

COMMITTEES

Community Affairs Committee Report

Senator BERNARDI (South Australia) (10.05 a.m.)—In rising to speak to this report on disability trusts by the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs I would like to reflect on the effectiveness of how the committee actually operates. I am not a full member of it; I am a participating member. In my experience, it is a true model of how cooperation can actually make great outputs and a meaningful difference to people's lives. The members of the committee take their responsibilities very seriously and they work very hard at working together to get the very best possible outcome. One of the issues that the committee deals with is disabilities. They have done so in this report in talking about special disability trusts and working to get an outcome that could potentially make an enormous difference to the lives of the tens of thousands of Australians who do it tough and for the carers who look after them and who are concerned for the future of those with disabilities. We have to recognise that in dealing with disabilities we have to do things better. Governments should continually strive to deliver better services and make available greater options to those who are living with disabilities and their carers.

Special disability trusts will have a continuing and growing importance in how we manage the affairs and the flexibility and the options of those who are affected by them or who could benefit from them. They were a great idea—introduced by Senator Patterson—whose time will come. The initial legislation that was introduced does need to be changed to reflect an enhanced or more beneficial outcome, and that is really what this report does.

The committee have worked very effectively. Their approach to this matter was outstanding. All the witnesses and committee members are passionate about making a difference in the lives of those with a disability and ensuring that we can provide the best possible services for them. The recommendations, as has been canvassed at length by Senator Boyce and Senator Siewert, deal with such important issues as accommodation. We have gone to great lengths in the coalition government, but also I acknowledge it is the Rudd government's intention, to make sure Australians can still own their own home and stay in their own home when they can. The committee want that option to be available for those with a disability. We need to make sure that they benefit from the same sorts of tax benefits or benefits that other Australians do, and particularly where there may be an inequity such as where their assets are controlled through a trust structure like a special disability trust.

The other important thing is that the committee have recommended that compliance be reduced for these trusts. We have based this on the assumption that people do the right thing most often. They want an effective outcome. We should not be looking for the needle in every haystack; we should be assuming that people are going to do the right thing. Through a not onerous but rigorous compliance regime, we can ascertain where any malfeasance occurs. I commend the committee on this report. I think they have done an outstanding job, and I urge the government to enact these recommendations. I seek leave to continue my remarks later.