

# **Disability funding is no indulgence, Mr Abbott**

By ABC's Stella Young

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Tony Abbott speaks at the National Press Club. Photo: Tony Abbott speaks at the National Press Club. (7.30 Report)

In a speech yesterday at the National Press Club, Tony Abbott outlined a plan for the nation if he is to land top job.

In summary, he wants the budget to be in "strong surplus", and until that happens there's a whole lot of stuff that's going to have to wait.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is one of those things that's been put on the "let's wait and see" list.

Knowing that it would be a burning question, Abbott said, "the Coalition strongly supports the Productivity Commission's recommendation for a disability insurance scheme but, with an estimated price tag of \$6 billion a year (roughly equal to the Commonwealth's current interest bill) this important and necessary reform can't fully be implemented until the budget returns to strong surplus."

Of course, elsewhere in the speech he (predictably) said, "after all, the measure of a decent society is how it looks after its most vulnerable members".

Excuse me while I pause for an eye roll. If I had a dollar for every time I've heard that one, I could probably just fund the NDIS myself.

The thing is, Mr Abbott, fixing the broken disability system we have in this country isn't like saving all your pocket money until you could finally afford that CD player you desperately wanted when you were 12. It's not a luxury item that we can simply do without until there's some spare cash floating around. What you said yesterday made it very clear that you see improving the living conditions of people with disabilities and our families as an indulgence.

This is beyond alarming. Whether or not we have the money, this can't wait. The seven-year timeline outlined by the Gillard Government is already far too long for many people with disabilities and our families. If you were really interested the quality of our lives (and our votes) as citizens, your speech would have been a commitment to making this happen sooner.

"As far as I'm concerned, there should never be first and second-class Australians based on where they were born, how they worship, or the length of time their forbears have been here," you said. But your relegation of the NDIS to the if-we-have-the-

spare-cash basket would rather suggest that you find the idea of a second-class based on whether or not you were born with a disability to be perfectly acceptable.

I don't.

Are you hoping to delay fixing the system for long enough that we'll all just go away and forget about it? We're not going to.

Would you be happy to lead a nation that ranks last among OECD countries for disability care and support and not do anything to change it? That's the current situation.

Can you define "strong surplus"? Are we talking an extra \$6 billion that it'll take to fund the first year of the NDIS? Or are we talking enough to pay for all the other things that need doing too, plus having a really hefty savings account? The budget has been in surplus before and no-one did anything about disability support then.

Are you willing, along with your promised stint in remote Indigenous communities (where you'll also come across a great many people with disabilities and their families, mind you) to spend a week every year living as people with disabilities live in Australia? Not one of those silly simulation exercises, where you go out and about in a rented wheelchair or with a blindfold on, but a week where you live the real life of someone with a disability.

For that week, your ancient wheelchair will be broken and you won't be able to afford to fix it. A stranger will come to your house and shower you. Not daily, of course, because many people who require that kind of personal support are only entitled to two showers a week under the current system. For the other days you'll feel grotty and reluctant to leave the house, even if you had the equipment and support to do so. You might even be living in a nursing home where you are the youngest resident by 50 years, because you can't access any support to live in your own home. Perhaps for that week you'll be unable to speak to or interact with anyone, because you're still waiting for funding for a communication aid. You won't have a job, despite being a highly capable employee not just willing but desperate to participate in the workforce.

And during that week you might hear a speech from a leader who wants to take charge of the nation, to make the economy strong and to guide the future of the country. But they'll tell you, as a person already living in poverty and desperation that you have to wait to live in that country as anything but a second-class citizen until the budget is in surplus.

They'll tell you that your life and your potential to be a contributing member of society are not as important as money.

They'll also be telling you that your own taxes, if you were to be given the great privilege of paying them, would be worthless to the economy. I think this is the point you're really missing, Mr Abbott, and it's a point the disability sector has been making over and over.

If you invest in people with disabilities, we can contribute to the surplus. If people have access to equipment, to education and training, to support in the workplace, we can work. We won't be relying on the DSP. We can ourselves employ people as our support workers. We can participate in the economic life of the nation you so desire to see in "strong surplus".

If you support children with disabilities by giving them what they need, their parents can also re-enter the workforce. We're not just talking about people with disabilities, we're talking about our families as well.

Investing in Australians with disabilities is not only the key to achieving your "measure of a strong society by the way it treats its most vulnerable citizens" (or whatever variation of that cliché you want to trot out). Investing in Australians with disabilities is also the key to the health of the economy.

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