

National Disability Awards Ceremony-2011

Parliament House, Canberra – 22 November 2011

Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, said,

It is a pleasure to be able to join you for the 2011 National Disability Awards.

I've been at three other events tonight but I really wanted to make sure I could drop-in to say hello to you all and to congratulate all the nominees and all the finalists in this year's awards.

Because what you do matters.

Because every idea, every product, every service that gives greater opportunity to people with disability is a triumph.

A victory for securing the dignity of work.

The freedom that comes from access and mobility.

And the simply joys of friendship and support.

Our 24 finalists for 2011 were selected from more than 400 nominations.

Among them are advocates, builders, educators, business people and for the first time, health and wellbeing providers who have created equal access for people with disability.

The sheer diversity of this year's nominees demonstrates the depth and breadth of the renewal that is taking place in our community.

We have employers and training providers working to break down the barriers for people with disability.

Designers working to ensure that people with disability can take for granted things like using a kitchen or taking a child to play in the park, that others take for granted already.

Advocates working to advance the rights of people with disability.

I'm also very proud of work we've been able to do as a Government since 2007 to make your job easier.

We're doubling Commonwealth funding for State and Territory disability support services – \$1.2 billion this year alone.

We've provided early intervention, support and services for children with autism.

We introduced the Better Start initiative to support early intervention in the vital pre-school years.

The National Disability Strategy to promote participation and create a more inclusive society.

The first National Carer Strategy to recognise and support our 2.6 million carers.

And just last week I announced \$2 billion to deliver an historic pay rise for our wonderful community sector workers.

So things have changed.

We are making the system better.

But in the final analysis, the disability support system in Australia needs more than tweaking at the edges.

It is a system that no longer adequately serves our community.

A system that has been characterised as:

Unfair.

Underfunded.

Fragmented.

Inefficient.

Not the kind of system we would wish for ourselves or those who are dear to us.

Friends, we have an ethos in this country and it's called the "fair go".

A pledge that speaks profoundly to who we are as a people and the values that define us in the world.

A promise that goes to the very heart of our dignity as human beings and our solidarity as Australians.

Successive groups have sought to redeem that promise: women, Indigenous people, migrants, to name a few.

All calling for our values of fairness and equity to be made real in their own lives and circumstances.

It is testament to the greatness of this nation that we have done it.

We have healed injustice and redressed inequity.

But if there is one part of our society of whom this cannot be said, it is Australians living with disability.

This field has been called the last frontier of civil rights.

Certainly your pleas fell on stony ground for many thankless years.

That happened, I think, because disability confronts us with our own worst fears and how easily fate could separate us from our easy, comfortable certainties.

We did it, also, because the scale of the problem was just too big.

But in a nation unafraid of bold policy challenges, that is a reason for action, not inaction.

It took time, but we addressed inequality in health through Medicare and inadequacy of retirement incomes through universal superannuation.

We must do the same for people with disability.

Because too many of our fellow Australians have lived incomplete lives for want of support.

Because too many generations of parents have gone to their graves not knowing what the future held for their children with disability as they grew to middle age.

So I say this as your Prime Minister tonight: Not another generation will face that agonising choice.

The nation has opened its heart and it will not be closed again.

That is why we asked some of the nation's finest minds at the Productivity Commission to report on the sector.

We knew they would not be moved by sentiment or expediency.

They would focus only on the evidence.

On the best practice deployed around the world.

And, of course, the Commission saw the truth and recommended sweeping and fundamental reform.

This won't be easy.

It won't be fast.

The reason for our measured pace is simple; a reason that honours all the waiting and frustration you have been through - we want to ensure this is done properly.

Not a false start or a half-measure that only creates disappointment later on.

Like the NBN, we want to do this once.

We want to do it right.

Not just another spending program to be raised and cut as budgets come and go.

But a scheme built to last.

A scheme that will stand alongside Medicare and the age pension as a fundamental strand of Australia's social compact.

Friends, with our States and Territory partners, we will build a robust, responsive and consistent system for the future.

A system that will serve people with disability with integrity and compassion.

A system that is consistent and fair.

A system that means funding and services no longer comes down to a lottery of where you live or the nature of your disability.

When I released the Productivity Commission Report in August, I said that we wanted to start work immediately.

In three short months we've made remarkable progress:

- At COAG, I secured State and Territory agreement on the need for fundamental reform.
- We have established an Advisory Group of disability experts and advocates, led by Dr Jeff Harmer to help lay the foundations for reform.
- The COAG Select Council of Treasurers and Disability Services Ministers meet for the first time last month and agreed to lay the foundations for a National Disability Insurance Scheme by mid-2013, one year ahead of the timetable set out by the Productivity Commission.

And tonight I'm pleased to announce that the Select Council has considered these principles and they have been agreed by State and Territory First Ministers, although we do still have some work to do with Western Australia, and we hope to have the remaining issues finalised before the end of the year.

These principles are the reform benchmarks to which we will hold ourselves:

- That people with disability will be supported to participate in and contribute to social and economic life to the extent of their abilities.
- That people with disability and their carers will have certainty and receive the individualised care and support they need over their lifetime.
- That the care and support needs of people with disability are met over their lifetime through an insurance approach, not the crisis-driven approach of the past.
- And that people with disability will be able to exercise more choice and control in their lives.

Let there be no mistake.

The decision I announced in August is a not just a preliminary hint or an aspiration.

It is the green light for a National Disability Insurance Scheme in this country.

The time for words is over.

The time for action has come.

We will get this thing done.

In reaching this historic juncture, I am humbled by the integrity and persistence of those who have advocated for a National Disability Insurance Scheme.

There have been many epic policy battles in our system of government.

I think of those who spent decades arguing for a carbon price or for the Apology.

But you have waited 40 years since a great Australian, Gough Whitlam, first pledged a disability insurance scheme for our nation.

It was right in 1972 – it remains right today.

And I believe the NDIS – alongside the carbon price – will be a defining achievement of this term of government as Medibank and recognising China were for Gough.

I know a journey this long and difficult would not have been possible without some pretty remarkable people.

If I single out one of those people tonight, it is to acknowledge what is best in this whole movement and to honour the resolve you have shown in the face of extraordinary odds.

I refer, of course, to John Walsh.

The Productivity Commission report is a piece of policy work that will long be known for its intellectual rigour and technical brilliance.

Qualities that helped embolden my Cabinet to undertake this reform with such confidence.

John has shown extraordinary leadership, not just over the last 18 months, but over many, many years developing the ideas that underpin the NDIS.

He stands as witness to the dignity of public service.

To the enduring value of good public policy grounded in reason and evidence.

And to the reality that change is always possible for those who never give in.

On behalf of the Australian people, I offer this special award to Mr John Walsh:

“to recognise his outstanding contribution to the disability sector and for the pivotal role he has played in the Productivity Commission’s report to Government on long term disability care and support”.

Congratulations John.

Congratulations to all our winners and nominees tonight.

And my deepest thanks to those who have campaigned so hard through these challenging years.

You made the case with eloquence and courage.

You kept the faith in hard times.

And because of your belief, the system will change.