



COVID response and the future of welfare

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Unconditionally: COVID response and the future of welfare

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Introduction

Can we imagine a future in which welfare is unconditional?

Can we imagine a future where anyone in Australia who needs help to make ends meet gets that help from government, without having to jump through flaming hoops to prove they deserve it?

Can we imagine a future where we simply say that nobody deserves to live in poverty, where we agree that poverty is a political choice, and that by making a different political choice we can eradicate it?

The Federal Government's COVID response in 2020 unexpectedly helps us imagine that brighter future. And it creates space for a conversation about permanently making Australia's income support programs unconditional.

When the COVID pandemic sent Australia into lockdown in 2020, the Federal Government was pushed by advocates and circumstance into an extraordinary step that changed lives and changed politics. Not only did they effectively double income support payments, but they suspended most of the so-called "mutual obligations" – the flaming hoops that people excluded in various ways from the mainstream labour market are forced to jump through in order to receive these below-poverty-level payments.

It is no exaggeration to say that the suspension of these "mutual obligation" conditions, alongside the higher payments, saved countless lives. People were able to isolate safely, pay off debts, and plan for the future with some confidence. The positive impact on the physical and mental health of tens of thousands of people is hard to overstate. And the flow-on effects to the state of our economy and politics were tremendous.

As NSW, Victoria and the ACT emerge from 2021's lockdowns – lockdowns that saw some conditionality suspended again, but payments kept below the poverty line – it's time for a serious conversation about making unconditional income support permanent in Australia.

In Australian politics, unconditional welfare is a sacrilegious idea.



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In reality, the most effective way to help people into productive participation is to offer them unconditional support. And the vast majority of Australians support giving appropriate support to anyone who needs it.
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The current political orthodoxy is that it's both economically necessary and broadly popular to treat those who find themselves needing income support with suspicion and hostility. This has had dire impacts.

Over the last generation, governments have introduced a proliferation of surveillance-based conditions – whether it's “workfare” or requirements to apply for numerous jobs, the paternalistic “ParentsNext” and cashless welfare cards, or simply the demand to show up for meetings regardless of other commitments. They've been introduced along with a punitive approach that sees already meagre payments suspended for even minor breaches of these conditions.

This policy approach is based on the rhetoric that welfare conditionality helps people get into the workforce, and the belief – or at least the claim – that people are generally lazy and won't want to work unless they're punished for failing to do so. It's premised on the insistence that highly targeted schemes, which require more and more surveillance of people to monitor compliance with the conditions, are fairer than universal ones. It's justified by a cynical pandering to ideas of “lifters and leaners”, attacks on the character of people who find themselves needing income support, and the assumption that most people disapprove of universal, unconditional welfare for all who need it.

As the contributions to this collection show, this orthodoxy is built on sand. None of these assumptions or beliefs accord with the evidence.

In reality, the most effective way to help people into productive participation is to offer them unconditional support. And the vast majority of Australians support giving appropriate support to anyone who needs it.

The evidence is clear. Conditionality consistently makes life harder for people, making it more difficult to manage already challenging finances and life circumstances, making it therefore harder to find paid labour, harder to care for yourself and family members, harder to make any kind of productive contribution to society at large. It helps no one except the private companies that profit from the processes, and the capitalist, extractivist economic system which depends on enforcing unpleasant and often oppressive work conditions.

Unconditional income support, on the other hand, helps people find their feet. It helps people live their lives with enough confidence to plan for the future, and work out how they can best participate and contribute. It cultivates trust in our society by demonstrating trust in each other. It helps democratise our economy, by giving people the capacity to push back against terrible labour conditions. And it shows basic human decency.

This collection is the latest in a series from the Green Institute looking at various aspects of the question of Universal Basic Income – in this case specifically challenging the idea that our society should put conditions on people's behaviour before giving them the basic support they need to survive. Unless and until we challenge the mythologies and orthodoxies underpinning conditionality, we will never be in a position to successfully implement a UBI. In this context, the collection explores from a range of angles the problems of conditional welfare, the benefits to people's lives of unconditionality, the giant experiment that was COVID response, and popular attitudes to conditionality.

The collection begins with a powerful and passionate explanation by Elisha Portelli of her personal lived experience with conditional welfare and its brief suspension during the pandemic. Even for those aware of how the system operates, Elisha's story is hair-raising and appalling. But she writes of the suspension of "mutual obligations": "in the absence of their ever-present shadow I felt a sense of relief I hadn't felt in years".

Dr Elise Klein and Dr Shelley Bielefeld, two of Australia's foremost researchers on these issues, extend the collection. Klein's contribution outlines her research, and that of many others, into the impact of the suspension of conditionality during pandemic lockdowns. The evidence is striking that unconditional support changed people's lives for the better, lifted countless people out of poverty, helped people find ways to productively contribute – either through the workforce or through caring, for example – and dramatically changed the possibilities for the future of welfare.

Bielefeld looks at the way Australian governments have specifically targeted welfare conditionality at Indigenous people, and how that targeting specifically contradicts the right to self-determination embedded in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. She outlines the evidence that empowering and listening to people is the way forward, and that conditionality in welfare through policies like the Northern Territory Intervention and cashless welfare cards, is a backwards approach that makes for worse outcomes all round.

