

SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other Legislation Amendment (Budget and Other Measures) Bill 2010 (Changes to Disability Support Pension)

SUBMISSION

SUBMISSION NUMBER: 3

SUBMITTER

Brett Matthews

Mr Brett Matthews

02/11/2010

Re: Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other Legislation Amendment (Budget and Other Measures) Bill 2010

To the Committee,

My name is Brett Matthews; due to a genetic condition I am unfortunately disabled. Schedule 2 of the bill may directly affect my children and I in a very negative way.

Firstly I will give you some history of my situation.

I receive a DSP due to a genetic condition (advanced kerataconus) that caused rapid and irreversible damage to my eyes resulting in permanent blindness in one eye and about 15% vision in my other, it is still getting worse and will eventually result in me being permanently blind.

During my working career I believe I was an exceptionally hard worker entering the workforce part-time at age 13 and continuing until my condition took over. Working 70+ hours a week was commonplace.

Remember what you did for your 21st birthday?

I do, I worked a 7 day, 10 hours a day week so did nothing spectacular.

Anyway, I worked hard and enjoyed a reasonable lifestyle. Unfortunately, that came to an end when my eyesight began to interfere with my workplace quality as well as health and safety. I saw myself (excuse the pun) becoming unemployable and there was nothing I could do about it. Knowing that your dreams of a decent life are about to end is a crushing experience that I wouldn't wish on anyone.

With failing eyes I lost everything I enjoyed. No TV, no books, no football. I struggled on the DSP for 12 months or so in Australia selling my possessions in order to maintain some dignity in what was becoming a very lonesome lifestyle. My friends were getting married so drifting away. I couldn't enjoy myself, could not go out as I never had any spare money and could obviously not drive. I became a recluse, drifting into alcoholism to relieve the boredom of doing nothing. I became suicidal, I really had nothing to live for.

On advice from my family to try and get some interest in life again, I sold some more possessions and I scraped enough cash together to fund a 3 month trip through South East Asia. This action saved my life, it gave me reason to go on, it gave me passion. My sight was lost but my other senses were heightened. I began wanting to experience different cultures, taste new foods and try to enjoy life. We only get the one chance at life so happiness must be a priority.

Two days after returning from my holiday I booked a 2nd and flew out 2 days later. It has been a 13 week cycle going on more than 5 years now that has restored my faith in life, given back my dignity and enabled me to be a better person. I never saw the 13 week limit as a loop-hole, I just presumed it was so the Commonwealth government was making sure the recipient was still alive. Keeping track so to speak.

I now have a three year old son and six month old daughter in South East Asia (they are both Australian citizens). With the new legislation I will not be able to provide for them and two young Australians will suffer. I will lose contact with them as I will be imprisoned within the borders of Australia. This outcome I cannot live with. If Centrelink does prohibit my travel so I cannot be with and support my children the consequences on my mental health will be dire. My dreams are yet again about to come to an end. I do not know what will happen.

Of course, you may ask, why don't I just relocate my children to Australia? Fact of the matter is, with my disability it is just not possible for me to look after two children by myself. Nor would I like to separate the children from their mother. No child should be without either parent but the mother is the more important of the two. It cost me nearly two thousand dollars to get my children citizenship having to undergo quite demeaning DNA tests after supplying more than enough documentation. This has destroyed my savings but still I am putting away as much as I can to try to get enough for the application fee for my children's mother to get a migration visa for Australia. Of course being on a pension the chances of this being approved are next to nothing but it is the only option I have of being able to relocate the family to Australia on a permanent basis.

I think if the legislation is passed unchanged I can stay in South East Asia with my children, however I will lose the income I need to feed, clothe and educate them, so I will have to stay in Australia permanently. Here my entitlements will increase as I will be able to claim rent assistance, pharmaceutical allowance as well as drain the Medicare system with the depression caused by the Government forcing a separation between myself and my children. What money I do get I will have to send overseas to provide for my children. So therefore the money will still be used out of Australia, the cost to the taxpayer will increase as my entitlements will. Is it fair for the Government of Australia to force separation of a family?

Will this create another Stolen Generation?

If it weren't for my children I would have to adjust to spending the majority of the year stuck at home in Australia but the fact is now I have to care for the two most important people in the world to me. That's it, that is my priority and that is my life.

The fact that this lifestyle was considered OK by the Australian Government until this legislation change means that lives and families that have been established LEGALLY and within the framework will soon be destroyed. When the Social Security Act of 1991 was changed in 2003 many Australians living outside the country were granted exemption from the new legislation, this allowed established lives to continue living as before. Why is there no possibility of exemptions being discussed? Real lives are at stake here. This is not a game.



The above two children are the ones (in my family) most seriously affected by any changes to the current legislation. They want to grow up with both a loving mother and father. They have hopes and dreams like any other child their age. Possibly and before the youngest even turns one year old she may have her future may well be confused by having parents forced to reside in different countries.

This is a girl that will one day pay tax and live in Australia. The birth of this Australian child incurred no baby bonus, no Medicare and no family tax benefit. That is saving the Government! Yet to save money the Government wants to relocate them all to Australia. Where are the savings? The eldest is kindergarten age with primary schooling coming up. More savings to the government with them staying in their birth country not their country of citizenship.

Was there ever any savings forecast with the legislative changes?

Why is the government taking such a hard line with the disabled? Is it because the disabled are such an easy target and have neither the financial means nor ability to fight back?

Has the government looked into individual cases affected by these changes or just glanced over some irrelevant statistics?

If the Government has looked into individual cases then why is this bill so callously going ahead?

This amendment is a huge negative on the mostly positive work the Australian Government does with the disabled. It has no place in the 21st century.

Thank you for taking the time to review my submission. I hope it can raise some awareness of my situation and that of many disabled Australians around the world.

Brett Matthews