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To the Senate Committee Members,

RE: Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee Bill 2023 [Provisions]

We are writing in regard to the inquiry for the abovementioned amendment. We are researchers at Monash University working in the area of welfare and economic inclusion with extensive experience working with people from diverse backgrounds.

We welcome the establishment of such a body to further advise government in principle. The presence of an ongoing advisory body ensures that broad perspectives across multiple pieces of legislation can be obtained. It can consider long term trends and the broader context of a legislative agenda, rather than specific enquiries being limited to specific pieces of legislation. With this value add in mind, we recommend that the membership criteria be broadened to include an expert with a strong research record in diversity and inclusion and current experience in inclusive program design and evaluation. This addition will ensure that any policy recommendations reflect the lived experience and needs of the intended beneficiaries of any given economic inclusion policy.

In the strategic framework we particularly welcome the attention to “including place-based approaches at the local level”. The interim report previously produced focused on the broader context, making important points that are worth considering. Sustainable solutions may not be universal nor even that broad; place based and customized solutions for our diverse communities will likely be needed. We recommend that suites of policy approaches be considered where local communities can select specific approaches that are most suitable to them. This is akin to the concept of “Cafeteria Benefits” used by employers recognized for their excellence in accommodating diverse employee needs and preferences – the approach enables employees to select from a menu of benefits, tailoring their compensation and perks to their individual needs and preferences.

The legislation makes mention of access to “relevant Commonwealth Government policies”; it is recommended that relevance is determined by the committee and not ministers, as diversity and inclusion implications are not always readily evident. It is also recommended that this be expanded to include relevant government documents in general, specifically noting audit and review documents of policies that often contain substantive information. Much of the power from such committees comes from synthesizing information for ministers



to better inform policy, so access to that information is essential. In so doing, ministers can be confident that diversity and inclusion considerations have been taken into account by an expert body best placed to do so.

There is risk in clause 8 of the current legislation, particularly regarding the Minister being able to direct that the committee: “only addresses specified matters falling within the parameters of the matters set out in sub-clause 8(2), and deals with no other matters.” We recommend the committee be given the autonomy to dissent and expound on the rationale for this in an appendix to the report should they disagree with the minister regarding the relevance of a specified matter. Without such a safeguard the minister can essentially veto any content by deeming it not relevant.

The Sub-clauses 8(2) to 8(4) deal on the one side with economic inclusion and on the other side with long term sustainability of the social security system and economic outlook. While we strongly support economic inclusion, we wish to underscore the health and wellbeing risks for some people if they are pushed into employment too soon, for too many hours a week or for too long. We would therefore welcome the addition of a clause that specifically states that a holistic definition of economic inclusion will be adopted whereby the health and wellbeing outcomes of those directly impacted by economic inclusion as well as those living in the household and potential carers are essential aspects of any policy evaluation. Without understanding the full benefits and costs of economic inclusion programs and policies across different sectors (and in particular the health sector), it is difficult to understand their impact on the long-term sustainability of Australia’s social security system. As the document currently stands, impact is a very broad term and making references specifically to health and wellbeing or “Measuring what Matters” would be a welcomed objective.

We thank the committee for their time and attention.

Sincerely,

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