Maiy Azize, the Deputy Director of Anglicare Australia and a highly respected researcher and advocate, rounds out the collection with an assumption-shattering exploration of data from surveys and attitudinal studies from Australia and overseas, showing that most people are compassionate towards those who find themselves needing support, and believe nobody should be living in poverty. It is clear that the more universal a policy is, the more popular it is, and there is remarkably high support for full, universal, unconditional payments.

Over recent years, advocates and activists got a national conversation going about “raising the rate”, lifting income support payments permanently above the Henderson poverty line. That is crucial, and we must not let up the pressure to make that happen.

And over the last generation and more, as each new condition was applied to the receipt of payments, advocates and activists have resisted.

Now is the moment, as south-eastern Australia emerges from lockdown, to lift our sights beyond resisting individual conditions, beyond raising the rate, and working to permanently make welfare unconditional.

“You belong to us”: The experience of conditional welfare and its brief suspension

I entered the Centrelink system in 2018, naive and hopeful with no idea of what to expect.

I was granted Youth Allowance payments and was referred to a youth program at a job agency. At first, I was assured that my employment consultant would help me find a job! Every fortnight I would visit the office and be given a laptop and get instructed to browse Indeed and Seek, which I had been doing in my own time. After the sessions were over, I would go home, feeling I hadn't accomplished anything. This went on for many months. I was eventually relieved to land a job (albeit a casual one with fluctuating hours) and my agent told me I had to send her my payslips every week, which I did without questioning. I later found out it was so she could get paid for having found me the job. I liked my agent and felt she had my interests at heart. She told me once that previously she worked for a disability services provider, but she would go home from that job feeling guilty for having to force people who were clearly not fit to work into activities and obligations.

When the time came for me to switch to the adult Jobactive services my agent warned me, “You'd better comply with all their requests because they are ruthless about cutting payments.” Rattled by this warning I always tried my best to juggle my increasing work hours with hurried job searches to upload to MyGov. Around this time, I had connected with the Australian Unemployed Workers Union on social media and learnt more about my rights as a Jobseeker. I was impressed by the Mutual Obligations strike they had organised and feeling quite empowered to negotiate terms with my agency when I felt they weren't being flexible enough regarding my circumstances.

So, for many months the agency told me it was acceptable to hold phone appointments instead of in person visits, due to not only my work schedule but the fact I was not fully licenced to drive, didn't own a car and lived in an area inaccessible by public transport. I was grateful for that consideration but having to call up the agency ahead of my shifts to let them know I will be at work and unable to answer their calls later in the day was very stressful. Sometimes I thought to myself it would be better to skip a shift than face the possibility of the agency marking me “non-compliant” if I were to miss a call.

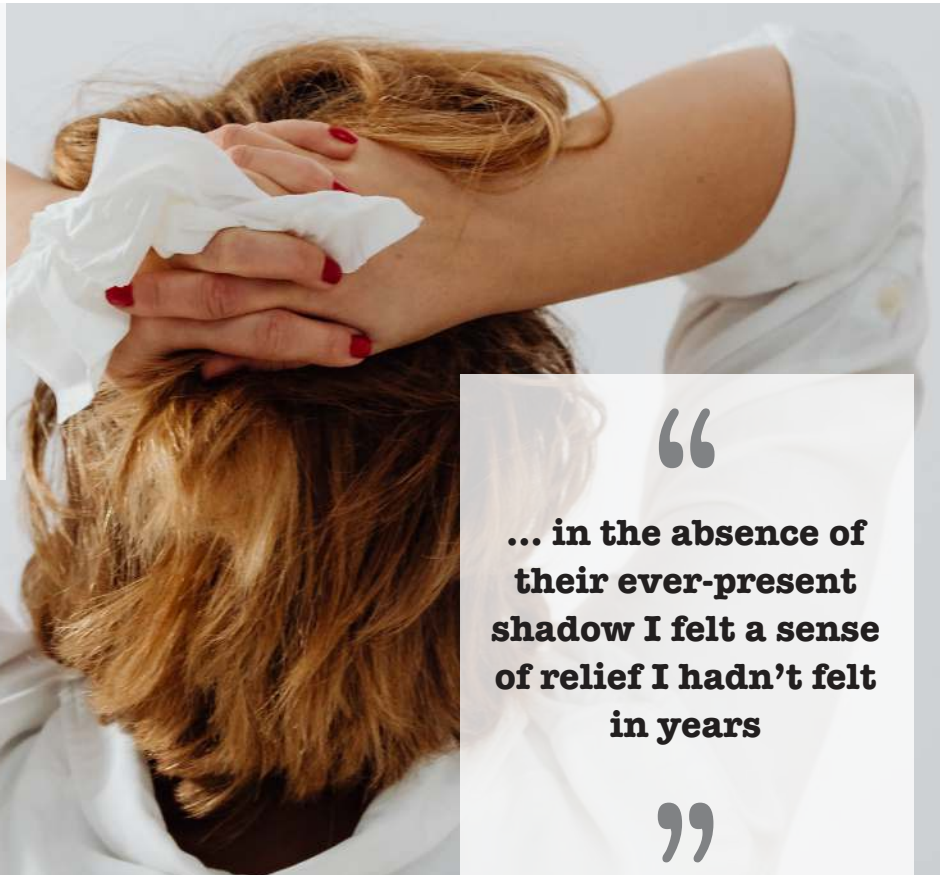
Elisha Portelli writes: *I live in Melbourne's outer west and I acknowledge the Wurundjeri and Bunurong people as the Traditional Owners of this land. I enjoy bird watching and nature photography in my spare time and I have a pet pigeon whom I adore. I'm passionate about the anti-poverty movement and related social justice causes and I am keenly following the work of the AUWU and The Antipoverty Centre.*

