

A glimmer of hope at last?

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After decades of struggle for even a semblance of social justice, some 800,000 unpaid primary caregivers (Carers) of Australians with severe and profound dependent disability, are today cautiously optimistic that significant changes to the funding of disability services across the nation have been moved one step closer.

This follows the release, on 28 February, of a long-awaited draft report and recommendations by the Productivity Commission into the urgent need for substantial improvements to disability care and support funding across Australia.

Tragically, the Commission's Report and recommendations have come too late for those marginalised and burnt out family Carers who, seeing only a future life for their adult children with disability tormented by neglect, ill-treatment and inappropriate accommodation when they could no longer care for them, ended the lives of their dependent loved ones, and then their own.

They are also too late to fix the broken families and the disabling depression forced upon hundreds if not thousands of Carers driven to despair by the bureaucratic and political indifference towards their plight, and the resultant lack of compassionate care and respite for Carers.

Despite the fact that one-in-five Australian families include a relative with some degree of disabling condition (20% of the Australian population), the people who provide around-the-clock personal care and special accommodation facilities in their family home for the most dependent in our midst are, for the majority of us, largely invisible. Precluded from participating in the paid workforce because of their ill-fated social role, the majority of these selfless unpaid Carers are forced into a life of economic hardship and deprivation, becoming isolated in their homes and largely marginalised from mainstream society.

So much for the "nanny state" ideology put about by the anti-social, anti-democratic ideologues in right-wing think tanks, big business councils, political parties and sections of academe.

However even with this glimmer of hope, the bureaucratic-political nightmare appears to be far from over, with 'interested parties and individuals .. encouraged to provide feedback on the Commission's draft proposals' either by further submissions or attending public hearings (capital cities only) in April. The final report will then be prepared and forwarded to the Federal Government by 31 July, 2011.

Commencing in 'early 2014', the scheme would initially cover all new cases of significant disability and some of the groups most disadvantaged by current arrangements: ... 'over the period from 2015-2018 the scheme would progressively expand to cover all relevant people with a disability.'

Quite obviously, no thought or consideration has been given to easing the plight of thousands of ageing and exhausted parent-carers through the immediate provision of additional respite funding or desperately needed supported accommodation facilities.

Thus, a degree of nervousness pervades many of the households of Australians with disability, a nervousness driven by the often-complex issues impacting people with disability and their families, and the pervasive focus on 'efficiencies' and the Orwellian bureaucratic language employed in the management (control) of people with disability and their families.

For instance the authors of the Report have recommended that the Disability Support Pension should be outside the NDIS. Covering some 793,000 people as at June 2010, the Commissioners argue that "There are grounds for reform of the Disability Support Pension, given that its design can significantly undermine the NDIS's goals of better economic, employment and independence outcomes for people with a disability."

The Report continues ...

Reforms would aim to encourage the view that the norm for many people should not be the long-term use of the Disability Support Pension (unlike the current 'until death or aged pension us do part'). Those changes would be mainly oriented to people with typically non-permanent conditions, like anxiety and depression, and at people who could have much higher hopes for employment participation (for example, those with sensory impairments or mild intellectual disabilities). Some policy measures could include additional payments for people to work, targeted rehabilitation, employer support, measures to encourage people to get even a small foothold into work (even if just a few hours a week), and temporary rather than effectively permanent entry to the Disability Support Pension for those with reasonable prospects of employment (with periodic re-assessments).

All perfectly rational and reasonable-sounding, particularly when augmented with a few 'flexibles', 'consumer choice' and 'alternative options' that would enable people to 'exercise power'. However given the epidemic of mass un-employment and under-employment adversely impacting the Rich Countries of the West, including Australia, the reluctance and failure of Corporate Australia - including governments - to employ significant numbers of people with disability, and the financial inability of many small to medium-sized companies to do so, the prospects for people on the Disability Support Pension and full-time Carers wishing to return to or enter the paid workforce to secure well-paid employment and financial security are severely proscribed ... by the economic imperatives and 'strategic initiatives' of the globally dominant Neo-Liberal or Economic Rationalist agenda slavishly adhered to by all contemporary Australian governments and the political party duopoly.