handicapped people.

This complex is a practical demonstration of community concern being productively expressed through a very advanced philosophy of assistance.

I wish all those involved in these initiatives every success.

And it is with great pleasure that I declare officially open, this Westhaven village complex.

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