One day out of the blue my agency sent me a letter that I had to come into an in-person appointment again. I tried to explain my difficult circumstances, but they said this was non-negotiable. When I was there, an agent updated some details and seemed sympathetic when I explained my circumstance. He assured me he put it as a note in my file that they will only organise phone appointments from now on. Shortly thereafter I had a scheduled call, but they didn't ring. The day after this I received a message that my Jobseeker payments will be suspended for non-compliance. I was immensely stressed as at this time I was getting very few shifts from work. I called the agency to clear things up, but it ended up being one of the most horrible phone calls in my life. The agent who answered chuckled when I said I'm not lying. According to him they did in fact call me (there were no missed calls in my phone) and that my previous consultant did not add anything to the file. I explained my current situation, but he said I must attend an in-person appointment to clear this issue up and likely from here-on. I got very distressed and said I can't. The agent replied, "you don't have a choice, you belong to us."

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Feeling degraded by this experience I called The National Customer Service Line (the government body that handles complaints about employment services providers) to file a formal complaint and ask to be transferred to a new agency. They told me I would have to stay with my current agency until the outcome of the complaint, so I decided to let the complaint go and cut my losses.

I called up all the agencies in the area and queried if they were able to accommodate phone appointments only. There was only one which was willing, so I transferred to them. With one hassle off my back, I would have to return to continue with my Jobseeker activities of sitting down to sift through the job websites in a frenzy for positions to apply for that didn't require lengthy cover letters, videos, or quizzes as part of the application process. In this time, I didn't have a particular consultant assigned to me, it would be someone new every week, even calling from interstate sometimes!

I felt full of despair as I waded the waters of bureaucracy. Did the agencies think I liked being on casual and part time contracts? I wasn't earning enough to disqualify me from Jobseeker payments but I desperately longed to be out of the system. I felt being required to apply for quotas took time away from me carefully searching for and crafting cover letters for positions I was more suitable for.

During the COVID 19 lockdowns there was a suspension of Mutual Obligations and in the absence of their ever-present shadow I felt a sense of relief I hadn't felt in years. I felt more productive and worked meaningfully towards my employment goals. Without an enforced time limit and set number of searches to complete I actually felt able to compare positions on the basis of what skills they required, areas they were located in and put effort into these applications rather than wasting both my time and that of unsuitable employers. Despite the Mutual Obligation suspension my agency eventually started scheduling appointments again and notifying me via text, voicemail, email, and physical letters on a near daily basis and it made me feel very anxious and harassed. The state government had given me a reprieve, but the agency seemed desperate to contact me. In an email they wanted to know if I had started a new job. I had not. I called the National Customer Service line again and the person on the line said, "while you technically don't have to interact with them at this time, they are allowed to schedule calls with you, and it'll be better off for you if you comply."

The premise of the Mutual Obligations includes the promise the agency will assist you in obtaining employment by subsidising the costs of licences or uniforms oftentimes unaffordable to people on Jobseeker payments. I recently ended up finding new employment outside the Mutual Obligation job application system, through a friend who had referred me to an employer. My agent claimed they would cover part of the costs of my urgently needed uniforms and never followed through. Shortly before this they also ignored my requests for assistance with a Working with Children check I needed. I was hundreds of dollars out of pocket and feeling abandoned by the people who claimed they were here to help me.

I feel I would not have been able to get through this all without friends, family and unemployment activists by my side. The Mutual Obligation system has made me feel like a criminal for needing help in today's Australia. The media demonises Jobseekers as "dole bludgers" and the two major political parties ignore our existence as much as they can. Where is the understanding of socio-economic factors such as the prevalence of casualised jobs? Many Jobseekers are under-employed like I was.

The fear of forgetting to submit my job searches and upload them in time and of missing appointments heightened my anxiety and sense of hopelessness. The whole system felt like it wasn't intended to assist me find gainful employment but rather police me, deter me from receiving payments and make profits for private companies.

What I feel is often not considered by people, and even job agencies themselves, is how many people on Jobseeker payments are not unemployed but rather under-employed such as I was. The under-employment issue is a very real one in this country, with many companies offering only casual contracts with no set or guaranteed ongoing hours. Not all these workers even qualify for Jobseeker payments due to strict and unreasonable means tests and parental/partner income tests but those that are fortunate to be approved then must co-operate with the onerous requirements to continue receiving payments.

I would like to see an Australia where our famed values of egalitarianism and "A Fair Go" were apparent in our welfare system. We should be giving people a hand up rather than kicking them when they're down, even more so in times of a worldwide pandemic that has disrupted many industries. We are being forced to jump through endless hoops for nothing other than payments far below the poverty line. This system is killing people.

Australia's COVID Basic Income – what can we learn?

During the first phase of COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns in 2020, the Australian Federal Government radically restructured the social security system to move towards a temporary 'Basic Income like' relief. In addition to making an additional \$550 per fortnight 'Coronavirus Supplement' temporarily available to people receiving various social security payment types, the government suspended, in part, "mutual obligation" activities such as mandatory job applications, work for the dole, and interviews with case workers.

Australia's social security system is notoriously targeted, and the means-test is strictly applied, but this was relaxed in this period to make the eligibility for unemployment benefits broadly applicable. The government waived the assets tests and some waiting periods for various payments. The actual process of making a claim was also made easier, where government removed the hostile conditions designed to deter recipients from even making claims. Claimants initially only needed to make declarations of their income and residency status, rather than providing proof, as well as having the ability to make claims on the phone or online rather than in person.

