



Article

Government mythology on income management, alcohol, addiction and Indigenous communities

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Abstract

Many governments have intensified conditions on social security payments, implementing new paternalist and neoliberal policy ideals that individualise responsibility for overcoming poverty. This article explores how such policy ideals can operate with a racialised impact in the context of income management, a type of welfare conditionality in Australia that delivers cashless welfare transfers. Income management originally applied only to Indigenous welfare recipients, but has since been expanded. The government's rationale for the scheme is to limit access to alcohol and other drugs, and promote 'socially responsible behaviour'. However, empirical evidence indicates that income management in the Northern Territory has not been successful in achieving the government's policy objectives. Income management is built upon a policy narrative of addiction - those subject to it are portrayed as addicted to welfare payments and to alcohol. This article critiques these depictions and outlines a range of pragmatic, political and ethical concerns about income management.

Key words

cashless welfare, colonialism, neoliberalism, new paternalism

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Introduction

This article aims to appraise cashless welfare transfers as an aspect of new paternalist and neoliberal trends that reshape social security with racialised consequences. To build the analysis, the article draws on parliamentary debates, policy documents, key evaluation reports, alcohol consumption statistics, stakeholder engagement, and academic commentary. In this article neoliberalism refers to discursive narratives and policies that foster “market-oriented ‘governance’” (Peck, 2012: xiii). New paternalists assert that people in need of government income support experience deficiencies in reason and/or character, and that intense supervision is required to bring about their adherence to mainstream behavioural norms (Mead, 1997a: 4, 22, 27, 33). Australia provides an apt case to illuminate and contest the rationale of neoliberal and new paternalist reforms where myth has served a key role in the contemporary transition to cashless welfare transfers.

Australian politicians are familiar with the power of myth in orchestrating the national imagination. Indeed, those with acquisitive political interests founded Australia upon the myth of *terra nullius*, the fiction that the land belonged to no-one. This foundational myth smoothed the path by which colonial acquisitiveness, euphemistically referred to as ‘progress’, could be augmented. However, Australia’s political mythology is contested terrain, and this breeds the need for further myths to explain why the supposed system of meritocracy is working out so poorly. Australia’s ‘Closing the Gap’ policy highlights that Indigenous peoples collectively fall far from the ‘norm’ when it comes to a wide range of educational, health, housing, and employment outcomes (Australian Government, 2017b: 6–7, 23, 36, 53, 96–97). Myths can contribute to political explanations for these ongoing ‘gaps’ and influence policy directions for their closure (Midgley, 2011: 1).

Myths about the characteristics of Indigenous peoples have long permeated Australian discourse (Nielsen, 1998: 85). Australia’s political myth-makers continue their quest to define Indigenous peoples and Indigenous communities, especially remote Indigenous communities, as dysfunctional places in need of intensive and discriminatory supervisory policies (Altman, 2013: 34, 47). Such mythology has proven difficult to dislodge, regardless of the content of numerous evaluation reports outlining the shortcomings of such policies (Altman and Russell, 2012: 11–13). Lea (2012: 109) contends that “mobilizing accounts of anarchic Aboriginal depravity” find their function in authorising “an ongoing bureau-professional presence in Indigenous worlds”. This leads to more intensive regulation of the Indigenous poor, creating a cycle where bureaucratic salaries are dependent upon those subject to such surveillance.

Those in need of government income support find increasing conditions more laborious and difficult to navigate. Yet the government claims that

welfare recipients are problematic due to their receiving “passive welfare” (Commonwealth, 2007: 2; 2009: 12783). Such claims are a crucial aspect of contemporary mythology about social security, not just in Australia, but also in other Western nations such as the United States (Mead, 1997b: 60). As David Graeber (2015: 41) observes, “[a]ll rich countries now employ legions of functionaries whose primary function is to make poor people feel bad about themselves.” This is the consequence of the dominance of new paternalist policies premised upon the mythology of the deviant poor.

This article will a) examine how income management was framed under the Intervention and beyond, b) consider evidence in relation to income management, alcohol addiction, and alcohol consumption, c) consider feedback on income management circumvention strategies from a range of stakeholders, and d) explore several political and ethical concerns about the scheme. In exploring the latter, the article will utilise the work of critical race theorists, given that income management reflects intersectional disadvantage based on Indigeneity and class. It will also critique neoliberal and new paternalist policy prescriptions for the poor.

