The NDIS as a ‘Good News’ story

Perspectives from economics and Catholic social thought

Brendan Long

There are many ways that a country as wealthy as Australia can direct public expenditure. It can invest in its economic future, it can invest in its people, or perhaps it can pursue policies which serve both objectives. This is exactly what we have achieved in the major national commitment to people with disability through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). A leading middle power in the global stakes with an economy that has survived the global financial crisis in a way no other has done, we could have spent the proceeds of prosperity on defence equipment, schools, hospitals or new roads. All such investments would have been welcomed by the voters. But what have we chosen to do? Rather than these other worthy projects we have chosen new spending of over $20bn dollars a year, a sum of money two-thirds of our annual defence spend, on some of the most marginalised people in Australia—people with severe and profound disability. Moreover, this is not a once-off capital investment, it is recurrent spending: an annual commitment provided for at least in the four year funding profile of the Forward Estimates of the Budget process, and committed politically to be ongoing.

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funding. While there are larger fiscal outlays in the Budget on social welfare, this measure is the largest single social spending commitment announced by the Commonwealth for decades. It is mandated with hard money, black letter law and strong political commitment across the national spectrum.

Everybody knows someone who has significant disability, or who cares for someone with significant disability. If we are honest, we would probably say to ourselves that if we were in their place we would doubt that we would cope. Those who live this daily reality only just cope. A message of compassion has resonated in the hearts of the Australian people. We have found here the capacity to express our natural egalitarian spirit, our sympathy for the underdog, the sufferer. The creation of the NDIS is not just an achievement of economic and social significance, it is also a very strong ethical statement by the Australian community to express solidarity with a suffering of part of our community.

This paper seeks to explain what has been done, why it has been done and how the policy reform will fundamentally change the lives of people with disability. It also seeks to explain how ethical, political and economic processes have found themselves in a rare conjunction of their revolving spheres to produce a vision—a legislated vision, of a great unfolding good. The argument presented here is that alignment of these three planets—the political, the economic and the ethical—is not a mere coincidence, but results from a gravity of mutually reinforcing benefits for all Australians. This paper also seeks to show how this process is aligned with a Christian ethical and theological perspective. Like any major reform, there are challenges in implementation and risks of failure. These are discussed. Ultimately, however, it is certainly a ‘Good News’ story in social, economic and theological senses.

**Australia’s ‘Anawim’**

In every country those who suffer most often speak least. They speak, of course, as we all speak, but their voices are muted by their suffering. Like an exhausted climber breathless after the ascent, their endless uphill travail deprives them of energy, which they simply need to devote to enduring the perpetual climb. Like the souls in Dante’s Purgatorio they are too focused on the endless strain of the journey to speak overly much, but their pain expresses their words. People with disability and their carers are such suffering pilgrims. Many carers for people with significant disability work two days in one: often a paid job and another an unpaid job, each a full working
day forged into a 24 hour cycle. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, about a quarter of employed carers provided 40 hours a week or more of care support.

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<tr>
<th>Weekly hours of care provided by the primary carer to the main recipient of care</th>
<th>40 hours or more</th>
<th>to less than 40 hours</th>
<th>Less than 20 hours</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>Persons (000’s)</td>
<td>Primary carers, living in households, who are currently employed</td>
<td>73.0</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>157.5</td>
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Only sleepless parents with sleepless children, so often sick and with pressing care needs, can appreciate the strain. For the parents that arduous labour passes over time as the children grow and prosper. For so many carers of people with disability, however, the strain never passes. It is a lifelong journey of labour, love and sacrifice. For those themselves with disability, they have the daily struggle of a soul that wants to break forth from the constraints of its mind or body, only to be perpetually frustrated, living the fragility of life in an extreme and pervasive way. They live a life of greater suffering. It is easier for us to imagine the plight of our national heroes, wounded on Turkish cliffs or in the muddy trenches of the Somme, than to identify with the plight of these fellow Australians whose wounds never heal and for whom a nation does not take pause one day a year to remember justly. Yet their suffering endures.

