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CREATING AN AGE-FRIENDLY NATION

HOME MODIFICATIONS AUSTRALIA CONFERENCE 2016 - CANBERRA

FRIDAY, 29 APRIL 2016

I want to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we meet on - the Ngunnawal peoples - and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Thank you to Glen Sorenson for your welcome. By all accounts you have excelled yourself again at compering the conference.

I'd like to acknowledge Home Modifications Australia's CEO, Michael Bleasdale invited me to speak. Michael is a terrific advocate for ensuring older Australians receive the necessary support and services to stay at home for as long as possible. Thank you Michael.

And thank you all for being here. I acknowledge that you have come from various parts of the nation and from around the world. I recognise that many of you are the leaders, innovators, experts and practitioners in this field.

I have a lot to learn from you.

Ageing Population

What I would like to do is outline a few insights into Labor's values and priorities as we head into an election.

Since 1972 Labor has been in Government 22 of those 44 years.

That is why you cannot ignore either side of politics.

And at this moment, right now, you cannot afford to ignore either side.

An election is just 64 days away, or nine weeks and one day.

The Budget has been brought forward a week to this coming Tuesday night.

There has never been a more exciting time to have a conference in Canberra.

But just as you cannot afford to neglect either side of politics, politicians from all sides cannot afford to ignore you.

You represent one of the fastest growing industries and demographic cohorts in this nation.

Age, community and disability services are the growth industries.

As you know, the cohort of older Australians is getting proportionally larger as we see people living much longer.

I often say that longevity is one of the greatest achievements of the 20th century; and longevity will define the 21st century.

Living Longer Living Better

In Government, Labor sought to address the challenges and opportunities that longevity presented through the *Living Longer Living Better* package.

We have just celebrated four years since that landmark package of reforms designed to transform aged care in Australia, was introduced on 20 April 2012.

Labor's reforms addressed the needs of older Australians well into the future and had the ambition to build a better, fairer, more sustainable and more nationally consistent aged care system.

Living Longer Living Better has continued to be implemented by the Liberal Government, which we appreciate.

Of course, I think we could have done a better job implementing those reforms.

You'll forgive me for being a little bit political, but what is an Opposition to do but call the Government to account and present an alternative vision?

Labor remains committed to the reform direction presented in the *Living Longer Living Better* package.

It's been a tough three years. The Liberal Government took a savage axe to funding, ripping \$1.8 billion from the sector, threatening the quality of services for older people.

They removed all references to "ageing" and talk only of "aged care".

When my colleague, Senator Helen Polley, challenged the Government during the previous Senate Estimates hearings, Senator Nash told her that "ageing" and "aged care" were the same thing.

I can assure you I do not think that is true. And the Australian Labor Party does not think "ageing" is the same as "aged care."

Age-Friendly Australia

Labor has a vision to see Australia transform into an age-friendly nation.

I believe we can be world leaders in this regard.

It starts with our nation's leaders agreeing that longevity is not a burden but a blessing.

Older Australians have much to offer and have contributed to making this nation what it is today.

As such, older people deserve fair, affordable, quality services to ensure they can age well, in their own homes and communities.

In fact, when this Government mentions the "ageing population" or "older Australians" it is to bemoan the spending required for this segment of society, whom they view as a burden or a challenge.

They no longer have a Minister for Ageing, focusing on the bigger issues of an ageing population.

They went from a Minister for Social Services to a Minister for Health and Aged Care.

And "aged care" has been treated pretty harshly as well, with major funding cuts, major disruptions thanks to tossing this portfolios between Government Departments, with numerous changes of Ministers.

But in that time, I am pleased to say Labor has had one Shadow Minister for Ageing and one Shadow Parliamentary Secretary in Senator Helen Polley.

Helen and I are the two constants through all of this change.

But then again, Labor understands that *Ageing* is an important policy area.

We understand that *ageing* is much broader a concept than *aged care*.

Labor is unashamedly *pro-ageing*.

As a result of the ageing of our population, our nation will look very different in 2050 to what it looks like now.

Labor's *Living Longer Living Better* package was far more than simply aged care reform.

It was about empowering, promoting and supporting older people to make the most of their lives.

In Government, Labor established an advisory panel made up of eminent older Australians, to ensure we could maximise the potential of this changing demographic.

To their great shame, the Liberal Government axed it in November 2013.

