

The Chair Person

Community Affairs committee for inquiry

RE: Social Security Legislation Amendment (Debit Card Trial) Bill 2015

Dear Senators

I write to you in reference to the proposed mandatory nature and implementation of the healthy welfare card roll out or the Social Security Amendment Bill 2015 as it is more formally known.

I live in one of the areas affected by the proposed amendment. I am over 50 years old of working age and receiving the disability support pension.

Married with 3 school age children and compared to most people I know a small mortgage.

I have been told my disability support payments will be part of the mandatory management package being rolled out via the healthy welfare card.

Having worked after school on weekends and during school holidays since my early teenage years and been employed and payed taxes most of my working adult life. My health gave out a few years ago and I have been on the disability support pension since.

On a personal level I believe I can address most of the criteria that would be used to trigger alerts for income management under other schemes. I fail to see how I would be income managed under any other schemes yet I am informed I will be. Am I being discriminated against due to the region where I reside due to my age or my disability? Whatever happened to treating all men equally in the eyes of the law? I note this is not happening to all people in my position across the country and most definitely not to those who do the right thing.

The Police or social services have never been called to my residence due to a domestic violence incidence, noise, unruly behaviour complaints, neglect or criminal behaviour. Neither has any one in my house hold been apprehended or held in custody for their safety or the safety of others. I have had police back ground checks into my history over the years for various jobs that required me to prove I was a fit and proper person and also not a security risk to the nations border. I am more than happy for you to verify my story by conducting another police check on me if you wish.

I value my peace and most of all my privacy and consider my neighbours and their rights to the very same things that I value, I also try to instil these values in my children as they are also a necessity in living peacefully in a small township .

No one in my house hold has been assisted by the local sobering up centre or availed themselves of the substance abuse and counselling services available in the town.

We have not been to the local family and community services for additional assistance or other agencies like Red Cross or centre care as we have never run out of money for our primary needs of food shelter and utilities. We meet all our financial obligations regarding our mortgage and are in advance in our payments. Recently when arranging finances for a medical trip to Adelaide at our local branch we were asked if we would be interested in a loan, we are solicited often by our bank, I can only assume they consider us valued and reliable customers. This could be verified very simply by contacting my Bank or running a simple credit check.

We do not receive subsidies or assistance for school fees we pay the full amount, they are generally paid in instalments.

Our Children have good attendance rates in school and any absences can be explained, For example Our youngest child has a skin condition and suffers severe allergies so does miss some school but these allergies and skin conditions are documented with the local doctors so any absences can be explained .

Academically, my children are above the school average for naplan tests with two of the three being above the national averages. Our eldest considered one of the brighter kids in class and year level has a keen interest in information technology. He attends school full time and recently we negotiated with the school for him to do a one day a week traineeship at the school to work on their IT network and computer needs. This is to help him in the future in the job market. He also holds down a part time job at a takeaway food outlet. In effect he is a very busy, but is under no illusion if his grades drop he will have to rationalise either leisure time or his work, He knows his schooling comes first.

We provide the best educational learning tools we can financially afford. The children have any education requirement met regarding computers or laptops and access to internet, also two have smart phones and there are android tablets available in the home as we endeavour to keep them familiar with technology. We envisage this will help them to keep up with the demands that a modern working life will require of them.

My wife, children or I are not suffering from domestic or family violence and abuse a fact that can be verified by checking medical records or if you were to check with Family and community services or other support agencies there should be no records of us at all.

We invested some time ago in solar electric and it has been beneficial in reducing our living costs for the greater part of the year. Consequently we pay our way with the funds available to us and do not go seeking further assistance. We manage our finances because we are responsible and due to the flexibility that is built into them.

The reduced Flexibility may increase our mortgage payments as we will no longer be able to combine our incomes into an account and off set that against our mortgage. Those extra funds sitting against our mortgage over short periods of time for many years have saved us considerable interest. We will no longer be able to take advantage of the sharp practice of many traders not only locally but around the nation who will give good discounts to non credit or eftpos card transactions which will drive up the cost of many items like shoes and items of clothing. In our rural communities we don't have access to large chain stores with already discounted prices, We need to be able to take advantage of every opportunity we can to stretch our budget further and the removal of cash a legal form of tender in Australia will make that job more difficult. Many businesses have minimum spend levels or they impose a service fee for the use of cards, this will further minimise our purchasing power.