We theologians have within our narratives a tradition of reflection on the plight of persons who suffer more than others. In the history of the people of Israel, prophets like Isaiah (10:1–4, 58:7), Ezekiel (17:7) and Amos (2:6–7, 4:1) chose to side with those who suffer and called on the community to do likewise. In the liturgical prayers of the people of Israel, present in the Book of Psalms which Jesus prayed, the plight of the poor is defended (Ps 34:7, 37:14, 140:13, 149:4).

These suffering people of whom the prophets, the psalmists and Jesus spoke, were called the ‘Anawin’: the poor and afflicted of Israel. Raymond Brown outlines the term with his usual rigour in *The Birth of the Messiah*:

The word Anawim represents a plural from the Hebrew ‘anāw which, along with its cognate ‘āni is a word for ‘poor, humble, afflicted’.
Although this title [‘Anawim’] meaning the ‘Poor Ones’ may have originally designated the physically poor (and frequently still included them), it came to refer more widely to those who could not trust in their own strength but had to rely in utter confidence upon God: the lowly, the poor, the sick, the downtrodden, the widows and the orphans. The opposite of the Anawim were not simply the rich, but the proud and self-sufficient who showed no need of God or His help.\(^5\)

Although the notion of the Anawim as the physical poor changed over time to reflect the loyal yet afflicted remnant of the Kingdom of Israel, the Anawim are seen within the biblical narratives as being vindicated by God. ‘The Lord takes pleasure in His people; He adorns the Poor Ones with victory’ (Psalm 149:4). This sense of the God taking the side of the Anawim was also present in the New Testament Christian community of Jerusalem and probably influenced Luke’s account of the canticles of Jesus’ infancy, especially the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55). The Jewish and Christian messaging has always been a call to side with the Anawim, who are close to God, for the sake of justice.

In every country today there are many Anawim. People with significant disability and their carers are part of Australia’s contemporary Anawim. The message of the inspired Christian narratives applies just as much now as it did to the people of Israel and in the first-century communities that influenced the writings of Luke and other New Testament writers. Recognising that the poor and afflicted are close to God’s heart, and vindicated in their plight by God, the Christian message is a call to serve, support and stand with them, just as God does.

**What is the NDIS?**

The NDIS can be described in a single sentence. The Australian Governments (the Commonwealth, states and territories) have agreed to combine their collective efforts on disability support into a national scheme under a new federally funded agency—the National Disability Insurance Agency. Its charter is to mandate that support for persons with significant disability will be delivered under consistent rules based on their reasonable and necessary needs. There have been a myriad of schemes operating at state and territory
level that have provided support to persons with disability for many years. Some arrangements have worked better than others. The level of support depended on where you lived, as state and territory funding arrangements differed. For persons with disability (PWD) and their carers it has been a lottery of location combined with the challenging task of navigating the maze of regulations. Best practice involved personalised funding arrangements when the client’s needs were assessed, followed by funding of services based on these assessed needs. However, personalised funding was not uniformly available and, where present, was constrained. In essence, people with the same constraints were treated very differently across the nation and some legitimate needs of PWD were not being met. Adequate funding for disability was patchy and difficult to access. In essence, the history of disability funding was a typical publicly funded system of service delivery. It was driven by fiscal constraints and associated prescriptive regulations of government. A second-rate system, but one that functioned more or less.

The NDIS has changed all this. It promises to guarantee funded support for those who meet tough, yet standardised, eligibility criteria assessed according to their needs and to give PWD and their carers control over their situation by providing for a personalised model of funding. Once the NDIS is fully implemented, PWD who are eligible for the scheme will be treated on an equal basis. One of the constraints of the old model was that you got what you got and you made the most of it. PWD had limited control over service delivery and lacked a sense of ownership and participation in the decision-making process. What happens under the NDIS is that PWD who are eligible will get a personalised funding plan. They will have a dollar amount that they can spend each year before their retirement age to fund the package of supports they need. The new model seeks to create a situation where people can apply ‘self-directed’ funding to choose how and when services will be delivered. If they are not happy with a service provider they can choose another. If they want to focus their support on attendant care or transport services they have power to make these choices within the overall funding constraints of a package of support tailored to their needs.

