



SENATOR MITCH FIFIELD

SHADOW MINISTER FOR DISABILITIES, CARERS AND THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR
MANAGER OF OPPOSITION BUSINESS IN THE SENATE
SENATOR FOR VICTORIA

TRANSCRIPT

**Doorstop Interview
With the Hon Kevin Andrews MP
Senate Courtyard, Canberra**

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3:40pm

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Subjects: Productivity Commission Draft Report on Disability Care and Support

KEVIN ANDREWS:

Ladies and gentlemen, Senator Fifield and I would like to make a few comments about the release today of the Draft Report of the Productivity Commission on the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

The Report of the Productivity Commission is quite clear about the need in this area. It says that the current arrangements are under-funded, that they're unfair, that they're fragmented and that they're inefficient. This clearly is a pointer to a need to address this issue with the degree of seriousness that is required for those hundreds of thousands of Australians who are suffering from catastrophic illness and disability and are therefore in need of lifetime support. I'll ask Senator Fifield to say some more about that.

MITCH FIFIELD:

Thanks Kevin. Today's Productivity Commission Draft Report provides a ray of hope for Australians with disability and a glimpse into what a better future for them might look like. Sadly in Australia it's a bit of a lottery in terms of the support that you get if you have a disability. If you're in an automobile accident or another accident you might get some decent support, but if you fall off the roof at home or you're born with a disability, then you really have to cobble together your own support.

The Productivity Commission Report identifies that there are billions of dollars of unmet need at the moment. We do need a new national arrangement that fills the gaps. We need to do much better for ageing carers – parents who may have a son or daughter who they've been caring for for 30 or 40 years. We need to help get young people out of nursing homes, and we need to do better in terms of early intervention. But most importantly, any new system needs to be focussed on the individual, and it needs to have the individual in charge.

JOURNALIST:

Is the National Disability Insurance Scheme the way to go, and should it be completely federally funded?

FIFIELD:

The Productivity Commission looks at a range of funding options and a range of governance arrangements. But there does need to be a new national arrangement, and one of the options put forward is that it be fully nationally funded, and that's certainly one we'll look at.

JOURNALIST:

Would you support a tax increase to pay for a disability insurance scheme?

FIFIELD:

I think people who have disability – they're not actually too focussed on funding mechanisms – they just want the system fixed. The Productivity Commission does note that funding for people with disability should be core government business and they also say that it should be part of core government funding.

We do keep an open mind. The Productivity Commission has presented a range of funding options, and we'll keep an open mind about those.

JOURNALIST:

So this wouldn't be a great big new tax if it was introduced?

FIFIELD:

The Productivity Commission looks at a number of aspects of funding, it looks at Commonwealth-state relations, but we're not going to get in the business of ruling in and ruling out. I think this Report is too important to treat in that way.

ANDREWS:

I think there are two things to say about that. One is that the Productivity Commission has indicated its own inclination, and its own inclination is that funding for this – as Mitch said – should be core government business and should come from consolidated revenue. That's the inclination that they've presented in the Draft Report. We'll of course wait for the final report, but what this Report highlights is the dog's breakfast we've got at the present time between the Commonwealth, the states and territories as to the provision of disability funding.

You look at disabled people, for example, who are in a nursing home in quite inappropriate circumstances for them. So we've got a mess – it's a mess that has grown up over time because of a whole range of ad hoc arrangements that try to provide support for people in these circumstances. But nonetheless, I think if you cut through the pages and pages of this Report, it says something needs to be done because it is a mess at the present time.

JOURNALIST:

This requires \$6.3 billion at the least and possibly up to \$11 billion of federal spending. Where's that money coming from? Do we need to cut other Government services to pay for it?

ANDREWS:

I think this is a good question that the Productivity Commission will need to look at as it continues its consultations around Australia. They've put out some suggestions there – it's not the final word – it's only a Draft Report. But this is a good process because they've put a lot of information on the table now. They've invited consultation right around Australia and these are the sorts of questions which, as an expert body, they're well-placed to provide some further guidance to both the Government and the Parliament in the future.

JOURNALIST:

So are we seeing a rare outbreak of bipartisanship on this issue?

ANDREWS:

We'll address issues on their merit. If there are issues for the good of the Australian people which are clearly so, then we'll address those issues in a comprehensive way based on the merit. But when the Government is simply trying to hike taxes, as they are trying to do in other areas, and there are better options available, we'll equally say that there are better options available.

FIFIELD:

That's right. And as I've found as the Shadow for Disabilities and Carers, people with disabilities and their families have a very low threshold for partisan point-scoring when it comes to support for people with disabilities. We want to see a better system and we're going to work towards that.

JOURNALIST:

Will you be urging your state counterparts to support it? Because the state governments will be asked – if they follow the preferred option of the Productivity Commission – to give up \$4.5 billion of state taxes. How easy do you think that is?

FIFIELD:

Premier Ted Baillieu at the weekend reconfirmed his commitment to a national scheme. He announced that they're setting up an NDIS implementation unit. In fact, he's offered to be the state to trial this approach, which is one of the recommendations of the Productivity Commission Report.

ANDREWS:

I think it's also so interesting that one of the proponents of doing something on this is the former NSW Minister John Della Bosca. Now I don't know what influence Mr Della Bosca will have in a month or so but nonetheless I think it shows that there are people across the political spectrum who are interested in actually solving the problem here, rather than, as Mitch said – political point scoring around the issue.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Andrews, do you think that Tony Abbott would have begged Tony Windsor to form Government during last year's negotiations?

ANDREWS:

I wasn't a party to the negotiations but I don't suspect that Mr Abbott would be begging anyone to form Government. If you want to look at who is doing the begging at the present time it seems to be the Labor Party and Ms Gillard in particular who is kowtowing to every policy that Bob Brown and the Greens are putting forward. If there was ever an example of a Greens-Labor alliance with the Greens being in the jockey-seat, you're seeing it over the last few days in Australia.

JOURNALIST:

So you don't believe that Tony Abbott would have done "anything" to try to get in to power last year?

ANDREWS:

I've always found Tony Abbott to be a highly disciplined and highly respected person of high integrity. As I said, I wasn't present at those negotiations, but that's how I've always found Tony.

JOURNALIST:

So what game do you think the Independents and the Greens are playing now?

ANDREWS:

Well the Greens are quite clear about what their game is here. They've got a set of policies which they want to inflict upon the Australian people and they're taking every opportunity within the political process to do that.

But ask me the question, 'do you think that the Australian people are happy with that,' well I can tell you they're not. I've had so many emails just in the last few days about this carbon tax. People are saying 'we didn't support that, this Government has got no mandate to do it, and more than that, we believed Julia Gillard when she said before the election that she wouldn't lead a Government that introduces a carbon tax.'

JOURNALIST:

Bob Brown also says that Tony Abbott told him that he would do "anything" if he supported the Coalition to form a minority government.

ANDREWS:

The facts of what happened subsequent to that don't support that version of events. Mr Brown and the Greens signed up with Julia Gillard – if that had been true, there might have been a different outcome. So I don't believe that for a moment.

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Media contact: Lydia Bevege
(03) 9584 2455 / 0409 792 081
lydia.bevege@aph.gov.au
www.mitchfield.com