**Reasonable and Necessary – Special Election Series**

**Interview with Bill Shorten MP on potential NDIS reforms under a Labor Government**

**George:** Hi, I’m Dr George Taleporos and welcome to our special election series of Reasonable and Necessary. You will hear what Australia’s NDIS portfolio leaders have planned for our NDIS and what a line-up, Linda Reynolds, Bill Shorten and Jordon Steele-John, and in our final episode, we will bring together Australia’s leading disability advocates to analyse everything that’s been said. The questions that we’re asking have come from you, sourced from advocacy organisations who have partnered with me to bring you this very important series. On today’s show, we speak with Bill Shorten. Check it out.

**George:** Hi, Bill, thanks for joining us.

**Bill:** Hey George, thanks for having me on your podcast. Long time listener, first time caller.

**George:** Ah, yes. I’m very excited about our conversation and I’m going to start, Bill, by asking you a really important question and that is, if you are in charge of the NDIS after the next election, what will be your priorities?

**Bill:** Two words. Restore trust. The problem is that the relationship between the Morrison government and the people running the National Disability Insurance Agency on one hand and stakeholders, people with disability, families, participants, the workforce, service providers, the trust is broken so I want to restore the trust. The way we restore the trust though, and that’s really our policy and people are welcome to visit it online, is that we want to get the scheme back to its original objectives. I don’t want the NDIS to be a second full-time job for people dealing with bureaucracy.

At the moment, it is a bureaucratic nightmare. You’re either having your funding cut or if you have a good package, and many people do, and those packages are helping, all the people that have good packages are constantly worried they’re going to be cut. So, we’ve got to take the anxiety out of the scheme, crunch the nightmare, get rid of the nightmare, have co-design with people with disability as we move it forward, go back to its original objectives. So, how’s that for a start, George?

**George:** Thanks, Bill. I’d like to clarify one thing. Will you make any changes to eligibility or to how the funding allocations will be made?

**Bill:** No. What I will do and I don’t want to have a war against kids with autism and I don’t think that the vast, vast bulk of people on the scheme should be kicked off the scheme. So, for me, the issue is let’s get the initial plan right. The time spent listening, co-designing, getting that first plan right, is fundamental to the success. What we also want to do is take a lot of the legal mumbo jumbo out of the processes. We shouldn’t be sending thousands of cases to the AAT so I want to have some alternative dispute resolution to blitz the waiting lists.

**George:** We’ll talk about the AAT a bit later. What about the board? Will you make any changes to the board? I see that you’ve made an announcement that you’re going to get people with disabilities on the board. Have you had any thoughts on the representation?

**Bill:** Yeah, I want more people with disability on the board. I want more people with disability in the senior ranks of the organisation. I want more people who are engaged in the sector. There are some good people on the board but I am disappointed that the government has rushed the appointment of ex-Liberal politicians to senior parts of the National Disability Insurance Scheme at 5 minutes to midnight, just before an election is called.

**George:** Are you concerned, Bill, about sustainability?

**Bill:** I’m concerned to make sure that taxpayer money is getting to participants. I’m not concerned that Australia can’t afford the scheme, no, I’m not. What I want to make sure is that the money is being spent efficiently and equitably, productively but I don’t think that this country is too poor to afford an individualised package scheme for the NDIS for participants. We can afford it. I do want to stop the waste of money on consultants. I do want to stop the waste of money on high-priced lawyers taking matters to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. I do want to stop wasting the time of participants with long bureaucratic processes. So, I think there are improvements we can make. I also want to make sure that if there are people out there overcharging vulnerable people, under servicing and overcharging, they’re on my not happy list.

**George:** They’re on my unhappy list too.

**Bill:** Good on you.

**George:** I’d like to talk about workforce because workforce is vital.

**Bill:** Yeah.

**George:** We know that unless we have a strong workforce, a workforce that meets the needs of the diverse range of people on the NDIS, the NDIS isn’t going to work. So, what will you do to address the workforce shortages? Currently we’re experiencing some serious shortages, especially in regional and remote areas.

