THE SENATE

BILLS

National Disability Insurance Scheme Amendment Bill 2016

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 4 May 2016

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE
Senator POLLEY (Tasmania) (12:10): I am pleased to speak on the National Disability Insurance Scheme Amendment Bill 2016. This bill amends the National Disability Insurance Scheme Act to increase the number of board members of the National Disability Insurance Agency from nine to 12, including the chair. The bill also clarifies the quorum arrangements for board meetings to make it clear that meetings must have a majority of board members in attendance. Labor is pleased to support the bill and hopes that it ends the government’s disgraceful attacks on the NDIS board and its members.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme, which was designed, funded and introduced by Labor, is already transforming the lives of thousands of Australians with disabilities, their families and their carers. The NDIS is being delivered on time, satisfaction amongst participants is very high, and the scheme is running on budget. We are incredibly proud of the NDIS. Just like Medicare, which was also created by Labor, the NDIS is one of Australia’s biggest social reforms.

Once it is fully rolled out, the National Disability Insurance Scheme will support 460,000 people living with profound disabilities. That is 460,000 individuals, their families and their carers who are going to benefit from this scheme. This proposed legislation reflects an agreement reached by the Disability Reform Council earlier this year to increase the number of board members and extend existing board terms. This is a sensible decision and will give the board more stability during the full rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Hopefully, this ends the government’s disgraceful attacks on the NDIS board and its members. The board and the agency should be congratulated on the successful rollout of the scheme thus far. They do a difficult job and they do it well. The agency’s staff and board deserve respect from the government, but unfortunately, on too many occasions, this has been in short supply. Imagine if you woke up one morning, opened the newspaper and saw an advertisement for your own job. This is what happened to the current members of the board. This is what they were subjected to by this government. The government put advertisements in newspapers asking for applications for board positions without even telling the current board members about it. There was no phone call from the minister, no consultation and no prior warning—just a none-too-subtle hint that this government considers them entirely expendable.

And we know that, if they had the chance, they would replace the board with people of like mind to the coalition government. They would appoint people from the big end of town. We know they like to look after their mates, and this board would not have been immune to that sort of appointment. They do not care about making sure their board members actually have lived experience of disabilities—which, as Senator Siewert has already said, is so integral to ensuring that this board represents the people that it is designed to serve. From the interactions that I and my colleagues Senator Urquhart, Senator Bilyk and Senator Brown have had with the disability sector, we know all too well the difference that it makes when there is an understanding of what people living with disabilities go through day by day. It is so essentially important to their families that the government of the day understand their roles in caring for their family members with disabilities and, of course, the roles of the carers who work in this field.

This is effectively what fired the starter’s gun on a series of attacks on the governance of the NDIS, and it is just part of the mantra of the Liberal Party on anything that they do not like. Those that are most disadvantaged in this country have been the target over the three budgets that they have now brought down, and last night was no exception. But in March it was revealed that the Turnbull government were pressuring the states and territories into sweeping changes to the NDIS. These changes would have allowed the Turnbull government to decide who is eligible for the scheme and what support people would receive. It would have given the Turnbull government the power to ignore the needs of people with disabilities, sideline the states and territories, sack board members and put their own conservative cronies in charge for—just all part of their DNA. Thankfully this plan was rejected by the states and territories. The government have tried every trick in the book to mislead Australians about the NDIS and to undermine its future. They have constantly fibbed, saying that Labor did not fund the NDIS. Well,
I could tell you, Labor most certainly did fund the rollout of the NDIS. The government must end their war on the NDIS and dump its plans for a federal takeover of the scheme.

Labor supports the legislation before the parliament today but we will continue to fiercely oppose any attempts by the government to undermine the future of the National Disability Insurance Scheme. I cannot be more clear than that. The message back to the government is those on this side of the chamber will always fiercely oppose any attempts by the government to undermine the future of the NDIS. If anyone opposite in this place tries to cut, cap and delay the National Disability Insurance Scheme or attempts another federal takeover to make more baseless claims about funding, Labor will stand with the people with disabilities and defend the National Disability Insurance Scheme against any of these cynical attacks.

People with disabilities, their families and their carers have waited their whole lives for the National Disability Insurance Scheme. I think sometimes, now that we are going through the process of rolling this out, some in the community and obviously those on the government benches have already forgotten that this was landmark. This was something that people had been waiting their entire lives for. And if you had been on any of the Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs inquiries over the decade that I have been in this place, you would know it was something that unified people within our communities and that ensured that the National Disability Insurance Scheme saw the light of day. As a government we ensured that that funding was there, that it was budgeted for and that it was going to be delivered because we know how important it is every single day for people with disabilities to know that their government is doing the utmost to support them to live as independent and fulfilled life as possible. It is actually unforgivable for the government to keep trying to mislead and frighten the Australian community about the future of the National Disability Insurance Scheme. People with disabilities, their families and carers will not accept being used as political playthings of the Turnbull government. Mr Turnbull and his Liberal government need to remember that people with disabilities are not political playthings. Australians will not accept more cruel cuts from this government under the guise of funding the NDIS.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme is already funded. We made sure of this when we were in government. Labor's 2013 budget set out a 10-year funding plan for the National Disability Insurance Scheme. The coalition know that the National Disability Insurance Scheme is funded because they actually voted for most of the measures. Not only did they vote for all but one of them but some of the measures even passed the parliament after the election, when the Liberals were in government. Those opposite know that we did the plan, they know that it was budgeted for and they supported the majority of those measures so they are just playing political games and they are lying to the community. To now say, as the government do, that the National Disability Insurance Scheme is not funded amounts to an effective theft that of money that was always intended for people with disabilities. But we know this is not the only policy area where those opposite do that, where they bend and twist the budget figures for their own benefit.

