



POLITICAL NOTES

Senator Mitch Fifield

Shadow Minister for Disabilities, Carers and the Voluntary Sector
Manager of Opposition Business in the Senate

FEBRUARY 2011



GILLARD FAILS ON DISABILITY

Towards the end of 2010, the Coalition was constantly accused of obstructionism in an increasingly shrill manner by the Government. You only needed to tune in to Question Time to hear ministers ranting and raving - not about how they're getting their job done - but about how the Coalition was blocking, obstructing and generally not being a team player.

Despite this criticism, there have been many instances of bipartisanship between the Government and Opposition. In my portfolio of Disabilities and Carers, the Coalition has supported efforts to raise the profile of the disability sector. Like the Government, the Coalition has committed to closely examine and consider the recommendations of the Productivity Commission on a National Disability Insurance Scheme.

However, since the return of the Gillard Government, disability issues have taken a back seat on the Government's agenda.

Bill Shorten used to wax lyrical about the need for disabilities reform. In a speech in April 2010, he gave the issue of disabilities an epic quality, comparing people with disabilities in Australia to the "Israelites after the Exodus from Egypt," and quoting Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. In another speech, Shorten stated he makes "no apologies for seeing disability as an issue, not of resource allocation, but of basic civil rights." He thus cleverly established himself as a crusader for the disability sector, fighting for change against his own Government.

Yet despite Mr Shorten's soaring rhetoric, the Government has clearly chosen to prioritise other portfolios over disability. It is of no small significance that Labor did not elevate the disabilities portfolio from Parliamentary Secretary to Ministry, despite assurances from Mr Shorten that he would lobby for it to happen.

After the election, I asked Tony Abbott for two things. Firstly, to elevate the portfolio to ministerial rank. Secondly, I asked him to allow me to continue in the portfolio. Tony readily agreed to both. One reason I wanted to remain in the portfolio was to continue raising the profile of disabilities. In the last term of Parliament there was a strong cross-party effort to do just that. We were striving to focus the attention of the public and the political class on an area which has been neglected for too long.

But it's important to recognise that bipartisanship is not and should not be an end in itself. Bipartisanship at its best helps achieve important reform. At its worst, bipartisanship is the chloroform governments use to render oppositions passive and inert. Bipartisanship should only be embraced in the area of disability if it advances the cause of reform.

There have already been indications that a more partisan approach will be required in this term, with a number of administrative failures by the Government.

The initial failure was the Prime Minister forgetting to appoint a dedicated member of her executive to the portfolio. This was a poor start by the Government and signalled a diminished profile for disabilities in the Government.

Next was the failure to deliver on supported accommodation and respite. The Government has promised a total of 463 supported accommodation and respite places for people with disability. So far only 142 of those have been delivered. The Government has also dropped the ball on helping young people with disability out of aged care facilities. The aim was to get 689 young people with disability out of nursing homes, but so far only 163 people have been moved into alternative accommodation.

As a result of these failures, there now exists within the disability sector a growing feeling that they were used as political props. After all, it's hard to believe that the man who could bring down an elected Prime Minister didn't have the power to have the disability portfolio elevated to ministerial rank and to stay in the job himself.

The treatment of people with disability in this country is shameful. Many Australians who are born with or acquire a disability are made to queue for services, wait for wheelchairs and other aids, and battle to get assistance.

Proper support isn't a luxury. It's not something nice to do if other policy commitments allow. Helping people who, as a result of their circumstances, need a hand is one of the most fundamental roles of government. It is not a policy choice, it is a responsibility, and this Government increasingly looks like abrogating that responsibility.



Senator Mitch Fifield
Senator for Victoria
42 Florence St Mentone VIC 3194
Ph: 03 9584 2455 Email: senator.ffield@aph.gov.au