**Bill:** Well, what I’d like to do is sit down with the whole sector pretty quickly and TAFEs and unis to find out how do we improve the pipeline of workforce. So, I want kids at school to learn about the caring economy and see it as a possible career. I want to find out what TAFEs and universities are doing to attract people to courses and that the courses are the sort of courses which prepare people for working in disability.

I also want to make sure that workers are getting paid properly according to the appropriate awards so people aren’t getting ripped off. I also think that we can do more in terms of offering full-time jobs in the agency rather than labour hire so we can give people career paths. So, I think there’s a range of things we can do and if we get elected, I want to get on with them if I’m fortunate enough to be the Minister for the NDIS.

**George:** Thanks, Bill. I’d like to ask you about the issue of people who are stuck in hospital. I know that there are many people who are waiting for many, many months for NDIS decisions around housing and support. How long do you think people should wait for these kinds of decisions so they can get out of hospital and live their lives?

**Bill:** I think it’s shameful that there’s probably thousands of people blocking beds in hospitals who are eligible and are medically ticked off to be on the NDIS but we’re not sorting out the accommodation issues. So, I can’t put a timeline on it. I need to get in and look under the hood but the status quo is completely unacceptable. It’s taking too long. It’s a joke. It’s beyond a joke.

**George:** What will you do to stop people waiting?

**Bill:** I’d sit down with the state governments, I’d look at what’s - so, to get their lists, but I’d also just try and sort out the logjam between special disability accommodation, supported independent living packages and make sure that the NDIA is not taking months and months to tick off arrangements which is partly our problem.

**George:** I’d like to now look at the issue of abuse and neglect and exploitation and violence against people with disabilities. We know that this is a really, really serious issue that goes back many years. What do you believe governments need to do on this really critical issue?

**Bill:** It’s a very important issue. Crucial, really. I think that we need to identify the problems before they happen so I think we need to fund advocacy better. I think we need to make sure that the Quality and Safeguards Commission has got the support it needs. I think that when people go into the scheme, we need to identify if they’re vulnerable and flag that in the first plan so we’re keeping an eye on matters. I also think we need to make sure that people working in the sector are qualified to work in the sector. So, there’s some of the propositions. Maybe a code of practice as well. We’ve just got to improve our standards.

**George:** Talk to me about the issue that you raised there around qualifications. I have some concerns and I know that other people do, that some people are saying there needs to be some mandatory qualifications and that that will impact on choice and control. What are your thoughts on that?

**Bill:** I think if there’s taxpayer money, we need to make sure that the people receiving it are qualified for their job but that doesn’t mean I want to get rid of - I want to keep self-managed plans so I want people to have control over who they hire but I do think that you’ve got to be qualified for the task which you’re contracting to do. It’s just a basic health and safety check in my opinion.

**George:** Do you think, though, that people with disabilities themselves can train staff to do the work?

**Bill:** Yeah. I don’t think that’s too hard but we’ve got to make sure that the people who are being paid by the taxpayer are capable of doing the work. Doing this with people with disability, be it training people, be it - that’s got to be part of the design process too. I don’t think this is too hard but I don’t think we can just leave it in the too difficult, too bad, so sad category either.

**George:** Yeah, I think the key there is making sure that we recognise that disabled people are the experts though.

**Bill:** Yeah, I think that’s fair enough. Yeah, I do agree with that.

**George:** I’d like to ask you about - you also touched on advocacy and you said before that you want advocacy to be appropriately funded. Tell me a bit more about that. I think you did make an announcement around advocacy.

**Bill:** Labor has said that we will double the funding to advocacy from 10 to 20 million dollars over 4 years. We’ll also support the work of the Royal Commission which is advocacy. I’m also interested in how I train people with disability in leadership too.

**George:** Tell me more about that because that’s something that I’m very interested in.

**Bill:** I just think what I’d do - one day, the person’s - if I’m the minister, which would be great, one day, the person who’s the minister ideally would be a person with a disability so we’ve got to train up the leaders of the future in all aspects of life.

**George:** What about the CEO of the NDIA?

**Bill:** Should be, should be, should be. We should be training people for all positions of leadership to deal with disability and beyond that.

**George:** Absolutely. Let’s now turn to appeals and we know that there’s a lot of people who are going to the AAT, going through court to get the supports that they need, Bill. What are you going to do to address this worrying issue?

