



Disability group, mad as hell and ready to fight

Voters are being asked to back only parties that promise a national disability insurance scheme. 1.5 million people with a disability, and that will grow to 23 million by 2030

Mike Steketee, [*The Australian*](#), March 27, 2010

In the 1976 movie *Network*, Peter Finch in his role as a television broadcaster urges people to go to their windows, stick their heads out and shout: "I'm as mad as hell and I'm not gonna take this any more." Windows are thrown open and the words echo around the country.

Australians with disability and their supporters are hoping for something similar from the campaign they are launching via their "australiansmadashell" website. As it says, "we are not going to take it any more - and there are millions of us".

They are asking people to take a pledge to vote in state and federal elections only for parties that promise to introduce a national disability insurance scheme. The responses will be compiled and candidates, particularly in marginal seats, will be told of the number of pledges in their electorate.

An insurance scheme, rather than paying a welfare benefit or damages, as with motor vehicle workers' compensation schemes, would provide the essential services and facilities to the disabled and increase their prospects of a meaningful life, including a job. It would constitute a landmark economic and social reform and, while costly in the short term, would pay for itself in the long run, according to its proponents.

The insurance concept is based on the fact that all Australians are at risk in life's lottery, whether they are among the one in 160 born with autism, one in 400 with cerebral palsy, are blind or deaf, have Down syndrome, suffer severe intellectual disability, fall from a skateboard and suffer brain damage, or dive into the surf and end up as a quadriplegic. As Sue O'Reilly, one of the campaign organisers, puts it: "This is not something that happens to Martians on another planet."

People decide how to vote for all sorts of different reasons and there are any number of issues jostling for a place on the political agenda. But grey power helped elevate the concerns of older Australians up the scale of there are any number of issues jostling for a place on the political agenda. But grey power helped elevate the concerns of older Australians up the scale of political priorities and the Women's Electoral Lobby succeeded in putting issues such as child care on the agenda.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare estimates there are 1.5 million people with a severe disability and that will grow to 2.3 million by 2030. Including parents and other primary carers, extended family members, disability support workers, health professionals and specialist teachers, organisers say their campaign could influence more than 2 million voters, people for whom disability is not just one of many issues but central to their lives.

For years, the disabled and those supporting them mostly have accepted their lot, often consumed by the daily struggle to survive. Now, something is definitely stirring. O'Reilly says they hit on their theme because they kept hearing people saying, "I'm just so angry, just so fed up." Under her maiden name, Corrigan, she wrote an article last year for The Weekend Australian Magazine that told of parents who, at the point of collapse, resorted to abandoning their children in emergency respite centres. She wrote of her experiences raising a son with cerebral palsy, how the lack of support drove her family to live in England, where there is a legal right to vital equipment and services, including a residential secondary school.

The death of her husband prompted her to return to Australia, to be confronted all the more starkly with the lack of services here. Her article prompted one of the biggest reader responses the magazine has received.

Last weekend's South Australian election saw the election to the upper house of Kelly Vincent, a 21-year old wheelchair-bound candidate for Disability with Dignity. She replaced the lead candidate, Paul Collier, who died during the campaign but whose name remained on the ballot paper. The party received only 1.2 per cent of the primary vote but came ahead of a string of other single-issue parties and independents, and picked up enough references to win a seat.

The Rudd government's Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities Bill Shorten has no doubts about the political potency of the issue. "I have a 100 per cent conviction that this is far more important than Canberra insiders, including in the press gallery, have treated it up to now," he tells Inquirer.

As for the new campaign, I am very supportive of moving disability from the important to the urgent column."

To a considerable extent, it is the government that has given the issue traction. It setup a Disability Investment Group of outside experts who reported that, despite governments spending \$20 billion a year on disability welfare through a patchwork of programs and an army of 2.5 million family members and other carers providing unpaid care and support, the present system was "a national disgrace", with glaring gaps and increasing unmet demand.

It warned that the demand for services was growing at 7.5 per cent a year after inflation, with a rising incidence of disability as the population aged combining with a shrinking pool of ageing carers and the huge cost of replacing informal, largely unpaid care with formal care. The group's principal recommendation for a national disability insurance scheme would use a social insurance model to assess the risk of disability in the general population, calculate the costs of meeting their essential lifetime needs and estimate the premium or cost required to pay for them.

The emphasis would be on early intervention and access to education and training to maximise long-term independence. The government has asked the Productivity Commission to look at the feasibility and costs of such a scheme, as well as other options for long-term care and support. In the meantime, the government has substantially increased funding to the states for disability services and guaranteed real increases of 3 per cent a year, as well as increasing the disability support pension and the carer payment.

Bruce Bonyhady, chairman of Yooralla, Victoria's largest disability service provider and a member of the group, says its work established the significance of disability as not just a social but an economic issue, "one with quite profound economic implications if we don't do anything. We are at a tipping point where it is now becoming a political issue. Once you have an all-embracing solution like an [insurance scheme], you open up the possibility that it becomes a political issue, as opposed to a partisan issue."

The major parties will have difficulty making an ironclad commitment to such a scheme, given the Productivity Commission is not due to report until the middle of next year. It is a scheme that comes with a price tag: a net \$4bn to \$5bn a year to cover people aged under 65, according to an analysis by PricewaterhouseCoopers. It also argues that the scheme could pay for itself, possibly after 10 years, through reduced disability support pension and carer payments, and lower bills for health, aged care and other social programs.

Bonyhady says the scheme could be funded through a Medicare-type levy of 0.8 per cent of taxable income. Politicians will balk at a new tax, particularly in an election year, although Tony Abbott will find it harder to invoke his great big new tax argument on this issue.

However the parties react to the election pledges she is seeking, O'Reilly will be happy if she hears Kevin Rudd and Abbott declare their commitment in the next term of government to a radical overhaul of the disability system.

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