

## THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

# Stop, go back, the NDIS board shake-up is going the wrong way

July 31, 2015 11.24am AEST



A board shake-up offers the Abbott government the opportunity to be visionary through implementing the NDIS's spirit and intent. shutterstock

Assistant Social Services Minister Mitch Fifield recently announced plans to replace existing members of the board charged with delivering the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), who have a lived experience of disability or experience in disability services, with senior corporate executives.

The motivation for these changes, according to Fifield's spokesperson, is because:

*As we move to the next stage of implementation of the NDIS – the transition to full scheme – the NDIA [National Disability Insurance Agency] will require a board with a highly specialised skillset to effectively manage a rapid increase in participants, from 30,000 to 460,000 over three years, and administer a \$22 billion insurance-based scheme.*

This change in governance belies an understanding that the NDIS is not just an “insurance scheme” requiring knowledge of the insurance business. Rather, the NDIS is a social policy reform including the National Disability Strategy that, at its heart, requires an understanding of the lived experience of people with disability.

This fundamental change to the board is thus a major backflip on the underlying principles and values espoused by the Every Australian Counts campaign, which led to the NDIS's establishment.

### Why is governance so important?

For any public policy reform to be successful, it needs to be appropriate, effective and efficient. At the heart of achieving such an outcome is good governance. This requires a balance of more than business skills and an understanding of the insurance industry.

The balancing of skillsets on the NDIA board requires an understanding beyond the corporate sector. There, the business of disability is only one part of the equation. Fifield must understand that any change to the board should be true to the underlying philosophy of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the desires of people with disability to have a say in their future.

The original appointment of the NDIS board included well-credentialed members with both disability sector and lived experience. But, it was not without controversy. The eight-person board included two people with disabilities and two people who had children with disabilities. The remaining board members came from the not-for-profit, insurance or disability sectors.

While there were people with disability and disability service experience on the board, there was disquiet in the disability community. This was due to the lack of transparency

### Author



#### Simon Darcy

Professor & Co-Director Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Research Centre - UTS Business School, University of Technology Sydney

in how the appointments were made, and that people with disability had no direct input into a board that was leading a reform that would have such a huge impact on their lives.

### What should the board look like?

The NDIA board and supporting organisation have a **multitude of challenges**. There is no doubt that establishing a major new government entity to oversee the expenditure of more than A\$22 billion for around 460,000 people is a complex organisational undertaking. It must deal with the aspirations of people with disability and the complex or **wicked problems** they encounter daily.

The NDIA board needs to reflect the complexity that it faces through a well-conceived board with a sophisticated skillset across government and politics, corporate sector and markets, and the not-for-profit sectors. But to do so without an understanding of how disability reform should achieve equity, independence and dignity without representation of those with the lived experience of disability is reckless at best – paternal and arrogant at worst.

Australian taxpayers are investing heavily in the potential of people with disability. They have every right to know that the NDIS is well managed from a business and insurance perspective.

They are also investing in their own peace of mind. If they or their family members ever have a disability, they will not have to endure the indignity that many people with disability have to go through every day of their life to try and have the essentials they need to live the life they want.

The NDIA board will oversee an organisation that is bringing about significant **strategic change** of an old-style, welfare-driven **disability service sector** to a mixed commercial and not-for-profit, market-driven system with individualised funding and responsibility.

Board members must believe in the abilities of people with disability, have their trust and want to empower them to achieve their desires. The board must engage with diverse stakeholders and must be diverse itself. This requires an inclusive approach to other marginalised groups that face a **“double whammy”** of disadvantage with disability – those from Indigenous, ethnic and other marginalised backgrounds.

There should be opportunity for those who are governed to have a say in **who is appointed** to the board to govern them. This point is a fundamental shift from a board of purely political appointments to one that represents those they govern.

The NDIA board shake-up offers the Abbott government the opportunity to be visionary through implementing the NDIS’s spirit and intent. The ultimate outcome of empowerment is to promote those with disability into positions of leadership to direct the change themselves. As goes the well-known disability advocacy slogan, **“Nothing about Us without Us!”**.

While in opposition, Fifield said:

*Australians with disability and their families are entitled to be cynical about the government’s commitment to an NDIS in the absence of any money in the mini-budget.*

Making changes to the board provides Fifield with an opportunity to allay the cynicism of Australians with disability and their families about the NDIS’s governance by showing leadership and providing an opportunity for those with disability to control their own destiny.

 [Disability](#) [NDIS](#) [Mitch Fifield](#)