

Australian government dismisses wide opposition to disability scheme cuts

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Health Minister Mark Butler used a national television interview last Sunday to insist that the federal Labor government's planned assault on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which will remove or block hundreds of thousands of disabled people from receiving necessary supports, must proceed on time.

Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Insiders" program, Butler was adamant there could be no delay to ramming the bill through parliament before the winter recess on July 2. Asked what a postponement would mean, Butler declared that "billions of dollars" in savings would be lost.

The NDIS bill is the cornerstone of the Labor government's May austerity budget, which slashes \$63.8 billion from social programs over four years while providing massive funds for the military and handouts to the rich. More than half of these cuts, \$37.8 billion, are bound up with the gutting of the NDIS, driving expenditure growth down to an average of around 2 percent.

Butler's interview was the Labor government's response to the damning evidence presented to a Senate inquiry into the bill. Tabled and referred on May 14, the bill was subjected to a rushed inquiry process. Submissions were initially open for a fortnight, later extended by just three days. The inquiry nevertheless received more than 4,000 submissions, while the committee held only three days of public hearings, from June 9 to 11.

The committee's final report, originally due on June 16, has been delayed by three days until tomorrow, underscoring the government's determination to push the bill through before the winter recess.

Around 1,000 submissions, less than a quarter of those lodged, have been made public. Even this partial

record underlines the far-reaching character of the assault on some of the most vulnerable people in the community. Many warned that plan cuts and the loss of supports would deepen isolation, mental distress and the risk of suicide.

The very first question put to Butler on "Insiders" was whether people would die as a result of the bill. Butler dismissed the evidence out of hand, saying, "No, they won't."

Yet deaths have already taken place as a result of cutbacks to support that will only worsen dramatically as hundreds of thousands of disabled are thrown off the scheme. In evidence to the Senate inquiry, Villamanta Disability Rights Legal Service cited the case of Lee, an NDIS participant who died after 24-hour care was reduced to just eight hours.

In January, autistic teenagers Leon and Otis Clune and their parents were found dead in Perth in what police suspect was a murder-suicide, amid reports that the family had struggled to secure adequate disability supports.

In May, a Campbelltown father in Sydney was charged with murdering his wife and two sons, aged 12 and 4, who had learning difficulties. Police allege he had planned the killings after reading about the Perth case.

While a number of factors may be involved, these tragedies reflect the desperate situations in which those with disabilities and family members are placed through lack of support.

Far from addressing the issues revealed by the Senate inquiry, Butler simply declared that the NDIS had gone "way off track," had grown "far too big," cost "too much," and had become "a honeypot for shonks and rorters." For months, the government along with the media have used supposed "fraud" as the justification

for the assault on the disabled.

However, even the government's own figures submitted to the inquiry expose Butler's claims as a lie. Internal modelling of the bill's projected savings shows that just \$0.9 billion of the \$38.1 billion in savings over four years will come from "anti-fraud measures"—barely 2 percent of the total.

Moreover, the NDIS itself was based on the privatisation of disability care which created a huge "honeypot" for businesses and a vast network of private providers. State and territory governments wound back or dismantled much of the previous disability infrastructure.

The overwhelming bulk of the savings will come from cutting people off support. The same internal modelling projects \$13.2 billion in savings from slashing existing budgets, and a further \$9.3 billion from tightening eligibility and throwing people off the scheme altogether.

The scale of the assault is far greater than is generally reported. Media coverage has largely cited about 160,000 people to be removed. But the government's own modelling projects 241,000 existing recipients, around one third of the more than 760,000 now relying on the scheme, will be forced off the NDIS over four years. More than 100,000 others will be denied access altogether.

The Labor government claims that those removed from the NDIS will receive assistance through so-called "Foundational Supports," a yet to be created system jointly funded by the federal, state and territory governments. Only \$10 billion has been allocated over five years, a fraction of the support now provided through the NDIS.

The only concrete element of Foundational Supports so far decided is Thriving Kids, aimed at children under nine with developmental delay or autism, but even this is not yet operational.

In a joint submission to the inquiry, state and territory disability ministers declared that at present there are no alternatives for those to be thrown off the NDIS. They bluntly declared their governments "are not in a position, and have made no agreement, to deliver like-for-like services to people who are exited from the NDIS."

The state and territory governments have no fundamental disagreements with the plans to slash

NDIS costs but simply do not want the costs shifted to them. Butler, however, dismissed their concerns out of hand, declaring they should "get on with that job" of setting up Foundational Supports, rather than putting in "submissions like that."

Butler's determination to proceed expresses the interests of the corporate and financial elites, which have repeatedly demanded that the Albanese government slash government spending, targeting the NDIS in particular. An editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* last week warned the government against any delay in imposing the huge cuts to the NDIS, declaring that it could cost \$17 billion in savings, "impede efforts to minimise government debt" and act as a "huge drag on productivity."

The opposition Coalition's call for a six-month extension of the inquiry is a cynical manoeuvre. It supports the central framework of making the NDIS "sustainable" through cost-cutting. Its delay proposal is bound up with horse-trading with the Greens over an inquiry into Labor's negative gearing and capital gains tax changes, which the Coalition opposes on behalf of property investors and wealthy layers.

The Greens have opposed the bill and called for greater scrutiny, amendments and co-design. But their role is to channel mass opposition back into backroom negotiations in parliament. The Greens have a long record of posturing as defenders of social rights and criticising government, but then passing regressive legislation with little more than cosmetic changes.

Butler's intransigence makes clear that Labor's Senate inquiry was never intended to be more than a perfunctory examination of the NDIS legislation, designed to pay lip service to the widespread opposition. Its report, due out tomorrow, will be ignored as the government attempts to ram through sweeping changes that will impact hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities.



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