Disability Done Different: Episode 6

John Baker on... turning the tables on the Australian vs UK experience

Podcast transcript

Audio Length:	00:18:40
Hosts:	Roland & Evie Naufal
Guest:	John Baker

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Intro

Maia: Hi, this is Maia Thomas. I am the DSC podcast producer of our first ever series. I just wanted to give you a quick rundown of DSC as an organisation before we get started. DSC is a team of 33 people across Australia, all working together to bring specialised training and consulting expertise to providers in the disability sector. Our focus in on helping providers to survive and thrive in the NDIS. Our purpose is better outcomes for people with disability. We take a different approach to our work. We focus on what works best for you, not us. We're real people and we respect that you are too, we challenge what needs to change. These podcasts bring a new dimension to our work and our commitment to be fun, frank, and future-facing. We hope you enjoy listening to them as much as we did putting them together.

Roland: Hello, welcome to Disability Done Different: Candid Conversations. I'm Roland Naufal, the host of the program, and my trustee sidekick is Evie.

Evie: [Laughter]. Thanks, dad.

Roland: We're talking with really interesting people across a series of six podcasts. This is our final one. You always hope that you're going to end on a high note, and we did. We nailed it. John Baker is a really interesting guy, worked at very senior levels of transformational change. It sounds wanky already, but it's not. What did you think of it?

Evie: I found it great. John has such interesting experience and it was really funny to see him flip around on us and our questions about what worked in the UK. I won't spoil the answer.

Roland: So, over to John.

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Roland: Our guest is John Baker.

Evie: Also known as, dad's only friend.

John: [Laughter].

Roland: No, I have another one!

We're really excited to have John here. John's got a stack of experience from the UK and more recently, with the NDIS in Australia. John began his career as a social worker, as did I. it's interesting that you've made that journey now from social worker to management consultant. Tell us a bit about the journey and how you ended up there, John?

John: How did I transition into being a management consultant? I'd love to say there was a sophisticated plan involved in all of that, but I've never really had one. I went through my career as a social worker and really enjoyed engaging with people and actually engaging in the change of how services where configured, the introduction to consumer-directed care. Then I actually started becoming more interested in how organisations work, and actually looking at some of the huge mistakes that were happening within organisations, as I was working as a social worker.

Roland: One of the things we wanted to touch on right from the start was, the whole UK thing and whether Australia has an inferiority complex, you know, everybody we bring over from the UK is the great expert or the USA. There's some expert that can tell us what we're doing wrong. We're often told the UK experience before the NDIS was about individualised funding. Do we have an inferiority complex? Are we receiving significant wisdom from UK and other places?

John: I do think it's a characteristic in Australia and it's something I've noticed. I've only been here four years. I've noticed the number of times you get asked about what's going on outside of Australia. There does seem to be this theory running through a lot of organisations that somebody somewhere has cracked this. There's somebody somewhere that is doing it better. The reality of the situation is that that's not the case. If one more person asks me about best practice in the UK, I think I'll scream.

Roland: That was my next question. [Laughter].

John: Well, actually, when you look at what the UK has done, I think there's far more to be learned from the mistakes, the rollout of personalisation in the UK, the introduction of large-scale IT systems. All of those sorts of things. You look at how that actually worked, they were huge mistakes.

Roland: I'd like to do two things, one is to pick up on some of the mistakes, but even before that, why do we allow the narrative to be: Things were great in the UK, or we've got so much to learn from the UK. Not from their mistakes but from what they've done wonderfully. Why do you think it is that we allow it to become a perverse narrative?

John: I don't think it's peculiar to Australia, but in a sense, what we do is so important and the services that you provide and that are being provided to some of the most vulnerable people are so important, that actually, we're desperate for an answer. I think in that desperation, it's quite tempting and a little lazy to think that somebody somewhere has cracked it. You always wish somebody has managed to crack it. The reality is, nobody's got this right yet. Just look around you, if you do a tour around Europe, if you do a tour to the States or anywhere, there's not a country in the world that has cracked this properly.

Evie: I wonder, too, if there's something in there, too, about actually wanting to believe that it's worked, because of the difficulty that so many people are experiencing and implementing this change. If there's just a part of them that's like, "Well, somebody did it, right? We're not just doing this on our own." I think part of the narrative of the NDIS is that it has been trialled elsewhere, that it's evidence-based. The reality that it didn't work there either would be probably a bit too bleak for most people to face.

Roland: I don't know if it's stretching it too far, John, but after a couple of drinks a week or so ago, we were talking a lot about shooting for the ideal in welfare systems, in community services.

