Australian government prepares to slash disability services

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The Liberal-National government has declared its intent to dramatically rein in the costs of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), potentially threatening the care provided to its almost 450,000 participants and those seeking services in the future.

Last week, the recently-installed NDIS Minister Linda Reynolds told a parliamentary committee the scheme was on an "unsustainable growth trajectory." She accused the public sector workers of too much "empathy" in applying the "reasonable and necessary" test for providing access to the scheme.

In reality, the NDIS, legislated by the last Labor government in 2012, has always been based on removing government responsibility for the care of people with a disability by outsourcing the services, creating a profit-driven "disability market."

The NDIS was designed to cut government spending by dismantling previous institutional facilities. However, such is the level of need that the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), which administers the NDIS, said expenditure on the scheme grew by 23 percent between 2019–20 and 2020–21.

According to the May 11 federal budget, the NDIS will cost some $30 billion by 2024–25. Far from being "unsustainable," that is only a fraction of the billions of dollars that the budget continued to pump into the hands of the corporate elite by way of subsidies and incentives.

The government's only concern is that $30 billion is some $8 billion more than the original estimate of $22 billion per year outlined by the Productivity Commission—the pro-market think tank that drafted the scheme.

In reality, $30 billion is not enough. John Walsh, a former NDIS board member and an associate commissioner of the Productivity Commission report, told a parliamentary inquiry that the total cost of meeting the support needs of all people with a disability under the age of 65 would be $50 billion.

Walsh said successive Labor and Liberal-National governments had "persisted with an ideology of welfare and paternalism." He claimed this had resulted in "total reliance" on "Tier 3" support—individual support plans or vouchers—while there was "poor implementation and eventual defunding" of Tier 2 services, called Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC).

The Productivity Commission had recommended the ILC tier to funnel people with psychosocial disabilities and supposedly low-level support needs into "mainstream" services and away from disability support.

According to the NDIS Actuary, there are 2.5 million people under 65 with a disability, but only 430,000 access the NDIS as participants. The rest must get support through ILC services.

Many of the NDIS participants have complex needs, including assistance with daily living, respite care, travel assistance, equipment such as walkers, home modifications, and specialist disability accommodation. Some need support workers to allow participation in social and community events and recreation, assistance dogs and their support, education support, and services such as psychologists, physiotherapy, exercise physiology and occupational therapy.

To slash costs, the government is planning to impose so-called "independent" assessments to determine eligibility to the scheme. The assessors are allied health professionals contracted by the government to conduct three-hour interviews to determine individuals' funding.

This is to replace the submission of reports from

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individuals' own treating specialists, as previously required by the NDIS. According to documents seen by the *Guardian*, the government plans to save an estimated $700 million over four years.

The assessors will use a series of questionnaires, dubbed "assessment tools." The data collected will be used to allocate various scores to a person to determine their functionality.

There is intense concern among people with a disability, their carers and disability advocacy groups about the introduction of the assessors. They see their use as a mechanism for locking them out of the scheme or reducing their funding, with all the NDIS participants having to be reassessed.

In one example, a nine-year-old girl, Eliza Tape, who took part in a trial in January was deemed to have no mobility issues, despite having an intellectual disability and a condition that gives her brittle bones, so she often has to use a wheelchair.

Sue Tape, Eliza's mother, told the *Guardian* she was only aware of the inaccuracies because she specifically requested the report. "I would imagine if I'm asking for a new wheelchair for Eliza because she grows out of the current one, they're going to look at the independent assessment, and it says she doesn't have any mobility issues," Tape said.

The deep opposition to the assessors has forced the government to delay their implementation for now but Reynolds remains committed to it. The *Australian* reported this week: "She is expected to make a decision on them later this year."

Documents obtained by the *Guardian* also reveal the establishment of an NDIS Sustainability Action Taskforce (SAT). Its three aims are to "slow net growth in participant numbers," "slow growth in spend per participant" and "strengthen operational discipline." Another goal is to "increase participant exits" from the NDIS, through the "targeted review of existing participant plans."

The Labor Party's shadow NDIS minister, former party leader Bill Shorten, said this was "proof positive the Morrison government has no plan for Australians with disability except slash, slash, slash."

This is a fraud and a coverup. Shorten was an architect of the NDIS in the previous Labor government. The NDIS has seen the closure of government-run public health services and institutions for disabled people. This has resulted in the premature deaths of numbers of people forced to rely on the privatised for-profit NDIS system. These outcomes are not aberrations, but inherent to the scheme itself.

The NDIS was always designed to further privatise the disability and health industry. Another federal Labor government would only deepen the outsourcing of health services.

The provision of care for those with a disability cannot be left in the hands of the financial elite and their political representatives. As the global catastrophe of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to prove, the ruling class places corporate profits before lives. Free and guaranteed access to high-quality healthcare for all, including disability services—a basic social right—requires a fight against the capitalist profit system itself.

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