

Victoria presses case for disability plan

“Push shuns Abbott's cautious stand”

By Josh Gordon, The Age State Political Editor, Friday 3 February 2012

The Baillieu government has upped the ante on a national disability insurance scheme by urging Canberra to commit to spending more than \$6 billion a year on the policy "as a matter of growing urgency".

It comes just days after federal Opposition Leader Tony Abbott said a Coalition government would not fund the policy until the budget was in "strong surplus".

The state government has been pressing the case for the scheme since the 2010 election, with Community Services Minister Mary Wooldridge last year offering to host a trial to test for any "bugs" before a national introduction in 2015.

Late last year she also announced funding for research to help prepare for the "no fault" insurance scheme, saying it could revolutionise the lives of thousands of disabled people, along with their families and carers.

But Victoria could be forced to wait, with Mr Abbott this week signalling that a scheme would not be an immediate priority for the Coalition. "The Coalition strongly supports the Productivity Commission's recommendation for a disability insurance scheme but this important and necessary reform can't fully be implemented until the budget returns to strong surplus," he said.

The Baillieu government has previously argued that the scheme should be fast-tracked so it was not bogged down in years of "bureaucratic debate".

Asked about the implications of Mr Abbott's comments, Ms Wooldridge said the state government remained committed to driving the implementation of the scheme.

She said the state Coalition [] agreed that a strong budget position would help and also agreed with the Productivity Commission's recommendation that the Commonwealth should fund the scheme because of its large revenue base.

"As a matter of growing urgency, we need the federal government to commit to the Productivity Commission's recommendation," Ms Wooldridge said.

Under the current system, the federal government spends about \$2.3 billion on the disability sector, with the states and territories spending about \$4.7 billion. The Productivity Commission concluded that an extra \$6.5 billion a year would be needed to fix the "underfunded, unfair, fragmented and inefficient" current system, bringing the total to \$13.5 billion.

The commission controversially recommended that the Commonwealth should be made entirely responsible for funding disability support services, while the states should be made to abolish inefficient taxes to offset the loss of spending responsibility.

Shadow disability minister Danielle Green said the conflicting positions of the state and federal Liberals could cause the scheme to be dumped.

"This will be a double whammy for Victorians living with a disability because the Baillieu government has simply seen the [scheme] as an opportunity to cut funding to disability programs and cost shift to the federal government," Ms Green said.

Federal Disability Reform Minister Jenny Macklin said Mr Abbott should explain to people with a disability, their families and carers why he was putting the reform on the back burner.

"We are working with the states and territories to lay the foundations necessary for a scheme by mid-2013," Ms Macklin said, "and we've committed funding for the critical design and development work that is needed for a launch of a [national disability insurance scheme]."

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