



## Women's Electoral Lobby Australia Inc.

66 Albion St, Surry Hills 2010

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### **Summary of problems for women if current Bills to extend the Income Management to a wider population are passed**

The income quarantining program has consistently been justified by Minister Macklin by claiming it is supported by women and protects them from violence. This is echoed in the majority (ALP Senators) report on the senate inquiry released last week. However, the evidence does not support these claims and both the original actions against prescribed communities and the proposed extension to the NT, and then to the rest of Australia, have serious implications for women.

- The evidence for any benefits is very limited despite the beliefs and perceptions of the NPY women's groups who are the main group supporting retaining and extending the program. It may well have had some short term benefits for the women in their communities but these could be continued by community based decisions to retain the program and not impose it coercively elsewhere.
- The benefits that are claimed, albeit often on contradictory and limited data, are mainly for better physical well being due to changed purchasing, nutrition and other spending. These are generally based on opinion and not hard data and no comparable data of prior expenditure is available. Sunrise Health data and some from the Menzies School of Health Research suggest no such improvements and even deterioration, and court statistics do not support the decreased violence assumptions.
- The possible detrimental effects, already observed by many, are about to be confirmed in a careful Health Impact Assessment (HIA) report by the Indigenous Doctors Association, (AIDA), include social and psychological: shame, distress and a lack of the sense of control over their lives that is crucial to good health.
- AIDA recommends compulsory income management be stopped immediately because of its "profound long-term negative impacts". It says welfare payments should be quarantined only in cases of proven abuse or neglect, or if people volunteered for it.
- This control factor is the key to wellbeing which has been consistently identified by research on the social determinants of health (Marmot et al WHO) and the more recent work on the toxic effects of inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett.)
- Most other so-called evidence has no professional acceptance of its validity and no attempt was made to measure the effects on social and emotional well being of those affected. Anecdotal evidence suggests that shaming is causing immense damage to women and men who have to line up in Basiccard queues, are denied goods and cannot control their own money despite no evidence of their past mis-spending.

Since when did feminism support imposing losses of rights for categories of women even as parts of a wider group of people, because some within them were seen as needing 'protection'? This is a return to paternalistic (maternalistic) protection that undermines the idea that women are full citizens with equal rights to others. Those women who are in need of protection have both the right and obligation to make their own decisions, maybe collectively, to ask for their rights to be removed. The use by the Minister of the needs of the NPY women to excuse this extension will result in hundreds of thousands of other women, both in the prescribed communities and the wider Australian society, suffering the consequences of a badly designed program.

On the basis of this lack of evidence for the proposal and the harm that the process could be doing to the current and future target populations, the use of compulsory income management needs to be strongly opposed by feminists because:

- It is primarily a women's issue because women do the household shopping and control the money, especially in low income households, and are most likely to be on benefits as single parents
- It will impact on the lives of the mass of sole parents who rely on parenting payments and Newstart by making them either accept half their income being controlled or proving they are good mothers
- It will similarly impact on others on Newstart who are also under pressure to find part time work and on inadequate income
- It will affect the unemployed whose income support is already very low and how they will manage their finances.
- It will limit spending to big chains and other approved shops and so undermine bargain hunting and use of markets and second hand goods.
- It will seriously distress women from ethnic backgrounds, particularly those recently arrived as refugees, as it will increase the complications of, and bureaucratic barriers to, settlement.
- It will be very hard for those with disabilities on Newstart, who may have many difficulties with literacy or authority
- It implies always that women are incompetent money managers who have to prove they are not.
- It is absurdly tied to the reinstatement of the Racial Discrimination Act, as making the targets general would allow the RDA to be reinstated and get the government off the UN rapporteur's accusation of discriminatory legislations.

The complexities, particularly for those seeking to justify their removal from the card, are many. It is initially shaming to be assumed to be guilty, i.e. a bad money manager, and, then, it is quite hard to prove you are not. It involves dealing with Centrelink staff and that is often problematic and proving by letters from others eg schools and medicos, that you are a responsible parent. Seeking this evidence is also going to be embarrassing and often difficult for those not used to dealing with authorities

## **Proposed Motion**

That we oppose the Bills for the extension of income management and ask the Government to find other ways of reinstating the Racial Discrimination Act

*14.3.10 Eva Cox for WEL Australia and Jumbunna UTS.*