

Australian government releases whitewash report after more than 1,200 people die waiting for disability services

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In a desperate act of political damage control, the Liberal-National Coalition government last week belatedly released an official review of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). The report offered a series of limited recommendations intended to quell the “dissatisfaction” and “anger” among NDIS applicants and recipients.

The “independent” review, conducted by former finance department secretary David Tune, was handed to the government in December. It sat on the report until widespread outrage erupted after statistics revealed that more than 1,200 people had died while waiting for NDIS support packages.

The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), the government department responsible for the NDIS, responded to a question on notice to Senate estimates in early January. It admitted that 1,279 people had died from July 2016 to September 2019 “between submitting an access request and receiving supports under the National Disability Insurance Scheme.”

This equates to more than one person a day dying since the national rollout of the NDIS in July 2016. Of those who died, 35 were children under the age of six and 40 were between the ages of seven and 18. In the first nine months of 2019 alone, 369 people died.

One of the key factors in the deaths is the protracted wait times between requesting services from the NDIS and receiving support. It was revealed that the national average wait time was 121 days for children under the age of six and 152 days, or five months, for those aged seven or older. Disabled people, carers and their families were left with next to no support services for months.

Last year it was reported that a 32-year-old

Tasmanian man, Tim Rubenach, died of pneumonia in May 2018. He had severe epilepsy and suffered bleeding stomach ulcers that required a tilt bed. The NDIS approved the bed, but it was delayed for months and only arrived the day before he was buried. His parents, both in their 70s, described the scheme as “abuse.”

Initially the government attempted to deny the figures published by its own agency. NDIS Minister Stuart Robert told 2GB radio the figures were “not even remotely correct.” Robert insisted: “The fact that they’ve passed away of course is correct, but no one has passed away waiting for the NDIS.”

Robert’s denial sparked further public anger, with numerous social media and media commentators condemning the government. Prime Minister Scott Morrison, seeking to suppress the growing fury, did not deny the figures, instead saying they were “unacceptable.”

Morrison and his government, already thoroughly discredited by their handling of the bush fire crisis in Australia, hastily released Tune’s report six days after the figures on the deaths came to light.

Tune’s review, entitled “Removing Red Tape and Implementing the NDIS Participant Service Guarantee” made 29 recommendations, all of which cover over the fundamental pro-business model of the NDIS.

While warning the government that “responses to the review often expressed frustration, dissatisfaction and sometimes anger about the way the NDIS has been implemented,” the review mainly consisted of vague calls for “transparency, consistency and timeliness.”

It proposes more government reviews, amendments to rules, changes in wording to make the scheme easier

to understand and the introduction of a Participant Service Guarantee. However, this vague guarantee of “shorter, agreed timeframes” for NDIS applications is yet to be finalised, and will not begin before July.

Notably absent from any of the recommendations is any call to address the severe staff shortage at the NDIA, one of the primary causes of delays. In the projected design of the NDIS the agency was to be staffed by nearly 11,000 Australian Public Sector (APS) workers. However, the Coalition government placed a staffing cap of 4,000 in 2014 and kept current staff levels at 3,200.

This was part of the government’s \$6.4 billion deliberate “underspend” on disability and welfare services revealed last year, which was used to promise to bring the federal budget “back in black.” The surplus pledge itself marked the transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top end of society, as the lion share of the budget deficit arose from the more than \$50 billion incurred by the previous Labor government to prop up the banks during the 2008-09 global financial crisis.

Former Labor Party leader Bill Shorten, now Labor’s NDIS spokesperson, hypocritically called the staffing cap “cruel.” Labor had promised to remove the cap if it had won last May’s federal election, claiming a Labor government was the best to “deliver” the NDIS.

After years of bitter experiences with pro-business Labor governments, many workers and young people regarded this pledge as no more believable than any of its other fraudulent “fair go” election promises. Labor’s share of the vote plunged to a century low of just 33 percent.

Both Labor and the Morrison government, as well as the Greens, are still peddling the fraud that the NDIS is a progressive reform that will provide genuine improvements for people with a disability, their carers and families. In truth, the scheme was always designed to privatise disability services, while shutting down essential public facilities and forcing people off welfare benefits.

The NDIS was legislated in 2012 by the minority Greens-backed Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard. The scheme, which was fully supported by the trade unions, was modelled from a report by the Productivity Commission—a pro-market body that specialises in cutting social spending.

The Morrison government has still made no formal

response to Tune’s report, despite having it in hand since December. Minister Robert only said the government would “use these findings to update and clarify the legislation and remove barriers to a better NDIS.”

Speeding up the wait times for plans or even increasing staffing will not resolve the fundamental issues with the NDIS. It is designed to outsource disability services to charities or profit-making companies, which compete for service contracts by cutting costs.

Already nearly a dozen former residents of state-run disability centres have died as a result of being forced into under-funded “group homes,” typically run by charity organisations.

At least 100,000 people with psychosocial disabilities—severe mental health illnesses—have been locked out of the NDIS due a cap on the number of participants who can access the scheme. This has been coupled with the shutdown of essential mental health services and carer supports across the country.

The author also recommends:

The Australian Election and the fraud of the NDIS
[10 May 2019]



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