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Breaking down the barriers: when parliaments display leadership and the executive follows

David Gibson

The problems of deafness are deeper and more complex, if not more important, than those of blindness. Deafness is a much worse misfortune. For it means the loss of the most vital stimulus--the sound of the voice that brings language, sets thoughts astir and keeps us in the intellectual company of man.

Helen Keller (Blind & Deaf American Author and Educator 1880–1968)

As long as we have deaf people on earth, we will have signs... It is my hope that we will all love and guard our beautiful sign language as the noblest gift God has given to deaf people.

George Veditz, 1913 (Former President of USA National Assoc of the Deaf)

Introduction

During the 2011 summer floods and cyclones in Queensland, the public saw someone new in their television picture. Along with the familiar political faces and those of senior emergency services staff, there appeared a face without a name but everyone knew what they were doing and why they were there; even if they did not understand what they were saying. This was the first time interpreters for the deaf were being used translating every spoken word of the hourly media conferences into Australian Sign Language (Auslan) for the deaf and hard of hearing members of the community. This paper will look into the background of the involvement of the deaf community in the Queensland parliament since 2006 and how those first steps by the parliament lead to a greater use of Auslan interpreters during the floods in 2011.

Background

It is estimated that approximately one in six people in Australia have some form of hearing loss and that about 15,500 people are deaf. Whilst it is widely known that hearing loss primarily affects language and communication, what is not as widely recognised is that sign languages such as Auslan have their own unique vocabulary and grammar and are not a complete representation of written or spoken English. Therefore those members of the deaf community who rely upon sign language often

lack a common language to the rest of the broader community. The deaf community have been lobbying to access government services in their own language in much the same way that services are now provided to non English speaking people. They seek access to government programs and services in their own language rather than simply text-based solutions in recognition of the unique elements of Auslan. Across Australia all levels of government and parliaments have statements and documents that outline their access policies for the disabled including the deaf. Whilst these documents are a good starting point and along with the various international conventions and legislation which make a commitment to inclusiveness for those with a disability it is not until we see the real life implementation of those policies that we can determine the effectiveness of them.

It was after my election in 2006 that my thoughts turned to the writing of my maiden speech and it was at this point I realised that as the child of deaf parents I wanted to give some if not all of my speech in Auslan to honour my parents. A request was made to the new Speaker of the Queensland parliament and what began a simple idea resulted in the education of the parliament in what providing real access to the deaf community entailed. After some discussion the Parliament was able to accommodate the request and, on 11 October 2006, the first speech was given in an Australian parliament in Auslan. I was able to give the first part of my speech in Auslan myself and the remainder was translated by a professional interpreter. The use of Auslan interpreters in the Queensland parliament was seen as a major step forward in greater access and inclusiveness for the deaf community. As previously mentioned the deaf community had been lobbying for years for greater provision to Auslan from all levels of Government with haphazard success. This was in part due to the difficulty in gaining access to the appropriate decision makers and from competing priorities within the various bureaucracies. The experience of the Queensland parliament in 2006 highlighted a new opportunity for the deaf community to pursue.

Deaf engagement

Whilst it has been said that deaf people often feel politically and socially isolated from the broader hearing community. A common mistake of governments is that they tend to think about the deaf community from the perspective of issues that relate solely to deafness rather than issues that affect everyone. A good example of this was the introduction of compulsory fire alarm legislation in Queensland in 2007. It became very evident early on that no consideration had been given to the impact upon the deaf community and how the stated policy objective would be achieved when a person could not hear a standard fire alarm. Deaf people are of course interested in their own unique issues such as SMS emergency relay services, better captioning and interpreting services, but they also have an interest and concerns in more 'mainstream' issues like health services, taxation, education and law & order to name a few. This narrow perspective that if the issue is not directly deaf related then the deaf community is not interested, restricts the view of policy

makers to deal effectively with members of the deaf community. These negative impressions leave many deaf people with the feeling they are powerless to change their circumstances. Often this is in part as a result of their lack of understanding or access to the political and policy making processes, and leaves them feeling helpless to change conditions or to develop services that are needed in their communities. It is from this position that the simple act by the Queensland parliament in allowing a speech to be given in Auslan was viewed as a significant achievement.

