

COMMITTEES

Community Affairs Committee Report

Senator PATTERSON (Victoria) (6.26 p.m.)—I rise to support my colleagues in commending the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs report on the funding and operation of the Commonwealth State/Territory Disability Agreement. The Commonwealth State/Territory Disability Agreement is to be completed by June this year, and this inquiry was a perfect opportunity for the committee to go to nearly all the states taking evidence from carers and organisations about the way they see the functioning of the previous Commonwealth State/Territory Disability Agreements.

When I resigned from the ministry, I said that one of my greatest sadnesses was that I would not have the same clout in fighting for people with disabilities. I made a commitment that during the rest of my time in parliament I would continue to fight for them. I hope being a member of this committee has been part of fulfilling that commitment. As we moved around hearing the various stories, I felt embarrassment that, in a country with the wealth and resources we have, we were subjected to stories—and I think it would have been beneficial for other colleagues to have heard them too—that were tragic, of people who had been caring for their children for years, year in and year out, who had given up hope of even thinking that they might be on a list for accommodation, who were at their wits' end to know where they should go and to whom they should speak to actually have someone listen to them. This was an opportunity for them to be heard.

We heard from a young man in Tasmania, 31 years old, with cerebral palsy—an articulate, bright young man who said that what he wanted to do was leave home, like any young person. He felt that he was a burden to his mother and stepfather, but there was nowhere for him to go. Today we met a young man with three children who has spent the last three years in Canberra Hospital. We met another young man today who had had a skateboard accident and been sent out of hospital in a parlous state because he was 'blocking' a bed—that was the word that was used. That young man read a statement at the press conference about his situation. He was considered virtually gone at one point.

We could go on with story after story. I commend the recommendations of the committee. I know it is not popular with treasurers, finance ministers, shadow treasurers or shadow finance ministers to be told that more money is needed for a program. But, if anything needs more money spent on it, it is the area of disability. There are people who are at their wits' end, who have cared for their son or daughter or niece or nephew or partner to breaking point. That is the only way I can describe it.

One of the things that I wanted to point out in the recommendations—and I will not go through them all for some of my colleagues have covered them—was recommendation 3, the last dot point: that the CSTDA should include a transparent and clear mechanism to enable people with a disability and their carers to identify and understand which level of government is responsible for the provision and funding of services. When it is not clear it is easy to buck-pass. When it is not clear who is responsible for a 24-year-old with multiple sclerosis, it is very easy to pass the buck. What has happened when we have had young people in nursing homes is

that once they were in the nursing home the Commonwealth was paying for them and there was no moral suasion on the states to do anything because the young people were off the waiting list. I am not criticising the states but that was what happened. There are some arrows that could be shot at the Commonwealth as well, but unless you have a clear definition it is easy to pass the buck.

We could not come to an agreement in the committee on a definition. My view is that you should specify an age and if the person is under that age the state is responsible for them and if they are over that set age the Commonwealth is responsible for them. With regard to accommodation in particular I am not saying that they should move, but they should be able to remain in place but with somebody to take responsibility for them. At the moment when you are on the cusp—if you are not young and you are not old and you have not got an absolutely clearly age related condition that is not related to your disability—it can be fudged about who is responsible. The fudging has to stop. There is no more excuse for fudging. The CSTDA should make sure that fudging from either side cannot continue.

I think that one of the most important things about this report is that it has been a unanimous report. As Senator McLucas has said, it reflects as much as it can, through the committee, the views of those carers and those people with disabilities who spoke for themselves as well. I want to commend this report to all the ministers. I know some of them and I hope that we have assisted them in jogging their treasurers and finance ministers into recognising that this is something that needs addressing. We cannot use excuses any longer.

To the committee, I know have they put in 150 per cent. I am concerned about the health of some of them and I would ask the Clerk and the President to make sure that one committee is not overloaded and understaffed, and I think ours has been. I am very concerned about the health of the staff of our committee because of the burden they have had and I would hope that that would be considered. I thank them for what they have done under very difficult circumstances. They have made a major contribution. We often forget them, but without them we would not have these reports. So I thank them and I hope we take consideration of the fact that they have been unduly burdened. Thank you.