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Autistic Australians call for Sen. Hughes' disqualification from the Select Committee on Autism

Senator Hollie Hughes' recent statement to the Australian Senate (Hansard, 24/08/2021) provides further evidence that she is unsuitable to chair the Select Committee on Autism. The Board of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network of Australia and New Zealand call for Senator Hughes to acknowledge the biases that prevent her impartiality and to immediately recuse herself of the position.

Senator Hughes demonstrated yesterday that she has not kept up to date with the latest research and her knowledge of autism is firmly stuck in the past. Her assertion that intensive early intervention, more commonly known as ABA, constitutes best practice is grossly misguided and contradictory to the research evidence (e.g., [Sandbank et al., 2019](#)). As Autistic adults, we take offense to the Senator's promotion of a therapy that seeks to teach Autistic children to appear less Autistic and draw her attention to studies that have found higher rates of post-traumatic stress symptoms in Autistic adults who have been subject to these interventions in childhood. It is our view that Senator Hughes' experience of choosing early intervention for her own child has introduced deeply-rooted biases that impact her judgement.

The Senator went even further in her statement to express her clear disdain for a significant proportion of the Autistic community, leveling accusations of a "woke agenda", questioning the identity and worth of "so called autistic voices", and undermining the validity of lived experience. ASAN logically and unequivocally states that **Autistic people are the foremost experts of their own lived experience**. It is critical that Autistic voices are both heard and respected by the Senate Select Committee on Autism.

It is evident from the [Hansard](#) that Senator Hughes has an extremely narrow understanding of the daily reality and experiences of Autistic people. Not only does she use obsolete diagnostic labels and descriptors, but she dismisses the complexity and diversity of Autistic presentations. Many of those amongst our membership, and our Board, are living proof that being educated or employed in no way excludes one from challenges such as sensory overload, self-harm, and episodic non-verbalism. We also remind Senator Hughes that being non-speaking should never preclude a person from having a voice and (ironically) caution her from taking an overly literal approach.

The Autistic community faces significant challenges across all aspects of life: we have lower employment rates than the general population as well as the disabled community as a whole; we face barriers to fundamental services such as healthcare; we experience mental health conditions at disproportionate rates; our lives are a great deal shorter than those of non-Autistic people; and we are up to eight times more likely to die by suicide. We respectfully ask Senator Hughes to reflect on her statement, and implore the Senate to appoint a Select Committee Chair who is more capable of championing the reform that our community desperately needs.

For further comment, please contact Abby Sesterka, Deputy Chairperson, ASAN-AuNZ.

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