These measures together made the Australian social security system more generous and unconditional, and is why some, including myself, saw this as a move towards a form of Basic Income. Limited studies of these measures reveal how life changing these measures were for people who had lived on the more hostile social security system before the pandemic. Through an online survey during COVID-19 last year, colleagues and I (Kay Cook, Susan Maury and Kelly Bowey) researched the impacts of this \$550 Supplement and the easing of mutual obligations on recipient's lives. Various important insights emerged that should be taken seriously when considering either a Basic Income or steps such as making income support permanently unconditional.



Dr Elise Klein is a Senior Lecturer at the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University, and a Co-director of the Australian Basic Income Lab. Her research focuses on development policy with a specific interest in work, redistribution, decoloniality and care. Her recent publications include *Postdevelopment in Practice* (co-edited with C.E. Morreo, Routledge, 2019), *'Radical Transformation or Technological Intervention? Two Paths for Universal Basic Income'* (with E. Fouksman, World Development, 2019), *'Unpaid Care, Welfare Conditionality and Expropriation'* (Gender, Work & Organization, 2021) and *'Affective technologies of welfare deterrence in Australia and the United Kingdom'* (Economy and Society, 2021)



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... I could buy things that helped me with employment – equipment for online work, a bicycle for travel, a proper phone ...
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Inadequate and conditional social security payments impede labour market engagement

First, we found that this natural experiment, set up through the government's COVID-19 response, helped people and exposed how counterproductive punitive approaches to social security are to the government's stated aim of getting people into employment. Our findings suggested that the longstanding view by policy makers – that social security payments at a liveable level can be an impediment for people to find work – is limited. Indeed, our research found that when people were given the Supplement and their time back (through reduced mutual obligations), they were able to engage further with the labour market than they had previously been.

As one respondent said about the impact of suspended mutual obligations, “I was able to focus on getting myself back into the workforce. Yes, mutual obligation activities PREVENT people from being able to start a new business or re-enter the workforce as an employee.”

Respondents in our research were able to make strategic decisions about their economic futures such as engaging in study, looking for work and making purchases to help their employment prospects. Another respondent said, “I could buy things that helped me with employment – equipment for online work, a bicycle for travel, a proper phone”.

Who is dependent on whom? People receiving social security contribute a lot to the economy and society

Our research also found that people with the \$550 Supplement and with reduced mutual obligations were productive in a multitude of ways, contributing to society and the economy through unpaid childcare, caring for the elderly, community work and volunteering. One respondent said they were able to, “car[e] for an elderly parent during pandemic and their recovery from major surgery”, and another respondent said that she was able to, “focus on my health needs and my children’s needs that I have been left wholly responsible for raising”.

People on social security are regularly accused of being dependent on welfare, but actually the economy and society at large are heavily dependent on their unpaid labour, updating old thinking on welfare dependency. Yet these people are denied an economic safety net that ensures their survival. The inadequacy of payments goes to a major and enduring flaw in the Australian social security system – its inability to recognise various productive activities people undertake – including unpaid care work which is largely undertaken by women.¹

Poverty is policy-induced

While poverty cannot be attributed to one single factor, our research suggests that social security policy settings directly affect the prevalence of poverty in Australia.

Respondents in our research noted a significant decrease in poverty through the rapid change in policy settings – the introduction of the Supplement and the reduction of mutual obligations. As one respondent in our research replied when asked about the impact of the Supplement, “I was able to afford all my groceries and utilities, I was also able to access all of my medication and didn’t have to choose between food, bills and medication”. This is reflected in population-level studies where research found² that individuals receiving JobSeeker were estimated to have had the largest reduction in household poverty during COVID-19, with poverty rates falling from 67% to 7%. It is shocking to recognise that two thirds of all those receiving JobSeeker prior to the pandemic were living in poverty, and that the simple change in policy was sufficient to lift virtually all of them out of poverty.

Such findings are particularly important for childhood poverty, as our research also suggests that when parents had more money through the Supplement and had their mutual obligations suspended, they felt they were able to better provide for their children.

1 Elise Klein and Andi Sebastian, “Not enough work? There’s plenty, we just need to pay for it”, *The Canberra Times*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6836986/not-enough-work-there-is-plenty-we-just-need-to-pay-for-it/>

2 Ben Phillips, Matthew Gray and Nicholas Biddle, “COVID-19 JobKeeper and JobSeeker impacts on poverty and housing stress under current and alternative economic and policy scenarios”, *ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods*, 29 August, 2020, https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/8/Impact_of_Covid19_JobKeeper_and_Jobseeker_measures_on_Poverty_and_Financial_Stress_FINAL.pdf

Still far from including all in need

However, this COVID-19 Basic Income was not available for all. Non-citizens were excluded, including international students stranded in Australia because of border closures and increases in the price of airline tickets. People receiving the disability support pension, which was paid at lower rate than the COVID-19 Supplement, were also excluded. Other forms of conditionality continued during the pandemic, including compulsory income management, where some recipients of social security compulsorily have parts of their social security quarantined onto a debit card to reduce their ability to withdraw cash and restrict purchases of alcohol and other products. Compulsory income management has been shown to have negative impacts on people's financial and emotional wellbeing.

Deserving vs undeserving?

