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Strides made to equality, but much is left undone

Date: Aug. 4, 2011

From: The Age (Melbourne, Australia)

Publisher: Fairfax Media Publications Pty Limited

Document Type: Article

Length: 681 words

Full Text:

The laws are in place, but discrimination still permeates our society.

MODERN equal opportunity and human rights agencies do much more than handle disputes. Increasingly, we seek to educate about rights and responsibilities, and work to root out the underlying causes of inequality and address them.

In six years with Victoria's Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, I've been pleased to lead an organisation that has transformed its public role.

Where once our mandate focused primarily on individual cases of discrimination, harassment or victimisation, our daily dealings now take in bodies as diverse as prisons, taxi drivers, sports clubs, local councils and small business owners. Our conversations today focus as much on prevention and education as they do on resolving disputes.

Victoria has led the world in equal opportunity and human rights law in the past decade, and I've been incredibly privileged to have steered the commission through such a period of progress. For both the commission staff and for me personally, it's a time to reflect on where we're going next, and celebrate what we've already achieved.

I believe that the staff at the commission would agree when I say I'm leaving an organisation that has the people, the tools and the laws it needs to continue to pursue equality for all Victorians.

Our suite of legislation gives us the instruments to guide government and business as they interact with everyday people. It enables us to deal effectively with individual issues as they arise and then look beyond them to identify what we can do to prevent such issues in the future.

And we are making strides in that direction.

For the first time in years, I believe that, as a society, we are poised to recognise the enormous harm we do to same-sex-attracted people when we dismiss, deny or simply refuse to recognise their sexuality.

I am also deeply heartened by the recent groundswell of support for the National Disability Insurance Scheme. That response does seem to signal that the challenges faced daily by people living with disability are starting to dawn on us, and we're ready to think smarter about how we create better opportunities for such people to participate fully in public life.

But we still have much to do. As much as anything else, advocates still need to convince the average man - or woman - in the street that human rights and equality aren't just lofty terms thrown around by people in ivory towers.

We need to remind ourselves that we're genuinely fortunate to have substantial human rights and equality protections that have the potential to take us beyond individual remedies and help us shape the sort of society we live in. We also need to remember that this potential may take years to realise fully, and will require diligence.

To achieve that, we need to continually test the wind of opinions, ideas and concerns. As a community, we need to engage in complicated, sometimes divisive, conversations, rather than reducing our consideration of serious issues to soundbites.

We also need to sharpen our focus on righting wrongs that are committed almost casually every day. The discrimination experienced daily by Aboriginal people is shameful. And despite all our pride in our multicultural heritage - and we do have much to be proud of - we still allow shades of bigotry to permeate our conversations.

Whatever issues of race, religion and tolerance we're grappling with at a state level are also being played out on the national stage.

Adjusting my focus from a Victorian perspective on diversity, and immersing myself in the broader Australian context will be both a great challenge and a great chance to come at a familiar issue with a fresh perspective.

Both Victoria and Australia are at critical stages in their equal opportunity evolution. We need to remind ourselves that gains in equality and fairness are possible, though incremental, and that they are worth having.

Indeed, we need to approach the next decade of striving for equality as we successfully navigated the last: mindful that equality benefits everyone, and leaves no one behind.

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Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

"Strides made to equality, but much is left undone." *Age* [Melbourne, Australia], 4 Aug. 2011, p. 15. *Gale Academic OneFile*, <https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.slv.vic.gov.au/apps/doc/A278700205/AONE?u=slv&sid=AONE&xid=7ae28cc2>. Accessed 9 May 2020.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A278700205