

# **Balancing, Building and Buffering: Helping People with Disability After 1 July 2006**

**Speech by**

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to the ACE National Conference 2005**

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.

As you all know, this conference is taking place at a crucial time for people with disability and open employment services. As soon as next month, legislation may be introduced into Federal Parliament that, if passed, will open the way for the most dramatic changes ever made to the income support and employment assistance systems for people with disability.

How we respond to this challenge is crucial.

We have the opportunity to influence the way that people with disability will be treated in the future. We can work to make sure that the changes that are introduced are respectful of people with disability, responsive to the limitations that disability places on people and are sensitive to the daily experience of life as a person with disability.

If we are to meet this challenge, I argue we need to do three things: balance, build and buffer.

We need to find a balance between our goals and aims and the obligations placed on us by Government.

We need to build alliances to share our strengths.

And we need to identify ways that we can protect people with disability within the new system that is introduced in July 2006.

I will talk about each of these in more detail, but first I'd like to tell you a bit about the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, or AFDO.

AFDO is a relatively new organisation, although it has its genesis in the old Caucus, which some of you may have been familiar with.

We are the peak national body for organisations of people with disability – that is, organisations that are run by and for people with disability. Our Board is made up of nominees from each of our member organisations and all Board members are people with disability.

I was employed in August last year, and our other two staff members commenced in November. This meant that we became fully operational around the time that the Australian Government began proposing the re-introduction of radical changes to the social security system. This time with a majority in the Senate.

Like ACE, we had to think about the best way to respond to this challenge.

In many ways, AFDO and ACE are similar. Both are small organisations in terms of resources. And both sometimes struggle to be recognised as the legitimate voice of their members.

It is not surprising then that we chose similar ways to respond to the challenge of welfare reform and turned to alliance building.

This year, both ACE and AFDO have played important roles as members of the Disability and Participation Alliance.

The Disability and Participation Alliance was formed in Melbourne in February. It is a loose alliance of 24 national disability and welfare organisations that are working together to improve the participation of people with disabilities in employment and community life.

Through the Alliance, AFDO and ACE have been working to meet the challenge of welfare reform at two levels - high level policy, such as the changes to the work capacity test from 30 hours to 15. And detailed policy, such as the purchasing arrangements for the new Comprehensive Work Capacity Assessments.

Working with the Alliance, particularly the Steering Committee members, which includes ACE, has been vital to AFDO because it has given us ready access to a level of expert knowledge that we would not otherwise have had.

AFDO's expertise is in knowing what people with disability want and need from the systems and services they interact with. We can tell you the challenges people face, and the kinds of things that can make it easier or harder for people with disability. But we do not have in-depth knowledge of the employment system and we are not social security experts.

This is the power of the Alliance. By bringing together organisations that each have specialised knowledge, we have become far more powerful than we could have been individually. And we have learnt from each other. By coming together, we have been able to identify gaps in services, unintended flow on effects, and better ways of providing services.

Through participation in the Alliance, ACE has achieved real and measurable change for the better for both its members, and for people with disability.

By bringing to the table its expertise in providing services to people with disability, ACE has been able to throw light onto many challenges and questions requiring clarification that would not have been identified by other players around the table.

As I said at the beginning of this speech, the world changes on 1 July 2006 and to be prepared for it you will need to undertake some thoughtful planning.

This conference is obviously an important part of this and I'd like to help by throwing some ideas into the mix.

I have identified three strategies that you can use to meet the challenges of the coming year: balance, build and buffer.

First, balance. It is essential that you stay focussed on your core business and your goals – remember why you are in this business.

This will be particularly important in the face of the new powers you are about to be given – the power to work with involuntary clients with disability and the power to recommend that people be financially punished for not meeting their obligations.

Open employment providers do important work with people with disability and you should not lose sight of this.

Second, you need to build. Keep reaching out to other organisations and building alliances. When you are confronted with what seems like overwhelming change, it is natural to want to retreat and focus your energy inwards. But this is self defeating.

You must continue to engage with a broad range of organisations, including those who you might see as competitors. And you must be open to alliances that may seem to come from left-field. For example, the rising influence of Family First may make an alliance with organisations representing sole parents invaluable.

Building alliances also forces us to develop a common language, which can only help us all.

Finally, buffer. As individual organisations and as a sector you need to identify your 'wriggle room' in the new system. As a key player in the implementation of the Government's 'work first' agenda, you will be an important buffer between "the system" and people with disability.

I understand that this role does not sit comfortably with many of you, but remember that with your new power comes new opportunities for discretion.

Look for the ways that you can exercise your discretion to improve the lives of people with disability. For example, if you have the authority to request reviews of work capacity assessments, you may be able to change the life of a person with disability for the better.

Identify your opportunities for discretion, use them wisely and make sure that you communicate your discoveries to your peers and your allies.

By using these strategies, you can achieve three things.

You can retain your viability and identify as a sector.

You can share your wisdom and ultimately hopefully improve the system.

And finally, and most importantly for AFDO, you can make the world that little bit better for people with disability.

Thank you and good luck.

We look forward to continuing to work with you.