

# Australia: Broad opposition to Labor's NDIS bill that cuts support for disabled

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The Labor government's far-reaching assault on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has provoked an outpouring of anger from disabled people, their families and advocacy organisations.

The cuts, contained in legislation tabled to parliament, are the centrepiece of last month's austerity budget, which slashed \$63.8 billion from social programs, while increasing military spending and providing handouts to the corporate elite.

The bill aims to cut the NDIS by \$37 billion over four years and to reduce growth in expenditure down to around 2 percent, far below the rate of inflation and the actual growth in need. Based on the government's own modelling, 241,000 existing participants are expected to be pushed off between January 2028 and mid-2031, while another 110,000 people will be barred from joining, a total reduction of 350,000 people receiving support.

Disabled people are already being hit by cuts under the existing NDIS framework, even before the new legislation has been enacted. Many submissions revealed participants being subjected to reductions in support hours, respite, consumables and essential care through plan cuts.

The bill was tabled on May 14 and referred to a Senate inquiry the same day. Submissions were initially open for only a fortnight, with the deadline later extended by just three days. Despite receiving more than 4,000 submissions, the committee held only three days of public hearings, from June 9 to 11. The final report was due today but has been delayed for three days.

The entire process has been compressed into little more than a month, with only five days between the final hearing and the reporting deadline. That such far-reaching legislation is being pushed through on this timetable underscores Labor's determination to minimise public scrutiny and suppress opposition. The haste is driven by Labor's understanding that its measures are deeply unpopular. Determined to prevent any mobilisation of workers and disabled people against the bill, the government wants it enacted before parliament rises on July 2.

This drive to force the bill through has nevertheless confronted deep-going opposition. This is reflected not only in the number of submissions, but in the testimony to the inquiry from disability advocacy groups, welfare agencies, medical professionals, human rights organisations, participants and

families. While only a fraction of the submissions has been published on the Senate website, the overwhelming majority of those publicly available are hostile to the bill and its consequences.

One of the most consistent and devastating features of the submissions and testimony are repeated warnings that the bill could lead to preventable deaths. Dr George Taleporos, chair of Every Australian Counts, made the danger concrete. He pointed to the proposed ministerial powers to impose support ratios and explained that for someone like himself, who requires suctioning every 30 minutes to breathe, being forced to share a support worker with three or four other people would be fatal. "People will die if these ratios are in place for people who need one-to-one support," he said.

Naomi Anderson of Villamanta Disability Rights Legal Service brought the consequences into sharp focus. She cited participants who have already died after NDIS supports were cut, including one she referred to as "Lee," who died of pneumonia in hospital after his 24-hour care was reduced to eight hours.

The inquiry has also revealed deep alarm over the bill's proposed eligibility requirements, especially the demand that participants exhaust "all appropriate treatment" before their disability is considered permanent. Witnesses described this as terrifying because it opens the door to coercion, medical abuse and the denial of support until people submit to interventions they may not want, cannot afford or medically tolerate, with potentially harmful treatment pathways.

Skye Kakoschke-Moore of Children and Young People with Disability Australia told the inquiry that, according to NDIA briefing material, the new requirement could amount to forcing children into forms of "chemical restraint" or medication as a condition of access to support.

Professor Allan Fels, chair of Mind Australia, noted that participants with psychosocial disabilities are already being asked why they have not tried extreme measures such as electroconvulsive therapy or clozapine.

At the Melbourne hearing on June 9, Andrew Bretherton, an NDIS participant with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, warned that the bill could force people with the disease to undergo, or repeatedly prove they had undergone,

potentially harmful therapies before receiving support.

One of the bill's most authoritarian features is the extraordinary power handed to the federal health minister to cut support by ministerial fiat. Submissions and testimony condemned the minister's right to unilaterally reduce funding for entire categories of support. That power could be used even where the NDIS itself had already determined that those supports were "reasonable and necessary" for a participant's care, safety or daily life.

Naomi Anderson of Villamanta Disability Rights Legal Service described the proposed ministerial powers as a "Trump clause," arguing that parliament should not hand such sweeping discretion to one individual.

Another of the most reviled elements of the bill is the proposed 50 percent cut to social and community participation budgets. Witnesses described it as an arbitrary measure that ignores individual circumstances and would slash the supports that allow disabled people to work, study, maintain friendships and participate in community life.

Luke Nelson, a NDIS participant since 2013, commented: "The changes in the bill make me afraid that I will not be able to get up in the morning... I am afraid that somebody won't be there to support me to get ready to leave the house."

Vanita and Rohan spoke of the difficulties already taking place at the second day of the Senate Inquiry public hearings on June 10 as part of a panel of NDIS participants. Rohan, a wheelchair user, read a statement on behalf of a friend with spina bifida and severe dyslexia whose incontinence budget was halved after a NDIS review, forcing him to choose between food, technology and essential products.

Vanita described the situation facing her 43-year-old brother who lives with autism, an intellectual disability and severe epilepsy. After their mother, his primary carer, moved into aged care, the system "dropped" him.

With no emergency placement or plan provided, he moved into Vanita's small two-bedroom home, where "my brother now sleeps on a camp stretcher in our open-plan lounge room. He has no bedroom, no door to close, no privacy and no personal space to retreat to." His new NDIS plan removed all respite funding.

Scores of submissions warned that the cuts would shift care from the state onto unpaid family members.

Sarah Langston, president of the Australian Neurodivergent Parents Association, said the redefinition of "parental responsibility" would "strip our children and us of rights" and "force us into child protection" as disabled parents collapse under the impact of long hours of uncompensated labour. Isabella Choate from the Youth Disability Advocacy Network told the inquiry: "When this bill says, in effect, that families should step up, what we hear is: we won't help you; you are on your own."

A submission from state and territory disability ministers—from Labor and Liberal-run governments—published

on the Senate Inquiry website last Thursday warned that the Albanese government was dumping costs onto overstretched public hospitals and other state health systems which could not absorb them. While these governments have no fundamental differences with the Albanese government's cost-cutting attacks, the submission insisted that state and territory ministers had made no agreement with the federal Labor government to provide like-for-like services to people removed from the NDIS. In other words, the statement makes clear that those removed from the NDIS and their families will have little or no support.

Health Minister Butler dismissed the criticism, telling the ABC-TV's "Insiders" program on Sunday that all governments should "get on with the job of delivering better hospital services and a NDIS that is secured for the long term."

Testimony and submissions to the inquiry show that disabled people and their families will not passively accept this social onslaught. Speaking at last week's Senate Inquiry hearing, Hannah Diviney, an NDIS participant with cerebral palsy from Sydney, called for the immediate withdrawal of the legislation.

"You may cast me as a frightened little girl but hear this. When disabled people die as a direct result of this Bill—and they will—their blood will be on your hands. How do I know people will die? Because you will have made it impossible for them to live," she said.

A government that will trample on the disabled, among the most vulnerable layers of the population, is signalling that there are no red lines it will not cross in imposing the burden of the capitalist crisis on working people.

The fight against these cuts and for the provision of high-quality care for the disabled cannot go forward if it is confined to appeals to Labor and other parliamentary parties. What is required is an independent movement of workers, disabled people and families and the working class a whole based on a socialist program in a political and industrial struggle against Labor's severe austerity measures.



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