

Ken Baker's Address to National Press Club Wednesday 1 April 2009

I congratulate the National Press Club for being one of the first businesses in Canberra to sign up to the Companion Card. The Companion Card enables a person with disability who requires the presence of a carer, to enter sporting, entertainment and other venues without having to pay for two people.

The Press Club has also revamped its premises to make them fully accessible to people in wheelchairs. It has plans to improve access further by introducing tactile navigation markers for blind people.

This is all part of building an inclusive Australia.

The 630 not-for-profit organisations that NDS represents support people with disability to participate in all domains of life – from the home to the workplace.

Every day there are thousands of examples from across Australia of the positive difference that disability support workers make to people's lives.

Unfortunately, there are just as many examples of people with disability missing out on services. The story featured in Sunday's *Canberra Times* - of a woman who has spent the last two years in hospital because she can't get the disability funding package she needs to live at home – is replicated in different ways across the country.

A consensus is now emerging in Australian politics that governments of both persuasions have failed people with disability.

A 2007 bipartisan Senate Inquiry found the disability services system to be grossly under-funded, disjointed, complex to navigate, hard to access, crisis-driven ...In short, broken and broke.

Late last year Cabinet Minister and Government Leader in the Senate Chris Evans stated in Parliament:

“All governments – state and Commonwealth and of both persuasions – in the last 20 years have failed people with disabilities. I think that is quite clear, be it over questions of care for young people with disabilities or be it over appropriate housing for people with disabilities. I think we, as parliamentarians who develop public policy, have all failed. The services are inadequate; the funding is inadequate. I think there are serious attempts to try to address that now.”

Admitting failure is a first step to fixing things. And I believe that the Australian Government – through Bill Shorten and Jenny Macklin – is committed to improving the system. Progress *is* being made.

But we cannot continue to ignore the hole in Australia's safety net - through which any one of us could fall at any time.

If you or your child is born with a heart defect or you acquire a serious illness mid-life, you are entitled, through Medicare, to medical treatment. Every Australian has that entitlement and we cherish it.

If, on the other hand, you are born with cerebral palsy or Down Syndrome or you acquire a disability mid-life through stroke, then you enter a lottery in which some Australians receive ample support services but many receive none at all or less than they need.

This is unfair and it's bad public policy. It means that more administrative effort goes into rationing disability services than improving them.

We need a national scheme which entitles people with severe disability to long-term care and support services.

Such a scheme would be a major policy commitment. It won't happen tomorrow and it may happen in stages. But we need to begin the journey now.

Thank you. And please now welcome a man who over the last 16 months as Parliamentary Secretary has emerged as a strong and passionate advocate for the rights of people with disability, Bill Shorten.