

Australian Labor government's assault on disability services to be based on brutal "functional assessments"

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The Labor government is belligerently defending its massive assault on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), even as people with disabilities and their families warn the cuts will destroy the lives of some of the most vulnerable.

On April 22, Health Minister Mark Butler announced \$35 billion in funding cuts to the NDIS over the next four years, as the centrepiece of an austerity budget to be handed down on May 12. The growth rate of federal spending on the scheme will be slashed from around 10 percent to 2 percent, far below soaring inflation, which has reached 4.6 percent.

The largest single cut to a government program in Australian history is going to have dire consequences. The plan is to drive down the number of NDIS participants from 760,000 to around 600,000 by 2030. That is far below the projected number of 900,000 by 2030, so that means cutting at least 300,000 people off support.

Following the announcement, Butler did the media rounds to tout the offensive. The first interview he chose was significant. It was with the Murdoch-owned Sky News, the most frothingly right-wing element of the establishment media, which has been braying for cuts to the NDIS.

Everything was about driving down spending, as the corporate elite has demanded. The swingeing cuts were "about good financial management," Butler stated at least three times in the space of several minutes.

Even the host Andrew Clennel, who expressed support for the cuts, asked whether "there will be more disabled people, parents of disabled people, or people now classified as having disability, reaching into their own pockets to pay for their services?" Butler coldly responded: "It depends what sort of supports they want."

Butler denounced the cost of "unscheduled reassessments," where a person on the NDIS or their carers raise that they urgently require more assistance. "On average, that sees plan inflation of about 20 percent, so a huge driver of cost growth," he said, declaring that the aim

was to immediately reduce that figure to 15 percent.

What Butler was referring to were cases where a disabled person's condition worsens and they need more support—for instance if a person with mobility issues could no longer walk and required a wheelchair. Labor's plan would mean they must wait until a "scheduled reassessment," which only occurs once every year or two.

Butler made clear that the NDIS would provide the barest assistance to the fewest number possible. Social and community participation programs, which enable NDIS participants to leave the house, go to work, socialise and engage in cultural activities were an unacceptable strain on the budget. They would be "brought under control."

Central to the cuts are "functional assessments." Butler confirmed that every NDIS participant or future participant would be subjected to the tests, which seek to remove people entirely or dramatically reduce the support they receive.

No longer would NDIS eligibility be based on a medical diagnosis. Instead, it would depend on tests of "daily functionality." The examinations would be based on "ordinary parts of daily life, looking after yourself, toileting, personal care, meal preparation, getting around, mobility, things like that."

In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Butler declared that the "functional assessment" tool would "be relatively blind to whether you bring a diagnosis of autism or down syndrome or a more physical quadriplegia or paraplegia, for example, and instead look at how your daily living needs are assessed."

That is an extraordinary statement. Diagnoses are not arbitrary labels. They are scientific designations, made by a professional.

There is an intrinsic connection between the diagnoses someone receives and the medical care and support they require. The assistance needed by someone with a neurodevelopmental disorder, such as autism, would be completely different to that required by someone with a

major physical impairment.

Those deemed capable of “looking after yourself, toileting, personal care” will be slated for removal. Those who remain may receive basic assistance with such daily tasks and be denied access to specialist services, which are often complex and costly.

The brutal character of the cuts is underscored by those already underway. Autistic children, who have been placed on the scheme after a diagnosis by a medical professional, have been vilified by the Labor government and the press and are being subjected to mass removal.

The *Guardian* reported that “Data compiled by the Australian Neurodivergent Parents Association (ANPA) shows that children with developmental delay are being removed from the NDIS faster than they are being let in.” The number of children with that condition had reached “a peak of 88,112 in March 2025, followed by three straight quarters of acceleration in the opposite direction, ending at 70,602 by December 2025.”

The ANPA was aware of 12,000 children who had been removed entirely from their individualised supports. That is just the tip of the iceberg, however, because in a growing number of other cases “a child would remain eligible, they remain in name on the NDIS, but their plan is gutted. So their support is just absolutely decimated. That’s the majority of what we’re seeing,” ANPA President Sarah Langston said.

The *Guardian* featured the harrowing case of Aidyn, an eight-year old boy with “level-two autism, an intellectual disability and an eating disorder. Two years ago, he had a gastrostomy tube inserted into his stomach because he was malnourished.”

His coordinator and advocate Jayde Parker explained that previously Aidyn and his mother, who also has autism, received through the NDIS “support coordination, an OT, physio, a dietitian and a feeding therapist” and a monthly visit from a nurse.

When Parker reported to the NDIS a change in the family’s circumstances and that they needed some more assistance, the National Disability Insurance Agency, which regulates the scheme, “took away everything – they completely cut therapy funding [down] to seven hours of a dietitian in a year. When Aidyn needed it the most, they just kicked him off.”

In justifying the cuts, Labor has claimed that other “foundational supports” will be provided through collaboration between the federal government and the states. But while autistic children are already being flung off the scheme, the “Thriving Kids” program—to which they will supposedly be directed—does not exist and has not even been detailed. All that Butler has said is that it will not provide

“individualised” supports that children such as Aidyn depend upon.

The reality is that people with disabilities are going to be removed from the NDIS and given nothing else. That this will result in despair and death is absolutely certain.

Labor introduced the NDIS in 2012 as a disability market, based on funnelling government money into private disability services. In other words, while now making unsubstantiated claims of “rotting” and “fraud,” Labor ensured that the profit motive was baked into the very design of the NDIS.

In his interviews, Butler declared that the government was not changing that “design.” Disability will remain effectively privatised, but to drive down costs in the interests of austerity, masses of disabled people will be thrown on the scrapheap. And thousands of workers who have provided support to them will be thrown out of a job.

At the same time, Labor has increased military spending to a record level of \$60 billion a year, and just days before unveiling its savage assault on the disabled, announced a further \$53 billion over the decade, to participate in US-led wars, such as the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, the criminal assault on Iran and the preparations for a disastrous conflict with China.

There is an intimate relationship between the two: to pay for war, funding on essential social spending has to be reduced as much as possible, if not eliminated. And the barbarism of imperialist wars abroad is matched by a barbaric assault on the social rights of ordinary people domestically. A government that will trample on disabled people, among the most vulnerable layers of the population, is signalling there are no red lines it will not cross.

The fight against these cuts requires an independent movement of the working class, against the Labor government, and the entire capitalist system, which is based on the relentless subordination of social need to private profit.



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