National Week of Deaf People

Each year in Australia the third week in October is designated the National Week of Deaf People (NWDP). The aim of the NWDP is to give an opportunity for the deaf to celebrate their community, language, culture and history, recognise their achievements as well as making the public aware of their local, state and national communities.¹ It is important, however, to keep in mind that, like any other minority community, the deaf community includes significant diversity even though its members share many characteristics, preferences, and perspectives. Deaf people are also members of other groups such as unions, the aged, property owners, sporting groups, the GLBTG as well as many others. It is however through the NWDP that the deaf community has had an opportunity for their diverse group to work together to raise awareness of deaf issues and achievements.

Following the willingness of the Queensland parliament to provide for a speech to be translated into Auslan, a request was made in 2007 by Deaf Services Queensland to the Speaker for the parliament to look at ways to support the NWDP. To ensure this request had bipartisan support Deaf Services Queensland approached Carolyn Male MP (ALP) and myself (LNP) to co-sign the request letter. This request resulted in the Community Engagement section working with Deaf Services Queensland to determine the best way for the parliament to engage with the deaf community during the NWDP. The final result was the provision of Auslan interpreters within the public gallery for one session of Question Time during NWDP. Over the following years this support has continued and seen other events being included such as a debate between MP's and members of the deaf community as well as morning teas to meet MP's. This support provided by the Queensland parliament is highly regarded amongst the deaf community.

Flexibility of the parliament

The ease of access to the parliament offered an entirely different dynamic to the deaf community. With low levels of bureaucracy between the decision makers and the community, it meant that proposals could be put forward easily and potential obstacles could be identified and ultimately overcome. What was found was that the

¹ Deaf Australia Inc, State Branches Information Kit Section 5.9-1 — National Week of Deaf People

structure of the parliament provided greater flexibility. This may be in part as a result of the goal of parliaments to have all members of the community engaged in the democratic institution enabling full citizenship and full participation in democratic society. The ease at which the parliament is able to work directly with the community to remove any barriers which obstruct these goals highlights its flexibility over the executive. Another advantage the parliament has over the executive is that it is able to engage with the deaf community without having a predetermined position, thus resulting in true engagement. Often the difficulty minority groups' face is that when they engage with policy makers they find there is already a defined position and if that position is not in line with their needs a great deal of resources can be spent trying to change the position.

In working with the parliament the deaf community was able to focus on the strengths and characteristics of their communities rather than in accordance with the policy position of the government and in doing so they were able to highlight their needs. It also provided an opportunity for direct access to ministers and MP's and to familiarise them with the broader needs of the community and the challenges faced with the existing available resources. This willingness to work directly with the deaf community also led to the executive gaining a greater understanding of the issues faced. Instead of just one or two ministers being aware of issues as they pertained to relevant portfolios the parliament was able to give exposure to all its members. Thus, when the Minister for Emergency Services was facing the flood disasters, he already had as a result of the actions of the parliament exposure to the deaf community and a better understanding of their unique needs with Auslan. The ability to raise awareness of their needs through the parliament has proven to be an effective strategy for the deaf community. Especially when compared in contrast to policy agendas that often seem focused on providing major funding for 'techno fixes' for deafness rather than direct assistance.

The events of 2011

Much has been written about Queensland's floods and cyclone in January 2011. During the unfolding crisis, the government commenced regular media briefings from the Emergency Services Complex at Kedron in Brisbane's northern suburbs that were often broadcasted live as information became available. This meant that the use of close captioning was not available or provided and the deaf community was left without a timely source of vital information in their own language. However, shortly after the media briefings commenced and the shortcomings were identified, approaches were made to the government to inform them of the problem and offer Auslan interpreting services. The fact that the need for these services was not previously identified by the government as being required, highlights that there is still much work to be done. However, the confidence shown by the deaf community in being able to approach the Government during a crisis and the understanding by the Premier and Minister for Emergency Services in the importance of the request highlights that progress has been made in accepting the needs of the deaf community.

Conclusion

The awareness of the importance for the use of Auslan in communicating with the Deaf community had its genesis in the actions of the Queensland parliament directly engaging with the deaf community. The willingness of the parliament to embark on an initiative for greater inclusivity displayed leadership and flexibility and, from that leadership, the executive gained a greater understanding of the issues faced by the deaf community. The parliament had also set the new benchmark in this important area of access that ultimately influenced the executive.

With a significant percentage of the broader community experiencing deafness or hearing loss the importance of developing awareness of the needs of these members and the impacts of policy and legislation upon them is necessary. The ongoing program of engagement by the parliament has had multiple benefits, from a greater awareness on the internal workings of democracy to a greater sense of empowerment and engagement by the Deaf community. In short, the needs of the Deaf community were 'heard' by the parliament when for so many years they fell on the 'deaf' ears of the executive. ▲