Garage sales or markets are opportunities of availing ourselves of various bargains. What of the local school fund raisers or buying from a cake stall where someone is raising funds for a charitable cause? These places do not have eftpos and cash is the only thing that enables transactions to happen. Purchases of second hand goods from local OP shops will no longer be an option as these charitable groups do not have eftpos options available. Further to this what will happen to those charitable organisations that do not have eftpos systems? Will they close their doors or will the federal government provide electronic funds transfer systems to those organisations and cover merchant charges so the disadvantaged may continue to shop there freely?

How will we be able to purchase second hand Items and goods privately? I could use an example of a considerable saving and a purchasing more suitable product being a leather lounge suite over a new velour cloth lounge the second hand leather lounge was a saving of some 1500 dollars over a new lounge at the time and purchased from a neighbour who was moving. It was a better option for cleaning and sanitising due to our youngest child's skin complaints as well as a massive saving. Purchasing cars from private individuals will be another nightmare as they obviously won't have eftpos available? Are we expected to purchase cars solely from motor vehicle dealers? What will

happen to our ability to negotiate a better price when paying cash? Senators please understand a vehicle in rural Australia is not a luxury it is an essential item and poor people not only drive them but need them to function and survive in regions with no public transport. Will the Federal Government invest heavily in public transport infrastructure in the regions to address this? As it would seem this amendment will ensure that treasurer Joe Hockey will prove prophetic with his statement that poor people don't drive cars.

My family and I may have difficulty attending social functions at the hotel or other embargoed premises for the purpose of family gatherings such as Birthdays Weddings and Funerals. Although I seldom go out socially it should be noted the local hotel is also used for a number of community events and functions, this may impact on what social occasions my family members or I can attend and limit even further any social activities I choose to go to.

Cash is a useful tool for incentives and reward for effort both academically and helping around the house and I ask how we will be able to give our children pocket money or bonus's to teach them that you are rewarded for your efforts along with teaching those budgeting strategies and money management skills essential to surviving in society .I may be able to give them their pocket money but I can forget about taking them to the footy , the dirt circuit racing or a travelling circus that may come through town under the amendment proposed.

The town Ship has had several Initiatives to curb problems with alcohol. Ceduna has been a dry zone since restrictions were introduced in 1988. Other initiatives have been the implementation of a limitation on alcohol purchases in a day and the ID tect system being introduced which has meant the need to have photographic ID scanned before purchase of alcohol is allowed.

Each of these initiatives has resulted in the eroding of people's abilities to enjoy the lifestyles and freedoms previously enjoyed and inconvenienced the people in the town to some degree. These initiatives were promised to be the silver bullet that would solve all the perceived problems of the town and region. The initiatives although widely lauded at the time and media articles since along with interviews given by Mayor Suter and others where they said the initiatives were working and having a positive effect. Now these initiatives despite all the media coverage and affirmations of how successful they were are apparently a failure.

If you were to look at census figures and other historical data you could be forgiven for believing that someone may have artificially bloated or manipulated figures so as to promote this initiative by insinuating that this problem was wide spread amongst the whole community.

Mayor Suter has been on public record countless times over the years saying it's a small minority causing the problem.

Tony Edmonds, an employee of a security firm employed by council in an interview with the ABC in 2013 stated: *"The people that we deal with everyday are the same people that we've been dealing with for the last five years."* <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2013/s3834225.htm>

At the 2011 census the Ceduna urban area had a population of 2,289 and the Ceduna council area a population of 3,480. Figures I have been given vary from between forty four to one hundred persons that are considered at risk substance abusers who attend the local sobering up centre on a repeat basis. I am concerned with the figures regarding attendances at the casualty department of

the hospital for assaults and would question further if able how those figures were collated, EG did a client have to attend outpatients for wound dressing several days in a row and were those attendances counted as separate assault incidences or would those visits be attributed to the one assault. In two recent articles one on Kununarra and the other on Ceduna I found the same identical figure quoted for assaults 68 times above the national average. Was this a coincidence or misreported?

I believe the following report which I have not read in depth but it appears to have a narrow and small sample group. Additionally it should be noted this report was conducted when any public discussions regarding quarantining payments was to be of a voluntary nature. The results if used to support this initiative in its mandatory form maybe misleading.

Community Perspectives on Income Management from Ceduna, Koonibba, Scotdesco, Yalata and Oak Valley Final Report December 2013. Conducted by Ninti one.

https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/02_2014/nintione_ceduna_acc.pdf

It appears I was not the only person to have concerns in regard to the sample size of the report.

