

**ASSISTANT TREASURER – Hon. BILL SHORTEN, MP**

**No.015**

***OPENING ADDRESS TO NATIONAL DISABILITY AND  
CARERS CONGRESS***

**EITHAD STADIUM, MELBOURNE**

**2 MAY 2011**

**Intro: Doing it tough**

Thank you to Bruce Bonyhady for his kind introduction. It's a honour to share the stage with such a persistent and consistent advocate.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land upon which we meet, and pay my respects to their elders both past and present.

It's good to be back among friends.

Looking around, I see a lot of familiar faces...

...the faces of people who were there - back at the end of 2007 - when I started out as Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children's Services.

The faces of people who took the time to explain to me what life is really like for thousands of Australians with a disability and their carers and families.

Let me tell you, it was an eye-opener.

I'd been around the traps. I'd travelled from end to end of our great country - from shearing sheds and steel mills to Beaconsfield - meeting hardworking men and women and listening to their stories.

I thought I'd seen it all. But I hadn't.

I thought I knew my country. But I didn't.

My thousand days working with you were more than an education - more than a revelation. They were a privilege.

I met a lot of great people and saw a lot of not-so-great things.

It was sobering to realise so many of my fellow countrymen and women are literally exiles in Australia, disempowered, shut out of the Australian way of life ... and unable to lead an independent life.

It was a privilege to be among you when you started to unite into a disability movement determined to campaign to finally make civil rights accessible to all.

And, let me tell you, I haven't forgotten what you told me.

I haven't forgotten your stories.

I haven't forgotten your campaign.

I'm here to tell you that your cause is my cause.

My cause is the young men and women with lifelong disabilities living in aged care homes.

My cause is the ageing parents and carers looking after an adult child for as long as they can - hanging on because they are haunted by the lonely midnight thought of what will happen to their son or daughter when they die.

My cause is the couples with a child with a disability whose marriages collapse because they're given no respite.

My cause is the Australians who are ready and able to work, but shut out of the workforce because of the thoughtless discrimination of people not prepared to look past the disability and see the human potential.

My cause is to put an end to generations of misery and wasted potential - and, in doing so, to build a better Australia.

An Australia where the opportunities - such as schools, housing, jobs, friends and social acceptance - are accessible to all.

### **Record of Labor in Government**

The good news is that I am not alone.

I am part of a Government that may not always get it right, but knows the status quo cannot stand.

I know we have achieved a great deal in disability in a relatively short space of time - under the wise and compassionate leadership of Families Minister Jenny Macklin, and under the current

stewardship of Senator Jan McLucas who I know has long shared a passion and determination to improve the lives of people with disability.

Disability used to be a peripheral issue.

Labor has made it a heartland issue.

We've added \$6.2 billion over five and a half years to disability funding under the *National Disability Agreement*.

We're developing a National Disability Strategy and a workforce strategy aimed at finding jobs for Australians with disabilities.

We've rolled out new places in Australian Disability Enterprises - creating employment opportunities for people with more severe disabilities.

And we've made it easier for people on the Disability Pension to look for job.

We've boosted payments to DSP, Carer Payment and Carer Allowance recipients.

We're establishing six Autism specific Early Learning and Care Centres across Australia - and have provided early intervention funding to over 12,000 children through our Helping Children with Autism package.

We've ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability - one of the first Western Countries to do so.

We're making housing more accessible through the *National Dialogue on Universal Design*, and the recently established *Livable Housing Australia*.

And we finally brought to a close the long-running saga of the *Access to Premises Standards* which came into effect on Sunday.

We worked with the cinema industry to make a night out at the movies more enjoyable for the hearing and vision impaired. So a blind parent can dissect the plot of Harry Potter with his daughter after the show, instead of just nodding along to her chattering obliquely.

We've expanded the delivery of individual advocacy services and improved service coverage.

But - most importantly - we understand that more needs to be done. Much more.

We get it.

We know that employment is one of the areas where more can and must be done right now.

As the Prime Minister said late last year, we are going to be focussing on getting a lot more people participating in our workforce in this coming Budget.

We have immense job-creation opportunities in the Australian economy, and an unemployment rate with a '4' in front of it.

But, to make the most of these opportunities, we need to invest in skills. And we need to help people who can work enter or re-enter the workforce

The Budget will include investments designed to give people every opportunity to people to get into the workforce.

As I said, we get it.

That's why we asked the Productivity Commission to go away and come back with a new way of giving Australians with a disability the support they need to live the life they deserve.

### **Productivity Commission process**

As you know, the Productivity Commission's draft report was released in February.

Our Government will consider the Commission's final report after it is delivered.

That final report will be handed to us in July.

What we've said is that any major change to the system needs to be sustainable and affordable - because that's the best way we can ensure any new system will endure and meet the needs of people with disability into the future.

In other words, the Draft or Final reports are not themselves the end of the matter.

A National Disability Insurance Scheme is part of the live public policy debate - but it is no done deal.

In every Government there are competing priorities, and there is still so much work to be done to finish what we started back in 2007.

Your continued advocacy of the cause is critical.

As is your unity.

