THE SENATE

BILLS

National Disability Insurance Scheme Amendment Bill 2016

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 4 May 2016

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE
Senator MOORE (Queensland) (11:42): Labor will be supporting the National Disability Insurance Scheme Amendment Bill 2016. It is a very important time for all of us as we look towards the future of the NDIS in our nation.

Naturally, when we are looking at the make-up of the board of the NDIS, it is timely that we acknowledge the work that has gone before, in terms of the board that was originally part of the NDIS program. I think it is important at this stage that we give acknowledgement of the strong and committed leadership of that board, as it put in place, I think, one of the most important pieces of legislation we have ever had in our parliament.

As Ms Macklin, in the other place, said of the chair of the board, Mr Bruce Bonyhady: ‘For Bruce, the design and the delivery of the NDIS is more than a profession; it’s a life mission.’ In terms of the work that he and his other board members did, when we are talking about the future of the NDIS we need to acknowledge and respect the work of the original board.

The legislation in front of us this morning is simply a proposal to expand the size of the board of the National Disability Insurance Agency from nine to 12. We believe, as the government has put forward, that having a larger board will give the board more stability during the ongoing rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme. In terms of the status of the NDIS currently in the country, we have gone through the first series of trials. Through those series of trials we have been able to see that the process, interaction and completion of the work of the NDIS has been completed in full and on time. We hear that phrase a lot in this place, ‘in full and on time’.

Each of the reports that has come to this place, the updates of what has happened in the NDIS across the trial period, has shown that progress has been made and the budget has been in place. We have very clearly wanted to make sure that this scheme—which was so important to ensure that people with disabilities would be respected and that those people could be assured that they would be the leaders of their own destiny—its care programs and the support that it provides are there. We are talking about people who need significant support. The NDIS was introduced to ensure that it was completely people centred so that the supports that wrap around a person were determined in their best interests, which is what they wanted. That was the scheme. We talked about it when we had the debate in this place to introduce the scheme, where there was cross-party commitment to ensure that we would have an effective NDIS.

That is in place. We are now moving into the next stage of the rollout, which is the expansion of the original trial sites into a wider area of implementation across the nation. I am really pleased that part of the new expansion of the trial will be the original process in Queensland. Certainly from my perspective as a Queensland senator, the fact that we will now have a site in place in north Queensland, in Townsville, is a really important part of the expansion of the scheme across the nation. That will be occurring all around the country. In that case, the necessity of having an expanded board is obvious. To handle the new responsibilities, to handle the expansion, we must have the best possible expertise in place to make the important decisions will be made to ensure that the operations of the NDIS will be as effective as possible.

As part of the process we need to ensure that the consultation has been effective and that the work of bringing it forward—bringing into the process all states and territories with the Commonwealth—is done so that the interaction is solid. That is the way that the process must operate. We work with all of the states and territories, and the decision that the parliament is considering today is the result of extensive consultation with all the states and territories to bring forward a recommendation to this place. That is critical and it must occur for this process to be successful.

It is important to note that there have been concerns along the way about the way that the government had originally talked about the changes to the board process. I remember when the minister on duty today, who was the then Minister for Social Services, was at the last Senate estimates—as you would remember, Minister Fifield,
through you, Mr Deputy President—and there was a lot of discussion around the process that at that stage we had had the unedifying process of seeing the advertisements for a proposed new board structure running across the nation. These advertisements were calling for applications for the NDIS board, while the current members of the board had not actually been given the courtesy of being advised that this process was going to happen. On record, we had the minister’s response about the fact that it was an administrative process; it is all in Hansard from those Senate estimates. But in terms of the respect that should be shown when we are going through a transitioning process, a change process, that was not a good look. The ongoing nature of how we would expect that the interaction between the government and whoever the board members will be—we would not have such a situation where there would not be effective communication with people who are involved, who are committed, who have a proven record of dedication and effectiveness. That is something that should not happen in the future. I wanted to put that on the record while we are discussing the make-up of the new board to reinforce the kind of pain that that causes people who are involved in the process. I trust that is something that will not happen in the future.

It is also important to note that there have been, over the past few months, comments made by the government that have called into question the effect of budgeting that had been put in place by the previous government around the introduction of the NDIS. We reject totally some of the comments that have been made about the lack of financial planning for the future of the NDIS. It is clear that Labor did make effective provision for the introduction of the NDIS. It was an important element of legislation, and we made a commitment to the community that we would effectively introduce a national disability insurance scheme to our nation. When we brought that forward, part of the commitment that the Labor government gave to this parliament was that there would be effective financial planning into the future. On record, it is clear that there was effective financial provision made into the future. We had savings processes put there that would match up so that, to the best of our knowledge, to the best of the knowledge of Treasury—and in Treasury documents that have been brought forward through the parliament—we had an effective provision for the future of the NDIS. This message must be consistently placed on record in this place, and in the community.

