



Where's Bill? Shorten ducks NDIS debacle for Ukraine peace summit

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Body

After a week in which the National Disability Insurance Scheme was revealed to be rife with fraud, you would think the Labor Minister responsible, Bill Shorten, would have his hands full.

This is a scheme that is costing us \$44 billion each year. That's more than the entire cost of Medicare. And its cost is spiralling, growing at more than 20 per cent annually.

If not brought under control, the NDIS will consume an ever growing share of government spending, forcing either cuts to essential services or defence spending, or increased taxes.

But rather than dealing with this mess, Bill Shorten is instead spending the week at a conference in Switzerland.

The event is a Ukraine peace summit. Heads of government from around the world will be there, including the German chancellor, the French president, and the US Vice President.

But rather than sending Australia's Foreign Minister, Penny Wong, or the Defence Minister, Richard Marles, or indeed any minister that sits within the national security committee of Cabinet, the Labor government has instead chosen Bill Shorten to represent Australia.

World leaders will be left scratching their heads, and wondering how the responsibilities of the Minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme can possibly be relevant to the issues of war and peace that will be thrashed out at the summit.

Ukraine needs weapons, munitions and diplomatic support to prevail in its struggle against Russia. But a national disability insurance scheme is not on the wish-list of Ukrainian President Zelenskyy.

Sending Bill Shorten to the Ukraine peace summit is a diplomatic insult. It suggests Australia does not consider Ukraine's existential fight for survival important enough to warrant sending a credible representative.

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But it fits a pattern of this Labor government that is long on rhetorical support for Ukraine, but short on actual delivery.

Under questioning in the Senate last week, we learnt that **Australia** has still not returned its ambassador to Ukraine, over two years after he was withdrawn.

Instead, the ambassador is based in Poland, whilst we continue to pay the rent on diplomatic premises in Kyiv, Ukraine's capital, whilst paying further rent on premises in Poland.

All up, it is costing us \$1 million per year to NOT have a functioning diplomatic presence in Ukraine.

The same week Bill Shorten is in Switzerland, the Labor Government in its wisdom has sent the Minister for Early Childhood Education, **Anne Aly**, to Jordan to attend a Gaza humanitarian conference.

Again, there is zero connection between **Anne Aly**'s ministerial responsibilities and the topic at hand. Again, **Australia** will be represented by a minister lacking the authority to take decisions on behalf of the government.

Given the frequency with which Foreign Minister Penny Wong issues press releases on the conflict in the Middle East, it is surprising she is a no-show at a summit that is solely devoted to this issue.

It seems to be a lucky draw system that the Albanese government is operating. Pick a number out of a hat and off you go overseas, never mind if you have no expertise or authority on the topic.

Next up we might see climate change minister Chris Bowen attending meetings of the World Bank, or agriculture minister Murray Watt trying his hand at the plenary of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

It all begs the question of why we even have a Minister for Foreign Affairs, or indeed an assistant minister (Tim Watts), if they are not prepared to do their jobs of representing **Australia** on the world stage.

Last week, Anthony Albanese skipped the 80th commemoration anniversary of the D-Day landings.

Every Allied leader was there for this solemn occasion.

Every Australian Prime Minister at least as far back as Paul Keating has attended these events, a testament to the fact that several thousand Australians participated in the Normandy landings.

UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has come under fire for leaving the commemoration early. But Albanese didn't even show up.

It's yet another sign of a government with misplaced priorities and out of its depth on foreign affairs.

Dave Sharma is a Liberal senator for NSW

Notes

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