Framing and implementing income management

Income management was introduced as part of the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (‘the Intervention’). The Northern Territory spans a vast area and Indigenous communities living in this jurisdiction have fewer employment opportunities due to a limited labour market. The Intervention was triggered by the *Little Children are Sacred* report (Wild and Anderson, 2007), which raised concerns over abuse of children in some remote Indigenous communities. The policy response of the Howard Liberal government was to develop a far-reaching racialised control project. The Intervention was clearly racially discriminatory; the Commonwealth *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* was suspended under the Intervention legislation, preventing Indigenous people subject to Intervention measures from accessing effective legal redress in Australia.

Those subject to income management were simultaneously portrayed as addicted to alcohol and as suffering from welfare “dependency” (Commonwealth, 2007: 6). In introducing the Commonwealth *Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Payment Reform) Act 2007* as part of the Intervention then Minister Malcolm Brough stated that income management would a) “stem the flow of cash going towards substance abuse and gambling”, b) “ensure that funds meant to be for children’s welfare are used for that purpose”, and c) reduce “humbugging” where Indigenous people are pressured to share financial and other resources with their kin (Commonwealth, 2007: 6). Brough indicated that Indigenous “parenting behaviours” had “broken

down” in communities targeted by the Intervention (Commonwealth, 2007: 2). Authorised in the parliamentary record, this narrative has contributed to a racialised ‘common sense’ about Indigenous welfare recipients – where Indigenous parents in need of social security payments are portrayed as drug dependent and incapable of fulfilling their responsibilities without externally imposed controls.

The narrative of addiction also featured in the 2009 and 2011 parliamentary debates which modified the income management scheme. Thus, when the *Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Reform and Reinstatement of Racial Discrimination Act) Act 2010* (Commonwealth) (‘the SSOLA Act’) was introduced then Minister Jenny Macklin stated that: “Income management helps people to order their lives ... giving them access to the basics of life by reducing the amount of welfare funds available for substance abuse and other risky behaviours” (Commonwealth, 2009: 12786). Similarly, when the *Social Security Legislation Amendment Act 2012* (Commonwealth) was presented to Parliament – extending income management – then Minister Peter Garrett stated that addressing alcohol problems was part of the government’s rationale (Commonwealth, 2011: 13559).

This bureau-speak of addiction has a long history of application to Indigenous peoples. However, more recent manifestation and application of it to Indigenous peoples claims to implement “new paternalism” (Thomas and Buckmaster, 2010: 1). This policy approach originated in the United States and views welfare recipients as functionally inept for failing to find employment and as more likely to indulge in risky behaviours due to higher levels of irrationality (Kleiman, 1997: 190). New paternalists consequently advocate rigorous state surveillance for those on welfare. Their aim is to prevent wayward behaviour by instilling authoritarian oversight (Mead, 1997a: 5). The stigmatisation of welfare recipients as financially incompetent individuals or deviants indulging in anti-social behaviour has been a key rhetorical device used to justify increasingly punitive policies for those who are now subject to compulsory income management.

Under the SSOLA Act amendments to income management, enacted by the then Labor government, several new income management categories were constructed so that compulsory income management would continue to apply in the Northern Territory to most of those initially subject to the 2007 Intervention. The new categories ensure that compulsory income management continues for those defined as ‘disengaged youth’, ‘long-term’ unemployed, or ‘vulnerable’ welfare recipients, and where there is a ‘child protection’ issue. There is also a ‘voluntary’ income management category. The income management scheme now also operates in limited other Australian locations outside the Northern Territory (Bray et al., 2014: 7). The development of ‘new income management’ occurred after Australia received international criticism from the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2009) over

the blanket application of compulsory income management to Indigenous welfare recipients in Northern Territory prescribed communities.

However, under ‘new income management’ compulsory categories still apply predominantly to Indigenous welfare recipients in the Northern Territory, the jurisdiction with by far the largest number of welfare recipients subject to income management. In their Final Northern Territory Income Management Report, Bray and colleagues (2014: xx) found that 90.2% “of those being income managed” were “Indigenous” and close to 80% of those income managed were on compulsory measures. More recent data shows that income management continues to be disproportionately applied to Indigenous welfare recipients. As of 30 December 2016, 81% of 25,033 welfare recipients subject to income management nationwide identified as Indigenous (DSS, 2016: 3–4). The Northern Territory has the highest percentage of Indigenous welfare recipients subject to income management in any Australian jurisdiction – with 87% of 21,164 income managed people identifying as Indigenous (DSS, 2016: 3–4).

Welfare recipients currently subject to ‘new income management’ typically use a government issued BasicsCard to spend their quarantined funds at government approved retailers on legislatively defined priority needs (Commonwealth *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999* section 123TH), but cannot expend these funds on prohibited items: alcohol, tobacco, pornography or gambling products (section 123TI). The percentage of income quarantined depends on the category of income management to which they are subject and which jurisdiction they reside in, but it is generally at least 50% of their fortnightly income support payment.