The introduction of the NDIS was a cross-party introduction. There was agreement together that we would introduce this scheme, and there was an agreement that it would be effectively resourced. If you remember, in the lead-up to the national disability insurance legislation that came to this place, there was considerable discussion and argument about how it would be resourced. We understood, as a parliament, that it would need a significant injection of funding because we acknowledged that across our nation effective disability services had been under-resourced. That was a given. The information that came to us—we had an extensive community affairs legislation committee inquiry as the legislation was being rolled out into this place for discussion—and the evidence that came forward from across the board was that at state and territory level, and at federal level, there was a lack of effective resourcing for people with disabilities in our nation. That led to a situation where people were not receiving the services that they deserved and, indeed, that they needed.

One of the elements in the whole production of this legislation was to make a commitment that the NDIS would be well resourced and well managed and that it would be based on effective communication and consultation across the board. That was part of the legislation that we brought forward. We need to reaffirm that because, in this place on a number of occasions, ministers have made comment about the ongoing economic viability of the NDIS. It is important that we reaffirm that that is a solid commitment because in the community an expectation was built up that, finally, people with disabilities would receive the services they deserved. But at the same time—because of years of lack of response and years of promises that were not able to be fulfilled for various reasons—there is a genuine vulnerability in the community in people with disabilities. They do not want to see this scheme—in which they have committed, in which they are engaged and which has been the result of promises from governments—fail. When questions are raised and when comments are made in this place and outside that effective economic provision had not been made, that causes real fear and great concern. It is really important that we understand that there has been an effective economic plan around the NDIS and that there is commitment across the board to ensuring that that continues.

Part of that process is to ensure that we have the most effective board in place, which is the focus of this legislation. We are happy to support the legislation as we know that the people who will be on this board will provide the commitment that is necessary to ensure that the process operates. We understand that the arrangements around which this board is developed include consultation with states and territories, and we understand that the financial expectations and the administrative expectations of these people are great. We also know that there is a commitment to ensuring that people with disabilities are part of the process and that among the current
board we have a number of people who have experience with disability as family members and who themselves have identifiable disabilities. That is part of the ongoing process and, as you well know, there is a longstanding statement in the consumer movement which says: 'nothing about us without us' and, in the area of disability, this is certainly a very strong demand. In terms of the appointment of the board it is important that, when that process is in place, there is an understanding that the people who are on that board have knowledge of disability and, where appropriate, that people who themselves have identified disabilities can be part of the management of the scheme that has been developed to provide services.

This is an important piece of legislation because it is part of the ongoing commitment we have to the National Disability Insurance Scheme. We know that there is an understanding of this process and that there is an ownership of this process. We expect that the board, as it will now be presented with the larger group, will be able to reflect the divergent needs that there are across the nation. One of the things that have been most clear in the trial sites is that, whilst there is the oversight and the basic expectation that services will be available and able to be accessed, the particular way this works varies enormously across the country. With the trial sites in Newcastle, the trial sites in Victoria, the specialist children's sites in South Australia, the young people's sites in Tasmania and also the remote site that was set up to look at the issues around introducing the NDIS to remote areas of Australia, the knowledge that has been built up through that process reaffirms the fact that one size never fits all. We need to understand that we have to ensure that services are tailored effectively and are available, no matter where you live.

One of the things with the NDIS is that we expect that, whether you live in the cities or you live in regional Australia, you will still get the best possible support that you can have. That is not only an element of the combined knowledge but also the way that we can have best possible practice in providing services to people with disabilities. I did acknowledge the work of the current board of NDIS, and I also think it is important to acknowledge the people who work within the system. The people who are working in the system have brought an enormous sense of commitment and skill to their jobs, and that will continue to occur. Another element that must always be taken into account is providing support for the workers in the system so that they have all the background, knowledge and resources they need to do the best possible job.

We support the legislation that is here today, which is to increase the board, and we also look forward to ensuring that the NDIS will have a strong, well resourced future and that this parliament will consistently have feedback as to what is going on in the system and will be able to ensure we have ongoing oversight so that the parliament continues its active role in the way the NDIS is rolled out across the country.