The political narrative of disability support reform

Implications for the Church, theology and discipleship

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Introduction

In the early to mid 1970s, attempts to reform Australian disability support systems through introduction of a ‘National Compensation Bill’ failed. In 2013 the National Disability Insurance Scheme—a similar reform of Australian disability support systems—was implemented as a pilot. This article demonstrates that while both reforms—and the respective political contexts—were similar, the narratives differ markedly, resulting in different outcomes. As church members and leaders discern these shifts in disability narrative and policy, they must recognise that the Australian Church itself has become more marginal, even as disability has become mainstream; theology and ethics have been largely unaware of, and even unchanged by, major social reforms; and an ever-widening gulf has emerged between theology and a
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social justice and human rights discourse. Finally, we call on the Church to recover its prophetic voice in advocacy for people who live with disabilities.

Disability reform and political context

The ‘National Compensation Bill’ (NCB) proposed a federal system of payments for the living and rehabilitation costs of those living with disability, extending the coverage of existing state-based workers’ compensation schemes to all Australian citizens with disability between 18 and 65 years, regardless of cause. The NCB was underwritten by government and removed the concept of ‘fault’ that excluded many people from support.1 As a national scheme, the NCB also lifted previous state and territory eligibility restrictions, extending entitlement to people with disability from non-compensable causes.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) also proposes a national system of support, with its most important feature being individualised payments to people with disability. Within this scheme, any Australians with a disability from birth to 65 years of age are covered regardless of the cause of their impairment. Like the NCB the NDIS provides a ‘no fault’ national scheme that eliminates state-based differences. Senator Bilyk in her 2012 speech describes the NDIS as ‘taking up work the Whitlam Labor government first pursued ... in the National Compensation Bill in 1974’.2

Independent experts were commissioned to design both schemes. However, legal experts from New Zealand and New South Wales formulated the NCB while the Productivity Commission designed the NDIS. Each recommended lengthy reforms spanning several parliaments and requiring extensive co-operation from private industry and State Governments.

Australian Labor Governments without outright parliamentary majorities initiated both reforms. In 1974 the balance of power in the Senate was held by Independents, following a period of Opposition Senate majority after the 1972 election.3 The balance of power during the Gillard Government was held by Independents in the Lower House and the Australian Greens in the Senate.4 Accordingly, neither government possessed the required numbers to ensure an unopposed passage of legislation through both houses of Parliament.

Both the NCB and NDIS confer concentrated benefits on a minority whilst spreading the costs of this initiative diffusely across taxpayers. According to Wilson’s theory of political decision-making, that weighs the likelihood of legislation through costs and benefits, diffusion and concentration, so
the policies that follow this particular model have a good chance of success. Usually, while beneficiaries who are motivated by large gains ensure success, those paying have low motivation to oppose a policy with low costs.5

This article analyses the political narrative of disability reform as represented in parliamentary discussions during these two periods. The methodology used in this paper is a content analysis of twenty parliamentary speeches from 1974–5 and twenty-two speeches from 2011–12, accessed directly from the Hansard records. Four speeches introduced the proposed legislative schemes: Lionel Bowen and Bruce Lloyd’s 1974 speeches, and Jenny Macklin’s 2011–12 speeches. These are also analysed to provide narrative detail.6

The political narrative of the National Compensation and Rehabilitation Scheme (NCB)

Analysis of government NCB speeches reveals a narrative of helplessness and control. Perhaps surprisingly both people with disability and the insurance industry, as underwriters, are construed as powerless. Lionel Bowen’s key speech describes the insurance industry as ‘anxious,’ ‘unprofitable’ and having ‘special problems.’7 A synecdoche of an insurance broker struggling to make a profit is presented. Assistance is ‘inadequate’ for people with disability and ‘increasingly expensive’ for the insurance industry. In this context the logical solution is a government scheme that effectively rescues the insurance industry. The ‘expert’ authors of the NCB are described as ‘learned,’ ‘admirable,’ ‘scholarly’ and ‘outstanding gentlemen,’ heroically bringing about a work of ‘great significance.’ These ‘experts’ and insurance representatives are given full names, qualifications and titles, personalising them and affording them an authoritative position in the narrative.8

In contrast, people with disability are not mentioned by name. Their circumstances are barely described, excepting in legal terms or as ‘cases,’ which depersonalises them. Medical metaphors abound, with frequent reference to ‘remedies’ and ‘rehabilitation.’9 Such constructions of disability within a medical model are highlighted by J Green, who draws attention to how they ‘perpetuate inequalities between the professional provider with expert knowledge and passive client or recipient.’10 Thus the government is empowered to ‘treat’ people with disability, effectively disempowering them. Further, people with disability are objectified and defined solely by their impairment, most usually as ‘the injured,’ ‘the sick’ and occasionally
‘congenitally disabled’ or 'handicapped'. The descriptor ‘incapacitated’ is used repeatedly, implying the need to be helped and managed. As Deborah Marks states, ‘language can be stigmatising … but perhaps more insidious is the way people with disability … synonymous with their impairments … are often simply not seen’. This is evident in the NCB speeches as people with disability are overlooked in the list of people invited to participate in the ongoing refinement of the scheme.

