



# Crying out for help

**Farrin Foster**

**O**lder Australians suffering institutional abuse, people with disabilities confined to their homes, welfare recipients living on rice and mothers without enough money to feed their babies ...

We hear stories like these every day. They tug at the heart, yet social security issues don't hold much sway at the ballot box.

Australia's needy are calling out for help and the systems which support them require drastic reforms, but in an election campaign run on grand announcements and popularity, the best they can hope for is a sprinkling of cash.

## AGED CARE

Ian Yates, chief executive of the Council of the Ageing, sighs when asked about the Coalition's \$935 million commitment to aged care.

"Our problem is when people think about aged care, they think beds," he said.

"Instead of residential care as the centrepiece, we want community care to be a priority because that's what the consumers want. They want a better range of packages which help them stay at home."

The Coalition's strategy has been widely criticised for providing beds without staff to look after the patients in them. Mr Yates said while it had some good initiatives, it did not address major, longer-term issues.

Labor has not made a big spending announcement on aged care, but said the sector would

be a second-term priority. Under the current Labor Government, an intensive study of aged-care delivery is being made by the Productivity Commission, which Mr Yates hopes will lead to an overhaul.

Issues such as discrimination against older people, a national dental health system and research into dementia – which has a mortality rate similar to cancer – are also concerns.

Opposition Leader Tony Abbott will pay employers incentives of up to \$250 a fortnight to employ people over 50, as part of a package which Mr Yates has cautiously welcomed.

Broader anti-discrimination measures remain unaddressed, and are likely to stay that way for the lifetime of most senior Australians.

## DISABILITY

Many people with disabilities are searching for the same thing as older Australians – a way to stay at home and still get help.

"The biggest and most important thing is the National Disability Insurance Scheme," said Monika Baker, the systems advocacy co-ordinator at The Disability Advocacy and Complaints Service of South Australia.

"The Productivity Commission is doing an inquiry. That would hopefully bring us an entitlement to services for people with disabilities. At the moment it's a lottery which depends on how much funding there is and what time of year you're asking for

help."

Ms Baker said a basic promise of care for every disabled person was a priority.

The next step would be to look at how and where to best deliver care.

Both major parties have focused on the photo-friendly area of children with disabilities. Prime Minister Julia Gillard has pledged \$122 million for early intervention programs, while the Liberals will put \$314 million towards helping students with disabilities access education.

Labor has also launched a 10-year plan to "improve the lives of people with disability, promote participation, and create a more inclusive society". How this will actually help them is something disabled voters must wait to find out.

## WELFARE

In the speeches of Australian politicians, there are two kinds of welfare. The first is received by hard-working families, veteran heroes and pensioners. The second is gobbled up by students, drug addicts and the unemployed.

But both kinds of welfare come from the same place. And most of the time they serve the same purpose – to support someone who can't support themselves.

So far, welfare policy announcements have been made only in the first category. Labor is pledging an extra \$4000 a year for families with teenagers to help them meet rising costs and is planning to make it easier to access payments



such as the baby bonus. The Coalition is re-examining the indexation of veterans' pensions and superannuation.

But welfare workers say these aren't the people who are most desperate.

"The real issue is the long-term unemployed," said executive director of the SA Council of Social Services Ross Womersley. "They are the increasing group in the population and we think that they're being forgotten."

Mr Womersley said people in this group, which includes many sole parents, need support to do work experience and training.

Instead, the Labor and Liberal parties plan to implement an "income management scheme" for the most disadvantaged people on welfare – something

the Australian Council of Social Security said will only make life harder for people who are already struggling.

### PARENTAL LEAVE

Bernie Sahb was a first-time mother at 39. Supported by her partner, parents, in-laws and a workplace with a paid parental leave scheme, she had the ideal circumstances for daughter Ella's first months of life.

But she said it was still "really hard".

"I did have a lot of moments in those early months where I wondered how you'd cope without all those supports I had," Ms Sahb said.

She believes paid parental leave acknowledges that family is

important.

"If they do think it's a valuable thing, it needs to be shown in the same way you value any other job."

Labor and Liberal are both planning to introduce paid parental leave schemes. The major difference is that Labor's will start next year, while the Coalition scheme will be delayed until halfway through 2012.

Labor's plan also offers more flexibility for fathers to take the leave while mothers return to work. However, the Coalition pledges 26 weeks paid leave, while Labor offers only 18.

Both parties are ready to acknowledge the importance of family and the rights of women through a major reform.

The disabled, the aged and the poor are not so lucky.



Bernie Sahb with 18-month old daughter Ella: paid parental leave shows politicians value family.

Photo: Kate Elmes