The government messaging around their generous lockdown measures is also important to note. Initially, the Federal government introduced these measures under the discourse of need – jobs were lost because businesses were forced to close, and workers locked down. This was acknowledgement of the middle-class losing work for conditions that weren't of their making, a discourse in stark contrast to one that the government has long weaponised against the welfare class, where unemployment is a choice and a behavioural failing, despite there also not being enough jobs. This narrative divide between the “deserving” and “undeserving poor” has long been central to the imposition of conditions on welfare payments.

When the positive impacts of their COVID-19 measures on the welfare class started to be more widely acknowledged through the media, the government used public appearances to again stigmatise the welfare class. In an interview on Sydney's 2GB radio, Scott Morrison, instead of talking about how his JobSeeker Supplement of \$550 meant people could now go a week without skipping meals, cited anecdotes of people using it to refuse work. Morrison also said, “What we have to be worried about now is that we can't allow the JobSeeker payment to become an impediment to people going out and doing work, getting extra shifts”³

As the pandemic wore on in Australia, the government's COVID-19 measures were dramatically wound back. In September 2020, 6 months after the introduction of the measures, the \$550 Supplement dramatically reduced by \$300 to a rate of \$250 per fortnight. The measures were wound up all together by April 2021 and replaced with a much more conditional and targeted emergency measure. Many of the gains that people experienced during the first lockdown, were taken away. People in our research reported having to ration food and medicine again.

3 <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/interview-ray-hadley-2gb-2>

Lockdown measures, whilst impacting the majority of the population, excluded those who could buy their movement, including the rich who were able to charter their own travel (including space travel), and pay for expensive hotel quarantine, and exemptions. Globally, billionaires increased their wealth by 50%. In Australia, the Federal government paid out a massive wage subsidy program called Job Keeper to business to keep workers connected to their jobs when they were forced to stay at home. Yet many businesses have overclaimed this payment whilst making profits during the lockdowns. For example, about \$6.2 billion in wage subsidies were paid to businesses with more than \$10 million in turnover that did not experience the minimum 30% fall in turnover in the first six months of the scheme (which was the criterion to be eligible for the subsidy).⁴

The government did not attempt to recoup these overpayments but has doggedly pursued up to 11,000 people who they say may have overclaimed unemployment benefits totalling \$32 million.⁵



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These changes enabled people to turn their attention away from day-to-day survival and towards envisioning and realising a more financially and emotionally sustainable future for themselves and their dependents...
 ”

4 Nassim Khadem, “JobKeeper a \$6.2b ‘sugar hit’ for larger businesses that didn’t take a big revenue hit during the pandemic”, *ABC Online*, Sept 21, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-21/jobkeeper-subsidy-turnover-small-business-covid-pandemic-pbo/100477492>

5 Emilia Terzon, “Centrelink chasing 11,000 welfare recipients over \$32m in ‘pandemic-related debts’”, *ABC Online*, Aug 16, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-16/welfare-pandemic-covid-centrelink-debts-jobkeeper/100379072>

There is a lot to learn from Australia's natural experiment

The introduction of the Supplement and suspension of mutual obligations were almost overnight policy decisions that made a major difference to people's lives. These changes enabled people to turn their attention away from day-to-day survival and towards envisioning and realising a more financially and emotionally sustainable future for themselves and their dependents. These gains are significant for individuals involved, and offer empirical insights into what can be included with some adjustments, into a Basic Income in practice. Yet also to note is the need for any Basic Income to radically restructure privilege, resourcing and power accumulated by the elite, as without that a Basic Income won't achieve the transformation needed.

As we move towards a post-COVID recovery we must include a more caring, supportive and economically secure future for all. A radically redistributive Basic Income will help us get there, and the simple decision to make all social security payments permanently unconditional would be a crucial step.

Welfare Conditionality and Indigenous Peoples: why conditional welfare payments are problematic

Welfare conditionality is about placing conditions on people's access to social security payments, and it is underpinned by the rhetoric that such conditions change the behaviour of people in need who seek state support for their everyday essentials. Often such behavioural change objectives have been determined by policymakers, without the input, let alone the consent, of those to whom the welfare conditionality levers are applied. It is therefore unsurprising that the consequences of welfare conditionality measures are frequently grim for people who are subject to them.¹

While there has been a long history of social assistance coming with conditions attached, stretching back to the English Poor Laws² beginning in the 16th century, contemporary welfare conditionality programs often impose significant obligations on people claiming state support that are multi-layered and complex in terms of their consequences. In many ways, contemporary welfare conditionality turns obtaining and retaining social security payments into a labour-intensive activity in and of itself. It is fair to say that, in this way, welfare conditionality structures disincentives into claiming government income support.³

Peter Dwyer explains how “very few rights to social benefits and services in contemporary welfare states are in effect ‘unconditional’” and that “conditions of category, circumstances and conduct ... routinely function to define and limit an individual's right to social security.”⁴ Australia is far from unique; this occurs on a global scale, with Western nations eagerly pursuing a multitude of welfare conditionality programs.

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- 1 Marston, G, Mendes, P, Bielefeld, S, Peterie, M, Staines, Z and Roche, S (2020) Hidden Costs: An Independent Study into Income Management in Australia (School of Social Science, The University of Queensland: Brisbane, Australia). <https://www.incomemanagementstudy.com/publications>
 - 2 The National Archives, '1834 Poor Law', <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/1834-poor-law/> (accessed 18/10/2021).
 - 3 Shelley Bielefeld (2021) 'Administrative Burden and the Cashless Debit Card: Stripping Time, Autonomy and Dignity from Social Security Recipients' *Australian Journal of Public Administration* (accepted 23 June). DOI:10.1111/1467-8500.12509
 - 4 Peter Dwyer (2019) 'Editors Introduction' in Peter Dwyer (ed) *Dealing with Welfare Conditionality: Implementation and effects* (Policy Press, 2019) p 2.