From the West Coast Sentinel Feb. 26, 2014 –

<http://www.westcoastsentinel.com.au/story/2113950/mayors-comments-cause-debate/>

South Australian Aboriginal Engagement Commissioner Khatija Thomas has responded to comments made by Mr Suter in a recent edition of the Sunday Mail.

Ms Thomas said Mr Suter had completely misrepresented the population of Ceduna and in doing so was perpetuating negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people.

"Mayor Suter has painted the picture that Ceduna is full of drunks, gamblers and porn watchers who can't control their spending, and this simply isn't the case," she said.

"What is really troubling is that his statement, 'most of Ceduna's residents would support income management', is based on the findings of a Federal Department of Social Services survey that was undertaken by only 204 adults in Ceduna."

In August 2014 the state commissioner for Aboriginal engagement stated in key feedback on recommendations

"There was no support for this recommendation. A number of community members likened this proposed arrangement to the 'handing out of rations' to Aboriginal people.

Community members in areas such as Ceduna, Port Augusta and Coober Pedy drew similarities between this proposal and the 'Basics Card' income management scheme that is in place within those communities. They believed that total income management would lead to more strain on extended families, increased crime, and a 'black market' of selling goods (such as whitegoods) for cash."

<http://www.statedevelopment.sa.gov.au/upload/commissioner-for-aboriginal-engagement/forrest-review.pdf?t=1440599806934>

I did ask Mayor Alan Suter what consultation process the council took and I also asked for public notices of advertised public meetings or ways to make formal submissions his reply was the initiative had support from the "senior Indigenous Leader Group", and. "Council is not required

to necessarily conduct public meetings and often relies on the members consulting with ratepayers by direct contact" Mayor Suter and I did send several emails back and forth but as yet he has failed to give me a straight answer regarding notices of meetings or ways to make submissions other than *"council is not required to necessarily conduct public meetings and often relies on the members consulting with ratepayers by direct contact"*. I can provide emails of this dialogue if requested, I would also ask how was I to raise my concerns when I was not kept informed and was not made aware of these negotiations.

I also refer to this statement from The Australian of August 6th this year

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/income-management-card-solution-to-alcohol-induced-violence/story-e6frg6nf-1227471794103>

"Fragile negotiations in Ceduna have been under way since late last year, with Ceduna's Mayor, Allan Suter, actively working to move discussions forward amid strong concerns about a potential backlash from community members, which would scupper the deal."

Would this indicate that it may not have been an open public consultation as those involved knew the objections would become too great once the true nature of what was being discussed was known.

As late as December 2014 Rowan Ramsay MP was talking of voluntary measures with the possibility that the next step be mandatory for alcoholics if needed. 9 Dec 2014 ABC news, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-12-09/mp-says-ceduna-income-management-scheme-be/5954472>

"federal MP has backed the local mayor's statement that voluntary income management is beginning to have a positive effect on the community."

"He said he was pleased with the number of people seeking help for managing their finances in Ceduna but said making the measures mandatory for chronic alcoholics may need to be the next step." How effective were those voluntary measures and the ones introduced soon after? Were these new measures given an appropriate time frame to evaluate their effectiveness? Will the new card get the credit if successful for measures already introduced? What drove the signatories to the agreement to begin negotiations so soon?

In the space of a few short months and without any public knowledge we progressed from a voluntary implementation of the basics card with a possibility to expanding it to a mandatory condition for those deemed to have substance or at risk behavioural addictions, to what we are now discussing today a mandatory quarantining of income for all welfare recipients.

I would also ask how this process can be classed as a true and open consultation as only a section of the community was involved. I do not identify myself as someone of indigenous culture or heritage. I do not have trouble with gambling or alcohol abuse in essence I do the responsible thing and am not on any of those organisations' books so they are not representative of me. If this was a truly open consultation where was my demographic represented in this matter. It feels like those who are not the proverbial squeaky wheel are denied a voice by reason of not being an issue or statistic.

This initiative is paternalistic it will serve to discriminate and stigmatise not only those it's meant to protect but also those who manage their affairs in a responsible manner.

Not only in this region will you be identified as someone incapable of looking after yourself but also you will have the knowledge that the discrimination and stigmatisation will follow you around the country. It will in effect turn me and others in the same position regardless of if they are responsible or not into second class citizens.

In closing I might mention as a person who suffers chronic illnesses the proposed changes and implementation of income management will take away one of the few areas of dignity and worth I feel that is open to me that being the ability to manage our financial affairs and act in an independent manner.

Real life is complicated. Individual circumstances are unique.

Yours Faithfully