

Labor's mislaid minister for the disabled not a good look

The government has downgraded disability as an issue and a portfolio

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RECENTLY I addressed an audience at a popular forum in Melbourne made up of intelligent young professionals.

At the end of the discussion, several of them approached me. One young man whom I had thought was seated turned out to be in a wheelchair.

He said to me: "Look, there's all this palaver about how important it is to recognise the gifts of people with disabilities. Do you think your paper could just start by making sure they always use the term 'people with disabilities' instead of 'disabled people'? I know it saves space, but I am working and I do not like being defined by my disability." And with that he wheeled off. Point taken.

We all should know by now that people with a physical disability do not like to be defined by the disability, whether it is obvious or not. But one of the biggest problems in the disability sector is that no one wants to define anything.

One thing we do know is that disability is a growing problem.

According to Australian Institute of Health and Welfare statistics, one in five adults and one in eight children suffer a disability.

Aside from the ever expanding definitions of disability, it is a growing demographic problem. Simply put, more people with disability are living longer and, like the young man I met last week, they expect to live useful, productive lives on their own terms.

So who should have responsibility for disability services, given that it overlaps other areas such as health, welfare and education?

More pertinent, what of the immediate future of the disability services sector now that former parliamentary secretary for disability Bill Shorten is no longer directly responsible for that area?

Perhaps the relative importance of the sector was defined by the gaffe made by Julia Gillard in announcing her new cabinet.

First, the disability sector seemed to have disappeared from any portfolio.

But later, when journalists had

noted its absence, and the opposition had made mileage from it, the portfolio was found by the government and its absence characterised as a simple error (along with the disappearance of higher education).

But meanwhile Gillard couldn't remember who was the new parliamentary secretary for disability. Journalists were quick to point out that despite Gillard rewarding Shorten for his "great job" with disability, the oversight signified the downgrading of disability as an issue and as a portfolio.

It is tempting to see the formerly Cinderella portfolio of disability as a stepping stone, part of a can-do narrative for the political career of one particularly favoured Labor son.

However, Shorten was a powerful and genuinely committed advocate for the disability sector. It is hard to find anyone within the advocacy groups who will criticise him. He was seen as the personal force behind the government's commitment to reform. But at the same time there is no denying the disappointment that many people in the disability advisory groups, most of them struggling on as carers, feel about his promotion out of an area that is still broken.

Stephanie Gotlib, mother of two children with disabilities and executive officer of Children with Disability Australia, an umbrella group that Shorten helped establish, acknowledges his input in three areas: in significantly raising the profile of disability on the political agenda; in establishing a national disability strategy; and in the progression of the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

But there is an omission. Shorten had promised the sector it would have its own ministerial representative. But the government has not provided what was promised.

The Gillard government relegated the portfolio, seemingly as an afterthought, to Jan McLucas, who is now Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Carers.

This is at least not a good look for the government, at worst a real blow to the hope of reform among disabled people and their carers and families.

It looks suspiciously like a downgrading of the portfolio and the consequences for the disability insurance scheme are obvious.

Surely a separate department is needed for the administration of such a project.

Meanwhile, the opposition is upgrading disability to part of a shadow ministerial portfolio headed by Victorian senator Mitchell Fifield.

Fifield is bright and ambitious, and is generally welcomed within

the disability advocacy groups. But when I spoke to him, he was frank about his lack of knowledge of the area. He described his reaction at the piecemeal nature of the assistance available, particularly for children.

"I was shocked. I thought, like most people, that you pay your taxes and you have the right to be helped. This is Australia, after all.

"We think disability deserves to have a spokesman at ministerial level to make sure that voice is heard. If you are an Australian with a disability, you have a pretty frayed patchwork of support. And the support that you get is determined not by your need but by how you acquired your disability. It's a bit of a lottery and in most cases you face a Soviet-style system of rationing.

"That is why we had a pretty comprehensive policy for disabilities at the election. One of the features of that was the education card, with a value of \$20,000 that you could take to the school of your choice. The money would follow the child and the parents could have real choice."

More comprehensive case management would also be welcome. Like most people, particularly parents who have had to wend their way through the maze that is disability services, overlapping the medical and social security departments with interminable interviews and filling in forms, I know that most of the time one relies on word of mouth from others who may know something you don't.

Surely we can do better than a do-it-yourself approach, which comes down to stumbling on some service that may make or break your own mental health.

On the question of whether disability should be a bipartisan area, Fifield is clear that it should be and Coalition policy supports the National Disability Insurance Scheme but, as he puts it, no government has covered itself in glory in this area: "Disabilities is an area where partisanship has been readily put aside because, frankly, people in that area are not interested in politics, they are interested in results."

He can't help having a dig at one Labor policy; supported accommodation. "Bill Shorten promised in 2008 another 300 positions. In February, [ABC's] *Four Corners* found that only 40 of those had been delivered, and in the election campaign the government promised another 150.

"There should be a comprehensive audit of supported accommodation needs in Australia."

Well, yes indeed, and doing it at ministerial level will obviously be a step in the right direction.