

# Alastair McEwin Speech Transcript

I'd like to introduce one of our keynote speakers for the evening who is Australia's Disability Discrimination Commissioner Alastair McEwan

Alastair commenced his commissioner appointment in July 2016 after holding several senior roles in the disability and legal sector

Including the peak body for Community Legal Centres in New South Wales and People with Disability Australia where he was the Chief Executive Officer

Please welcome Commissioner Alastair McEwin (Applause)

Thank you and hello and good evening everyone

I'm absolutely thrilled and delighted to be here

firstly and I'm mindful of what the former Senator Vanstone said but I do also want to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people and pay my respect to their elders past and present

and I'm sure I'll get into trouble from her later on in the night

I also want to acknowledge all the wonderful people here who are present here today parliamentarian Members of Vision 2020 and stakeholders and in particular I want to acknowledge the number of parliamentarians here

The wonderful Minister for Disability Services Minister Prentice thank you so

much for your commitment it seems like we see each other almost weekly at events and I think that demonstrates Minister Prentice's commitment to getting out and about and really listening to the community listening to what people have

To say I also acknowledge the Shadow Minister for Disability Senator Carol Brown

Thank you also for your commitment and to also all of you here and in particular Board and Staff of Vision 2020

I was so excited to be here tonight, so excited that in my excitement I left my parliamentary pass behind in the hotel room. So I'm wearing quite unusually for me a visitors escort pass so I must remember not to walk out on my own otherwise I'm sure I'll be dealing with security

but also the night got even better when Amanda talked about one of my favourite things in life Haigh's chocolate now I eat Haigh's chocolate because of their practice of employing people with

Disability I also eat it because and you're probably going to work out I'm very biased I'm also a former South Australian born and raised in South Australia and but I'm delighted that Hague had shopped around Australia and

there's one dangerously close to my office in the Strand off Pitt Street Mall so I am a regular visitor but also one thing that Amanda and I also have in common is that we support the same Football Club so we are not that popular in South Australia but I can also say we know which one to follow

so picking up on the theme of what Amanda talked about or the former do you mind if I call you Amanda is that okay I feel like I know Amanda really well because I have the Age Discrimination Commissioner Kay Patterson and from one I used to hear stories about you know Amanda and I in Parliament Amanda and I in Parliament now I'm not going to tell you all the stories that I've been told because I really will be in trouble but I feel like I know Amanda well

so thank you also for the support that you're giving to Vision 2020 I want to talk about two things tonight and then our one what can you do and what needs

to happen for the broader community firstly the example that Amanda gave about a Haigh's chocolate installing a flashing fire alarm for people who are deaf or hearing-impaired now I also have one in the office and it's a simple thing it's a really simple thing it doesn't require innovation it does not require great expense it does not require a working group to come together and brainstorm and try and work out what do we need to do for the poor deaf guy or that kind of thing it doesn't the solutions are out there what is unlimited is imagination

but I'm oftentold when I meet with politicians and I'm not going to name name's tonight but when I meet politician's I say do you employ a person with a disability in your office and what I invariably hear is oh actually you know politics is a hard profession it's a tough profession long hour you have to come to

Canberra in the winter you have to travel a lot you have to know lots of people and I think okay that politics what about being a Doctor we have Doctors with disability what about being a lawyer we have lawyers with disabilities

what about being an uber driver we have uber drivers who you have disability and I am a living example of someone who well I was a young graduate many many years ago out there graduating from Adelaide law school I wanted to do what other graduate wanted to do and that was to go out and

practice law have a fun year I thought at the time of being a judge's associate now you might think being a judge it's a pretty high stressful high a lot of high intensity work I mean you're tasked with interpreting the law of

Australia and you have to get it right. I had a number of interviews with Supreme court judges and there was a very common theme of shaking the head invariably they were older white anglo-saxon males thankfully that changed a bit in the last 20 years but a lot of them were just shaking the head

and saying your deaf I can't really see this working I remember one in particular shaking his head looking down saying it cant work it won't work but then I had an interview with a federal court judge

the interview was going quite well you know what are your aspirations how did you go at uni and then he said now you're hearing impaired and of course in

my mind I start to get ready for how can I defend myself and the simple question he asked was how can we make it work? what do you need in the workplace that will make you be able to work with me and in the end he actually

gave me the job so I'm forever grateful to the Honorable John von Doussa who had me for a year it was a fun year but it was also a year full of learning for not only for him but for the staff about a week after I started the judge said you need a TTY the old deaf phone that we use to use in those days you need that

so let's order it week 1, week 2, week 3 no TTY the judge came into the office one morning and said where is it? ohh... ahh.. registry downstairs they having I was trying to defend registry ohh... there's a bit of a problem with the order so he flew down to registry and spoke to the manager and it turned out that the

manager thought it would too expensive not worth it because I was only going to be there for a year and you know wouldn't worth the expense well you can imagine what the judge had to say about that but our new TTY arrived following week so you can see you can have the most fantastic leader

but you have also got to get the staff behind you so that's the first thing I want to talk to you about why not why can you not employ a person with the disability in your parliamentary office in your workplace out and about Uber and all those other things that we take for granted so think

about what is stopping you and also it is against the law I'm sorry to be so blunt but it is against the law if you have two candidates one with the disability and one without and the one with the disability meet all the

criteria you are looking for and you want that person and you say nobecause of their disability you are breaking the law I would love as commissioner to have enforcement and compliant powers but that just ahhh... if you're ever thinking about reforming the Disability Discrimination Act to the MP's in the room think about giving me some more powers and I

know what I will do with them (Applause) um the second thing I want to talk about very briefly and I know you're all having dinner but I also know I've got a captive audience I hope quotas and

targets and I'm a strong believer in both now no quotas can be unpalatable to many if people feel that it's forced upon them but we have seen it work in some

areas we've seen it where it can work in gender equality and in other areas but targets can also be useful targets are voluntary in the way that an organisation can say right we are missing out on a wonderful pool of talent out there let's set ourselves targets so if there's that sense of ownership that sense of we know what we need to do we are missing out on potential

candidate so for me I think targets are a great way of recognising we do have entrenched discrimination we do have a problem and as Graeme Innes said as mentioned earlier we do have an additive problem I know the rhodes scholar who was blind and he's now working for the

New South Wales Government in in the

Attorney-General's Department so if a  
rhodes scholar can do it you look at the amazing talent that you could be missing  
out on a potential Nobel Prize winner could be amongst your candidate so target a really good way of  
embracing but also of setting the tone of also being leaders and I have to say they're a

Companies that are doing it there are organisations that are doing they know it makes business sense but  
they also know it makes common sense but as well it makes

it fair for everybody I've been absolutely thrilled to be here and also I want to acknowledge acknowledge  
again Amanda and the Board and staff of Vision 2020 and I look forward to seeing your  
campaigning and your work produced results well and truly before 2020 but I  
will also settle for 2020

so thank you (Applause)