We are entering a really crucial period for the National Disability Insurance Scheme and there are plenty of unanswered questions. The government needs to focus on the unanswered questions, not on trying to complete control of the scheme, picking fights with states and territories, fibbing about the funding or trying to sack the board—enough is enough, no more. People with disabilities know that Labor will always stand with them. Labor built the National Disability Insurance Scheme after much consultation with the sector and with individuals. We most certainly will not stand by and watch the Turnbull government tear it down.

I would like to talk about the NDIS workforce issues, which I have spoken about many times in this place—that is, the workforce for the disability sector as well as for aging and aged care in this country. Unlike the government, which just last night put the big end of town over older Australians, Labor is unashamedly pro-ageing. Mr Turnbull's budget offered nothing for older Australians and what was even more telling was what it did not say. True to form, for the third time in a row, this Liberal government and the Abbott government—the Abbott-Turnbull government as it is now—has ignored the crucial issues facing older Australians and the sector. There is no direction in the future for aged care reform.

Also introduced by Labor when we were last in government was the 'Living Longer. Living Better' rollout of major changes to the aged care sector. It was major reform, once again a 10-year plan, that was then going to be built upon. Even though that plan was there in black and white for them, those opposite have been unable to roll that scheme out.
I will give some credit to Senator Fifield, who is in the chamber today. At least when he was the assistant minister responsible for aged care he had an interest in the area. What we are seeing with the new minister is somebody who quite obviously—from all indications and then again last night in the budget—has no interest in aging or aged care in this country. There is no vision or leadership when it comes to the workforce in either the disability sector or the aged-care sector. It is in everything that they do, whether it is their desire to cut penalty rates or the cuts that they have made to the sector over the last three years. What is the figure that we now have? What have the cuts amounted to now under this government in just three years? Some $3 billion out of the aged-care responsibility that this government has in this country.

We all know—and various people from that side, around the chamber and the crossbenches always acknowledge this fact—that we have an enormous challenge before us with an ageing population. What have the government done over the previous two budgets and again last night? They have cut, cut and cut. Today they are trying to hose down the sector by saying: ‘They are not really cuts. It is not really a cut. Things are blowing out.’ The reality is the sector will not buy that argument because there is no justification for the lines that they are running. The people working in the sector and the people who have family members who are having care at home or are already in residential care know that they have been neglected and they have been a target of an unfair and callous government when it comes to aged care in this country.

Instead they should see aged care and ageing as a positive and an economic key for the future. The biggest growth area in jobs going forward in this country will be in the aged-care and disability sectors. No-one from the government has ever come into this chamber or the other place to dispute what I have said previously. We talk about the mining boom and tourism. We have seen the manufacturing industry go in this country. The growth areas are going to be in the service sector—in the disability sector and the aged-care sector. There has been no leadership shown by this government at any stage of the last 2½ years, or almost three years, in terms of having a vision or any policy. They have not demonstrated any leadership when it comes to resolving the workforce issues that we are confronted with.

Let us look at the last estimates. We may not have time on Friday, because there is always a threat that Mr Turnbull can go to the Governor-General on Friday and we may not even have estimates on Friday. Even if we do there will be so little time that we will not be able to drill down to find out exactly the real impacts that the $1.2 billion cuts announced last night will have on the aged-care sector. You cannot keep taking money out of the aged-care budget and expect to have the same care and services. It is absolutely impossible.

It is the mantra of this government to attack and cut services to those who need our help and support the most. It is those people who are ageing and want to stay at home while having home care support, which is a good thing. We all want to as we age be able to stay in our own homes as long as possible. Every government, including this government, needs to recognise that when people go into residential care it is going to be the most expensive time that any government has had to see. People will be going in with very complex health issues. They will still need to have the care that they are having today. People are in residential care now getting care, physio and the support that they need but under this government with the cuts that they have made they will not have that next year, the year after or the year after that. The Australian people will have a very clear choice when they go to the ballot box on 2 July. It is a very clear choice between electing a government that is basing it policies on what is fair or electing a government that continues to support the big end of town.

Senator O'Sullivan interjecting—

Senator POLLEY: I know, Senator, you may never need to go into residential care. You are wealthy enough to be able to support yourself, but there are an awful lot of Australians who do not have that support. They do not have the financial backing to be able to do that. Once again—and it does not matter whether you are talking health generally, disabilities or aged care—your level of care in Australia should not depend on the size of your bank balance or your credit card. The type of care that you get really should not come down to what you can afford.

The government have failed on every front when it comes to rolling out the aged-care reforms. They have cut the funding now to a total of $3 billion—not $3 million. Some $3 billion has been taken out of an area of policy that affects so many Australians. It is right. I just came from a meeting. It is right. Most people do not think about aged care until they are confronted with somebody in their family who is ageing and will need that support. I say time and time again that we all—every Australian—need to consider as part of planning for our retirement and transitioning from work to retirement what support we will have and what options we will have as we age.
As I said, there will be a very clear choice at the election between a Labor government that developed the policy plans for the National Disability Scheme and rolled out the Living Longer Living Better aged-care reforms and a government that has tried to dismantle the NDIS and put its own mates in charge of it and that has cut $3 billion out of the aged-care budget.