John: Well, there's an element of that in what we're discussing. That's kind of a progression from what we were talking about. You've got this desperate desire, and I agree with you, Evie, you've got this desire to somehow find somebody who's got the answer. There is an answer. Actually, the reality of the situation is that there isn't. What is being done is really hard. Then what you're talking about there, Roland, is another frustration, which had shadowed me throughout my career, which is a lot of what I've done has been dealing with imperfection. It has been coming up with a good enough answer within a damaged environment.

One that doesn't work properly or is counterintuitive. What I've found in particular in human services, is this design of the ideal. I don't want to get too philosophical, but Plato talked about the ideal chair. The idea that somewhere conceptually there is the perfect chair. A carpenter could eventually make it. Now, that's fine, it's good to have an ideal. Actually, if you design and refuse to actually accept anything that doesn't meet that perfection, then you constantly fail.

If I think about something like and adoption service and I can remember early on in my career, the fact that we couldn't place kids, because we didn't have a perfect placement. Yet, those kids were in residential homes. They weren't getting good outcomes. When I think about how the NDI is rolled out and the perfect idea of what

needs to happen compared to good enough, I see failure as a result of that. That does frustrate me.

Roland: Very significant failure, as well.

John: Yes, huge. If you think about everything from technology systems and the design of the ideal, as opposed to just making something work. Very early on in my career, I started in child protection, I can remember actually having a computer system that never worked. It had 140 kids on the child protection register. You could use a rolodex and it would have worked better. We wanted an IT system. I see that a lot at the moment, in dealing with complexity, and dealing with consumer-directed care. Everybody is reaching for this perfect IT solution. Whereas, actually, it's probably a human solution and we'll make the IT fit later.

Roland: I can think of about three examples, probably more in the current disability system, in the implementation of the NDIS, where we're shooting for the ideal inappropriately. I can't say them because I'd get shot down by the advocates for being politically incorrect. That's not the language they'd use. They'd characterise me as some sort of retrograde dinosaur that wants to take us back to the dark ages because I'm not shooting for the ideal. If all we do is shoot for the ideal, we're going to miss something in the middle.

John: I'm not sure that's right. In a sense, always have the ideal in your head, but don't be afraid to compromise. I think we need to be braver about the compromise bit. I think we actually need to be braver about just actually, "Do you know what? It's going to take a hell of a long time and maybe we'll never get to that point. At the moment, if we're only interested in outcomes for these people right now, then there's a series of things we can do that aren't perfect." Yes, it's frustrating sometimes that people say, no, you can't do that because it's not the ideal. Yes

Roland: There are a couple of things jumping up. Did you want to jump in, Evie?

Evie: What's coming up for me when you're talking about this is, I'm wondering if it's linked to what we see a lot in the sector, which is not so much shooting for the ideals, as shooting for the right thing to do. We get a lot of questions about, what is the NDIA want us to do? What does the policy say we can or can't do? What can and can't we buy with these funds? People want really concrete answers, really audit-safe answers.

A lot of the time, the answer is, whatever is reasonable and necessary and whatever is reasonable and necessary is open to interpretation. It's frustrating for us sometimes when we see those participant outcomes being blocked by providers who are saying, "Well, it doesn't seem right, it doesn't seem like the thing we should or shouldn't do." At least from our perspective or from a different interpretation, it looks like, actually, the NDIS facilitates a lot more creativity, a lot more flexibility.

John: I couldn't agree more. I think this goes a little bit to what we were talking about, about people searching for an answer, as well, and an ideal answer. Certainly, in the UK,

and my experience in Australia has been that, again, we think somebody has got the answer, as a provider, I'm consistently asked about, what does the NDIA think about this? What is their answer to this? The reality is, they don't know either. This is a massive rollout of a hugely complex scheme, and we're all finding our way, including the NDIA.

The challenge often is that the NDIA have probably been not as forthright about the fact that they don't know, they feel like they should have an answer. As a consequence, I think they've been contradictory through some of this journey. The provider is still there with the belief that they have an answer. All it does for me is reinforce the fact that I think you're right, people are quite compliant in this space, that's part of the DNA of the sector, really, isn't it?

You have to register, you have to be compliant, you have to manage your risks. That encourages that kind of approach. Actually, the reality of the situation is you have to play your own game in this space. The most successful organisations I've seen in this sector and the ones that really excite me are the ones that aren't looking for an answer, are actually the ones that have said, "We're going to do this because it's good, because it's fun and it's the right thing to do."

They're brilliant, but they're not looking for someone to tell them to do it. I think that's an interesting aspect of this, if we just try and be compliant through this process, I don't think we'll ever achieve very much.

Evie: Yes, I couldn't agree more.

Roland: I wonder if we can move onto the idea, and to do more myth-busting, around for-profits and not for profits. I remember your entry into the not-for-profit world quite a few years ago, Evie, when you first in Belgium struck the not-for-profit organisations? Do you want to talk a little bit about some of the surprises you experienced?

