

SPEECH BY PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY FOR DISABILITIES AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES BILL SHORTEN

LAUNCH OF THE PARLIAMENTARY FRIENDS OF POLIO SURVIVORS

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It is great to have so many MPs here with an interest in disability.

Disability is a much bigger issue than political wisdom would have it. That is not to take away from the commitment and generosity of individual MPs, but means that disability does not always get the attention it deserves.

So to have a parliamentary friends group for polio is an important development.

I believe that disability has been invisible in our country for a long time.

One of the most famous people who struggled with the perception of disability was the great American President Franklin D Roosevelt, who survived polio and, sometimes on crutches, sometimes in a wheelchair, sometimes being carried over the shoulder of a security guard while the news cameras looked away, ruled America in time of Depression and war, founded the United Nations and helped build the world we have today.

He hoped he would walk again, but he never did. He showed what could be done, but for him it was not enough. Never again the power to do somersaults, high dives or baseball slides. Never that glad bright motion again.

Ten years after his death a vaccine was able to prevent it, and of the forty thousand Australian cases between the 1930s and 1960s many were cured of it, and many, like Kim Beazley, slowly recovered by swimming winter and summer and twisting up a foot till the pain could no longer be borne.

But for many, the story did not end there.

Over 10,000 Australians still live with the effects of polio. Victims of what was once a scourge and a terror, but is now the subject of their young relatives history essays.

Many now are suffering polio's late effects.

A fatigue unrelated to exercise taken, or time spent awake. Decreased strength and endurance. Unshakeable pain in muscles and joints. Twitchings and spasms. Difficulty breathing. Wakefulness. And, yes, depression, anxiety and low self-esteem.

The story didn't end there, and those who triumphed over adversity and the stares of the ignorant, are battling again the aftershocks of a misery that is back for a final grudge match in their old age.

For such pioneering sufferers of the consequences of cure, Polio Australia was set up in May 2007, in collaboration with a committee of State polio networks. Its purpose was to give the veterans of this long march information they needed, support they needed, comfort they needed for feeling like they did, the comfort that others were like this too.

Many people so placed obscurely feel they have let the side down, that they should be stronger than this, they should be clearer of purpose, and not so weary and sorry in these last furlongs of their life's journey.

Polio Australia was formed to give them again some resonant conviction that hope was possible, and help near, and a network of kindred souls who would give them counsel, and consolation, in this new abiding anxiety in their lives.

Those in this room do not need to be reminded that no man is an island and there need not be any waters of ignorance between us in the last, most rigorous days of our lives, that friends are near, and kindly advisors there to assist us in the final challenges of our existence.

These friends in need I salute and praise the hope you are giving to many.

I thank you.