Evidence on income management, alcohol addiction and alcohol consumption

Claims that income management is useful for combating alcohol addiction have regularly been made by politicians eager to continue the scheme. In addition to the statements made by political leaders referred to earlier, some witnesses who appeared before the Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs for the *Inquiry into the Harmful Use of Alcohol in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities* (the ‘Alcohol Inquiry’) expressed the view that income management would help Indigenous people experiencing alcohol related problems (SCIA, 2014b: 5–6; SCIA, 2015b: 1, 11). However, it is important to measure such claims against robust evidence.

There has been a government commissioned university based evaluation of ‘new income management’ in the Northern Territory with reports released in 2012 and 2014. This study involved quantitative and qualitative research with numerous stakeholders and people subject to different types of ‘new income management’. It also involved a longitudinal survey. This remains

the most rigorous income management evaluation to date, and it casts serious doubt on the capacity of income management to address the problems policymakers claim to want to address. Bray and colleagues indicate that expenditure on alcohol and other items prohibited by income management had not been a problem for the vast majority of those now subject to the scheme in the Northern Territory:

A central rationale for income management is to *reduce the amount of welfare funds available to be spent on alcohol, gambling, tobacco products and pornography ...* The majority of survey participants reported that none of these issues were a problem for their family. (Bray et al., 2012: 185, emphasis in original)

This runs counter to government views about income management being an appropriate and necessary measure of blanket application for welfare recipients due to their presumed rampant spending on alcohol and illicit substances. Interestingly, this finding in the income management evaluation data compares favourably with recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) revealing that government income support recipients “spend proportionately less of their total spending on alcohol than all other Australians” (Knaus, 2017; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). In the ABS Household Expenditure Survey, households with government pensions and allowances as the main source of their income reported spending 1.8% of their income on alcoholic beverages compared to all households who spent 2.2% of their total income on alcohol (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

In December 2014, the Department of Social Services released the Final Evaluation Report on the operation of income management in the Northern Territory. Some of the key findings of this research on income management were that there was a) no “substantive evidence of the program having significant changes relative to its key policy objectives, including changing people’s behaviours”; b) “no evidence of changes in spending patterns, including food and alcohol sales”; c) “no evidence of any overall improvement in financial wellbeing, including reductions in financial harassment or improved financial management skills”; and d) that “general measures of wellbeing at the community level show no evidence of improvement, including for children” (Bray et al., 2014: xxi). Bray and colleagues (2014: 305) concluded “the evidence is that income management has had no impact on alcohol consumption or alcohol-related harm.” This counters government mythology about income management being an effective mechanism for addressing alcohol related issues in the Northern Territory.

Bray and others pointed out (2014: 253) that although “income management seeks to limit financial exploitation and people’s ability to misuse alcohol and drugs”, people with addiction problems can “work around the restrictions that income management places on them”. Those determined to circumvent the card restrictions can do this in a number of ways, including a) pressuring

relatives for food or money, b) stealing BasicsCards, c) swapping their BasicsCard with other people's, d) asking someone else to share their BasicsCard, e) swapping groceries for alcohol and/or tobacco, f) getting a taxi driver to over-charge for a fare or charge for a hoax fare and then provide an amount in cash to the BasicsCard holder, and g) gambling using the BasicsCard as a payment for a debt (Bray et al., 2014: 202, 134–135; Bray et al., 2012: 88).

The capacity for some people to find ways to circumvent externally imposed alcohol restrictions is also consistent with views expressed elsewhere by some other stakeholders. For example, Kirstie Parker, then Co-Chair of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, who appeared before the Alcohol Inquiry made a similar point (SCIA, 2014c: 8). This point was also made during the Alcohol Inquiry by Doreen Hart, a regional coordinator for the Family Responsibilities Commission implementing income management in Cape York in Queensland. Hart stated that Indigenous people subject to income management under the Cape York scheme can find ways to circumvent the restrictions on the purchase of alcohol if they so desire (SCIA, 2015a: 19). Nevertheless, the idea that income management is effective to counter addiction problems of welfare recipients continues to play an important part in the government's rationalisation for income management and its disproportionate application to Indigenous peoples and their communities. Thus, income management remains a policy sphere "where the myth-garden badly needs weeding" (Midgley, 2011: xvii).