This personalisation associated with the new service delivery funding model is a critical new reform. The ownership and control over service delivery will allow eligible PWD to take greater responsibility of their life situations, to better apply funded services to their needs. It will allow them to chart their own course in their lives through employment or social activity.
that empowers them to make an enhanced contribution to their community. In terms of the overall legislative model it represents a ‘gold standard’ benchmark for publicly funded service delivery.

The old English proverb reminds us that ‘there’s many a slip ‘twixt the cup and the lip.’ Things can go wrong even when they seem to be going to plan. This has happened with the NDIS. Its design was rushed to meet a political timetable, despite an independent report calling for a slower implementation with better-funded administrative arrangements that have been adopted in Budget process by the Government. What has been promised to PWD is an immense thing in social policy and fiscal terms. There have been implementation issues and there will continue to be such issues. However, the Government of the day and all sides of politics have remained committed to the key policy intent. The funding arrangements are very complex indeed. A national levy on all taxpayers is in place as a supplement to the Medicare Levy which will partially fund the scheme. An intricate set of negotiations has been concluded between funding governments. Full funding is technically appropriated only for the four year funding profile of the Commonwealth Government. All parts of the complex legislative and administrative arrangements are not yet in place. The scheme has been started in ‘Trial Sites’ across the nation with variable success and there are many teething problems. However, the judgement should be made that on the whole there is a strong basis for confidence that the scheme will remain adequately funded and there has been a high commitment to address administrative issues that have occurred.

**Principles of Catholic social thought**

When we seek to analyse the policy reform embodied in the NDIS we can find points of clear resonance with Christian social ethics. The NDIS is seeking to empower a section of the community that is socially and economically marginalised. If persons with disability are a modern day form of the Anawim, a section of the community who suffer and who have real unmet needs, then, as outlined above, there are clear biblical warrants for policies that seek to deal with these needs in a real and rigorous way.

Catholic social thought (CST) provides an analytical framework to evaluate the NDIS through a broad Christian ethical lens. It is a biblically based corpus and, while not necessarily propounded, nor even agreed to,
by all Christian ethicists, it presents a reasonable set of principles by which to assess public policy from a Christian perspective.

This primary notion in CST is the pursuit of the common good. The view is that the welfare of a community is integral to welfare of the individual—they exist as twin principles that reinforce each other. The pursuit of charity, service and a socially just society enhances the individual morally and spiritually, and builds a community of justice from the bottom up. Under this principle we are called to live ‘with others’ and ‘for others’. The common good, in fact, can be understood as the social and community dimension of the moral good. A just society respects the dignity of all individuals who then work together in harmony for mutual good. The pursuit of the common good is the task of enhancing the sum of social conditions which allow people—either as groups or an individuals—to reach their fulfillment fully and more easily. It is not a utilitarian viewpoint where the social good, or rules to enhance it, are pursued in some great social cost/benefit calculus. Rather, it calls on the individual to value the welfare of all as much they value their own welfare and refuses to trade-off aspects of the dignity of one to serve the good of the many, insisting to the contrary that the good of all is only enhanced by respecting in all ways the rights and dignity of each person. The common good is enhanced when we see economic means as shared, owned by individuals, but directed and shared equitably for the pursuit of the welfare of all.

