



Congratulating Kurt Fearnley

Main Committee

24 November 2009

Sharon Grierson MP

Ms Grierson: (Newcastle) (4:03 PM) — I rise today to commend a wonderful man, a constituent in my electorate of Newcastle, Mr Kurt Fearnley. Last week he completed an absolutely astounding feat: he quite literally crawled the Kokoda Trail. Kurt is profoundly disabled and usually confined to a wheelchair. However, his achievement was astounding. He set his goal and he made the distance after a very rigorous training regime.

Many people know the challenge of that track. Many people have failed. Kurt did not, and that is something that we always expect from Kurt. He is a legend and Newcastle's very own Superman. I do not have enough time to tell you all the things I would like to tell you about Kurt. He is the youngest of five children. At school athletics carnivals he could push his wheelchair as fast as any other kids could run. He is now considered one of the best wheelchair racers in the world. His achievements as a Paralympian representing Australia are also at the highest level—gold and bronze medals. He has won the New York City Marathon for four years in a row.

But he does not rest on his laurels. He is an inspiration; he takes on astounding tasks. When he took on the Kokoda Track, not only did he train physically for it but he also undertook the challenge to raise awareness for men's health. All the money he raised was donated to this cause. Being the intelligent and sensitive young individual he is, he also researched the history of the track and paid particular homage to the Aussie diggers who served there, to the many people who supported him on the track and to the Papua New Guinean locals who assisted his success. Anyone who heard his interviews would understand what a profound experience it was for him and what a generous man he is. He is an inspirational young Novocastrian. He does exemplify the toughness and resilience of our town. He embodies all the things that are good about the human spirit.

We have heard in news today of his experience at the hands of Jetstar, having to crawl through Brisbane airport. We have also heard Jetstar's apology. But what happened to Kurt should not happen to anyone. It is undignified. It is an insult, and it certainly must never occur again.

I welcome the Prime Minister and the Parliamentary Secretary for Disability and Children's Services' understanding of these issues and for their taking a special interest in them. I also welcome the Prime Minister's announcement last night that the government will engage the Productivity Commission to examine the feasibility of a national long-term care and support scheme, a scheme that would address the issue of improving support to those who incur a disability in any circumstance. I know that the Prime Minister made special mention of Kurt last night and saluted him when making this announcement. Kurt Fearnley is an amazing individual. I take great pleasure in reporting his efforts to the House. I congratulate him and thank him for the work he does mentoring and inspiring young people in our city of Newcastle.