

"As a champion of the disabled, Shorten has found a brave voice"

Phillip Hudson Herald Sun May 25, 2010

*Bill Shorten thunders with the passion of an old-fashioned preacher!
"Before I was elected to politics I spent 14 years in the union movement and let me tell you something: I thought I knew my country. I didn't," he says.*

"The past two years have opened my eyes. Hidden in plain sight are more than two million Australians who are citizens in name, but in reality are more like exiles in their own country. It's shameful."

He is talking about people with disabilities, their families and carers.

The ambitious Shorten has become their champion. He is pursuing two dramatic ideas that would reshape the way Australia thinks about people with a disability.

The first is to convince the housing industry to adopt universal design for residential buildings. The second could lead to a radical Medicare-style national disability insurance scheme.

Both ideas will take time but they are gaining momentum due to Shorten's evangelical-style advocacy within the Government and the community.

Shorten came to Canberra as one of the stars of the union movement amid high expectations he would win a ministry in Kevin Rudd's Government.

Rudd didn't give Shorten a prize. He was made parliamentary secretary for disabilities. Many saw it as a backwater.

But Shorten has defined his quest and drawn on skills forged in the rough world of trade unions to challenge disability groups to lift their game and present a united voice to Government.

And he is using his strong links in the business community to change perceptions. The disabled should be seen as consumers, not charity, he says.

The number of people with a severe or profound disability is tipped to more than double from 1.4 million today to 2.9 million by 2050.

Governments spend \$22 billion a year on the disabled. About \$8 billion is paid to community care and support providers, \$3 billion is for family and informal carers and almost \$11 billion goes to the 770,000 people who get the disability support pension.

Demand for disability services is rising by 7.5 per cent a year but will be overwhelmed by the future unless attitudes and policies change.

Shorten says business seeks to attract the green dollar spent by those passionate about the environment and the pink dollar reflecting the purchasing power of the gay community. He urges them to look to the untapped orange disability dollar.

"It's not corporate charity to employ someone with a disability. It's good for your business. People with disabilities are not liabilities. They are assets."

About 160,000 houses and units are built each year. Basic changes to design rules would make homes more suitable for young families, the elderly and the disabled - allowing people to remain living independently in their own home for longer. This could include wider doors to allow a wheelchair or a pram to move in and out of rooms. A toilet on the ground floor is also a major factor.

Shorten hopes all new homes will be built to universal design standards by 2020. He argues it is "commercially stupid not to build houses that are easier to sell" as the population ages and disability becomes more prevalent.

He also thinks it would be a smart investment to introduce a national disability insurance scheme, if it proves to be feasible. The Productivity Commission is conducting an inquiry.

A N insurance scheme could be a compulsory levy on the wage of all workers on top of the Medicare levy. It could be structured another way.

It would pay for lifetime care for people with severe disabilities and replace the current system where the amount of assistance depends on what type of disability a person has and whether it is the result of negligence, an accident or birth.

The Rudd Government has poured more funds into disability services and increased the pension but many people still struggle to cover primary and respite care, modify their home and find appropriate transport.

Sometimes they require a round-the-clock carer and there is no care for the carers. Waiting lists for help are too long and will only grow.

The interesting thing about this issue is that Tony Abbott isn't running a campaign about this possible "great big new tax" even though he could.

Abbott says if the Productivity Commission thinks it's a good idea "that would be a sign that as a nation we should take it forward".

The challenge is to make sure Shorten's brave ideas do not end up as a lost opportunity mired in controversy like the emissions trading scheme or the mining tax. So far, Shorten deserves high praise for taking up a low-profile cause with such gusto. Abbott and his spokesman Mitch Fifield deserve credit for not playing politics.

At the South Australian poll in March, Paul Collier led a party called Dignity4Disability. He died from a brain haemorrhage but his name stayed on the ballot paper and he became the first person elected to any Australian Parliament on a disability platform. His spot went to cerebral palsy sufferer Kelli Vincent, who has taken her place in a wheelchair.

The Productivity Commission report comes out in July next year. That puts it beyond this year's election but the political voice of the disabled is growing.

LISA Comment: "Well done Bill for breathing some fresh life into the very long and very tired campaign for reasonable rights for our disadvantaged citizens. Traditional campaigners are worn out and downtrodden by the never ending battle with extremely difficult bureaucracy. We need them to see entitled people, not begging bowls!

Note: [Women's Day Magazine, Carers](#)

(<http://womansday.ninemsn.com.au/articleindex.aspx?sectionid=75260§ionname=lifestyle&subsectionid=205119&subsectionname=carers>)

"Vote for NDIS". (<http://womansday.ninemsn.com.au/vote.aspx?v=&q=144687>)

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