Lloyd Bruce, the Leader of the Opposition, and other speakers from his party, propose a counter-narrative that questions the proficiency of ‘experts’ and in which the insurance industry is under threat from the NCB itself. By providing a counter-narrative, the Opposition effectively characterizes the policy as one with a reduced chance of real world success. Concentrated benefits for people with disability are characterised as shouldered by the insurance industry who now may sustain concentrated losses. In matched contests, such policy is likely to alternate between each interest group and may become stalled, rather than becoming entrenched in legislation.

The NCB report was tabled in the Senate on 3 October 1974, debated and passed in the Lower House on 24 October, before being rejected in the Opposition controlled Senate. On 6 November 1975 Prime Minister Whitlam announced his intention to reintroduce the NCB bill to the lower house ‘in the next 2 weeks’. The Government was dismissed on 11 November 1975 and attempts to reintroduce the NCB from opposition in 1976–77 failed.

Key developments in disability discourse from 1970 to 2015

Since the demise of the NCB a great deal has changed in disability discourse. Increased self-advocacy by people with disability, the growth of a rights-based narrative and the development of a social model of disability are three significant changes within the Australian context. Central to these developments is the move away from medical terminology, replacing the emphasis upon impairment and experts, towards language that focuses on people’s ‘capacities rather than limitations’. These three changes will now be explored.

People with disability are increasingly advocating for themselves in Australian society. Recently they engaged a group of professional communications experts, who devised a community-organising initiative to advocate for reform of disability support services in Australia. The resulting campaign, ‘Every Australian Counts’ (EAC), implements numerous rhetorical devices
to advance its cause including ambiguity, a numbers metaphor and extensive use of personal narratives. Within political discourse, D Stone notes that counting conveys something as worthy of being counted. Thus the phrase ‘Every Australian Counts’ conveys the significance of each person. Additionally, Stone notes that ambiguity serves as a ‘useful means to unite disparate groups … under a specified agenda.’ This slogan also is ambiguous, in that it tends to obscure the fact that people over 65 are excluded from the NDIS. Further personal narratives carry the power to ‘propel socio-political action,’ and such types of narratives are prominent in EAC’s website and lobbying. These narratives are similarly important in many ‘modern social justice crusades.’ In this way the EAC has drawn upon contemporary community organising techniques to secure a successful legislative outcome.

However, there are other contextual changes. Rights-based discourses are ‘conceptualising disability as a socio-political construct’ now evident in Australian anti-discrimination legislation, in the Disability Discrimination Act and in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability. Banner headlines on the EAC website invoke rights in the UN convention, while politicians such as Bill Shorten have drawn on a human rights and social model perspective in championing the NDIS.

The United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities describes the social model of disability, which proposes ‘a distinction between impairment and disability’ in which ‘disability stems from the failure of society to adjust to meet the needs and aspirations of a disabled minority’. This places any blame for the consequences—reduced living standards and exclusion, which are often the outcomes of living with disability—upon the society rather than the individual. Such a distinction is reflected in the UN-sanctioned language of the phrase ‘person with disability’, which emphasises personhood and effectively prevents their identity from being subsumed by the descriptor or label ‘disability’. People with disability, governments and service providers now extensively use the terminology employed by the UN.

**The political narrative of the National Disability Insurance Scheme**

A detailed comparison of parliamentary speeches supporting the NDIS (2012) and NCB (1974) demonstrate the more recent speeches to be shorter, metaphorical and descriptive, including the personal stories of people with
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disability. The narrative of speeches addressing the NDIS is of helplessness and control, weakness and strength.

