

Final Summary

Governments and employers need to acknowledge, emphatically and publicly, that mature age people (aged 45 and over), can claim, as an inherent right, equality of opportunity, especially the right to work and to attain economic security, and more especially personal **financial security**.

Retrenchment at around mid to late career stage, which affects a majority of this group, invariably results in debilitating stress and personal trauma. A feeling of violation is common, and in some cases an ensuing and deepening anger is combined with other negatives which threaten personal dignity, self-esteem, self-worth ...etc. Uppermost in the minds of these people is the sudden threat to financial security as the realisation that long term plans made for retirement and later life have been rudely interrupted, and the security for themselves and families becomes a constant concern, giving rise to further, and compounded Stress related conditions.

Consequently urgent consideration should be given to **offering compensation to the majority of unemployed mature age people forced to substantially draw down on life savings and superannuation**. This can be amortised in proportion to the term of unemployment, acting as an incentive in securing new permanent Part or Full time employment. Re-imburement can be facilitated as lump sums, graduated payments, or other mutually agreed arrangements, As always, these would depend on individual circumstances, should be generous in areas like Taxation, being GST exempt, and offering common sense Tax and other Concessions for past lost Income. Thus by investing a little in its most precious resources now, the Fed Govt. will provide the mature aged with greater opportunities for financial independence and self-funded retirement.

Where anxiety and depression has become more and more deeply entrenched, individuals can prove almost impossible to rehabilitate, and it is here that I believe the government and/or Centrelink can assist by overseeing medical and other counselling, where appropriate. It should also **immediately Review and apply some flexibility** for individual activity tests and eligibility for Disability Support, which may apply for the short, medium or longer term, depending on circumstances, duration of medical treatment, counselling and the like. I do not believe that the present Commonwealth Rehabilitation programs provide all the answers in such cases (I have personally participated in one of these). Centrelink could also assist in alleviating some of these problems by more lenient criteria for 12 weekly, as compared to fortnightly, lodgement of application for benefit forms, where the former requires only two (2) approaches to employers for the entire 12 week period, identical to the fortnightly requirement. This would ease the pressure on Clients enormously, and would prove mutually beneficial due to Clients being under less pressure while easing overall stress levels. The benefits of this would be obvious when Centrelink Clients approach potential employers. It would also provide invaluable general benefits, of course.

Clearly, **early** remedial action and intervention, sadly lacking in the past, following undignified retrenchment, will provide greater opportunities for restoration of individual self-worth, dignity, self-esteem and the like for our precious mature age resources. The restoration of these natural human traits is summarily a personal right and entitlement, essential for individual and mutual productivity, and remains perhaps **the highest single priority** for the too many mature age people who have been thus afflicted.

An **appropriate career transition facility** is desperately needed. There is limited, and in most cases, **no provision** for this vital service following sudden and traumatic employment termination, often unexpected and carried out with indecent haste following almost a life time of service and loyalty to the employer.

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While recent government subsidies to encourage employers to engage mature age people is a step in the right direction, and applauded, there is much more to be done to overcome the yawning gap in the labour market and a multitude of invaluable mature age human resources remain chronically under-utilised if not totally ignored in the Australian workforce.

An area needing **very** urgent attention is the alarmingly steep decline in male workers of working age in full employment. This has fallen from approximately eighty percent (80%) in the 1970's to just over fifty percent (50%), or half, at the end of the century. It is impossible to ignore such a glaringly disturbing problem, as statistics reflect that the percentage of female workers has increased almost proportionally to the male decrease. In the last quarter of this century many female workers, including a very high percentage of mature age females, have taken jobs in traditionally male only bastions. It is acknowledged that the reverse occurs to deprive female workers opportunities, but the balance is so out of proportion that drastic measures are needed before the issue spills over in to gender overload.

Further, the problem has become so acute that it may be necessary to consider means testing families where a high single income has been established and likely to continue, while many single or no-income families struggle on or below the poverty line. Assets testing could be introduced and occur as a permanent, on-going program, carried out on a random, ad-hoc basis. (Of course this proposal exempts families who are facing genuine hardship, where additional income is the only solution to such circumstances). A suggested threshold, for determining **need**, as opposed to greed, is \$60K per annum. In this way the principal bread-winner, generally the senior male (husband/father) member, although sometimes a female, of the house-hold, is at least given a reasonable opportunity of competing in the labour market.

It is an issue that will not go away and governments must face up to a such a serious problem, contributing so significantly to on-going individual and family hardship. It can be avoided or at least minimised with careful, yet decisive action. For governments to consider shelving the issue or placing it in the "too hard" basket because of potential to offend (gender) activist individuals and/or groups, is summarily irresponsible, negligent and reprehensible. Some cynics even claim it is an issue that continues to be swept under the carpet by successive governments because of political expedience and fear of electoral backlash.

