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## **Albanese Government makes good start for the dispossessed, but much more to be done**

By Francis Sullivan

In 1996 Paul Keating said, “when you change the Government, you change the country”.

Nothing could be truer as the Albanese Government goes about implementing a far reaching, some might say radical agenda, particularly as it relates to many of Australia’s most marginal and disadvantaged.

Since the federal election in May last year, we have seen a significant increase in the basic wage, a Budget that has delivered extra investment in community services, additional front-line workers, a boost to social and affordable housing, and new fee-free TAFE places.

The cashless debit card has been relegated to the trashcan, a Royal Commission is investigating the appalling Robodebt scheme while at the same time nearly 200,000 Robodebt reviews, which had thousands of Australia’s most vulnerable hanging from financial tenterhooks, have been scrapped.

Significantly, in one of the most welcome and innovative initiatives in decades, the Albanese Government will set up an independent panel to annually review support payments — such as JobSeeker and parenting payments — ahead of each Federal Budget.

This is a game-changer that will provide a platform for advocates and others to argue for increased payments, and it marks a clear approach to ensuring support payment kept pace with the cost of living and inflation pressures.


And while many would, rightly say, this is just a start, and we are coming off a low base, at least we now seem to have a government that looks to the underprivileged and marginalised with a degree of compassion and pragmatism rather than indifference.

That said, I’m sure Ministers in the previous government can roll out a long list of ‘achievements’ contradicting what most in the social services sector see as 10 years of neglect.

But the facts speak for themselves – housing affordability is at an all-time low, outcomes for First Nations Australians have fallen off a cliff, community service organisations are run off their feet, and more than 3 million of our fellow Australians (including 760,000 children) are living below the poverty line.

In a country that prides itself on a fair go for all and sees itself among the world’s most civilised nations, this is a poor result by any measure.

And these are not the sort of circumstances that will be corrected in months, let alone years.



The current Government has a massive job on its hands, and in the social and community services portfolios that chew up more of the Commonwealth Budget than any other government endeavour, the job must be done right.

So, where to begin?

The Government's plan for a root and branch review of the NDIS is a good start.

The sustainability and operation of one of the country's most important social support services must be protected. It has arguably been the best and most effective policy initiative for people living with disabilities, their families and supporters in generations.

But it is not working as it should, it is too easy to corrupt, and its costs are becoming untenable. Shonky providers need to be weeded out. It is too confusing for the people who need it most and too easy for those people with the cunning and the resources to game.

Another key focus for the Government must be ensuring that the social services safety net is well resourced and funded.

The facts are that the community and the Government cannot manage the enormous needs of people at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder without the support of not-for-profit and Church based social service organisations; St Vincent De Paul, Mission Australia, UnitingCare, The Smith Family and many others.

For too long, governments, state and federal, have failed to fully fund the overhead and running costs of these organisations. The gap between the funding and the actual costs of providing the services gets larger every year. This leaves a sector struggling to run programs, help beneficiaries and deliver meaningful outcomes.

Another major challenge for the Government is the need to address the trend towards giving major social services contracts to national providers at the expense of place-based operators.

It is widely accepted that a place-based approach to delivering services that focuses on local needs, local solutions, and local attributes, delivers better outcomes, particularly in remote or otherwise unique communities.


The one size fits all approach may suit English-speaking urban communities but can fail elsewhere.

And lastly, but certainly not finally, is the challenge the social services face recruiting and retaining the workforce needed to care for Australia's most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

The recent Care Workforce Labour Market Study has found that by 2050 there may be a shortfall of some 210,000 workers within the welfare and social services sector, with the shortages most severe across aged and disability services.

The challenge of improving attraction, retention and the sustainability of the care workforce will be ongoing and require a major commitment and focus from the new Federal Government.

Australia stands almost alone as one of the most egalitarian and open countries in the world.



Most of us are from communities where we are free to live as we wish, to bring up our families as we like, with health and education services looked on with envy by most of the world.

At the same time, however, millions don't live like this. They are on the fringes and don't have the opportunity, good luck or prospects many of us take for granted. This is mostly through no fault of their own but rather the result of the communities or families they have been born into.

We are also lucky, luckier than most, to have the welfare and social services network we have. A network that is there as the backstop, as the last resort, as the helping hand when there is nothing much left.

Our safety net must be protected – for many of us, the line between needing it or not can be very thin.

Francis Sullivan is the Chair of Catholic Social Services Australia. He is a teacher, administrator, and leader in health care organisations. He was CEO of the Catholic Church in Australia's Truth, Justice and Healing Council, in addition to being the previous Secretary-General of the Australian Medical Association.

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