The language employed by Minister Macklin in her 2011 speech describes people with disability and their carers as ‘victims’ struggling with dignity against ‘the system’ and awaiting ‘overdue’ relief. Macklin declares that ‘the system is unfair, underfunded and fragmented.’ The Productivity Commission is presented as the initial authority, but leadership shifts from the Commission to the Government during the course of her speech. Initially the Government is described as ‘consistent with’ and ‘sharing the vision’ of the Productivity Commission, but later ‘asking them’ to act and noting that the Productivity Commission ‘agreed’ with the Government. The rhetorical force is to portray the Government in an authoritative role, a government in control, the Government as the ‘hero’ that ‘rescues’ those rendered helpless by disability. A better, more dignifying story of the NDIS employs the biblical motifs of strength in weakness and the sufficiency of grace for the vulnerable. Minister Macklin’s 2012 speech commences with a Paralympic metaphor of triumph over long held adversity. This metaphor is similarly ambiguous, as it is unclear whether people with disability or the government are those triumphing over adversity. The role of each is developed throughout the remaining speech. Government repeatedly describes its ‘progress,’ ‘passion’ and ‘pride’ in the ‘landmark’ scheme. People with disability are now conveyed as teachers, helping government ‘learn’ and ‘understand,’ ‘informing’ the process and providing ‘expert’ advice. A strong theme of choice and control by people with disability emerges, reflecting progression from the victim role to a newly empowered position of wisdom and authority.

NDIS speeches in parliament typically contain personal stories of people with a disability and their carers. Individuals were named as their personal story was recounted with personalising detail. Emotional persuasion is quite prominent; the speaker admits that ‘my heart was heavy with pain,’ the parents were ‘desperate’ and ‘dedicated.’ Minister Macklin commenced her 2011 speech with the heart-wrenching story of elderly parents contemplating the fate of their disabled son when they die. As well as evoking strong emotions, the story portrayed the carers as simultaneously dignified and helpless. Nearly 70 per cent (fifteen of twenty-two) parliamentary speeches in support of the NDIS utilised such personal narratives. Alongside the story of elderly parents’ strain in caring for family members, two other
archetypal stories were typically retold. First, the unexpected progress of a young person—with recent catastrophic injury—who prevails against ‘the system’; second, the urgent need of children for early intervention services. Unusually, the parliamentary speakers conveyed warmth and closeness to people with disability, who are referred to by their first names—even as friends or identified as family members. These characteristics demonstrate the more powerful, mainstream status of people with disability and the desire of parliamentarians to be personally aligned with them.

The effectiveness of these speeches also illustrate a continued blurring of personal and public lives, and the enduring power of testimony. The NDIS discourse deftly wove together a rational case with an emotionally persuasive argument. The tone and tenor of these testimonies would not be out of place at a Pentecostal revival meeting! The prophetic voice of elderly parents asking ‘who will care for my disabled child when I’m gone?’ reflects the old prophetic tradition of ‘speaking truth to power.’ The successful introduction of the NDIS also highlights the Church’s misplaced priorities and missed opportunities in supporting disability reform.

**Disability groups and the Church: from marginal to mainstream**

In support and advocacy of people with disability, the Church must do more than simply follow political and popular trends. The ugly possibility of grasping for trendiness must be named because many parts of the Australian Church are seduced by cultural relevance. Since the apostle Paul heard the words, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Corinthians 12.9) the Church (at its best) has embraced the power of vulnerability while exposing the vulnerability of power. The Church must rediscover this truth in advocating for people with disabilities. An immature infatuation with celebrities, politicians and sporting stars belies a fundamental conviction that God’s grace, borne in humility, is enough—more than enough everyone. Those living with disability daily bear testimony to this deep spiritual truth. Those rendered vulnerable through limitations of mind or body remind us that true strength is marked by resilience, not ripped muscles; and is developed through perseverance, not performance-enhancing drugs. This is not to deny the people with disability or groups that have faithfully supported and advocated for this positive policy reform. Strong and influential advocacy has been essential to the NDIS story to this point. As the NDIS continues to be implemented, however, a deeper
truth must be upheld: power is made perfect in weakness. As the Church leans forward and lives faithfully into this gospel truth, it must reclaim its prophetic voice by advocating for those brought low and made vulnerable through disability.