**Bill:** Well, I think it’s a disaster that so many people are having to go to the AAT. What we’re seeing is NDIS packages by trial. It is just the dumbest, meanest way I’ve seen of allocating taxpayer resources for people with disability ever invented. In 2019-2020 financial year, there was $10 million spent on AAT matters. Now, for the first 8 months of financial year 2021-2022, so this last 8 months, the Government has spent $31 million already. This is out of control. It is bonkers.

So, if we get in, we’ll stop the informal instructions to cut everyone because I think that’s what I think has happened. Change of government will relieve a lot of pressure and for matters currently listed, we will do alternative - we’ll give the option of alternative dispute resolution and we’ll triage this because it is just ridiculous.

**George:** Bill, we spoke about choice and control earlier. You know it’s a very important part of the NDIS. It’s the foundation of the scheme. What will you do to build capacity amongst participants so that we have more choice and control and that the principle of choice and control is realised by all participants?

**Bill:** We will start by being transparent with the data we have. That enhances choice and control. We will look at the tier 2 supports with our ILC funding. That will enhance choice and control so the NDIS doesn’t keep being the oasis in the desert. Create supports beyond the NDIS so not everyone wants to be on it. We will put more people with disability into the NDIA and we will embrace the principles of co-design with people with disability and other representatives. So, I think there’s a range of ways there which we can make a big difference.

**George:** You said earlier that you were committed to self-management. How do you think we can make self-management better and more effective and get more people to self-manage?

**Bill:** Part of the thing when people get a plan is it’s almost set and forget and people are left to work it out themselves. We’ve got plan managers, we’ve got support coordinators, we’ve got local area coordinators, we’ve got planners but there’s a lot of role overlap. I see 2 fundamental functions in those 4 jobs. One is get the initial plan right and then the second one is to help them navigate the system, so I think that’s how we can empower people who are self-managers. Work with them.

**George:** And will you maintain the ability to use unregistered providers?

**Bill:** Depends what for. It all depends what for. The devil is in the detail. For some things, sure, and we’ll still have unregistered - but for other things, it’s not whether or not the provider is registered, I just want to make sure that the service which is promised is the service which is delivered.

**George:** So, you are committed to making sure that people can access the providers that they choose?

**Bill:** Yeah. My first point is not to…

**George:** I’m raising this, Bill, because there’s been a lot of talk around the issue of unregistered providers and I know that a lot of people want that freedom to decide.

**Bill:** Yeah, I want people to have freedom to decide. I also want to make sure that people can’t charge the taxpayer money if they’re just - if they haven’t got the qualifications to do the service. So, there’ll be a meeting of minds and the way we do it is we involve people with disability and those people doing self-planning to hear their voices. I’m not about to upset the applecart for self-management and autonomy.

**George:** Bill, the last thing I’d like to ask is to really get a real sense of what you’d like to say to the people who really want to know about who to vote for when it comes to May 21. Do you have any final words that you’d like to say to people?

**Bill:** I love the NDIS. I want to empower the lives of Australians with disability. I think we can do a lot better than the current government currently does. I want to restore trust. If you want to continue on this world where you’re either having your package cut or you’re worried at each plan review you will have your package cut, if you’re worried about these things, then vote Labor because this NDIS needs a major reorientation back to the original goals of choice and control, the original aim of the Act, which I was involved in.

So, voting Liberal or for the small parties would be the act of hope over experience. Only 2 groups of people can be in charge of the NDIS, Liberal or Labor. Liberals, their time is up. They’ve had 9 ½ years and it’s going down. Time for new management. That’s why I’d like you to vote for Labor.

**George:** Thanks, Bill and thank you for your time.

**Bill:** Thank you. Top job, Dr George.

**George:** That’s all we have time for on today’s episode of Reasonable & Necessary. Remember that this is just one of a series of episodes for the Federal election, so make sure you check them all out, including our final analysis episode, which is a ripper. To be notified of future episodes, don’t forget to hit the subscribe button and the notification bell. You can also follow me on Twitter at drgeorgethecrip. Thanks for listening and until next time, stay well and reasonable.