



DISABILITY MOVING ON TO CENTRE STAGE AT LAST

BY KEN BAKER



It's a lop-sided world when Australian newspapers devote several front pages to the car financing fracas dubbed 'Ute-gate', but few, if any, column inches are given over to the desperate, chronic shortage of disability support services across the nation.

The fact that disability doesn't ignite political heat baffles people in the disability sector; but the intricacies of disability policy and the opaque jargon used by insiders are hardly likely to engage the interest of politicians and the public.

Still, when Bill Shorten became Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities 19 months ago he was shocked at the prevailing indifference. Speaking at the national press club a few months ago, Shorten described disability as "the last frontier of practical civil rights in this country".



Bill Shorten

He went on: "If someone was told they could not get on a bus, train or taxi because of their sex, or their old age, or the colour of their skin, there would be an outcry. If someone is unable to get on a bus because their wheelchair won't fit, we make no comment – we turn a blind eye."

A strong advocate inside Government is a boon for the disability sector, especially one like

Shorten who tells it like it is: "without access to robust and adequate specialist service systems, the rights of people with severe disability and their carers remain theoretical," he stated.

Access to "adequate specialist services" is a right denied to several thousand Australians and will remain so as long as we do not get state, territory and federal governments to make disability a priority.

There is no simple solution, but three key strategies have emerged in the last few months that point to substantial change.

Strength in unity

In June, three national peak organizations – the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, National Disability Services and Carers Australia – joined forces to form the National Disability and Carer Alliance. The aim of the Alliance is to unite the disability sector around big issues and debate differences constructively.

As in politics, divisions in the disability sector weaken our efforts, and communicating confusing or conflicting views to governments gives them an excuse to do nothing. I'm not opposed to diversity of opinion or robust debate, but on large matters where we have common interests, it's vital to present a united view if we are to get governments to listen. The National Disability and Carer Alliance which complements similar coalitions in some states and territories, will help to achieve this unity.

The Big Idea

An inspiring big idea which has broad appeal and can be communicated simply has also emerged: a National Disability Insurance Scheme. (Bruce Bonyhady's article on the scheme appeared in the June issue of Link.) Currently, Australians who are born with or acquire a significant disability have no entitlement to disability services. With a National Disability Insurance Scheme however, people with severe disability would be entitled to the long-term care and support they need to engage in the life around them – at home, school, the community and in the workplace.

There's no escaping the fact that working through the details of a National Disability Insurance Scheme will be complex and, in part, contentious. But this is a compelling idea whose time has come.


Although there's a long way to go before governments commit to a NDIS, public support for the idea is growing, and the idea has been endorsed by The Australian, broadcaster Alan Jones and the ACTU Congress, which gives some indication of its broad appeal. Promoting the NDIS is a key goal of the newly formed National Disability and Carer Alliance.

National Disability Strategy

Within the next few months Australia will have its first ever National Disability Strategy. If well-crafted and well-supported across governments, it will result in much-needed policy changes and investment in resources. And with a National Disability Strategy in place, we are likely to see practical flow-ons from Australia's endorsement of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Politics is a crowded space where hundreds of claimants compete for attention – human services especially. Sorting out legitimate claims from special pleading and then culling all but a few of the most convincing is everyday business for governments.

The old refrain: "We need money because we're underfunded" might be true but it doesn't distinguish your claim from hundreds of others, and it puts the cart before the horse. Having a vision, a plan that aligns with the Government's objectives, and backing it with evidence of well-defined public benefits is far more likely to win attention. And, if all goes well, the funding cart will follow.

For the most part it takes years for important issues to be taken up by politicians and debated in the public arena – witness the decades long dispute about the greenhouse effect. Patience is required, as well as persistence and ingenuity. Now, at last though, disability is pushing and weaving its way through the crowd towards the stage. 

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