

## **ADDITIONAL COMMENTS BY COALITION SENATORS**

Coalition Senators welcome the focus represented by this bill on school attendance by at risk children.

Although the inquiry heard that the truancy rate in Australia, by international standards, was not high, the situation where up to 20,000 children may either not be registered for or attending school is of enormous concern. Over each of these children a question mark must hang regarding their ability to fully participate in our society because of sustained absence from school. School attendance is a critical factor in literacy and numeracy development and in the social adjustment of these children as they grow up, as well as their employment prospects as adults.

In light of the important objective which this legislation seeks to achieve, Coalition Senators do not oppose this legislation. However, we note that some fundamental and valid concerns remain which at this point are not addressed by either the legislation or its subordinate legislation to implement the trials of this scheme in certain communities.

Coalition Senators note that this legislation seeks to deal with an education-related issue which has traditionally been the responsibility of the states and territories. At no point during this inquiry has the reason been adequately explained for the Commonwealth's "takeover" of this responsibility from state governments. Of course absence from school is a serious problem in addressing education standards and outcomes across Australia; but no evidence was advanced to the enquiry to suggest that state and territory governments were unaware of this problem or unsympathetic to taking stronger action, at the behest of the Federal Government, to deal with it.

The second philosophical concern about this legislation is the linkage of welfare payments to the attendance of the payee's child at school. To deny a person access to subsistence on the basis of their failure to comply with certain extraneous legal obligations represents a significant shift in the philosophy of social security in Australia.

Government witnesses were at pains to point out to the Committee that parents would be exempted from the onerous nature of these sanctions where they could demonstrate that they had made reasonable attempts to enforce their child's attendance. However it remains a reasonable question as to whether adhering to a range of social and legal obligations should be a precondition to a person's entitlement to receive income support where they otherwise qualify for it.

Comparisons were made during the inquiry to the former Coalition Government's income quarantining provisions as part of the Northern Territory Emergency Response. Coalition Senators note some similarities but also observe a significant

difference between these two regimes: income quarantining does not involve loss of an entitlement to receive income support (though it may restrict the way a recipient spends that income), whereas the regime in this bill may deny some recipients access to income support altogether.

Coalition Senators also note the poor level of prior consultation with affected communities prior to the scheme's announcement. They note in particular that this contrasts with the now government's criticism of the lack of consultation surrounding the income quarantining provisions announced by the previous government.

The committee heard that evidence of the successful linking of school attendance with welfare payments in other parts of the world was either lacking or ambivalent. However, we note that the present legislation underpins a trial in a select number of communities, mainly indigenous communities, and that testing the value of this linkage in the Australian context may be worthwhile in this context. Coalition Senators are prepared to suspend their doubts about the philosophical basis for this scheme if it does significantly improve school attendance rates.

As such, we do not oppose the passage of the bill. We do however strongly endorse the recommendations made in the substantive report of the Committee to address some issues with this scheme's implementation. Coalition Senators particularly endorse Recommendation 2 dealing with the allocation of sufficient resources to Centrelink to enable it to prevent welfare recipients losing their entitlements unnecessarily, in inappropriate circumstances.

**Senator Gary Humphries**

**Senator Judith Adams**

**Senator Sue Boyce**

**Senator Mathias Cormann**