

Submission to the Community Affairs Committee, Department of the Senate, Parliament House Canberra ACT

Re: the Federal Government's plan to link welfare payments to school attendance.

As I have been watching the SBS program *The First Australians* currently being shown on television it has struck me that 'white' Australia's relationship with indigenous Australians has been marked at times not only by downright violence, selfishness and lies, but often by the actions of well-intentioned people making ill-considered and ill-informed decisions which take little or no account of the beliefs, attitudes, feelings and fundamental human rights of the indigenous people. To my mind the Federal Government's plan with the *Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Requirements) Bill 2008* to link welfare payments to school attendance comes under the latter type of action. While I do not question the Government's 'good' intention to encourage all Australian children to attend school and thus improve the educational outcomes for indigenous and non-indigenous children alike, I do question and object to the means by which it plans to bring that about.

By withdrawing income support payments for up to 13 weeks, where parents are seen to be non-complying in 'getting' their children to school, how are poor indigenous and non-indigenous Australian families helped or encouraged to strive for school attendance for their children. Without this basic income for food, rent and everyday necessities, families face further poverty and suffering which could lead to a greater incidence of domestic violence, homelessness and even crime.

I believed this current Government was going to take a considered and carefully thought out approach to its 'Education Revolution', not merely to rubber stamp or follow on with the ideas and actions of the previous government. A holistic approach to education surely looks to undercover underlying causes of school non-attendance (which can be I'm sure almost as many and varied as the children involved) and takes and allows for time to find the means to try and solve the problem(s) and does not merely place all responsibility on individuals, regardless of other factors. As in child-rearing a positive and affirming approach to children, while time-consuming and at times frustrating, will reap a far better outcome than a punitive and quick-fix approach, so too I believe will be the case in a truly holistic approach to education.

Some families already habitually do not comply and others for various reasons will be intermittent compliers and so be intermittently in breach of the conditions under the Act. How will driving these families into further poverty increase the likelihood of their children developing a regular pattern of attendance at school, especially when poverty is likely already a contributor to their non-attendance. The 'quick-fix' which the legislation provides for will in fact not be a fix at all, but a merry-go-round of on-

again and off-again welfare (and school attendance using the stick approach) with all its concomitant problems.

In the Northern Territory (NT) the previously established Intervention Income Management regime under the *Northern Territory Emergency Response* has caused suffering and disruption to many Aboriginal families, with many now displaced, forced to live in fringe camps in the larger towns, with of course children's schooling necessarily affected. Here the Government's plan to link welfare payments to school attendance will compound the problems facing these people. Furthermore according to the Australian Education Union 1,400 extra teachers alone are required immediately in the NT. There are just not enough schools, classes, teachers or resources in the NT for children to be able to attend school. Where is the justice in punishing parents for children's non-attendance when there are not even sufficient basic resources to allow for their compliance.

If this punitive legislation becomes law, no matter how well-intentioned its proponents, Australia will continue the history of making ill-informed and ill-considered decisions in this instance for those aboriginal people and others dependant on income support – support which is their basic right as Australian citizens – and with little likelihood of it providing long-term solutions to the challenge of guaranteeing education for all Australian children.

Carmel F Cowan