### **Importance of unity in the sector**

Plato once said:

*Truth is the beginning of every good to the gods, and of every good to man.*

Let me tell you something: just as truth is the beginning of every good, disunity is the ending.

You all get it.

You all know the issue and can see a solution that will deliver every good.

But the challenge is this: How do you make that understood plainly understood by the millions of Australians who are not in this room?

1. Discipline.
2. Perseverance.
3. Unity.

You need to have the discipline to stick to your message.

You need to have the perseverance to persist even when you think no one's listening.

And you need to stick together as a movement.

Never let day to day tensions or disagreements distract you from the cause that you all share.

Unite behind a common set of claims and remember the cause that we are all fighting for.

And persevere - because the door to great change is ajar. It just needs more pushing by more people to open the door to a time.

Persevere until the cause for change is no longer a question but an accepted and bipartisan truth that can no longer be ignored.

## **While maintaining unity you can still maintain the rage**

Now, my current job is all about facts and figures.

But I'm not going to read you a laundry list of statistics about disability and disadvantage in Australia.

You know the numbers.

You know the stories.

And you know where the projections are heading - up.

But I will make a few observations.

There are enough Australians with a profound or serious disability to populate Adelaide.

And there are enough Australians caring for someone with a disability to populate Adelaide and Perth.

Those Australians are among our poorest citizens - and poverty rates of people with disability have been growing.

The long boom of the last 20 years cruelly passed-by people with a disability and their carers.

Right now, more than 30 percent of households with a person with disability live on less than half the median income - but they pay the highest prices for the basics.

Economists believe the impact of disability amounts to around one third of household income.

In other words, having a disability makes and keeps people poor.

In Australia in 2011, what does it mean to have an intellectual disability or a serious episodic mental illness or mobility impairment?

Practically speaking, it means:

- you are less likely to finish secondary education,
- you are less likely to enjoy tertiary education,
- you are more likely to be unemployed,

- you are more likely to have a lower income,
- you are more likely to be in public housing,
- and you are more likely to be in jail.

If I was to ring-fence the great cities of Australia - populations in their millions - , and tell every parent in these ghettos that their child was likely to have a worse life-outcome in each of those categories, there would be outrage.

There would be upheaval.

Now, Australia is a great country.

We have been the land of the long economic miracle - ever since the introduction of the Hawke and Keating governments' hard-fought national and competition reforms.

How is it, then, that we can live with such inequity?

In my view, we cannot.

And so, we must work together - with discipline, perseverance and unity - to extend the Australian notion of a fair go to all our citizens.

### **Keep reminding people why the status quo is unacceptable**

A couple of years ago, on a visit to Western Australia, I told a disability advocacy group that in politics, there is no premium on bad news.

The premium is on the good news: the announcements, the policy and press releases, the positive stories for the daily news diet.

That's why there was a collective sigh of relief within the disabilities movement (and myself) when the Productivity Commission handed down its draft report back in February.

But while reaffirming again my belief that the fight is far from won, I believe that if we're to move to the positive, taking nothing away from the many accomplishments of many people over many years and decades, we still have to promote and recognise the bad news.

Because far too much of what is going on today is just awful.

Heartbreakingly, backbreaking, spirit sapping, morale destroyingly awful.

It is worth having a reminding read of the **Shut Out** report, which the Government released in August 2009.

39 in every 100 of the submissions in that report specifically mentioned discrimination and violation of rights of disability.

As **Shut Out** said:

"Virtually every Australian with a disability encounters human rights violations at some point in their lives, and very many experience it every day of their living."

And as **Shut Out** shrewdly noted:

"Governments rely on most parents never being able to bring themselves to abandon their children. Deep parental love and a sense of duty are being heavily exploited solely in order to save money, which in a country as wealthy as Australia is profoundly shocking. But even the most devoted and self-sacrificing of parents can't keep on caring if they're dead."

That's what the Prime Minister and I are talking about when we say the status quo is not an option.

The system needs to stop banking on the desperate goodwill of loving parents and start lending a hand.

**In conclusion, let me say this.**

You will always have a friend and advocate in the Parliament as long as I'm an MP.

And you'll always have a strong voice round the Ministerial table while Labor is in Government and I have a seat at that table.

In my job as Assistant Treasurer I see your cause as one that is central to the future prosperity of our nation.

It's not just about social justice. It's about economic justice as well - not to mention the productivity and sustainability of our national economy.

It is about empowerment.

Labor has many challenges.

Making big reforms. Stimulating growth that builds jobs. Investing in those jobs and the skills needed. And caring for and empowering people.

I am committed to a NDIS. Because this is what Labor Government's do. An NDIS is what we should do because this is what Labor Government's should do.

The path ahead will not be speedy. The numbers have to balance.

The new system needs to work in reality not just on paper. I's need to be dotted and T's need to be crossed.

But just as Labor is managing the changing Australian economy with carbon pricing and the National Broadband Network, a NDIS is whatever form we ultimately resolve is a big life changing reform that Labor Governments do.

Thank you very much for inviting me back to speak to you at this important gathering this morning. Your cause is my cause.