

## **Fire at Kew Cottages**

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Late on Monday night there was a fire at Kew Cottages, in Melbourne. Imagine, if you can bear to, the terror of the 25 young people, all with intellectual and physical disabilities, in the dark and the billowing smoke, the roar of the flames and the roof falling in. By the time the firefighters got it under control, towards midnight, there were nine dead, and horror.

In a dreadful irony, that very morning the Melbourne Age published a passionately critical letter about the skewed priorities of a society which “cheerfully spent \$80 million on renovating Parliament House, \$30 million on demolishing the . . . Gas and Fuel towers to improve the view, and \$25,000 on a table for the Premier’s dining room, yet cannot afford to fund Kew Cottages so that its residents, completely innocent of any wrongdoing, can eat as least as well as prisoners”. Their treatment, the writer said, was an indictment of the poverty of Victoria’s community concern. He pleaded for adequate funding so the residents might have a decent life in “group houses, clusters or hostels, according to their choice,” on the redeveloped Kew site, as a monument to the generosity of the human spirit.

During 1993 and 1994 parents and supporters of Kew Cottage residents fought a running battle with the Victorian government over drastic cuts in their staffing levels. Community Visitors, established to protect and promote residents’ rights, had heavily criticised the amenities, the tedium of residents’ daily lives - six hours of “activities” a week - and the lack of urgency with which they were addressed, in their 1992 report to the Victorian Parliament. Kew Cottage residents, the most handicapped and least independent, have been waiting two years for a bus, so they could access their community, where many of their more mobile fellows live now.

One grieving Community Visitor told me on Tuesday of his “uneasy feeling”: that on his last visit he had recommended that management call in the Fire Brigade to review their fire safety. There was nothing he could put his finger on, he said: he just felt that they might not be able to move people out as fast as a fire grew. According to firefighters, the unit - quite a new one - had been fitted with sprinklers: they would have been connected to the water supply in “about six weeks”. Bad timing. Fate. No-one’s fault.

Who is responsible for the lives of these people? We have all the same needs: food, shelter, warmth, support and encouragement, friendship and love, to be safeguarded from harm, a sense of control over our own lives, and an environment which is safe and accessible. These are part of what it means to be human. We who do not have a disability meet these needs in ordinary, routine ways, not through a welfare industry or government services, but through the normal day to day interactions of community, friends and family. But these ways are not available to people with disabilities: we do not accept them. Their needs are “special” because they have to be asked for, an obvious drain on community resources. We provide something “special”, but limited. We leave it to their parents and families to urge their cause. We appoint Visitors to link them to the community; to observe, report, advocate with management, write to the Minister, report to the Parliament, and wait, and wait, for the groundswell of public opinion that it is time to be generous, now.

Change has come, but slowly. There has been no swelling of the public heart. In the “can-do” State, there was a greater priority for public monuments and major projects than meeting the human needs of those who are terribly defenceless.

This is the issue: why it is that people with disabilities are forced to rely on large, usually under-resourced, welfare industries for their most basic, ordinary, human needs? Their needs are great but their “rights” to have them met the same as

ours. They are entitled to have them met by the community, not as “special” or an imposition, but as a matter of course. We developed government services because the community did not include the needs of people with disabilities in the business plan, because “ordinary” people don’t have to ask for the same fundamental rights to be met. And we took our time.

Nine deaths and terror in the dark. Is that what it takes to build a monument to the human spirit?