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Australia's disability royal commission has faced near media silence – and left politicians unaccountable

Elly Desmarchelier

Ending violence against people with disability requires a detailed plan on how we make housing, education, health and transport equal for us

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📷 A disability royal commission hearing. This week is the commission's final public hearing for the year and submissions close forever on 30 December. Photograph: AAP

For decades Australian royal commissions have uncovered deeply buried truths and brought about hard-fought systemic change.

From the 1987 royal commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody to the 2013 royal commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse and the current royal commission into the robodebt scheme, these royal commissions have shone a light on horrific practices, capturing the public's attention and ensuring governments had no choice but to act.

So it brings me great sadness as a disability rights campaigner to say the royal commission into violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of people with disability currently looks unlikely to join the list of royal commissions that change the country.

In 2023, the disability royal commission (DRC) is headed into its fourth and final year. This week is its last public hearing for the year and submissions close forever on 30 December this year.

We're at the very end of this long journey, and yet when I speak to anyone outside the disability sector most don't even know the DRC is still running.

With the exception of a few select journalists, the media has all but ignored the DRC. Unlike the robodebt royal commission, which seems to be making

the nightly news whenever it sits, the DRC is lucky to get a mention.

National disability peak bodies collectively raised the alarm last week that despite a year's extension to make up for lost time due to the pandemic, the commission has failed to take a deep look into even some basic areas where people with disability are at risk of abuse such as financial security and the justice system.

In what seems to be a departure from other recent inquiries, the DRC has not released any interim recommendations, which means people with disability and the public at large have no idea what the commissioners are prioritising or where they are taking us. The failure of the commission to capture the nation's attention and delve into the systems that are failing people with disability is certainly not due to a lack of people with disability providing detailed and shocking testimony of the decades of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation they suffered.

Every hearing week, people with disability have turned up and shared their devastating stories of being let down by the systems that were supposed to support them. Their testimony is gripping and often comes at a significant personal sacrifice to their own physical and mental health.

But, as a nation, we are not honouring their sacrifice. The DRC is not honouring their sacrifice.

People with disability and the organisations that represent us campaigned for decades for a royal commission. Speaking to many of those campaigners over recent weeks, each defeatedly admitted the same thing - this is not the royal commission we worked so hard to create.

The reason we fought for a royal commission is because they have special and extraordinary powers, including being able to legally obtain documents, call witnesses and investigate potential crimes.

But the DRC has failed to find documents that approved the abusive policies. Not a single politician has been called to answer questions over accountability and, most disappointingly, there has been no sight of an investigation unit like the one set up during the royal commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse to dig deeper into the testimonies of disabled people and ultimately refer cases to the police.

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The DRC is a once in a lifetime opportunity to design a blueprint for how we get disabled people out of settings where violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation are most likely to occur, which means creating a plan for how we transition away from all forms of segregation.

Abuse thrives in darkness, where nobody is there to see, or hear or act.

Ending violence against people with disability requires a detailed plan on how we make all systems - housing, education, health, transport - equal for us. Where we can be free to move around our own communities equally.

The commission can either create that plan or miss its moment, instead tinkering at the edges of recommendations that simply make segregation more palatable.

But disabled Australians deserve nothing short of equality. Is anyone willing to pay attention long enough to care?

Elly Desmarchelier is a disability rights activist

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