

SUBMISSION TO COMMUNITY AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
re *THE SOCIAL SECURITY AND VETERANS' ENTITLEMENTS AMENDMENT (SCHOOLING
REQUIREMENTS) BILL 2008* 21 October 2008

Thank you for receiving my Submission on this very serious issue.
I refer to the legislation as 'the Bill.'

1. Tony Fitzgerald the NT Anti Discrimination Commissioner in a speech in Darwin in June this year, noted that the NTER legislation made a precedent in that **it took away people's entitlements as Australian citizens**. I ask Members to look very seriously at the further step this current legislation – (the Bill) proposes to make: that is, going the further step not only of quarantining income entitlements **but actually removing them entirely** if the Australian citizens concerned fail to meet a certain criteria, namely failing to send children in their care to school.

I submit that this legislation has serious implications for the democratic processes of our country. And furthermore is the question - What is to stop any other legislation being drafted that will remove these entitlements from these or other Australian citizens if some other criteria is proposed?

2. Much seems to be being made by the proponents of the Bill of the **'last resort' clause**. How will this be determined? And by whom?

3. It also seems to be implied by the proponents of the Bill that very few families will fall into this category of 'last resort.' I can only wonder how they are so sure of this. As a person with 30 years involvement in community living I know that this legislation is going to cause enormous suffering among the poorest Australians, including but not confined to Aboriginal Australians, including the 3200 children and their families involved in the ' trials ' scheduled to start in January 2009 in eight locations. The Bill and its safeguards as written seem only to demonstrate an enormous faith - I'm afraid I would say a **completely unrealistic idea – by its proponents of what Centrelink and the Schools can do to for a poor and also dysfunctional family to suddenly have funds, and capacity to be organised in difficult circumstances every day to send many children to school.**

4. 'Children need to be in school to profit from the education revolution.' This is a handy saying and on the surface of things at least seems quite logical to many people. **However the more basic fact remains that children need food, clothes, adequate shelter even more.** Poverty including lack of funds for transport as well as for food, clothes, shelter and so on, is at the root of many of the thousands of Australian children who don't attend school. How on earth will this be improved when even the income the family has, is taken?

There must be a genuine acknowledgment of the difficulties of those Australians caught in the poverty cycle with all the burden and responsibility placed back on the individual shoulders of parents or often single parent or grandparent. The difficulties of the every day survival of such families, particularly those with many children, and of then providing travel and breakfast, recess and lunch funds for each child each day particularly towards the end of the pension fortnight in these straightened times must be acknowledged. (Added to ordinary every day survival in many families is the trauma of family or extended family members not coping with the added pressure of their resultant stressful behaviour – see # 7 below)

Food is basic to school attendance. Breakfast and Lunch Programmes which exist in some disadvantaged areas and have survived programme cuts are obviously a big incentive to children to get themselves to school where this is possible. Malnourished children, including those who struggle to attend school regularly, cannot learn. Funds need to be allocated to schools in disadvantaged areas to assure this basic right

5. What is needed are positive programmes which help families and suit the poor and in particular the cross cultural poor. Many thousands of children in the recent past have been allowed to slip through the system. Now with very poor or no literacy, numeracy skills they refuse to face the humiliation of attending school where their inabilities will be obvious. (Or alternately turn up to school and misbehave so as to be suspended.)

Aboriginal children and children of multicultural backgrounds need to be able to identify within the school system. Committee Members may not realise that, for example, over the past decade or so, many Aboriginal programmes have been taken away. When the Abstudy allowance was withdrawn from all but senior students, the ASSPA program gave funds for parents to spend in a positive way within the school context. Several years ago this in turn was taken through Government cuts.

The 1999 Government cuts to bilingual programmes have unsurprisingly been a factor in declining school attendances, together with other positive programs helping students with identity and ease of learning. In the 1980s the NT Government's educational system with its skill in Aboriginal education was unsurpassed in Australia. This is no longer the case. In some states Aboriginal Studies once flourishing in the general curriculum, is now no longer in many schools.

(By contrast the revival of Aboriginal languages and the teaching of them in local schools in states including SA and NSW, is bringing pride and identity and it is programmes like these that may positively help children of this background regain an enthusiasm and identify with school. On another level the positive Clontarf programme based on football continues to be far more successful than punitive threats in ensuring reluctant students from the Alice Springs Town Camps and in southern WA are eager to attend school regularly.)

