

**Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights**  
**Response to Questions on Notice from Senator Thorpe:**  
**Professor Matthew Gray & Dr J. Rob Bray**  
**17 July 2024**

Question. Your submission argues that there has been a ‘consistent pattern of highly selective use, and misrepresentation of the evaluation findings by the Department and successive governments’. You said that this could only be seen as deliberate policy to give readers a false understanding of the evaluation findings. What goal do you think that the department is trying to achieve in their actions here?

**Response:**

Our submission documents the distorted presentation of the findings of evaluations of income management by the Department.

We have noted that this has been a persistent issue across the history of the program and has involved both statements by the Department and a succession of Ministers<sup>1</sup>.

As to the reasons why this has occurred, we would consider several inter-related reasons. Central to this is what Thodey (2019) referred to as “the risk of failures (or at least failure to meet all expectations) being exposed” (p. 222). Essentially it can be considered that most policies are implemented with a belief that they will be successful. Sometimes this is wholly or partially evidence based, but frequently it is on the basis of a simple hypothesis. Governments and implementing departments have a strong self-interest in resisting anything that challenges such beliefs. This we consider is exacerbated in political debate where any evidence of policy or program failure is seized upon as evidence of much wider failure of the party which is responsible for the policy.

It can be also considered that other factors come into play. Faced by social or economic problems there can be pressure on governments and departments to be seen as doing something. In such circumstances even ineffectual programs, or programs which have some adverse impacts, are seen as preferable to doing nothing, or admitting that the problem is much more fundamental than just its surface manifestation. This again can be exacerbated where such programs also serve as ‘dog whistles’ to certain elements of the electorate, for example, that punitive action is being taken, and where the population which is subject to the program is relatively powerless. All of these factors appear to be in place with respect to income management.

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**References:**

Thodey, David I., (Chair). 2019. *Independent review of the APS: Priorities for change*. Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of Ministerial presentation of material is given in Bray (2016, 460-463).

Bray, J. Rob. 2016. "Seven years of evaluating income management – what have we learnt? Placing the findings of the New Income Management in the Northern Territory evaluation in context". *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 51(4): 449—468.