A further key principle of CST is the notion of ‘solidarity’. A just society is built on the moral relations of individuals that constructs a community of justice and is not a top-down model where policy is delivered from an ivory tower. At the personal level, the principle of solidarity calls on all people to identify with the needs of others in their personal struggles, to take their side and shoulder their yoke. We are called to bear their pain personally, at least in some measure, by seeking to engage, encourage and support them. When this occurs a heightened awareness of our mutual interdependence will naturally develop. Our daily life as well as our decisions in the economic and political fields must be marked by these realities. This high level of analysis finds a very critical edge in a specific doctrine or ideal: the preferential love or option for the poor. This is a challenge to policy makers to recognise that the needs of the poor and socially marginalised are so pressing that they should enjoy the first claim on the resources of government.
These perspectives have found a new and powerful expression in the recent encyclical of Pope Francis: *Laudato Si, On the Care of Our Common Home*. 

In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters. This option entails recognizing the implications of the universal destination of the world’s goods, but, as I mentioned in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, it demands before all else an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor in the light of our deepest convictions as believers. We need only look around us to see that, today, this option is in fact an ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good.12

Another key aspect of the solidarity and the pursuit of the common good is the recognition that work brings dignity to a person. Developing over two centuries, this notion found newfound emphasis in the writings of Pope John Paul II. In his writings, work is about much more than striving for economic gain. What he provided was an economic anthropology of work: a way of being and becoming more fully human.

Only man is capable of work, and only man works, at the same time by work occupying his existence on earth. Thus work bears a particular mark of man and of humanity, the mark of a person operating within a community of persons. And this mark decides its interior characteristics; in a sense it constitutes its very nature.13

Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfilment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being’.14 The new element here is a sense of the subjective dimension of work. This means that work is one of the fundamental ways by which we express our humanness and the existential
dimension of our being. It is about how we become persons, become more fully human, living our lives to the full for the sake of others and ultimately also for ourselves. This element of CST is also emphasised in *Laudato Si*.

Work should be the setting of this rich personal growth, where many aspects of life enter into play; creativity, planning for the future, developing our talents, living out our values, relating to others, giving glory to God.  

A final key principle is the notion of subsidiarity. This principle favours models of social organisation that work from the bottom upwards. Recognising the giftedness of the individual as made in the image of God and created by God, with legitimate natural desires that are part of the grace of creation, this doctrine opposes attempts of the state or corporate entities to suppress or overly regulate individual freedoms. While it has been most strongly deployed as a criticism of a communist social system, it is also a perspective that favours the small over the large, recognising the importance of the family, small businesses, local community groups and collectives of workers at the local level who support each other and strive for the common good in their communities.

**Analysis of the NDIS from through the moral lens of CST**

Within the analytical framework of CST the NDIS scores very well. If we look at the principle of the preferential option for the poor, the NDIS stands as a very positive social justice program. PWD are economically marginalised in Australia. A major survey of disability in Australia is conducted every four years by the ABS. The survey shows that PWD with severe and profound disability enjoyed median weekly personal incomes about 45% of those who had no reported disability.  

In statistical term they are part of the Anawim, so funding to support them accords with the priority focus on social action that is mandated by the preferential option for the poor in CST.

Economic disadvantage is a wider notion than income inequality. It is also implicated with concerns for the future security of dependents. PWD have lived for many years with limited certainty about how their needs will be met. For ageing parents with an adult child with disability this fear for the future security of service delivery for their dependents has been an immense concern. The promise of guaranteed funding for delivery of services in the future for PWD under the NDIS relieves this concern. Ageing
parents of PWD can now feel that their loved ones with PWD have a more secure future. This peace of mind is perhaps more important to them than anything else the NDIS offers. It is one thing to offer financial support for the disadvantaged here and now. It is another thing to combine this with a legislative promise that this support will be sustained if and when the capacities of familial support naturally start to decline. The Christian perspective must affirm a policy that gives hope in place of a sense of hopelessness and insecurity. This is caritas embedded in social policy.

