

First it applied only to Aborigines...

by Nick G.

The old adage of how repression directed at a minority may become generalised across the rest of society is playing out in the wake of the racist Northern Territory intervention into remote Aboriginal communities.

Paternalistic and draconian measures were enforced by the Howard Government onto 73 "prescribed" Aboriginal communities. This required the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) in the Northern Territory.

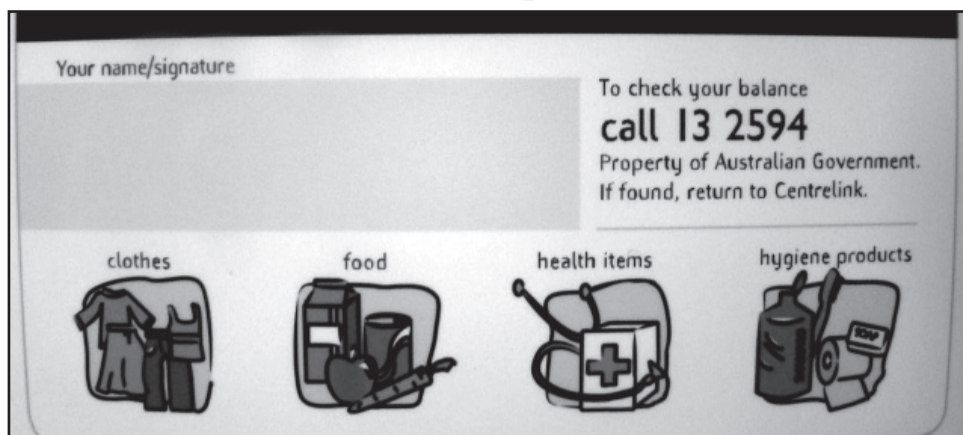
One of the most controversial measures was the introduction of income quarantining, requiring Aboriginal welfare recipients to have 50 percent of payments withheld and available only for food and other purchases at designated stores through a special BasicsCard.

Through Centrelink, many "customers" are in fact encouraged to have all of their welfare payments pre-committed to designated items including household goods, clothing and footwear.

This so-called "income management" became a focus for Aboriginal complaints about the suspension of the RDA. The shame of having to stand in special queues to pay on the BasicsCard, the inconvenience of not being able to make purchases when "the computers are down", the resentment at the procedures for surveillance on spending and how bills were paid, and the fact that designated stores were not subject to price controls – leaving Aborigines open to rip-off merchants – became the shared experience of the communities.

In all, some 16,000 NT Aborigines were required to have BasicsCards, with Centrelink using the issuing process to preclude some forms of payment to over 800 recipients and change the payment type for nearly 600 more.

The incoming Federal Labor government was well aware that an intervention based on such a flagrant



device as the suspension of the RDA was unsustainable. Aborigines, progressive Australians and the international community were joining forces to protest the racism inherent in the intervention.

Labor's agenda was to continue the intervention (which is essentially a land grab orchestrated by huge mining and pastoral monopolies at the expense of Aboriginal land rights) whilst reinstating the RDA.

For seven of the eight main intervention items, a loophole in the RDA allowing "special measures" of a beneficial nature to a disadvantaged group provided Labor with the solution to its dilemma of putting back the RDA alongside racist policies. Alcohol and pornography restrictions, community store licensing, compulsory five-year leases on community land and other items are to be considered "special measures" for the purposes of the RDA.

Given the focus of Aboriginal resentment on income management, Labor had to drop plans to include it as a "special measure". Instead, Jenny Macklin announced on November 25 that it would be "redesigned as a non-discriminatory measure" and the only way to do that was to apply it to other non-Aboriginal Australians.

While this is a measure to attack non-Aboriginal people, it kills two birds with one stone, by also covering the attack on Aboriginal people.

If Macklin gets approval for the necessary legislative changes, she will

be able to make any area in Australia a "declared income management area". It is expected that three types of welfare recipients will be targeted:

- "disengaged youth" between 15 and 25 years old who have been receiving Youth Allowance, Newstart, special benefits and parenting payments for 13 out of 26 weeks
- "long-term recipients" for those over 25 but not yet old enough for the pension and who have been receiving the above payments for 52 out of 104 weeks
- "vulnerable welfare recipients"

Intervention for those on welfare

by Jim H.

The Federal Labor government is about to announce significant new changes to welfare policy. The main point is that the experiment where the incomes of Indigenous Australians in the northern territory were taken over and managed as part of the intervention will be spread to other Australians.

The first place where this is likely to occur is in the Northern Territory. Then it will spread through the rest of Australia.

Many had always suspected that the Intervention had characteristics of a pilot program. It now seems these fears were justified.

The intended welfare changes include compulsory income management for people with children in protection and longer term unemployed on Newstart. Old age, disability and veterans are expected to be exempt, at least for now.

Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin announced on November 25 that "we're intending to introduce a new income management scheme aimed at protecting children and families and helping disengaged individual people who are on a variety of welfare payments."

The writing's on the wall. This is a scheme that is expected to roll out and cover a much larger proportion of welfare recipients.

There is also an assumption that if

for anyone who is on a welfare payment who is considered "at risk".

Obviously Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians will be over-represented in these groups anyway; however, the inclusion of non-indigenous persons will make the provisions legally non-discriminatory.

Thus, measures first designed to apply only to Northern Territory Aborigines under a racist regime, but effectively test-driven over Aboriginal communities and found to be acceptable to governments, are now poised to be imposed on a wider section of the population.

The effect will be to take away what little independence and individual empowerment is now enjoyed by marginalised peoples, and make welfare payments harder and more onerous to access, as part of a general cut in welfare benefits.

How much longer can we tolerate this system that impoverishes so many so that a few can enjoy immense wealth, and then punishes the victims for their poverty?

someone finds themselves in difficulty, it is their fault and their fault alone. It has nothing to do with existing economic and social conditions. Least of all, it has nothing to do with the operation of the capitalist economy. Given this, the second assumption is that those who wilfully maintain themselves in poverty must be dealt with harshly.

Jenny Macklin went on to say that, "...the evidence we have so far is that income management is very helpful... there's more food on the table, that rent's being paid, clothes are being brought for children, less money is being spent on alcohol and gambling." This is a grossly unfair generalisation that could only be aimed at discrediting the poorest Australians, to reduce them to second class status and targets for attack.

Under the plan, those on youth allowance and Newstart will attract special attention. Never mind that there are not enough jobs to go around!

The intention is to take over control over fifty percent of benefits and how and where they are spent. This is bad enough in itself. It takes away a right that we often take for granted. This also represents a foot in the door to a major control over people's lives.

There is a real danger that the welfare changes will be used as a vehicle to turn Australians against other Australians, by using the process as fuel to blame the poorest and most vulnerable for the whole range of problems that the system has caused and the people are facing.

Comment by a welfare recipient (from newmatilda.com)

"I am on a disability services pension and get approx \$20,000 in full benefits a year.

The last pay rise the politicians gave themselves was near what I get for the year. Public servants, politicians and other government agencies are paid with tax payers' money, but do you see anybody complaining about how they spend their money?

Are we going back to the ration queues and green stamp setup?

If this is what our government is all about let's have a revolution and change things once and for all. We are paying people who sit and monitor the little person on welfare more than what the person on welfare is getting. This is the idea of the "fair go"?

If we didn't let the rest of the world own all our natural resources then there would be more than enough to share around, instead all that wealth goes overseas."