

Coalition will act with ALP on disability scheme

- by: *Tony Abbott*
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There are four million Australians with a disability. There are at least half a million Australians whose profound disabilities mean that they can't do what other Australians take for granted. This is a very large number of people who quite rightly expect the delivery of better services to our most vulnerable citizens.

At present, the quality of the professional care that people with disabilities receive depends very much on where they live and how their disabilities were brought about.

People with disabilities from work or traffic accidents normally receive the best available services co-ordinated through state traffic-accident commissions or workers' compensation insurers.

The quality of life of many other people with serious disabilities depends on whether they can win the "litigation lottery" by successfully suing for negligence someone with deep pockets or a good insurance policy. It can further depend on whether they or their guardians are good managers of money.

People with disabilities from birth or from mishaps not covered by insurance invariably rely on the help of state and territory-run disability services.

Mostly, these are staffed by people of expertise and compassion struggling to meet demand that always exceeds supply.

Most people with disabilities in this position wait weeks, months or years for professional services, personal support or housing. In the meantime, their families suffer financial hardship, mental stress and sometimes much worse: family breakdown, mental illness and even suicide.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme aims to provide to everyone with serious disabilities the same range and quality of services as is currently available to people injured at work or in a traffic accident. A national insurance system means that equitable treatment, rehabilitation and personal assistance will be provided regardless of how or why someone acquires a disability. A bit like Medicare for medical treatment, the disability insurer will fund quality services at a competitive price to give the best possible outcome to the person with a disability and also to taxpayers.

No longer will the majority of people with disabilities have to queue for whatever the public system can provide. Instead, everyone will have access to

a growing range of high-quality services which the national disability insurance scheme will fund.

This, in any event, is the cherished dream of disability advocates such as Bruce Bonyhady whom I recently met in the home of Milly Parker. A traffic-accident survivor, Milly has been treated and rehabilitated back into the workforce and independent living through the Victorian Traffic Accident Commission. Others at that meeting, though, had been dependent upon whatever was available through state governments. They had mostly received only the services that the system could afford rather than those that they needed most.

The Productivity Commission has outlined a seven-year timetable for the shift from state government-funded and provided services to services provided by a wide range of organisations. The commission has estimated that providing the right level of services to people with disabilities will cost an extra \$6.5 billion a year beyond the current combined state and federal spending.

The government and the opposition have committed themselves to implementing the commission's recommendations but, for all its insinuation that the NDIS is already a "done deal", the Gillard government has not made any funding commitment other than \$20 million to work with the states and disability bodies on transition arrangements.

I am currently cycling through Victoria for my annual Pollie Pedal bike ride and I am meeting people with disabilities and their carers in suburbs and towns between Geelong and Canberra. Carers Australia, the beneficiary of this year's ride, will be helping to arrange these meetings. I suspect that support for the NDIS will figure prominently in these discussions.

The Productivity Commission said that financial arrangements, legislation and administrative procedures for the scheme should be fully in place by the middle of 2014 with regional rollouts to follow initially costing \$900m a year. The scheme should be fully implemented by the middle of 2019.

The Coalition intends to work constructively with the government to implement the NDIS as quickly as possible.

Fully implementing the NDIS will require a return to strong surplus. It's one of the reasons why getting unnecessary government spending under control is so important. As opposition spokesman for disabilities Mitch Fifield has said, achieving a surplus is not an obstacle to implementing the NDIS; it makes the NDIS sustainable. For instance, if the government did not face an interest bill projected to be \$6bn a year, the cost of the NDIS would be so much easier to meet.

In the meantime, there's much that should be done, beyond merely arguing with the states about who will pay, to start the process of rolling out better services. This is something that the government must tackle in the upcoming budget.

LISA Comment:

The Productivity Commission described the present disability services as in crises and chaos – a shambles. Slow release of Federal (NDIS) funding will mean little more, than more of the same!

The Productivity Commission outlined a seven-year timetable for the **shift from state government-funded and provided services, to services provided by a wide range of organisations.**

Slow release of NDIS funding will allow the traditional government unaccountable services to hold their line, and re-group to remain a service provider within NDIS funding.

At present state governments ensure their direct services are well funded in comparison with non government (CSO) services. Being used to having money to burn, the Productivity Commission suggested the present state government direct services may not be viable under NDIS funding levels.

We suggest state government direct care services will do everything possible to maintain their status quo. Even to the extent of demanding/negotiating a higher NDIS assessment for their clients, and/or using state funding to supplement NDIS funding levels.

It is certainly wonderful to hear that the majority of people with disabilities will no longer have to queue for whatever the public system can provide. Let's hope this will not be the public system using NDIS funding to maintain its status quo. Rather than everyone have access to a growing range of high-quality services which the national disability insurance scheme will fund.

On the suggestion of existing state government funding being, overnight, replaced by NDIS federal funding to maintain similar questionable service level and quality, the Productivity Commission suggested the person or their family take their NDIS funding package and seek an alternative service.

The million dollar question is, "What support will people have to seek alternative services with their new found NDIS freedom (ISP) funding?" Moving people with moderate and high support needs can be extremely traumatic for them.

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