

# Sir Roderick – an unlikely political protester

**When Sir Roderick Deane was made a knight in the Queen's Birthday honours he said he felt most proud of the work he has done in the disability sector.**

He was talking about the fight he waged as IHC President to close down institutions and to make sure children with disabilities could go to normal schools.

This was a very personal battle by the man who in public life has led many of New Zealand's biggest businesses – the Electricity Corporation, Telecom, Fletcher Building, ANZ National Bank and Te Papa. Sir Roderick and his wife Gillian became involved because of their child.

"My daughter Kristen had Rett syndrome and we had difficulty getting a diagnosis for many years. We could not get her into a school in New Zealand," he says.

That was back in the 1970s, and the breakthrough came only when Sir Roderick was appointed to the International Monetary Fund and Gillian and Kristen moved with him to Washington in 1974. "We were offered positions in six schools in two weeks. It was such a huge contrast. It was then that I realised that New Zealand did not provide for free education for every child," he says.

Sir Roderick joined IHC at first on its finance committee. He was elected vice president in 1982, then president from 1988 to 1994. During this time pressure was growing to change the Education Act to protect the rights of disabled children. Pressure too was building to close the psychopaedic institutions and to care for people with intellectual disabilities in the community.

"That was when we started buying hundreds of houses," he says. "We went along to the bank and we borrowed about \$30 million."

Sir Roderick joined a "march against the institutions" to Parliament in 2001 to

celebrate the announcement that the Kimberley Centre in Levin was to close. It finally shut its doors in 2006 – the last of the institutions. "That is the only time I have ever done a political march. I am not normally a political protester."

Changes to the Education Act were hard won and IHC struggled with successive National and Labour Governments. "What they were worried about was that it was going to be so expensive to provide a free education for all youngsters with disabilities". The Act was finally changed in 1989.

"These were very passionate campaigns in which I was a very active participant. That is why it gave me so much satisfaction. There is nothing more important for all of us than being able to live normal lives in the community and to build upon our talents, whether or not we have a disability."

He says there have been huge improvements in the disability sector. People with disabilities are now able to live in the community and attend regular schools. But what worries him now is the lack of employment opportunities.

"That is the area that is still the most difficult really – to get jobs for people with disabilities." But he hopes new technology, such as iPads and voice-recognition software, will open the way to employment for more people. He sees these as exciting developments.

Sir Roderick was made a Knight Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit (KNZM) for his contribution to business, policymaking and for supporting the arts and disability sector for more than 30 years.

Sir Roderick and Lady Gillian Deane are joint patrons of IHC and Sir Roderick is

Chairman of the IHC Foundation. Gillian is National Coordinator of Rett New Zealand and Chair of the Deane Endowment Trust. Their only child, Kristen, died at the age of 27.



*IHC patrons Sir Roderick and Lady Gillian Deane.*

## Did you know?

- A film was made of the 'march against institutions', in which Sir Roderick participated, entitled *People First March to Parliament* (7 September 2001).
- The march was organised and led by representatives of People First to celebrate the announcement of the closing of the Kimberley Centre in Levin. Marchers presented a petition to then Minister of Disability Issues Ruth Dyson.
- The film has been converted to DVD format and is available for borrowing from the IHC Library.