CST’s call for solidarity is also embedded in the fiscal model of the NDIS. Solidarity with those who suffer is not meant to refer to some warm sense of affection for the poor in our community, a polite ‘g’day’ to the woman who offers me the latest Big Issue on the threshold of my local supermarket. Faith-inspired solidarity with the Anawim requires an active engagement of us all to work with those who suffer, to empower them in love and hope. It is hard for individuals to do this in a modern society. We all have our own pressing needs and we don’t know how to help others in a way that will really work for them. As a result we often just don’t do very much even though we want to do more, while remembering that the road to perdition is paved with a multitude of good intentions not acted upon. One of the greatest benefits of the NDIS is that it has harvests this inactive solicitude through the funding model. We are now paying a supplement to the Medicare Levy to fund the NDIS. This higher tax is a direct transfer from normal wage earners to PWD who are NDIS-eligible. It pays for about half of the scheme costs. The Government has created a real means of expressing solidarity for those who suffer from significant disability. The law allows us—and yes, requires us—to express solidarity with PWD by allowing them to benefit from our work. Sceptics might say that it is just another tax. Theologians might call it a social tithe for the Anawim. From either the secular or religious viewpoint the principle of solidarity is built into the NDIS funding structure.

The third fundamental aspect of CST—respect for the dignity of persons through work—is also potentially actualised in the NDIS. As noted above, CST in the writings of Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis offers a broader conceptualisation of work as an integral part of life. This points to the need for people with disability to be given the opportunity to experience employment that allows them to express and develop this aspect of their lives. The author has engaged in economic modelling for the peak body of disability
services providers, the National Disability Service (NDS). This research indicates that the NDIS will increase disability employment by between 25,000–40,000 in full-time job equivalent terms. These are NDIS-eligible people who indicate they can work with further support. The NDIS is assumed to give eligible recipients the funding they need to meet their work intentions. In addition, there will be an increase of 34,000 full-time jobs for carers as the NDIS relieves them of their care obligations. This allows carers the capacity to attain the level of employment they state they are seeking. So the NDIS has the important benefit of giving PWD and their carers the dignity that work brings.

The personalised element of the NDIS reform approach also accords with the CST principle of subsidiarity. The method by which NDIS recipients gain funding is a rigorous assessment of their needs. However, in consultation with PWD and their carers, a plan is devised to fund their needs. As noted above, scheme participants have choice about how to allocate the funds. They are not constrained by a detailed spending plan, but can direct the overall package to support the services they value most and can choose the service provider who offers them the best model for the best price. The NDIS empowers the individual to have control over their lives and to take responsibility for their own care, with support. This approach resonates with the broad principle of subsidiarity. As outlined above, this principle seems to favour a less top-down approach, where prescriptive regulation at a jurisdictional levels suppresses the freedoms of individuals. It favours a more bottom-up approach whereby individuals, families or community groups have the freedom to express their own desires and organise their own activities. The ‘self-directed’ funding model of the NDIS creates a balance: between the needs of the state to link funding to assessed needs, and the bottom-up approach of allowing individual PWD and their families a high degree of freedom over the choice of the care structures.

**How have we done this?**

The fact that disability support programs have developed over time in a fragmented way, based more on funding constraints than individual need, can be explained by the way the funding mechanisms work within Australia’s federal system of government. The major revenue sources lie with the Commonwealth, so states and territories have to work within a constrained fiscal envelope where a multiplicity of needs compete for access to a limited
pool of funds. The NDIS breaks this model by absorbing much of the state and territory funding into a national scheme which guarantees funding on assessed need in federal legislation. Funding is not directly constrained by an annual budget appropriation, but is provided for on an actuarial basis from the Medicare Levy supplement and scheduled appropriations from Consolidated Revenue of the Commonwealth. It is a unique funding model.

