

## Disability issue requires political maturity

### Canberra observed

Laura Tingle

Somewhere in the past couple of parliamentary sittings we have passed from the "we want to be better than the last lot" era of new government to the "whatever we do, we aren't as bad as the last lot" stage, where governments, made arrogant by a struggling opposition, don't feel they have to argue their case as diligently as they once did.

Julia Gillard has led the charge in this rather tawdry evolution, using the 'you were worse' argument as a pathetic attempt to defend problems in the primary schools infrastructure program, followed, this week, by the government abusing question time.

The worst aspect of the change is that the government has shown itself so willing to use its in-built parliamentary advantages when things are going relatively well.

Sure, it has been under a bit of pressure on schools, but not as much as it might be if the coalition didn't have internal problems that derail its political attacks with the meticulous punctuality of the Swiss rail system.

It raises the question: if the government behaves like this when enjoying meteoric standing in the polls, what is it going to be like under a bit of real pressure?

Parliamentary behaviour can, over time, feed into voters' negative perceptions of a government. But it is not what most politicians would want to be remembered for.

They want to be remembered for the so-called "legacy" reforms which profoundly change public policy. The legacy issue that has been quietly bubbling away under the surface of this government is disability reform. The business community has been at the centre of consideration of this issue, consideration that has the most profound implications for the lives of hundreds of thousands of Australians. Most significantly, business has been contemplating how to shift the basis on which disability policy is framed from charity to risk.

Early last year, the parliamentary secretary for disabilities, Bill Shorten, established a Disability Investment Group, which includes Allan Fels, Bill Moss of Boston Management Services (and formerly of Macquarie Bank), AustralianSuper chief executive Ian Silk, and former Treasury official and fund manager Bruce Bonyhady.

Their brief has been to try to identify ways of getting greater private sector involvement in disability services (just as the private sector has come to play an increasing role in aged care). Just as the Stern report sought to shift the ground of the climate change debate from the cost of addressing global warming to the cost of not addressing it, the policy task starts with getting disability policy seen not just as an equity and social justice issue, but as an economic one, the key being the policy shift from charity to risk. The group has been examining a proposal to introduce a national disability insurance scheme.

This is a momentous idea: as big as Medicare or compulsory superannuation and not one that is likely to be achieved in the first term of any government. It would involve recognising the inevitability of profound disability striking a large number of us, at birth or by misadventure, and providing a pool of taxpayer-funded insurance premium funds to provide the proper lifetime support such disability requires.

This would replace a barely functional system that does not work and leaves a chilling 700,000 Australians - more than half the population of Adelaide - and their family carers in a state of

underresourced poverty, where the requirements of full-time care keep carers out of the workforce and unable to self-fund the massive costs of supporting disabled loved ones.

The Disability Investment Group is due to report to the government within weeks and the expectation is that it will recommend a full feasibility study into a national insurance scheme. Don't groan and say "another study!"

This is one area where the complexities really are profound and need a lot of cogitation. It has implications for everything from worker's compensation schemes to health and education budgets, it raises questions about hypothecated taxes and direct levies, and requires a broader, gargantuan political sales task to put the issue on centre stage.

As someone observed this week, the ambition should be that pollsters feel compelled to ask voters "Who can better handle disability policy?", just as they now ask who can best handle water policy.

Of course, we are talking big bucks here, and bucks sufficient to make ambitious reform seem a long way down the government's current to-do list.

But funding disability is one of the issues Wayne Swan touches on in the speech he is giving today about the forces that will be at work in the community - and the budget - in the time frame being studied by the imminent third intergenerational report.

There is significant engagement in the disability issue around the cabinet table, not least because it is one of the issues with which the Prime Minister and his colleagues are confronted repeatedly at community cabinet meetings.

It may also help that Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner was a personal injuries lawyer in a former life. The government gave an election commitment to have a national disability strategy in place before the next election.

It has made some reforms, and pledged some extra money, via changes to the disability support pension and to the funding of disability services under the commonwealth-state disability agreement. These changes are piddling however, compared with the national insurance scheme.

Such a scheme - first floated by the Whitlam government almost 40 years ago - may seem beyond the realms of politicians who judge themselves in terms of "relative badness".

But Medicare and compulsory super also once seemed beyond the realm of the possible, and proved the politics can occasionally lift itself to produce some lasting good.

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