Mature age job seekers should be provided some opportunity to **take a holiday** during the year. Current Centrelink requirements preclude this in most instances. Such a break is an essential part of the rehabilitation program, where it is possible for the individual to relax for a brief period, escape the on-going stress job seeking so often involves at mature age, enjoy life a little, recharge the batteries and return much better for the experience. Again invaluable mutual benefits would result.

While some older Australians are nervous, even apprehensive, regarding new technology, a significant number are also interested in participating in this exciting field. No effort should be spared to provide appropriate training and education for the mature age in IT & T and other local industries where growth opportunities have been identified. It may even be worth offering incentives in some cases to encourage older Australians to move in to these areas, particularly where opportunities for personal wealth creation exist, including home based and other suitable business opportunities. Again Centrelink itself could be more interventionist or **a separate unit established specifically for these purposes.**

The NEIS scheme has not been fully understood, marketed appropriately nor utilised to its fullest, in my view. Some consideration could be given to broadening its charter to train (at low or no cost to the unemployed) equity investors and sleeping partners for various entrepreneurial projects. Alternatively **a separate program should be introduced** to cater for such (an) essential facility/ies, possibly via AusIndustry.

Older Australians are understandably concerned and **highly stressed** regarding present and future financial status, and to this end prudent wealth creation strategies should be both vigorously encouraged and even identified and promoted where appropriate by governments of the day.

The very contemplation of older Australians being forced and/or humiliated in to *Working for the Dole* is both a further exercise in dehumanising these (generally) already distraught and humiliated precious resources, and totally obscene. Any such consideration should immediately be rejected by responsible governments, properly concerned with the positive development and enhancement of our more senior citizens.

The chronic depletion of human resources in the public sector in recent times has dramatically exacerbated the many problems faced by welfare recipients, including the mature aged. Unless and until governments acknowledge and move to correct this seemingly irreversable trend, a number of reforms will not occur, certainly from within Centrelink as it is presently structured. In particular, many recommendations contained in Final Summary, including Para. 4, will be difficult, if not impossible to facilitate unless urgent action is taken to address this most serious of problems, with Centrelink staff barely able to manage the 'conveyer belt' type service, which in most cases is "take a number, and wait until you are called" scenario provided for Clients, many of whom face inordinate delays when seeking assistance for seemingly the most basic of services.

The concept of a "One Stop Shop", identified in *The National Strategy for Older Australians, November, 1999*, at Local Govt. level, has merit. I understand that some initiatives are already occurring in this regard. However I have grave concerns that such a facility could provide an all embracing range of specialist services (as the name suggests) for the mature aged, especially where medium to long term advocacy and other support programs are essential. It is in these circumstances that the "One Stop Shop" may need to function as a partial referral agency, rather than a facility attempting to cover unlimited services.

Should the Federal Government strategically and prudently invest in its most precious resources (the mature age) now, as recommended in this Submission, significant rewards will ensue in the longer term. Some of these will include the government's long sought after goal of **self-funded retirement** being more attainable and realistic, while the many immeasurable mutual benefits will include the restoration of much needed independence (esp. Financial), individual pride and other relevant human benefits too numerous to detail and impossible to measure.

N.B. The above contains the private and personal views of Jeff Filsell, 2 Day Place, Salisbury Downs SA 5108. It is thus requested that a certain discretion be observed by readers.

Proposed Reforms for Mature Age Unemployed

1. Establishment of a community based advocacy service for the mature aged, including and especially the unemployed and generally disadvantaged.
 - a. Funding to come from the public, private and community sectors, with proportional representation of these sectors comprising the administration of such a facility. This would theoretically prevent a dominant position being assumed by any one (1) sector.
2. Establishment of an Enterprise Unit for mature age individuals wishing to invest in local industry/ies. This can again be a joint funding venture, with facilitators and advisers being drawn from all sectors of the community.
3. Centrelink deeming of superannuants' assets to be abolished (unless these assets are excessive). Threshold of \$181K should be at least doubled to allow for retirement planning, financial security and individual peace of mind.
 - a. The present penalties applying to hard working Australians aged 55 years and nine months an abomination. This is generally the result of scrimping and saving for retirement and such "nest eggs" should be sacrosanct, and not vulnerable to enforced declaration as "Income".
 - b. A "period of grace", after turning 55 and 9 months, should be afforded to those who have been suddenly retrenched or dismissed, and unable to secure employment for significant periods prior to turning 55 or near. The period of grace to be proportional to the time spent in unsuccessful job seeking since employment termination.
 - c. Consideration should also be given to those with Special Circumstances, e.g. mature aged who have been fighting Unfair Dismissals and Compensation Claims and have incurred substantial Medico- Legal, other costs. Cases to be determined on merit by independent panels.
4. Higher profile positions to be taken by organisations like Morgan and Banks, who strongly support reforms for mature age unemployed, but are publicly identified from marketing exercises like their *Youth Jobs Day*, in partnership with Advertiser Newspapers, which places undue emphasis on the plight of one particular societal group (youth).
5. Enlist support of groups like COTA, DOME, SACOSS and other community welfare organisations as appropriate to be part of an alliance to continually negotiate for these and similar reforms to be implemented as a matter of urgency.