A concerted effort with positive strategies based on proper evidence, using research and consultation with knowledgeable on- the- ground teachers and practitioners together with the re-installation of previous successful programmes as above is far more likely to achieve the desired result of children attending regularly than the punitive, expensive negative Bill

4. Six of these proposed 'trial' sites are in the NT I understand them to be Hermannsburg, Katherine, Katherine Town Camps, Wallace Rockhole, Wadeye and the Tiwi Islands.

In the NT this punitive approach is to come on top of the suffering, misery and disruption already caused by Income quarantining with hundreds of Aboriginal Northern Territorians now forced to remain in fringe camps or elsewhere in the larger towns. Precious non discretionary funds have had to been used to buy expensive fuel or pay some other method of travel from Communities to obtain the Centrelink cards and to shop at the designated stores (only this month widened from the big stores). Then with no funds for the return journey, families are stranded, making children vulnerable and disrupting much chance of their regular schooling. **This Bill now proposes to punish such families likely to be in breach because of the NTER conditions - by removing their entire income.**

5. In the NT moreover there are simply not enough schools, classes, teachers or resources in the first place for children to be able to attend school. The Australian Education Union reports that 1400 extra teachers, 100 teacher aides and at least \$1.7 billion in funds are required. Up to 5000 Aboriginal teenagers have no access to school or any kind of vocational training. Teacher turnover is very high. The Federal Government has made a recent commitment for just an extra 50 teachers a year.

6. Housing is directly related to school attendance The Government has acknowledged that there is an enormous backlog in this very important area of life. Unfortunately there seems less understanding that this crisis is directly related to this issue. Poor quality housing and the need for thousands more houses for the poor with the resultant chronic overcrowding of 15-20 people in a substandard house is a factor very connected to school attendance. With the housing crisis from decades of insufficient funding and neglect in Aboriginal communities and with the changing of the former Federal Government's priorities for funding public housing across the board (SA alone has sold off 30% of its public housing stock) **overcrowding is very common, making 'school readiness' very difficult.**

7. Mental Health issues Life is now completely different in schools with a recent Australia wide survey showing 1 in 5 children are affected by mental health issues, many caused by drug and alcohol. Grandparents across the nation are struggling to bring up many children including large families. Unfortunately in the face of all the difficulties, particularly financial ones many families will be unable to comply with the legislation.

8. Facing the inevitable Implications of the Bill. A few families will be able to comply with the proposed legislation. Unfortunately there will be many in the 'last resort' category - families unable to

comply or will comply for a few days and then it will be too hard again. **As a result there will be many families then without income - no food, rent money, funds for electricity, clothes. and every day expenses, for fares for the children to get to school, to keep up financial commitments. How is this helping the children?**

Even for 3 days this would be a nightmare as families on such basic incomes never have enough to be able to save and tide over. For 13 weeks this is completely beyond comprehension. People with already under everyday pressures as outlined and with limited coping skills cannot immediately work under serious threat to suddenly turn around their own lives.

To state the obvious: **hunger, homelessness, violence, crime, family break up can only result** with further alienation of the poor including the Aboriginal poor from mainstream Australian society.

Sadly this legislation, if well meant, shows more than any other, how completely removed from the real world are the senior policy making public servants.

CONCLUSION To the Members of the Community Affairs Committee with the opportunity to study the serious implications of this legislation, I ask on behalf of those who will be affected, to put politics aside and to explain to the Bill's proponents, on behalf of the poor Australians who also are entitled to a share in the riches of this vast country - that this legislation has no place and must be abandoned. If there must be some kind of punitive monetary system 'as a last resort' then institute a system based on fines with some part – never all or the greater part– of the families' social security to be withdrawn instead of the harsh, uncompromising proposed legislation.

I trust Members will acknowledge instead the huge job that many poor Australian families are doing on very limited fixed incomes and help those whose children are presently non attenders by recommending the (re)introduction of programmes that will ensure Government, schools and poor families can work together as partners, not opponents **without** this frightening punitive component which is unworthy of the name Australian

Thank you for reading my submission.

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