

Wanted: work not walls

Has ideology undermined the meaningful occupations of many of the country's intellectually disabled? BY KARL DU FRESNE /PHOTOS BY DAVID WHITE

Ian Gillard was the Taupo branch president of IHC for 10 years. He was a member of the organisation's national council and served on its finance and audit committee. He ran a national calf-rearing scheme that has raised millions of dollars for the intellectually disabled. But how does Gillard feel about IHC now? His disillusionment is unmistakable.

It's not the organisation it used to be, he says. It used to be run by the members – typically parents with disabled children. Then it seemed to be taken over by people Gillard describes as “bureaucratic types who tended to be young, female and university-educated”.

He isn't alone in noting the change in one of New Zealand's best-known non-governmental organisations. His disenchantment is echoed up and down the country by former IHC stalwarts who see the society as having been captured by a rights-based ideology that politicised the care of the disabled.

Traditionally, those with disabilities were seen as vulnerable people requiring special provision and protection. But under sweeping policy changes introduced in 2001, they took on the status of an exploited minority crying out for liberation.

With the publication of the NZ Disability Strategy and the Pathways to Inclusion policy statement, the last Government adopted the goal – supported by IHC and other organisations representing the disabled – of a “fully inclusive society” in which disabled people would be able to work in the open labour market.

“Disability is not something individuals have,” the Disability Strategy said. “What individuals have are impairments.” Disability, the strategy said, was what happened when other people created barriers that prevented the impaired from enjoying a full life.

This ideologically driven change in official attitude was brought into sharp focus by the repeal of the Disabled Persons Employment Promotion (DPEP) Act. Under this legislation, dating from 1960, sheltered workshops run by IHC and other care providers had been exempted from minimum wage laws, enabling them to provide the intellectually disabled with menial work in return for a token wage.

It was an arrangement that most parents with disabled children of working age supported. Under Labour's reforms, however, the system was deemed exploitative and discriminatory. IHC's director of advocacy, Trish Grant, wrote: “Times have changed. We now understand that people with intellectual disabilities have the same needs and aspirations as anyone else.” The attitudes reflected in the DPEP Act, Grant wrote, were discriminatory and contravened the Human Rights Act.

So, in a radical overhaul, the automatic exemption from the minimum wage laws was abolished from November 2007. Henceforth, disabled workers were to be granted the same rights and opportunities as everyone else – including the right to earn the legal minimum wage, to join trade unions and to take annual leave.

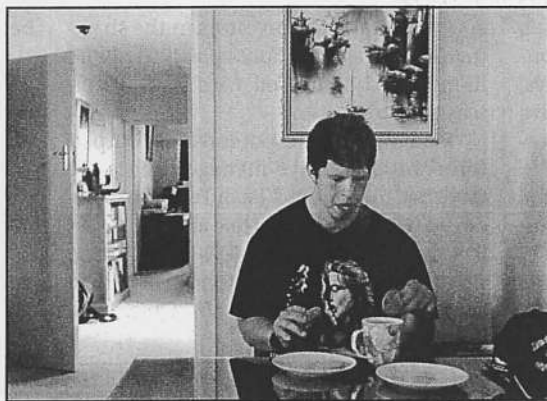
Everyone employed in sheltered workshops was to be individually assessed. Those deemed able to work in mainstream employment would be helped to find real jobs on the open market, while those not capable of earning the minimum wage would be able to apply for an under-rate worker's permit – effective-

ly, an individual exemption from the minimum wage – and be paid according to their productivity.

In a speech welcoming the repeal of the DPEP Act, Green MP Sue Bradford labelled sheltered employment as “systemic oppression”, underpinned by a paternalistic charity model in which deserving unfortunates were expected to be grateful for the favours bestowed on them.

IHC, which operated 70% of the country's sheltered workshops, not only endorsed the change, despite resistance from parents and caregivers, but seized the repeal of the DPEP Act as justification for closing its 76 workshops and “business units”. Chief executive Ralph Jones explained that IHC's primary role was to support people with intellectual disabilities, not run business enterprises for them.

For those who found “real” jobs, the repeal of the DPEP Act meant a big increase in earnings. But for the many less able workshop “clients” who were not capable of mainstream work, IHC arranged something called community participation. In practice, according to critics, this usually means going for walks and



Patrick Pascoe at his parents' New Plymouth home.