It must be remembered that some Indigenous people and some Indigenous communities experience alcohol related challenges, but not all. Before the Intervention commenced, eighty per cent of Indigenous homelands in the Northern Territory "were considered to be 'dry' communities" (Harris, 2012: 39). Data from 2014–15 indicates that "39.9 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians aged 15 years and over reported not consuming any alcohol in the previous 12 months (or drank one day a year or less)" (Productivity Commission, 2016: 11.4). Within the same time frame, "15.2 per cent reported exceeding lifetime alcohol risk guidelines" and "30.8 per cent reported exceeding single occasion risk guidelines" (Productivity Commission, 2016: 11.3). Whilst supportive measures need to be taken to address alcohol related problems for those who experience them, it remains doubtful that income management represents the best use of finite resources in addressing such challenges. There are also legitimate political and ethical concerns about the scheme.

Political and ethical problems with income management

In addition to the practical problems previously referred to, namely, that the income management system can be subverted and does not necessarily redress

addiction where it does exist, there are numerous political and ethical problems with income management. Several of these will now be examined.

The need to place feedback about voluntary income management in context

Then Minister for Human Services, Alan Tudge (in Mitchell, 2015), promotes income management by claiming that “when given the opportunity ... to come off the BasicsCard fully 60% choose to stay on it because they realise it’s beneficial for them.” However, there are dubious ethics involved in adopting a simplistic understanding of feedback on voluntary income management in an attempt to justify continuation and further expansion of compulsory income management measures. Minister Tudge’s comments are contrary to grassroots feedback about how difficult it is for people to exit income management – including so-called “voluntary” income management. Many who are on voluntary income management have not understood they have an exit option. Bray and colleagues (2014: 238) refer to an interviewed legal service officer who reported that “[t]he people on Voluntary Income Management that we see don’t identify with it being voluntary”.

Tudge’s comment about voluntary income management also fails to take into consideration that there are other colonial surveillance policy factors contributing to the feedback the government receives from some Indigenous people about income management. For example, community feedback on income management in Alice Springs was influenced by historical and contemporary government practices of forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities (HREOC, 1997: 28–29; ATSIJJC, 2016: 28; Bray et al., 2014: 168). This community stated “it would be a shame job if we said things had got worse for our children” after income management was introduced “and if we did, what would happen? Would the government take them away again?” (Bray et al., 2014: 168).

Government practices of forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities, known as the Stolen Generations, continue to loom large in the consciousness of Australia’s First Peoples (HREOC, 1997: 28–29). There is a direct link between compulsory income management and surveillance by child protection authorities, thus under the Commonwealth *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999* s 123UC a person will fall under the compulsory income management regime if there is deemed to be a ‘child protection’ issue. Numerous Indigenous parents live under weighty surveillance undertaken by child welfare officials and this is increasingly combined with surveillance and control via income management. Community feedback from Alice Springs reveals that the threat of further scrutiny is ever present and acutely felt by those subject to the state’s far-reaching gaze.

Although favourable feedback about voluntary income management has been reported by some people on this particular measure, the vast majority

of Australia's income managed welfare recipients are caught by compulsory measures where evidence indicates a lack of benefit in most jurisdictions and some serious problems (Bray et al., 2014: xxi, 259, 136–137, 272; Deloitte, 2015: ii, 29, 47; DSS, 2017: 72). The government has avoided mentioning this nuance in their public statements about the benefits of income management. Numerous reports indicate that compulsory income management can create stress related health issues and depression for some welfare recipients. AIDA and CHETRE (2010: 25) report that compulsory income management can result in “cumulative trauma”, “shame”, “discrimination”, “stress”, and “trans-generational trauma” with “children seeing parents’ control and capacity undermined”. The Equality Rights Alliance (2011: 19) refers to a woman who had medically confirmed “heart palpitations” due to “the stress of being Income Managed”, which ceased once she was removed from the programme and could “manage her own finances again”. Bray and colleagues quote an Indigenous woman subject to compulsory income management who explained: “It makes life a lot harder actually. I was already suffering from depression and that just made it worse” (Bray et al., 2014: 199).

Exemption challenges faced by Indigenous welfare recipients

Indigenous welfare recipients subject to compulsory income management with the BasicsCard can apply for a twelve month exemption if they fall into the ‘disengaged youth’ or ‘long-term’ unemployed categories. However, as noted by the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples (2014: 3), it is arduous for them to do so. Difficulty for Indigenous welfare recipients in attaining exemptions was also confirmed by Bray and colleagues (2014: 83) who stated “[w]hen account is taken of exemptions, only 49.5 per cent of non-Indigenous people are on income management 13 weeks after their initial proposed commencement date, compared with 91.1 per cent of Indigenous people.” Consequently, there are racially disparate outcomes in accessing exemptions under the new income management scheme. Setting up an exemption system where formal equality operates is not the same thing as providing a system conducive to substantively equal outcomes. Government policymakers responsible for income management need to be aware that “racism must be understood in terms of its consequences, not as a matter of intentions or beliefs” (Winant, 2004: 126).