Thankfully, the tenacious Everal Compton and the Panel for Positive Ageing continued their work and produced the Blueprint for an Ageing Australia in September 2014, with support from Per Capita.

It is a wide-ranging document that takes into account the economic and social potential of older Australians, overcoming barriers to working, encouraging inter-generational partnerships, the need for infrastructure planning and of course housing.

Older people need suitable housing if they are to “age-in-place.”

Housing that is located where they can stay connected to their communities and social networks and families.

Where they have access to services and public facilities.

Suitable housing is essential in an age-friendly nation.

Unfortunately, there is limited appropriate stock for the growing number of older people.

We know that one of the greatest risks of hospitalisation and entering residential aged care, are falls. And far too many of those falls happen at home.

We need homes that provide safe and secure environments, that are easy to maintain, are located near essential services, transport and that allow residents to remain connected to their communities.

And we need a healthy mix of private and social housing.

I have spoken to a number of local Governments around the nation. I am heartened by the work being undertaken by local Councils around the nation.

I was in the City of Swan, to the north east of Perth, last year.

They have developed an age-friendly policy that embeds ageing needs and issues into every level of work the Council is involved with.

I would like to see Councils take charge of developing age-friendly communities that meet the unique needs of their communities ...

Planning and development, public transport, age-friendly parks – with equipment for older people to enjoy, with suitably located toilets, adequate seating and access that is suitable for wheelchairs and mobility aids.

Everal Compton came to a small country town in my electorate, deep in the Somerset Region in South-East Queensland.

The Mayor and some Councillors attended a forum I ran with Everal. He told them that a town like Esk could be revitalised, not necessarily with retail and family oriented residential developments.

No he told the Council to consider turning Esk into a mecca for older people or “oldies” as Everal likes to say.

He said attract businesses and services that support and service older people.

Develop housing that is suitable for older people and places them in the heart of town, near the park, the doctor, the newsagent, cafes, etc.

Have entertainment and events that older people will come and visit Esk to enjoy.

It makes sense.

I believe the Federal Government should work with Local Government and service providers like yourselves to develop age-friendly homes and communities.

Aged Care

While I have wanted to share some of my vision for an age-friendly nation – and I could say more about mature-age employment and recognising the value older play - I want to briefly address the future of the aged care reforms.

The first thing we need to do before making any more changes is fix **My Aged Care**.

My Aged Care was a significant feature of the *Living Longer Living Better* reform package.

It was meant to assist in making aged care services easier to access.

What we have instead is a monster that is making life increasingly difficult for consumers, providers and the medical profession.

One of the reasons for the problems is that the reforms have been poorly implemented.

We have seen is a distinct lack of interest and poor leadership in terms of aged care reform implementation.

Yesterday I had a care worker tell me that one of her consumers said she didn't like calling My Aged Care. “They just don't know me,” the lady told her.

In the rush to change the aged care system, to free up supply, give greater choice to consumers, there has been a distinct loss of personal attention and care.

Not all of our older people have access to or literacy in using technology. But consumers are being pressured to access services online.

Not all consumers can make complex and difficult decisions;

People with cognitive impairment, dementia, people who have no computer, people with limited literacy or those from CALD backgrounds.

The current cohort of older people have not been prepared for consumer-directed care.

The Aged Care Roadmap wants to take us down the path of greater consumer control and choice, but implies a greater financial commitment from consumers.

This may well be the direction we need to head. But I do not think we have had time to evaluate and assess the impact of the current reforms in detail to ensure we embark on the next phase of reforms successfully.

Living Longer Living Better is a ten year reform package. It is legislated that a major review take place at the five year mark.

That needs to be tabled in parliament by 30 June 2017.

I believe the current reforms need to be embedded and proven to be effective before we rush to make new changes.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by saying that I believe your segment of this industry is absolutely essential to the future of an age-friendly nation.

Home modifications ensure people can live in their own homes safely and securely.

Your work keeps people on their feet or provides greater mobility.

Home modifications require upfront expenditure but in the long term they reduce the impact that falls and other issues around the home have on people's health.

You assist in keeping people out of hospital and out of residential aged care.

You make sure older people, as well as people with disability, can live with dignity, security and confidence at home and in their community.

Suitable housing is an essential not an optional extra in age-friendly nation.

I may not be the Minister for Ageing. But that could change in 64 days. In that eventuality I look forward to working with you all and to hearing more from Michael about how we can work together to make sure Australia truly is an age-friendly nation.

Thank you for your time.

ENDS

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