Evie: Yes, so my background before I worked in disability, I worked in sustainable development. I first worked for Procter and Gamble, but we were working on a corporate social responsibility project with an NGO in Kenya. It was to my amazement when I first entered the space, how competitive NGOs were. There was this sense of, "They're going to get there first." I was like, aren't we all trying to solve that profit?

Roland: Are we non-profit, you used to say?

Evie: Exactly. I was just blown away by the level of competition in reaching what would have been an amazing outcome. It's been really funny for me to come into this sector now and see similarly, although, I do think the disability sector in Australia can be very collaborative. I think the NDIS has certainly gotten in the way of some of that cooperation. It's funny to see then how the non-profits turn against the for-profits and criticize them for exactly the types of things that I think you could easily level at the non-profits, as well.

John: Well, isn't it an interesting phrase, as well, because actually, I don't know whether you know this, but not-for-profit is not a phrase that's banded around a lot in the UK. We don't use it as a phrase. We talk about charities and we talk about private sector. We don't talk about for-profits and not-for-profits because it's nonsense. It's nonsense that an organisation out there, a massive not-for-profit doesn't make profit. It does. It's actually perverse in the market because actually what you see very often are it forces behaviours from government, as well. When we think of not-for-profits, they think of grants. You don't apply for a contract, you apply for a grant. What does that mean? Actually, it's okay to configure something with profit in it, it's about the value within the market that's actually really important.

I think this distinction between not-for-profit and for-profits is way too crude. I've seen some for-profit organisations deliver fantastic value in this market. Consistently. They're really, really good, exciting, innovative. Collaborations between charities and private sector organisations. The idea that a not-for-profit somehow can and does have the moral high ground within this market, I think it's a big of a mistake.

Evie: Yes, that's what really rankles me a lot of the time, is you sometimes get the feeling of, we're not-for-profit, we're here for the mission, so how we get there is not that important. It's almost like a safety blanket that people have – do you know what I'm trying to say?

Roland: I do.

John: If you look at how the market is skewed, as well, actually, because when you think about – I was surprised by the number of contracts that are issued from government that are only open to not-for profits. They're not open to for-profit organisations. Originally, the local area-coordinator contracts, in theory, were open to private sector organisations, but it was blatantly obvious in the way that those ITT, the invitations to tender were configured. The private sector organisations were not welcome in that space.

Roland: We're talking about hundreds of millions of dollars of contracts annually.

John: Hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of contracts. Now, what does that say to the market? Actually, you've got a bunch of organisations, they're large and small, which are doing a great job, don't get me wrong, the charities, not-for-profits are doing a fantastic job very often. Actually, you've cut off a huge range of organisations that could deliver huge efficiencies and deliver things extremely well. They need to be managed. I've been for-profit organisations that have social impact as a priority. I've seen for-profit organisations that are in it purely to make money. There are some really bad examples. I don't think it's an exclusive club. I don't think it's for-profit is bad and not-for-profit is good, this is about doing the right thing in this market.

Roland: Let's finish where we started, John. What can Australia learn from the UK experience?

Evie: [Laughter].

John: Well, again, I think people need to go back and look at not just the UK, but the rest of the world and understand the fact that nobody has got any answers to this. This is hard. Actually, if you're going to come up with some solutions here, there are Australian solutions for Australia. Actually, when I look at what, and let's just think about this for a moment, when I look at what the national disability insurance scheme is about, and I go back to the primary legislation and I look at that, no other country in the world has done this.

It's awesome. It's really cool what Australia is trying to do with that. Sometimes I think we can be a bit glib about talking about all of the problems. We've spent a bit of time talking about that, but let's not find the solution in the UK or in Sweden or in the United States or wherever. If you're going to find a solution to the problems that you're experiencing in Australia, they're going to be Australian.

Roland: Okay. John, will you pick up the guitar and play us out with a few bars?

Evie: [Laughter].

Roland: Seriously, folks, we're in a proper studio with a guitar and John's going to do that.

Evie: Unfortunately, he didn't bring his banjo, but we'll settle for second best.

John: It's tuned, as well.

Roland: You've been talking to John Baker, Evie Naufal. This was the final of our initial podcast series. Thank you, John. Thank you, Evie.

Evie: Thank you to all of our listeners.

End of Interview

Outro

Maya: You've been listening to DSC's podcast series, Disability Done Different, Candid Conversations. Roland, Evie, and I had so much fun making this podcast. We've already started cooking up series two, along with some other secret projects we're really excited about. Make sure you subscribe to our newsletter to keep updated on what's next. Links are in the show notes. See you next year.

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