



The Honourable Senator Abetz
MG 68, Ministerial Wing
Parliament House ACT 2600
senator.abetz@aph.gov.au

Dear Senator Abetz

subject: **meeting request**

I write to request a meeting about some of what you said on the ABC's Q&A program broadcast on 17/2/2014. Annex 1 (below) is a transcript of part of the program.

In effect, Daniel Turner asked you initially:

Could you -

- 1. explain the Government's plan to review the Disability Support Pension, and*
- 2. put me at ease ... to know my income won't be totally cut?*

In our view, you did not answer the questions.

1. The nearest you got to explaining Government plans to review the DSP was when you said "... that is why each and every case has to be determined on its merits". You said that the Government's plans involve yet another (probably more demoralising) "merit" process and implied that the existing "merit" process is inadequate and failing.
2. You did little to put Mr Turner (and others) at ease about continuing access to Disability Support Pension or its existence as a "safety net".

Your call for someone to employ Mr Turner specifically suggests little understanding of the scale of the challenge that disability employment (and poverty) represents. While it is likely that your public plea will get a job for Mr Turner, you did not mention any plan or intention you (as Minister for Employment) or your Government have to improve more generally the currently abysmal employment rates or labour force participation of people with a disability (especially people with autism, see <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4428.omain+features72009>).

Tony Jones asked you how many people who receive the Disability Support Pension did you see as using the DSP as "a hammock" rather than "a safety net". Apparently you don't know the answer. Please would you find out how many people currently use DSP as "a hammock" (your term) rather than as a "safety net" and let us know.

We note that previous Governments also had demeaning attitudes to our most vulnerable citizens, portraying people with disability as unworthy and welfare bludgers. Recent history shows both the Howard and Gillard Governments sought to reduce substantially *welfare bludgers* with disability from among DSP recipients

through welfare-to-work schemes. In each case, these Governments found far fewer “hammock-users”/welfare-bludgers with disability than they expected/predicted ... and their vilification of the most vulnerable quietly dissipated.

Sadly, it seems the Abbott Government intends to repeat previous mistakes.

Neither of these previous Governments seriously tackled employers' deep apathy for, possibly reluctance and resistance to, employing people with a disability. Even with the Government's own Public Service, employment of people with a disability is in decline.

Our organisation has already written to the Prime Minister to warn that repeating the same process and expecting a different outcome (specifically, seeking to excise significant numbers of *welfare bludgers* from the DSP – see <http://a4.org.au/a4/node/742>) invites people to adopt negative conclusions about the mental state of their politicians (see <http://a4.org.au/a4/node/780>). It seems officials and your political minders chose to “protect” you and other relevant politicians from our advice (see <http://a4.org.au/a4/node/779>).

In the Q&A session, you also claimed:

“... there has been a huge growth in the disability support pension in this nation unrelated to other socio-economic factors ...”

and

“... the growth in the Disability Support Pension is unrelated to the other factors that you might suspect would see that change ...”

Recently, another Minister said more specifically ...

DAVID LIPSON

Why has there been such a big growth in these payments over the last decade?

KEVIN ANDREWS

It's difficult to precisely know, and that's why I'm having my department look at it at the present time. But as you say, a 22 per cent growth in a decade, more than 800,000 people on the DSP - if those trends were to continue we could have close to a million people on the DSP, which is a very significant number, given the population of Australia.

From <http://kevinandrews.dss.gov.au/transcripts/37> (transcript 10/1/2014).

Is it not the case that *most* of this 22% growth in the number of people receiving the DSP over the last decade is due to 17% growth in population over the same period? Contrary to your claims, population growth is a socio-economic factor, and one that we certainly expect contributes to growth in the raw number of DSP recipients.

Older citizens are **much more likely** to be DSP recipients ... so population ageing is a factor that we expect contributes significant growth in the number of DSP recipients. We are surprised you suggest anyone would see population ageing as an “unrelated” or unexpected growth factor.

Further, advice given to all politicians, including the Government, says ...

“The increase in DSP has been extensively analysed, but ... this growth has been driven by an ageing population and the closure or restriction of some other income support payments (in particular the raising of the Age Pension age for women). In fact, the proportion of the population with a disability who are in receipt of some form of income support has fallen, however these recipients are now concentrated in the DSP numbers, whereas they were previously spread across a range of payments including Parenting Payments, Veterans' payments and other non-activity tested payments, many of which have now been closed to new entrants.”

