



## **SENATOR MITCH FIFIELD**

SHADOW PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY FOR DISABILITIES, CARERS AND THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR  
SENATOR FOR VICTORIA

### **SPEECH**

**Launch of the Deafness Technology Demonstration  
Deafness Forum of Australia  
Parliament House, Canberra  
19 August 2009**

#### **E & OE**

Thanks very much. We are obviously in the forum where some of the great and controversial debates of Australian history have taken place. But I don't think it is fully appreciated that probably 90 per cent of the legislation that passes through our parliament does so with the support of most political parties and the area of disabilities is where partisanship is most readily put aside. And where there is partisanship it is certainly of a much less intense nature. And that's what we are hoping to demonstrate here today.

I pay tribute to Senator Rachel Siewert and her staff for organising this event and for being the chief sponsor of this demonstration, and also Bill Shorten, who is genuinely passionate and committed to the cause that he has. We saw that fairly well demonstrated in the situation which Bill referred to, where Brendan Nelson and Kevin Rudd together announced that infant Australians by the end of 2010 will have their hearing assessed. And that's a great thing. We want to see some more of that. And we want to see situations where people who have good ideas presented in good faith are taken up by Government. That was a very practical demonstration of that.

Obviously I acknowledge the great Alex Jones, the chairperson of the Deafness Forum. For those that don't know you can now actually carry Alex with you. If you look at the iphone with the Auslan tutorial on it, every single shot is of Alex. And you can tell that it was actually produced over a period of time because you get to see about half a dozen of Alex's hairstyles. In fact I suspect that Alex has grown his beard so that he can now go incognito. I understand Alex is occasionally mobbed by children who can't believe that he's actually the guy in the iphone. So congratulations on that work Alex and to the Institute for Deaf and Blind Children who were involved in that important project.

I was first exposed to hearing impairment through my grandfather, which is a not an uncommon thing I'm sure. But he actually lost most of his hearing through a search for beer. You might think that sounds odd. Well he was a veteran of the First World War. He fought at the battle of Somme, and during a lull in proceedings he decided that he should head to the nearest town in search of beer. He was where he shouldn't have been and a shell landed next to him. That's how he lost his hearing. That was the first time that I came across the frustration sometimes felt and what was at the time a fairly rudimentary form of hearing aid.

My own hearing I'm sure, would also have been adversely affected if I could actually work out how to load a song onto an iPhone or an MP3 player, but I haven't been able to. What that indicates is that through technology, the ways in which people lose their hearing or suffer hearing impairment will change. But at the same time technology will also allow us to better assist people who are deaf or have a hearing impairment. And that is what we are here for today.

It's been a long time since ear horns and we've come through a range of supports – TTY, the National Relay Service and a range of new technologies. We're here today to look at the future. And I was incredibly excited upstairs in the committee room looking at some of the demonstrations. One of the reasons I was particularly excited was I discovered that if there is a double dissolution election and I happen to lose my seat there may actually be a future for me as a re-speaker, working for AI. I put the headphones on and I wasn't too shabby. So that certainly gave me hope for the future.

There is a lot that government, there is a lot that Parliament can do to better support people who have a hearing impairment. And I know in Parliament House itself we have a way to go, there are some things we should be doing that we are currently not doing. And there is, I think, a general will to tackle that. But to all of the exhibitors who have come here today and also to Kathryn Greiner, thank you for making the trek to Parliament House, we know it is a long way for many of you to come. But we are very keen, we're very excited to help. And as a result of the exhibition today all Members and Senators in all parties, will be much better equipped for that task.