Human rights issues

Ongoing disproportionate application of income management to Indigenous peoples has given rise to criticism that the scheme is still racially discriminatory in its operation (PJCHR, 2013: 61–62; PJCHR, 2016: 60–61), contrary to Australia's international obligations under the *International Convention on*

the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. The Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights has also expressed concern “that the income management regime is not rationally connected to achieving its objectives” and that “compulsory income management is a disproportionate measure” (PJCHR, 2016: 61). The National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples (2014: 3), which includes 190 organisational members across Australia, has also stated that:

mandatory income management ... must be replaced by a voluntary system with provision for case by case income management where warranted. Although income management has been extended to include select groups within the broader Australian population, the majority of those affected on welfare are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and hence the measure continues to discriminate heavily against Aboriginal people.

Intersectional disadvantage - a racialised and class based addiction narrative

The dominant income management discourse contains criticisms of the character and capacity of welfare recipients. Representations of alcohol related abuse as “welfare fuelled” (Tudge in Mitchell, 2015) are highly problematic. Perpetrators of alcohol related harm can be found amongst all social classes – but the narrative of addiction perpetuated by the government as part of their income management discourse stigmatises welfare recipients and imposes paternalistic restrictions upon them not placed upon other social groups. This violates the “Paternalism Test Principle” (Standing, 2014: 123) that “policy or institutional change is socially just only if it does not impose controls on some groups that are not imposed on the most free groups in society.” If parliamentarians supporting the expansion of compulsory income management are operating on the principle that taxpayer dollars should not be expended on alcohol (Tudge in Horn, 2017), it is important to note that a class based double standard is present. In his final two months of office as Prime Minister Tony Abbott spent over AUD\$7,000 of taxpayer funds on alcohol with no repercussions (Johnson, 2016).

In addition to reflecting class discriminatory new paternalist and neoliberal welfare reform agendas, the government’s income management narrative of addiction echoes negative stereotypes about Indigenous peoples throughout Australia’s colonial history. Whilst Indigenous subjects have long been constructed “as requiring the paternal willpower of the state for salvation” (Nicoll, 2012: 183), the state’s attachment to coercively governing Indigenous peoples as part of their “civilizing mission” (Said, 1994: 131) warrants further examination. This dynamic routinely plays out in Indigenous policy and it is repeated in the income management context. The geographical

locations the government has selected for income management disproportionately apply to Indigenous communities (DSS, 2016). This circumstance combined with the fact that Indigenous peoples in Australia are subjected to “racialised ascriptions of defective willpower” (Nicoll, 2012: 184) explains why so many Indigenous welfare recipients remain heavily over-represented in the new income management categories. Arguably, income management is connected with the colonial attachment to regulating the Indigenous poor with coercive mechanisms in an attempt to reimagine the colonial project as an ethical enterprise. Yet, as Fiona Nicoll (2012: 172–173) aptly points out, “racialised habits of ... governing Indigenous people on the basis that – like addicts – they are incapable of knowing what is in their own best interest” means “[p]ossibilities for change within this dynamic are limited”.

The narrative of addiction illustrates “the work essentialism does for domination, and the ‘need’ domination displays to essentialize the subordinated” (Winant, 2004: 46). Evidently many of the recipients of classist and racialised essentialism who are subject to income management find this frustrating, “unfair, embarrassing and discriminatory” (Bray et al., 2014: xxi; Scott and Heiss, 2015: 61, 63). Nicoll (2012: 175) explains that “a degree of coercive power is implicit within discourses of addiction.” To use the framework of addiction means rescue is rationalised, indeed it is required. Welfare recipients portrayed as either addicted to welfare in terms of being “trapped in an intergenerational cycle of dependency” (Commonwealth, 2007: 6) or addicted to alcohol are therefore prime targets for government income management intervention. They can readily fall within government conceptions of ‘vulnerability’. This then ushers in what Nicoll (2012: 186) refers to as “a bloodless paternalism that seeks redemption as it delivers a ‘tough love’ that is impossible for Indigenous subjects to (legally) refuse.”