**Social reform and theology: the body politic and the politics of the body**

The Church, despite a particular commitment to social justice, appeared to be missing in action during this era of significant social reform in Australia. More concerned about the impact of no-fault divorce on Australian marriages, in the 1970s it appeared indifferent to the introduction of Medicare and ignorant of the introduction of proposed disability reform through the NCB. Over the next forty years, theologians and ethicists have focused too narrowly on private morality instead of public policy. The Church that ‘invented’ hospitals was now suffering from ‘bystander syndrome’, failing to witness of behalf of those without access to basic health and disability services. By 2012, when Australians finally responded to the growing chorus that ‘every Australian counts’, the initiative was not publicly supported by the Church, or with support from theologians and ethicists, despite the fact that many of the contributors may have been Christians. And the biblical references to living with disability, such as the apostle’s ‘thorn in the side’, had been largely spiritualised to such an extent that saving souls eclipsed bandaging bodies. At the centre of Christian theology is Christ’s body broken. At the centre of Christian worship are two sacraments—Eucharist and baptism—symbolising Christ’s body and the washing and renewal of the disciple’s body. Yet those who lived with broken bodies in the Church were rarely regarded as living sacraments of grace and mercy (the modern-day L’Arche communities being a notable exception). Christian theology should pay closer attention to the witness of L’Arche and its profound integration of people with disability in community, disability services and advocacy. Theology must reclaim the power of Christian testimony: one person’s story of salvation and communities that respond with compassion and care. Christian theology, while continuing to eschew manipulation, must do more than advocate morally rational reasons for disability support. By reviving the prophetic tradition of ‘pleading the case of the poor and vulnerable’ the advocacy of Christians can become ethically and emotionally persuasive.
Disability support and discipleship: social justice, human rights, or both?

To what extent has the shifting terminology towards a rights-based discourse for disability support—which reflects underlying attitudes—been adopted by the Church? As Australia has become more secular its governments have become more reliant on Church-based agencies to deliver key social service programs such as employment and aged care. Another feature of this shift has been a widening gulf between faith-based activism (grounded in a vision of social justice) and secular advocacy (grounded in human rights). The latter rights-based discourse has dominated the reform in disability and is perhaps where the inertia of the Church and indifference of theology has been most urgently required. The Judeo-Christian vision for social justice, found in the prophetic concern for the ‘quartet of the vulnerable’, has recognised inherent human rights, but it has also transcended them in some important ways. Nicholas Wolterstorff, for example, affirms both the Christian conviction of rights and extends the concept of justice to include love, centred on another person. The Church should, as it recovers and revives its prophetic voice in disability reform, ensure that both are heard: the inherent rights of those living with disability and the broader concern for loving, social justice.

Conclusions

When parliamentarians of 2011 and 2012 relate personal stories, directly quote EAC slogans and use rights-based and social model language, a ‘discourse coalition’ is evident in which people with disability, industry and government share a common narrative. These changes can be seen in the rhetoric produced by present day disability advocacy, the Productivity Commission, government policy (for example, the National Disability Strategy) and parliamentary speeches.

In the 1970s the Whitlam Government cast the policy problem as an insurance industry in need of rescue by a government compensation scheme. The political narrative was devoid of personal stories, human dignity and rights of persons with disabilities. It was not presented within a social model. After the dismissal of the Whitlam Government, further attempts to revive the NCB failed and people with disability were marginalised.

In 2011–12 the political narrative of the NDIS portrays people with disability as needing assistance in the face of a system in need of reform, but capable of shaping their own services. The stories and the dignity of
people with disabilities have been honoured. A coalition emerged around this narrative, enabling the NDIS to progress against the odds, through a precariously balanced parliament, securing the co-operation of state governments from opposing political parties.

How does the Church make sense of these shifts in disability reform between 1974 and 2012? First, by acknowledging that neither the Church nor the concerns of theology have remained unaltered in forty years. As disability groups have become mainstream, the Church has become more marginal. As rights terminology has emerged, theology has retained an emphasis on justice. As personal testimony has become influential in shaping public policy, Christian ethics and discipleship have become emotionally unconvincing. Second, since the sexual revolution of the 1960s and changing gender roles, theology has become preoccupied with a politics of the body, while its public theology and social ethics have been unaware of—or unchanged by—some of the major social reforms in the body politic during the same period. Third, an ever-widening gulf has emerged between faith-based activism grounded in a vision of social justice and secular advocacy grounded in human rights.

As the NDIS is implemented and launch dates are brought forward, there is a clear and compelling case for the Church to recover its prophetic vocation in disability reform. Theology can provide sustained reflection on justice as love, embracing the inherent rights of all created in the image of God that will extend and deepen the conviction that ‘every Australian counts’. Finally, the Church can become the remaining voice for social justice as Christ-like love, within a predominantly secular discourse concerned only with human rights. The prophetic vocation of the Church is to ensure that the idea that people with disability are honoured with dignity, justice and love is implemented through the NDIS. This will demand more than excellence in Church delivery of disability services. The Church must find its voice for the continuing advocacy of people with disability and not exclude itself from the political conversation on disability reform.

Endnotes


6. Ibid.


8. Ibid.


15. Stone, *Policy Paradox,* p. 239.


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Disability Insurance Scheme Committee, 20 August 2012, G Christensen MP.