Before her employment at Griffith Law School and the Law Futures Centre at Griffith University as an ARC DECRA Fellow and Senior Lecturer, **Dr Shelley Bielefeld** was the Inaugural Braithwaite Research Fellow at the School of Regulation and Global Governance (RegNet) at the Australian National University. Her current research projects are an ARC DECRA: Regulation and Governance for Indigenous Welfare: Poverty Surveillance and its Alternatives (DE180100599) and an ARC Discovery Project: Conditional Welfare: A Comparative Case Study of Income Management Policies (DP180101252).

An approach in line with Indigenous People's rights to self-determination would see this historical approach, which has particularly impacted Indigenous Peoples, reversed and replaced with a system designed to empower people, based on deep listening to people's experiences.

The Intervention, BasicsCard, CDC and CDP: significantly impacting Indigenous Peoples

Australia's commitment to welfare conditionality has been entrenched for many decades.⁵ However, in terms of how this has impacted Australia's First Peoples, welfare conditionality has often been intensified,⁶ especially when welfare reforms are introduced in remote Indigenous communities or in areas where a high proportion of government income support recipients are Indigenous.

Lengthy colonial power dynamics have resulted in an Australian Indigenous policymaking approach where laws and policies have often been pre-determined by government and then presented to First Nations Peoples as a fait accompli. For example, this occurred with the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (the "Intervention"), and the lack of consultation and negotiation with Northern Territory Indigenous elders and communities has been criticised in the strongest terms,⁷ as has the trauma, shame, and stigma inflicted through this policy.

In addition to a range of other measures, the Intervention introduced additional welfare conditionality into Indigenous communities with compulsory income management via the BasicsCard, which has a PIN and allows cardholders to purchase "priority needs"⁸ while also restricting a range of purchases⁹ from income quarantined funds. Key aspects of the government's rationale¹⁰ were to reduce access to alcohol, tobacco, pornography and gambling products, and to promote "socially responsible behaviour". Compulsory income management has been applied irrespective of whether people managed their finances responsibly and regardless of whether they engaged in the type of behaviours that the government attributed to Indigenous Peoples who were living in prescribed areas.

5 Philip Mendes (2020) 'Neo-Liberalism and Welfare Conditionality in Australia: A Critical Analysis of the Aims and Outcomes of Compulsory Income Management Programs' *Journal of Australian Political Economy* 86: 157–177.

6 Shelley Bielefeld (2018b) 'Indigenous Peoples, Neoliberalism and the State: A Retreat from Rights to "Responsibilisation" via the Cashless Welfare Card', in Deirdre Howard-Wagner, Maria Bargh and Isabel Altamarino-Jiminez (eds), *The Neoliberal State, Recognition and Indigenous Rights: New paternalism to New Imaginings*, Australian National University Press, 147–165.

7 Dr Gondarra et al (2011) 'Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011 and two related Bills' www.respectandlisten.org/submission/stronger-futures.html (accessed 18/10/2021).

8 *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999* (Cth) section 123TH.

9 *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999* (Cth) section 123TI.

10 *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999* (Cth) section 123TB.

DR SHELLEY BIELEFELD: Welfare Conditionality and Indigenous Peoples:
why conditional welfare payments are problematic

Although the BasicsCard has been portrayed by government as a supportive¹¹ welfare conditionality measure, this view has routinely been contested¹² by those cardholders who are subject to it as a compulsory measure. Furthermore, power outages¹³ in remote locations that persist over days mean that people are left without access to essentials when the BasicsCard cannot be used.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson, an Australian First Nations scholar and a pioneer of Critical Indigenous Studies, explains that measures such as compulsory income management pressure Indigenous Peoples to behave as “extra good citizens”.¹⁴ The pressure of being subject to surveillance and control by others when shopping using the BasicsCard has also been reported in government evaluation of income management: “we had incidences in the supermarkets where the checkout chick would tell the customer, no, oh well you are on that card, you can’t have that steak. You go and get that other steak, that cheaper one. You are wasting your money.”¹⁵

11 Australian Government (2021) ‘Income Management’ <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programmes-services/family-finance/income-management> (accessed 18/10/2021).

12 Emilia Terzon (2019) ‘Australians on Basics Card anxious for welfare support change ahead of federal election’, ABC News, 8 May 2019, updated 8 Oct 2019 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-08/basics-card-welfare-cashless-northern-territory-darwin/11087340> (accessed 18/10/2021).

13 Lorena Allam (2020) ‘Calls for emergency taskforce after outages leave Aboriginal communities “hungry and forgotten”’, *The Guardian*, 10 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/mar/10/calls-for-emergency-taskforce-after-outages-leave-aboriginal-communities-hungry-and-forgotten> (accessed 18/10/2021).

14 Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2009) ‘Imagining the good Indigenous citizen: race war and the pathology of patriarchal White sovereignty’ 15(2) *Cultural Studies Review* 61–79, p 63.

