

Additional Comments by Labor Senators

1.1 Labor Senators on this committee note the recommendation of the Chair's report.

1.2 Labor Senators are of the view that the changes proposed by the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Encouraging Self-sufficiency for Newly Arrived Migrants) Bill 2018 have the potential to disproportionately impact families, women and children.

1.3 This is a cause of serious concern to Labor Senators.

1.4 The Department of Social Services told a recent Senate Estimates hearing that these changes would affect 30 000 individuals, 50 000 families and 110 000 children over the forward estimates.¹

1.5 The committee heard some evidence that the current two year NARWP already creates some difficulties for recent migrants.

1.6 The committee heard evidence that extending the existing NARWP, and introducing a NARWP for other payments could jeopardise successful settlement for many recent migrants.

1.7 The Brotherhood of St Laurence explained to the committee that:

Migrants are overrepresented in the poverty statistics as well as the homelessness statistics, and we feel great concern that the proposed bill will further compound that issue.²

1.8 The committee also heard that "...migrants actually have a very strong desire to work and only look to income support when they're unable to work and are in financial hardship."³

1.9 In particular, the committee heard that despite a strong desire to work, that recent migrants are a cohort that are particularly vulnerable to changing circumstances, and that access to assistance in Australia when this happens can have a significant impact on their overall settlement.

1.10 The Refugee Advice and Casework Service said:

Most migrants do not need to access the social security system, but for those who do, it can be the difference between flourishing stability and an

1 Mr Shane Bennett, Department of Social Services, 2017-18 Additional Estimates Hearing, *Committee Hansard*, 1 March 2018, p. 84.

2 Dr Shelley Mallett, Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Committee Hansard*, 17 April 2018, p. 6.

3 Ms Leanne Ho, National Social Security Rights Network, *Committee Hansard*, 17 April 2018, p. 27.

inability to effectively settle in Australia. Moreover, it can set up children and their families to either prosper or flounder for decades.⁴

1.11 The committee heard that the vast majority of recent migrants actively participate in the labour market.

1.12 The Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria told the committee that the workforce participation rate of migrants is 80%, compared to just 60% for people who are born in Australia.⁵

1.13 Labor Senators acknowledge the high workforce participation rate of migrants, and also the expectation that migrants are able to support themselves while they settle in to Australia. The committee heard from an overwhelming majority of submitters and witnesses that the changes in this Bill would disproportionately impact women and children.

1.14 The Brotherhood of St Laurence warned the committee that the changes in the Bill would:

...potentially increase child and family poverty. Children will be adversely affected.⁶

1.15 The Australian Council of Social Service said also:

Women and children will be the biggest losers if this Bill goes through. They are the primary beneficiaries of the family tax benefit and paid parental leave, which is where the biggest cuts in this bill will be made.⁷

1.16 The committee heard particular evidence from a number of witnesses that migrant women are already vulnerable to exploitation, and would be placed in an even more precarious situation if the Bill were to pass.

1.17 The Brotherhood of St Laurence explained that:

Migrant women, we know from statistics, are at risk of exploitation, including slavery and forced marriage, because of their limited networks and access to support...the proposed changes will expose migrant women to greater risk of exploitation and violence by limiting their access to financial assistance.⁸

1.18 The Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia and Settlement Services International expressed serious concern about the introduction of a NARWP for family tax benefits, and told the committee that the measures are discriminatory.

4 Ms Sarah Dale, Refugee Advice and Casework Service, *Committee Hansard*, 17 April 2018, p. 43.

5 Parsuram Sharma-Luitai, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, *Committee Hansard*, 17 April 2018, p. 38.

6 Dr Shelley Mallett, Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Committee Hansard*, 17 April 2018, p. 6.

7 Ms Charmaine Crowe, Australian Council of Social Service, *Committee Hansard*, 17 April 2018, p. 28.

8 Ms Hutch Hussein, Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Committee Hansard*, 17 April 2018, p. 6.

1.19 The Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils explained in detail:

You could possibly have the situation where two children are born in the same hospital on the same day but their families and therefore those children will be treated in vastly different ways because of the residency of their parents. The family of the Australian-born child of Australian citizens will be eligible for those payments, which will ultimately be used for the care and upkeep of that child. But the parents of the Australian child who was born in the same hospital on the same day will not receive those payments because of their particular visa category, and therefore that child is being born into a situation where they will be economically disadvantaged.⁹

1.20 Settlement Services International emphasised that the Government should prioritise the wellbeing of all children. They asked:

Why would we not want the children of recent migrants to have the same benefit? These children of migrants are also future Australian citizens and it is in all our interests that they do well. The proposed waiting period for receiving the family tax benefit is discrimination.¹⁰

1.21 Labor Senators are of the view that these are significant issues, and that they cannot be ignored by Government.

Conclusion

1.22 Labor Senators on the committee note the significant proportion of newly arrived migrants who actively participate in the labour market, and do not require access to our social security system.

1.23 However, evidence provided to the committee also indicated that measures in this Bill will increase or create vulnerabilities within this group – particularly for families, women and children.

1.24 Labor Senators are of the view that the Senate should only pass this Bill in the event that these impacts are substantially reduced and adequate exemptions for changes in people's circumstances are guaranteed.

Senator the Hon Lisa Singh

Senator Murray Watt

9 Dr Alia Imtoul, FECCA, *Committee Hansard*, 17 April 2018, p. 32.

10 Ms Esta Paschalidis-Chilas, Settlement Services International, *Committee Hansard*, 17 April 2018, p. 41.