The dominant income management discourse also embodies the “politics of forgetting”, where the relationship between “past injustices and current symptoms” is under-examined (Douzinas, 2007: 87). This strategy attempts to circumvent analysis of institutional legitimacy/illegitimacy (Douzinas, 2007: 87) and substitutes focus on myth for a more nuanced understanding of ongoing economic disadvantage disproportionately experienced by Australia’s First Peoples. The “politics of forgetting” (Douzinas, 2007: 87) is especially important when considering the impact of income management on Indigenous welfare recipients – who have been significantly affected by colonial laws and policies excluding them from economic privilege as part of Australia’s racialised social engineering. As one Indigenous generation after another had few finances to pass on to the next, huge wealth disparities emerged between the colonisers and the colonised (Bielefeld, 2015: 100–103). Despite this historical injustice, current policymakers assert that income management is a suitable mechanism to overwhelmingly regulate the Indigenous poor, alongside comparatively small numbers of non-Indigenous others.

This dynamic embodies what critical race theorist Howard Winant refers to as “the new politics of race” (Winant, 2004). He explains that “racial differences often operate as they did in centuries past: as a way of restricting the political influence not just of racially subordinated groups but of all those at the bottom end of the system of social stratification” (Winant, 2004: 105). The dominant income management narrative therefore curtails more than spending patterns of those dependent upon government income support – by collectively portraying such people as deviants addicted to welfare and to substance abuse majoritarian politicians create powerful explanatory myths for poverty and inequality. The responsibility for poverty and inequality can then be conveniently transferred from government to individual welfare recipients whose “lifestyle choice” (Abbott in Griffiths, 2015) is presumed to be self-defeating.

Compulsory income management has also been taking place in the context of other alcohol policy measures first introduced as part of the Intervention that specifically target alcohol use of Indigenous peoples. Income management can therefore be seen as part of a complex racialised colonial project. One contemporaneous alcohol policy measure concerns Alcohol Management Plans (AMPs) for Indigenous communities. Pursuant to sections 16–19 of the Commonwealth *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act 2012* Indigenous communities are to submit their AMPs in the form prescribed and such plans are subject to ministerial approval before they are operational. It is interesting to contrast the government’s narrative of Indigenous addiction with what has happened in some Indigenous communities who have taken responsibility for formulating their AMPs but have been unable to get these legislatively required plans implemented due to the government’s untimely administrative delays. For example, Tangentyere Council has encountered numerous bureaucratic obstacles in having their AMP approved, which was “bounced” from one government department to another over many years (SCIA, 2014a: 37–38). Their experience is not unique (SCIA, 2015c: xxi). Such delays may feed into the government’s representation of Indigenous communities as disorderly spaces requiring top down coercive governance with disciplinary mechanisms such as compulsory income management, whilst simultaneously overriding self-determination efforts within Indigenous communities.

The ongoing significance of the addiction narrative

In the May 2015 Budget the Australian government announced that income management would continue for another two years. They declared that: “Income management helps people manage their welfare payments, encourages socially responsible behaviours and protects vulnerable Australians” (Australian Government, 2015). This claim ignored the growing body of negative feedback about income management and reveals an

ideological commitment to income management regardless of evidence based research and a wide array of pertinent reports pointing to serious problems with the scheme (Bray et al., 2012: 94–95; 2014: xxi; PJCHR, 2013: 61–62; Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2012: 6, 9–10, 12–16, 30; 2013: 43–46). Income management is also slated to continue under the 2017–2018 Budget, purportedly to reduce “social harm in areas with high levels of welfare dependency” and support “vulnerable people, families and communities” (Australian Government, 2017a).

It is important to examine the political work that has been achieved by the dominant discourse on income management over the past decade of its operation in the Northern Territory. The Intervention appears to have normalised the idea of cashless welfare cards as necessary policy for welfare recipients presumed to be drug dependent and socially irresponsible. The Forrest Review (2014: 100–108) advocated further cashless welfare transfers in the form of a “Healthy Welfare Card” with 100 per cent cashless social security for all except “age and veterans” pensions. Greens Senator Rachel Siewert responded that this proposal was “income management on steroids” (Siewert in Wild, 2015). Even so, there was bipartisan support to implement aspects of the Healthy Welfare Card via the *Social Security Legislation Amendment (Debit Card Trial) Act 2015* (Commonwealth) (‘the DCT Act’), now reframed as the Cashless Debit Card by government (Commonwealth, 2015: 2).

