

It's about NOT leaving anyone behind

On election night last year the Prime Minister made a key promise: that his new government would not leave anyone behind. We are very interested to see how the Welfare Review commissioned by Minister Andrews at the start of this year might inform that promise, and look forward to seeing its interim report which we understand the Minister will release in the next couple of weeks.

The overarching theme of the review is maximising participation, with the ultimate goal of the welfare system being to “support people to participate to the extent that they are capable.” That is a good goal. Across the Anglicare Australia network we are committed to interventions that get people ready for and into work. It is what our clients tell us they want from the system as well. It is a common ambition.

But up until now the review itself has been a bit mysterious. The Minister's expert team led by Patrick McClure has had a number of discussions with key members of the sector (the ‘welfare lobby’ as media commentators like to describe us). For those of us who have been involved in any way it's difficult to see what is being examined and how, while other people - even if they are interested and have something to add - have no idea what is in it yet at all.

So we were heartened to hear that the interim report will soon be released as it could very well be used to frame, or kick off, the public discussion so many of us are keen to join.

Minister Andrews has credited the charitable sector, of which Anglicare Australia is part, with real expert knowledge on how that system does and doesn't work. While I'd argue that the most expert group consists of people on benefits themselves, their families and friends, between us all we would have something very useful to add to the conversation.

For example there are some useful contributions Anglicare Australia would like to put on the table: Our recent national survey on the impact of food insecurity on people on low incomes highlights how that experience inhibits education, social wellbeing and the capacity to find work. Our national research this year is looking at what can help young people connect back in to our society if they grow up outside of the security of strong family or community support. And around this time each year we run our Rental Affordability Snapshot which provides concrete information on the terrible housing shortage Australia's low income households face and, with that, insight into the cascade of difficulties that work against their participation in our society.

There's a lot that can still inform the next stage of the review.

There are many different – but related – public debates emerging now. The total cost of welfare is seen to be a national problem, as the Minister and many others have argued, although that is

not in itself the focus of this review. But the whole idea of raising the retirement age so as to bring down that cost is generating complex questions about people's varying capabilities to keep on doing the work they are trained or experienced in, and the discrimination they face if they want to do so. That does fit into the theme of the review. Similarly youth unemployment is skyrocketing in many parts of Australia. This points us towards investing in targeted, place based strategies that will work for this clientele, rather than stigmatising them. Finally, there is a lot in the public space on the capacity of people with disability to participate in our society, ranging from disability insurance to suitable housing, income support in general and (should they be so lucky) appropriate employment.

Governments have ideologies and agendas - specific views on what is needed to ensure our wider society works as best it can. That's one of their purposes. But if implementing that agenda means changing the living conditions of the most vulnerable members of society and re-shaping the way government funded services are delivered, there needs to be an element of openness and engagement between those political decision makers and the people most affected.

So that's why, if the promise to NOT leave anyone behind is a real one, it would seem essential that the welfare sector and the people we work with are a part of the conversation about welfare reform.

We know the interim report will be released shortly, but we don't know how it will be used. There is a sense that it may simply be the precursor to budget decisions in a few weeks' time. In my mind it would be a profound mistake for government to lock itself into a course of action informed by the interim report before the wider community – including the experts who work or live in the field – have the opportunity to engage with its recommendations and explore some of the ramifications. The risks of further excluding the very people Government is aiming to link back to the economic engines of our society – leaving them further behind – are significant. If the Prime Minister is to keep his promise, the government needs to work with its partners.

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