15 Bray J, Gray M, Hand K, Bradbury B, Eastman C & Katz I (2012). *Evaluating New Income Management in the Northern Territory: First Evaluation Report*, Social Policy Research Centre UNSW, Sydney.



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Towards the end of 2020, the Federal Government announced that BasicsCard holders in the Northern Territory would all be forcibly transferred to the Cashless Debit Card (CDC), and the vast majority of these cardholders are Indigenous. This was yet another instance of the government telling Indigenous communities what they were about to do to them rather than working “in partnership” with communities, as the recent *Closing the Gap* policy said would be necessary and appropriate for better outcomes.¹⁶

Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT) CEO John Paterson stated that the proposed compulsory roll out of the CDC in the Northern Territory was “like the Howard era Intervention all over again”.¹⁷ Numerous Aboriginal organisations went on the public record demonstrating that they were opposed to a mandatory CDC rollout; their reasons included that there had been no previous trial of the card in the Northern Territory, research indicates that the card is ineffective, and there had been no meaningful consultation with Northern Territory Indigenous communities about the transition prior to the formulation of the law and policy change.¹⁸

In December 2020, the Federal Government realised that they could not get the votes in Parliament to make the CDC a permanent compulsory measure in the Northern Territory and other sites¹⁹ where the CDC has been implemented. Their compromise²⁰ was to extend the CDC until the end of 2022 in the earlier trial sites (where most cardholders are subject to the CDC as a compulsory measure with 80% of their fortnightly income restricted to the card), and to introduce the CDC in the Northern Territory as a voluntary measure with 50% of people’s fortnightly income restricted to the card. Income restricted to the CDC cannot be spent on alcohol, gambling or “cash-like” products.²¹ However, in practical terms there is also a range of other everyday items that people have had trouble purchasing with the CDC.²²

Despite the Government claiming that the CDC is not a racially discriminatory²³ program, data from 3 September 2021 shows that Indigenous Peoples are grossly overrepresented under the CDC.²⁴ Research shows that the CDC has created a range of problems for numerous cardholders, from difficulties with basic

16 Australian Government (2020) *Closing the Gap Report 2020* <https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au> (accessed 19/10/2021).

17 Shahni Wellington, ‘Aboriginal organisations attack cashless welfare card “intervention”’, NITV News, 12 September 2019 <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/nitv-news/article/2019/09/12/aboriginal-organisations-attack-cashless-welfare-card-intervention> (accessed 19/10/2021).

18 Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, ‘Submissions Received by the Committee’ https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/CashlessWelfareContinua/Submissions (accessed 19/10/2021).

19 Department of Social Services, ‘Cashless Debit Card’, Australian Government, <https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children/programmes-services/welfare-conditionality/cashless-debit-card-overview> (accessed 19/10/2021).

20 Social Security (Administration) Amendment (Continuation of Cashless Welfare) Bill 2020 https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_LEgislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bld=r6608 (accessed 19/10/2021).

21 *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999* (Cth) section 124PM.

22 Marston, G, Mendes, P, Bielefeld, S, Peterie, M, Staines, Z and Roche, S (2020) *Hidden Costs: An Independent Study into Income Management in Australia* (School of Social Science, The University of Queensland: Brisbane, Australia). <https://www.incomemanagementstudy.com/publications>

23 Explanatory Memorandum Social Security (Administration) Amendment (Continuation of Cashless Welfare) Bill 2020, p 34.

24 Australian Government, ‘Australian Government Cashless Debit Card Program’ <https://data.gov.au/dataset/ds-dga-e5a6ca38-b17c-4e65-af70-84e7759a0ffa/details?q=> (accessed 19/10/2021).

bill payment to difficulties managing their finances.²⁵ Evidence reveals that the CDC is a financial services product that is not working well for many of those who have been forced to use it, with government evaluation research indicating that 74% of people on the card wanted to exit the program.²⁶

As is the case with the BasicsCard, people on the CDC have also been impacted by power outages and other technical problems,²⁷ which has rendered their social security income inaccessible at times and restricted their capacity to pay for essentials when these were needed.

Another contemporary form of welfare conditionality that greatly impacts Indigenous Peoples living in remote areas is the Community Development Program (CDP),²⁸ where workfare obligations have been imposed as a condition of access to social security payments with the goal of “increasing employment and breaking the cycle of welfare dependency”. As is the case with the BasicsCard and the CDC, CDP is described by government as a way of supporting people in receipt of social security.

During the early phase of the program, CDP labour obligations were imposed for five hours a day and scheduled across five days of the week for working age program participants. In 2019, the labour obligations were reduced to 20 hours per week for program participants, with a little more flexibility in terms of when the labour needed to be undertaken. However, steep penalties for non-compliance with program rules have routinely been administered during much of CDP’s operation.²⁹

CDP has been criticised as a penalty heavy regime that ignores the structural barriers to employment faced by Indigenous Peoples living in remote regions, with penalties administered under CDP creating “financial hardship” that “negatively impacted on ... food and housing security, physical and mental health and well-being” for program participants.³⁰ During the early phase of the COVID pandemic, from 1 January to 31 March 2020, 22,872 “Total Financial Penalties” and 18,216 “Income Support payment suspensions” were administered under the CDP program.³¹ It is impossible to see these penalties as a supportive measure that can or will deliver positive behaviour change.