There is some divergence from Forrest’s recommendations; the amount of income the government quarantines under this new system is 80% of a welfare recipient’s payment, reflected in the DCT Act section 124PJ. Those subject to it can apply to a Community Panel to have their restricted portion reduced to “a percentage in the range of 50% to 80%” (DCT Act section 124PK). The DCT Act allows for voluntary and coercive forms of income management in the trial communities targeted by the government (sections 124PG, 124PH and 124PJ). However, the vast majority of those subject to the scheme in trial communities are coerced into income management. At the time of writing, Indigenous welfare recipients are disproportionately represented in trial locations: Ceduna, Kununurra and Wyndham (ATSISJC, 2016: 91–91). Thus the new card is creating racialised disparities in terms of access to cash. As of November 2017, no government plan has been announced to replace government issued BasicsCards with the Cashless Debit Card issued by the financial services provider Indue Ltd; however, in the second reading speech for the DCT Act, Tudge stated that the Cashless Debit Card trial “will make a vital contribution towards informing potential future arrangements for income management” (Commonwealth, 2015: 3). This raises concerns about further privatisation of social security payments processes (Bielefeld, 2017: 30).

Tudge (in Mitchell, 2015) claims the Cashless Debit Card will be beneficial “for certain communities which have very high welfare dependence and welfare fuelled alcohol and drug abuse.” Addiction is central to this narrative

of ‘need’. The notion of pathological welfare dependency is a key feature of new paternalism. Thus Vaillant (1997: 280) asserts that: “[l]ike addiction, the joblessness of welfare recipients is a self-detrimental illness that is susceptible to cure.” He contends that the cure is coerced “self-care”, explaining “that care must be coerced because the irrational self does not view such self-detrimental behavior as a disease” (Vaillant, 1997: 285). This so-called ‘cure’ involves intensive regulation of the poor. The reference to welfare dependency as a disease has been framed as though it were an urgent “public health problem”, which is also captured in the language describing “welfare dependency spreading from one generation to the next” (Schram, 2000: 84). This purported threat to public hygiene creates a rationalisation for permitting technologically invasive public health ‘solutions’, such as the BasicsCard and the Healthy Welfare Card/Cashless Debit Card.

Minister Tudge (2017) has heralded the Cashless Debit Card (CDC) trial as a “success”, claiming that it has reduced alcohol consumption and a host of other social harms following the release of consultancy research undertaken by Orima (DSS, 2017). However, commentators warn that this research contains methodological flaws so serious that it cannot be relied on as a foundation for drastic changes to social security policy (Cox, 2017; Hunt, 2017: 2–3). Hunt (2017: 2–3) observes that alcohol related data in the report contradicts the Minister’s claims. For example, in the East Kimberley 20 per cent of CDC participants reported more drinking in their community since the CDC was introduced, 18 per cent reported less drinking, 52 per cent reported that alcohol consumption remained the same, and the remainder were unsure as to how much alcohol intake had changed (DSS, 2017: 47). In Ceduna 14 per cent reported more drinking, 23 per cent said there was less drinking, 37 per cent indicated that alcohol consumption had remained the same, and the remainder were unsure (DSS, 2017: 47). Importantly, several Indigenous community leaders and numerous community members have called for the CDC trials to cease (Smart in Davey, 2017a; Smart and Peters in Davey, 2017b; Benning, 2017). They report that the CDC is creating problems for people such as increased alcohol consumption, financial stress, difficulties paying bills, shame, and suffering (Smart in Davey, 2017a; Smart and Peters in Davey, 2017b; Benning, 2017).

Resistance to neoliberal and new paternalist policy prescriptions

The triumph of new paternalism in government policy circles has coincided with the neoliberal assault on the welfare state (Soss et al., 2011: 2; Brown, 2015: 37, 133–134, 211), but such policies are frequently resisted by those defined in disparaging terms by the dominant discourse. This embodies what Nancy Fraser (2013: 54) refers to as a contested “politics of need

interpretation". This represents "the struggle over the interpretation of the need, the struggle for the power to define it and, so, to determine what would satisfy it" (Fraser, 2013: 57). Income management is an area where such political dynamics have resulted in a current victory for new paternalists and neoliberals. Yet resistance continues. Resistance can be express; however, it can also be covert. For example, it has been suggested that some Indigenous welfare recipients engage in resistance by purchasing food with their BasicsCards which they then swop for prohibited expenditure items (SCIA, 2015a: 19). Similar methods of circumventing the Indue Card have been reported (Davey, 2017a, b). This is unsurprising, as "all systems of domination create resistances" (Douzinas, 2007: 268). Another form of resistance by Indigenous welfare recipients when confronted with intensive regulation is to disengage from the social security system altogether. Evidence was given at the Alcohol Inquiry by Brian Stacey, Head of Policy for the Cape York Partnership, that "some people end up disengaging" with the social security system if it is made too difficult via welfare conditionality (SCIA, 2015a: 20). Consequently, such people do not receive the financial support they need. This may then create further problems with other high risk behaviour to satisfy material needs. It may also place additional burdens on their friends and families – in effect privatising 'care' for people in need.