N.B. Views expressed in the above DRAFT (incomplete) by Jeff Filsell, 2 Day Place, Salisbury Downs, SA, are not necessarily those of other individuals or organisations.

Additional (Proposed) Reforms For Mature Age Unemployed

1. Compensation for erosion of savings following Retrenchment, Dismissal and other ENFORCED employment termination circumstances when mature age individuals secure employment against the odds. This would act as an exciting incentive.
 - (a) The actual amount of compensation can be proportional to the term of unemployment upon securing permanent Part or Full time employment.
 - (b) Compensation can be credited as a lump sum, graduated payment or as a Tax refund. Taxation of compensation to err on the side of generosity for the recipient, and on a sliding scale depending on financial assets, amount of draw-down since retrenchment, other personal circumstancesetc.
 - (c) Legislation to be introduced urgently to ensure that all retrenchments are classified as **enforced** termination of employment.
 - (d) Legislation to be implemented to classify retrenched workers, except in rare circumstances, as suffering a **disability**, as so many suffer distress and trauma and also post traumatic stress disorders, following employment termination. "Scrap heap" mentality common among many such victims.
2. Aggressive marketing of free (govt. sponsored) Train the Trainer type courses for mature age (would be) mentors and trainers of young job seekers.
 - (a) Courses to cover several industries (as many as possible)
3. Much more Aggressive Fed Govt marketing of (mature age) Training opportunities in future growth industries, especially I T & T., with the following suggested priorities :
 - (a) Address the acute shortage of intermed. and advanced computer skills in Australia.
 - (b) Ensure that other technology skills are transferred to the many highly intellectual mature age people resources who could add inestimable value to the burgeoning telecommunications industry, including the mastering of advanced internet skills.

N.B. The above proposed reforms contain the personal views of Jeffrey W. Filsell, 2 Day Place, Salisbury Downs SA 5108 and are not necessarily those of other individuals nor organisations

ADDENDUM

While some of the following may appear to state the obvious, it appears that an imbalance remains between mature aged unemployed people with many and varied skills and industries with a deficiency of skilled workers, including one of the on-going growth industries of the new century, I.T. & T. It is therefore necessary to gather more information and intelligence on mature aged people with knowledge and skills in :

1. Computer hardware and software applications.
2. Telecommunications, including intermediate and advanced Internet skills.
3. Report writing where employment in Programs to develop employment and other community initiatives could evolve. Funding to be split between public and private sectors, with sponsors to be provided PR advantages. Employment could be provided by some of these (sponsor) organisations, e.g. Local Govt., Banks, Telstra, personnel agencies (e.g. Morgan & Banks, Drake, Direct Personnel)etc.

Other industries identified where skills shortages have been determined and human resources with these skills exist among the mature aged unemployed.

- (1) Programs aimed at redressing this balance may need to be conducted through local communities, with Local Govt. given part of the task of "selling" these opportunities to the public. A scenario needs to exist where the public is comfortable that these opportunities exist as a community benefit locally, and are NOT linked with bureaucracy (e.g. Centrelink, where a cynical view may evolve where present (meagre) welfare benefits will be threatened/adversely affected by such employment opportunities). This can give an intimidating edge to Govt. initiated programs.

While it may be necessary to upgrade skills in some cases, training to upgrade and enhance skills could encompass placements in the public and private sectors after, say, two (2) to three (3) weeks' training, and visits to the intended workplaces could occur prior to the placements, to allow all parties to acquire a "feel" for each other. Placements would result, of course, result from recommendations (to potential employers) from specially selected Trainers, and follow discussion and close consultation with nominated Trainees, the Trainer/s and the employer/s.

The placements to be for a "mutually agreed period". These could be split in to the first month of a placement being followed by an Early Review by all parties, and could result in either a continuance for a following three (3) months, depending on mutual suitability and/or satisfaction or agreement to terminate the placement. The following is an example of how such a trial period could evolve.

Placements could initially be for one (1) (or more) month depending on mutual suitability and/or satisfaction. Salaries for this first month to be split between employer/sponsor and govt. (Unless employer is the govt., of course). Should all parties agree, after one (1) month, to continue, Salaries to be paid for a minimum of a further three (3) months, solely by the employer, who would receive the *mature age incentive* payment during the early phase of this period. A further Review to occur after this four (4) month (in total) trial. Following the four (4) months trial, a decision could then be made regarding an indefinite period of employment.

An observer/adviser unit to be established to provide both major parties (employer, employee) support and assistance and act as intermediary, if necessary. However this unit would strive to generally allow employer and employee to determine their own needs - only entering discussion when requested by one or the other parties.

N.B. The above Draft (incomplete) has been prepared by Jeff Filsell, Salisbury Downs SA. 5108. It is requested that readers observe a certain discretion in this regard.