

**Speech to National Press Club: Senator Jan McLucas, Shadow Minister for Ageing, Disabilities and Carers: 22 August 2007**

Firstly can I thank National Seniors Australia for their initiative in proposing today's debate on Ageing policy for the 2007 election.

I also acknowledge Everal Compton, Chair National Seniors Australia, Annette Ellis, Member for Canberra and Senator Bob Brown.

Australia, like all western countries, has – I'm sure you all know – an ageing population.

But this is not news. We have known this reality for 50 years.

The policy challenge is how to prepare for our changing demographics.

The policy challenge facing our nation is how to prepare now for the long term – the next 15-20 years; not the next 10 weeks.

That's the policy challenge Labor is embracing. Planning for the long term. Putting in place policies that are sustainable, that support the aspirations of older Australians wherever they may be.

When the first Intergenerational Report was released in 2002 the Treasurer spoke of the fiscal burden that our country was facing.

That language – talk of older people as a burden – was highly offensive to older people, and they have made that known to me very plainly.

Talk of a fiscal burden does not recognise the enormous value, in fact the asset that older people are to our communities.

It does not recognise the reality that older people volunteer at the highest rate in the country.

It does not recognise the unquantifiable value of the childcare they are providing their grandchildren due to the costs of formal childcare.

And most importantly it does not recognise that this section of our society has worked hard, paid taxes, in many ways built our nation – and deserve respect and to be valued.

It is those values that underpin Labor's policy approach to ageing.

A policy approach based on supporting the aspirations of older Australians, in the many and varied forms those aspirations will be.

In a policy sense, the common view is that the portfolio of ageing is aged care – and residential aged care at that. However, the reality is that most of us will not use residential aged care.

Most older Australians live in their own homes and pursue active and productive lives.

And they, like all other Australians want their governments to provide the services they expect.

Governments need to ensure that all policies across all portfolios acknowledge and plan for our ageing population.

And to achieve that goal Labor wants to give older Australians a voice – an advocate.

A Rudd Labor Government will establish an Ambassador for Ageing – the public face of older Australians.

The Ambassador will promote positive programs and activities that ensure our communities value and respect older people.

Just like Jeff Kennett has been able to inform and educate our community about depression, Labor's Ageing Ambassador will promote active and healthy ageing not only to older people themselves – but also to the broader community.

Further, a Rudd Labor Government will establish a Ministerial Council on Ageing reporting to COAG – just as we do in education, health, justice for example. to ensure that policies and programs in State and Territory governments are also focussed on inclusion of older people.

As I said earlier Labor knows that older Australians want to remain in their own homes, connected with families and friends and the social supports they have built up over time.

Labor supports the Community Aged Care Program – let's not forget it was established under Labor in 1995.

Labor further supports the Home and Community Care program which delivers a range of services into an older person's home.

But there are significant challenges that must be faced now so that community care will be sustainable into the future.

One of the most challenging statistics to cross my desk in recent months is from the Report to the Community Care Coalition by Allen Consulting.

It says:

*At present, unpaid family and informal care accounts for 74% of the support provided to older people and persons with a disability. There are 57 primary carers available for every 100 persons needing care. By 2031, the availability of carers is expected to have fallen to 35 primary carers for every 100 persons needing care – a reduction of 39% - significantly increasing demand for formal care.*

Older people, ageing in their own homes rely on the availability of family members and friends to provide their fundamental support but this data shows that these family carers will simply not be there in the same numbers into the future.

This is not an argument for more residential aged care. Quite the opposite. But it means that policy makers have to be alive to how community care will have to respond to the lack of family carers into the future.

That's part of the reason why Labor has already announced that we would review the allocation of residential aged care beds and community care packages.

The current ratio was established nearly 25 years ago and, while it has been tinkered at over time with the increase in community care packages it is evident that a robust analysis of the changing care needs and aspirations of older people needing care must be undertaken.

Alongside the diminishing numbers of family carers is the looming workforce crisis facing the aged care sector.

In 1995 there were 38,662 nurses working in residential aged care. In 2004 there were 33,794. At the same time the numbers of residents in aged care facilities increased by 21,770.

Aged care providers, particularly in the mining boom states and in rural and remote areas struggle to compete for qualified workers – personal care workers and nurses to run their community and residential aged care services.

There are a number of reasons for this.

The gap in wages between aged care and the acute hospital sector is continuing to grow.

The paperwork that nurses in particular have to complete leaves them professionally dissatisfied. The new Aged Care Funding Instrument, commencing 20 March 2008, *may* resolve some of this but I was surprised the Government did not agree to Labor's move to ensure this occurred through a review of its effectiveness.

We know there is a direct link between staffing levels and the quality of care being provided.

How many times have I been told by residents that "the staff are lovely but they're just so busy we never get to talk"?

We must address the workforce issue to ensure long term sustainability in aged care.

Labor has already announced our first tranche of aged care policy, "Improving the Transition between Hospital and Aged Care".

This policy addresses the fact that, on any one night, there are about 2300 older people who are eligible for aged care who are waiting in a hospital simply because they cannot access community care or a residential aged care bed.

Labor will establish 2000 transition care beds to allow older people to move from hospital to a far more appropriate care setting.

It can take months for a frail older person to receive age care - and it is months of bed time that can then be used for acute patients – patients who are now in Emergency Department corridors or having to delay surgery.

Further, Labor has announced \$300M in zero real interest loans to providers to construct or redevelop aged care beds in areas of need.

And we'll remove some of the costs borne by aged care providers in seeking bed licences by allocating beds in advance and allowing applications to stay current into the future.

Another challenge we face is to ensure that our many migrants who are also ageing receive culturally appropriate services both in the home and residential aged care.

We know that people, as they age, often revert to their first language. We must provide them with care that suits their needs.

So too, we have to ensure indigenous people receive the care they need, older remote indigenous people, like all older people want to remain in their communities as they age.

Due to the fact we are living longer, the prevalence of dementia is increasing. We applaud the goal of Alzheimer's Australia to delay the onset of dementia and we will support them to achieve that goal.

Thank you again to National Seniors Australia for arranging this debate. It is great that we are focussing nationally on the issues of ageing.

Thank you also to the many aged care providers, both community and residential, who have so openly discussed the issues of importance to you.

And thank you also to the many, many older Australians who have shared their experiences with me.