Resistance to income management policies is likely to mount as neoliberal "outsourcing, downsizing, salary and benefits reductions, along with slashed public services" (Brown, 2015: 211) begin to impact upon ever greater numbers of the populace, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. As Wendy Brown notes (2015: 211), under neoliberalism "when economic 'reality' requires it, even the most thoroughly responsibilized individuals may be legitimately cast off from the ship." As ever more people, even those who have played by the rules supposed to secure financial prosperity, find themselves short-changed by punitive policy prescriptions, pressure for social change will mount. Brown (2015: 132–133) explains that responsibilisation "discursively denigrates dependency and practically negates collective provisioning for existence" while positioning "the individual as the only relevant and wholly accountable actor". Yet no amount of responsibilisation rhetoric can manifest the jobs required by those struggling with the consequences of unemployment.

The current challenge is to move beyond coercive forms of income management and formulate a vision that will create a more socially just reorganisation of resource redistribution. Australia's income management scheme is a shaming, stigmatising system for resource redistribution (Miller in Davey, 2017b; Bray et al., 2014: 8, 94, 110, 137). This is not constructive. Non-stigmatised resource redistribution is essential for all welfare recipients, but is particularly pertinent for Australia's First Peoples who have long experienced economic injustice as a key aspect of colonisation. To this end, some commentators have suggested that a Basic Income would be a preferable

policy pathway for addressing Indigenous disadvantage, one more likely to deliver the necessities of life than intensified welfare conditionality (Altman and Klein, 2017: 9). A Basic Income has advantages of recognising work undertaken “in the informal sector” as well as “the absence of formal employment” opportunities in many remote regions of Australia (Altman and Klein, 2017: 9). Indigenous communities subject to income management are also simultaneously struggling with additional challenges – a lack of adequately funded community services such as health services, Aboriginal housing, meaningful employment, and culturally appropriate vocational training (Altman, 2013: 18, 67, 108–109). A concerted effort needs to be made to fund necessary programmes to alleviate disadvantage, and less funding is available to meet such needs when compulsory income management programmes absorb limited resources.

Cashless welfare card schemes promise considerable benefits for a new generation of “poverty profiteers” without delivering advantages for many of those subject to them (Bielefeld, 2017: 30–31). This is part of a broader global phenomenon described by Torin Monahan (2017: 191) as “poverty capitalism”, where governments outsource regulation and surveillance to third party providers who undertake costly monitoring of social security recipients and others experiencing abjection. Poverty profiteer policies have long been present in the United States (Soss et al., 2011: 178–185), and Australia’s ministers responsible for social security seem keen to follow these trends. At a cost of AUD\$6600 to \$7900 per annum for remote living BasicsCard holders and approximately AUD\$10,000 per annum for Cashless Debit Card holders, income management is expensive to operate (Bielefeld, 2017: 30–31; 2014: 716). Over AUD\$1 billion has been dedicated to this experiment thus far (Buckmaster et al., 2012: 34). In an age of economic insecurity fostered by neoliberal restructuring of the state (Standing, 2014: 1, 10, 21), and as more people need government income support, compulsory income management is arguably not the best use of finite resources.

Conclusion

This article has teased out welfare regulatory dilemmas by contrasting the government’s income management mythology with information drawn from policy documents, key evaluation reports, alcohol statistics, stakeholder engagement, and academic commentary. Clearly, policy narratives about the addiction of welfare recipients to alcohol and social security have tremendous power. Such policy mythology can operate to produce racially disparate outcomes, as well as perpetuate class based negative stereotypes. Political and ethical concerns about income management warrant further attention by policymakers. Neoliberal and new paternalist policy prescriptions are concerning,

and a Basic Income policy would provide a more dignity enhancing option for people in need than intensified welfare conditionality. This is important because downsizing and lay-offs are common in the current economic climate, which means that more people may struggle to find new employment opportunities and require social security payments. Developing punitive policies for individuals and communities thus affected by market failure is not a just, sensible or sustainable solution (Poxon, 2017). Yet, income management is treated reductively as a solution to intractable problems of ‘addiction’ and ‘dependency’ by its proponents. Therefore more people are at risk of being subject to stigmatising, expensive, and ineffective income management policies. The opportunity cost in this arrangement is that other essential services remain underfunded, and cycles of poverty and disadvantage created through structural effects continue unabated.

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