How is it that persons with significant disability have found themselves in a situation of need-based funding—such a superior funding model—when almost every other section of the population in need of support works within the constrained, competitive model of funding? The optimist might say that this is because Australians have united in compassion for those in special need with significant disability. The sceptic might say it was all about obtaining positive political messages. In my view neither of these perspectives adequately explain how this superior funding model under the NDIS has emerged. What matters most in this country in terms of public support is a good economic argument. This is how we removed the tariff barriers, pursued deregulation and secured microeconomic reform. There were visible economic benefits from the changes, which were well grounded in economic reasoning. The same is the case with the NDIS. We have an ageing population with a large number of people (800,000) on the Disability Support Pension (DSP) and a declining tax base to fund welfare. By activating people on the DSP with a partial work capacity, labour force participation grows, which drives economic growth, taxation revenue and overall living standards. The NDIS was resisted by central agencies in the Commonwealth due to high potential costs, but in the final analysis it was difficult for the economists in government to oppose measures that could enhance the chances of people outside the labour force to participate in it.

The success of the creation of the NDIS might lie in its capacity to align social, economic and ethical concerns in a united trajectory. The social benefits for PWD of a needs-based funding mechanism are clear. The ethical perspective supports this. The moral case for the NDIS has been made here from a Christian ethical perspective—but it is also supported by other perspectives like a rights-based argument from disability activists. The economic argument is also made here. By supporting disability employment and carer employment, the NDIS will increase tax revenue by growing the labour force. As a result it also reduces expenditure on income support payments. This assists in dealing with the problem of an ageing
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population where there are fewer taxpayers to fund social welfare programs as people age and work less. So, the social, ethical and economic objectives align. It is indeed rare that these three paradigms find a common locus, a united goal. That they have may be the secret of the success of the NDIS as a progressive social reform.

Concluding remarks

While the NDIS is a positive step forward for PWD, and one supported by a Christian ethical perspective, it is still but a funding instrument—an impersonal piece of legislation involving cold calculations of monies shifted between accounts. PWD need better funding and Christian social justice advocates must welcome the change. However, our perspective as Christians probably places greater value in the ‘Embodiment Theology’ of Jean Vanier and the L’Arche movement, where persons with intellectual disability find love in a community that values them, misses them if absent, finds meaning and power in the weakness of their disability, and simply cherishes them and allows them to cherish each other and those who choose to journey with them as friends. The NDIS does not legislate this ‘Embodiment Theology’. The monies do not buy the love and acceptance in community that PWD seek. The economist qua economist cannot administer the personal love and acceptance that L’Arche does. We deal with the aggregates, the billions on the balance sheet, the complex rules for hundreds of thousands. This is a limitation and, for the Christian economist, a cross of the vocation. Usually we deliver little to many, but we can do so in the hope that this will better empower some to give much personally to those around them. The NDIS is a policy which has real claims to support this hope, greater claims indeed than any other policy the Australian Government has adopted for some decades. In the NDIS, the economist may have found the capacity to turn policy into caritas.
Endnotes

1. The annual spending commitment is $22bn when fully implemented in 2018–19, to assist some 457,000 people: Department of Social Services, Portfolio Budget Statements 2015–16, Australian Government, Canberra, 2015, pp. 234, 238.


5. Ibid, pp. 350ff. Brown continues: ‘There is considerable scholarly debate about the pre-exilic origins of the Anawim, and about the extent to which they constituted a class or contention that in post-exilic times the Anawim regarded themselves as the ultimate narrowing down of the remnant of Israel. The concept that God was not going to save His whole people but only a remnant was redefined many times.’

6. The origin of the proverb is uncertain, but may have originated from an epigram by Palladas.


10. Ibid., p.164.


12. Pope Francis, Laudato Si, §158.

13. Ibid., §42.


15. Pope Francis, Laudato Si, §127.

16. ABS, Survey of Ageing Disability and Carers 2012, 44300DO001_2012, Table 8, online source at abs.gov.au. The measure of median income for
people with severe and profound disability as a proportion of the median income of the whole population is 50%. This level of half the median income is the technical definition of poverty in economic literature.


18. For a discussion of rights-based discourses regarding disability and the NDIS, see the article by Broughton and Hiller-Broughton on page 96.