From <http://parliamentflagpost.blogspot.com.au/2014/01/growth-in-age-pension-receipt-elephant.html>

Substantial growth over the last decade in the number of people with autism spectrum disorder and getting DSP is not known to be related to socio-economic factors. Health Department officials wrote, showing alarming ignorance, that they are “not aware of any evidence of any major shifts in prevalence of autism in Australia” (see <http://a4.org.au/a4/node/359>). Other Government officials say/opine that growing autism prevalence is due entirely to “better diagnosis” of milder cases, but this contrary to solid actual evidence from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (showing more of the growth in autism is people with severe or profound disability).

Labour force participation for people with autism spectrum disorder is abysmal. Government has yet to recognise and address the challenges relating to employment for the growing number of school leavers with autism spectrum disorder.

It seems you were misinformed about several important issues affecting employment of people with a disability and people who receive the Disability Support Pension. We would like to meet you to discuss the facts, and what Government can do to improve on the current abysmal employment and labour force participation outcomes for people with disability due to their autism spectrum disorder.

Please contact me via email or by mobile (04xx xxx xxx) to set up a meeting.

Yours sincerely,

Bob Buckley
Convenor, Autism Aspergers Advocacy Australia (A4).

25/2/2014

Annex 1. Q&A transcript

from the time point 54:27 in the downloadable version of the show (see <http://www.abc.net.au/iview/#/view/81657600> or http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/vodcast/qanda_2014_ep03.mp4)

Speakers: Daniel Turner, Tony Jones, Eric Abetz

Turner: Thanks Tony. Ah ... I totally disagree with what James just said. Just putting it out there.

My question is to Eric Abetz. I'm currently on a Disability Support Pension for various disabilities I have. I don't want to be on a DSP, I'd much rather be in work and earning my own wage. I'm applying for a number of jobs but because of my disabilities I'm limited to applying for only sit-down jobs or desk jobs. Could you share more light on the Government's plans for reviewing the Disability Support Pension just to put me at ease ... to know my income won't be totally pulled out from under me.

Jones: Eric Abetz!

Abetz: What the Government has said is, and in general terms, what we need in this country is that the social services that we provide provide a safety net and not a hammock and as a result we do have to be careful to ensure that money goes to those that actually need it, deserve it and require it rather than those who may think that it's a life-style choice. Clearly in your circumstances that you've outlined, the little that I've gleaned, clearly you are a person that is aspirational; you are willing to work, you want to work and I hope as a result of this program tonight somebody might be out there saying "I'll give that bloke a job" and an opportunity and that is what I would call on all employers to do is to have a look at the opportunity to assist the disability community in our nation.

Jones: A quick question just to follow up Eric Abetz ... you mentioned "a safety net not a hammock". How many of the people who are on disability support pensions do you believe are in "a hammock"?

Abetz: I cannot specify that and that is why each and every case has to be determined on its merits and should be so determined and what I think however if I might say with respect that there has been a huge growth and the questioner I would definitely not categorise in this situation but there has been a huge growth in the disability support pension in this nation unrelated to other socio-economic factors and so one would have to ask "why has there been his growth?". And I think in fairness to the Australian tax-payer. It's not us that funds it as a Government, it's our fellow Australians that fund it and in fairness we need robustness in the system.

Tony: I'll just go back to our questioner as he put his hand back up ... go ahead.

Turner: I just want to know on what basis do you say that there's been growth unrelated to the socio-economic factors?

Jones: Thank you, Daniel.

Abetz: Right. The circumstances and the statistics that have been put to me on many occasions and to the Government indicates that the growth in the Disability Support Pension is unrelated to the other factors that you might suspect would see that change and so what regrettably happens is that some people that are on unemployment benefit are able to shift to the Disability Support Pension in circumstances where that may not necessarily be appropriate and the best use of Australian tax-payers' money. So let's just remember whenever anybody's on welfare, or indeed my salary as a parliamentarian, I'm very conscious of the fact it is my fellow Australians paying the money for that particular benefit and that is something we as a Government need to keep front of mind whenever we analyse these payments.

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