25 Shelley Bielefeld (2021) ‘Administrative Burden and the Cashless Debit Card: Stripping Time, Autonomy and Dignity from Social Security Recipients’ *Australian Journal of Public Administration* (accepted 23 June). DOI:10.1111/1467-8500.12509

26 Kostas Mavromaras, Megan Moskos, Stephane Mahuteau, and Linda Isherwood (2021) *Evaluation of the Cashless Debit Card in Ceduna, East Kimberley and the Goldfields Region: Consolidated Report*, Future of Employment and Skills Research Centre, University of Adelaide.

27 Rangi Hirini (2019) ‘Cashless card outage affects hundreds across the nation’, *National Indigenous Television* (NITV), SBS, 21 January 2019, <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/nitv-news/article/2019/01/21/cashless-card-outage-affects-hundreds-across-nation> (accessed 19/10/2021).

28 National Indigenous Australians Agency (2021) ‘Community Development Program (CDP)’, Australian Government <https://www.niaa.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/employment/cdp> (accessed 19/10/2021).

29 National Indigenous Australians Agency (2020) ‘Community Development Program Quarterly Compliance Data’, Australian Government <https://www.niaa.gov.au/resource-centre/indigenous-affairs/community-development-program-quarterly-compliance-data> (accessed 19/10/2021).

30 National Social Security Rights Network (2020) *Community Development Program — The impact of penalties on participants*.

31 National Indigenous Australians Agency (2020) Community Development Program (CDP) March 2020 Quarterly Compliance Data.

As the pandemic continued, CDP penalties were halted, and in the 2021 budget the government announced a new Remote Jobs Program will replace CDP by 2023,³² with some trials of the new program commencing “by the end of 2021”.³³

Coercive, Counterproductive and against the Right to Self-Determination

There are good reasons to be sceptical about the claimed virtues of welfare conditionality via workfare at the best of times,³⁴ however, during a pandemic, the imposition of workfare obligations on anyone for any duration of time is especially cruel and shows a reckless disregard for the people upon whom these bad bargains are imposed. Although governments imposing welfare conditionality often emphasise that the terms are “agreements” between the social security recipient and the state, the nature of welfare conditionality is essentially coercive in character.

As Robert Goodin explains, “The rhetoric of workfare and mutual obligation insists that the unemployed repay their dole payments with some very specific thing: labour time, spent in one of the prescribed activities”; however, “the unemployed have no choice but to accept the offer on whatever terms it is made, whether or not they think it is a ‘good’, ‘fair’ or even ‘remotely reasonable’ offer. It is a ‘contract concluded under duress’, in that sense.”³⁵

Overriding the autonomy of people in need of social security has been a popular pastime for conservative governments desiring to reshape the behaviour of those struggling to survive on the lowest incomes. As other pieces in this collection show, welfare conditionality measures do not contribute to constructive behaviour change and hark back to a time when people in need were told to bow their heads and bend their knees in deference to their socio-economic superiors.

While this is a problematic power dynamic for all people, for Indigenous Peoples it is a specific and direct contradiction of their rights to self-determination.

Indigenous peoples have a right to self-determination under Article 3 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and a right to autonomy contained in Article 4.³⁶ An essential feature

32 National Indigenous Australians Agency (2021) ‘Community Development Program (CDP)’, Australian Government <https://www.niaa.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/employment/cdp> (accessed 19/10/2021).

33 National Indigenous Australians Agency (2021) ‘New Remote Jobs Program to replace CDP and changes to Mutual Obligation Requirements’ <http://www.niaa.gov.au/news-centre/indigenous-affairs/new-remote-jobs-program-replace-cdp-and-changes-mutual-obligation-requirements> (accessed 19/10/2021).

34 Guy Standing (2014) *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens* (Bloomsbury) p 262.

35 Robert Goodin (2002) ‘Structures of Mutual Obligation’ *Journal of Social Policy* 31(4): 579–596, p 592.

36 UNDRIP https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf (accessed 19/10/2021).

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”

of self-determination is that it allows free independent choice – an issue of critical importance for First Peoples³⁷ – and the very thing that each of these welfare conditionality programs with compulsory program elements systematically erodes.

Australia's dominant politicians have often portrayed First Nations Peoples as “not yet”³⁸ ready for the challenges of self-management, self-determination, and autonomous decision making – both on a collective level and on an individual level. As Megan Davis, a First Nations scholar with human rights expertise points out, Indigenous Peoples are often treated as if they have to “earn” human rights through modelling “good behaviour or the performance of duties.”³⁹

37 Dr Gondarra et al (2011) ‘Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011 and two related Bills’ www.respectandlisten.org/submission/stronger-futures.html (accessed 18/10/2021).

38 Desmond Manderson (2008) ‘Not Yet: Aboriginal People and the Deferral of the Rule of Law’ *Arena Journal* 29/30: 219, p 237.

39 Megan Davis (2007) ‘Arguing over Indigenous Rights: Australia and the United Nations’ in Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson (eds), *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia* (Arena Publications) p 104.

Empowering and Listening: the way forward

Rather than routinely restricting the human rights of Indigenous Peoples in need of resource redistribution, governments need to address “the immediate, underlying, and structural causes of the non-realisation of rights.”⁴⁰ The government needs to create programs that genuinely empower rather than disempower people in need, and listen deeply, respectfully and responsively when program participants give feedback about their everyday experiences. Programs such as the BasicsCard, CDC, and CDP, imposing strict conditions on the receipt of income support are diametrically opposed to this approach.

The COVID-19 pandemic reveals now more than ever the impact of structural factors on unemployment and underemployment rates.⁴¹ The reality of market failure looms large, and the reluctance of capital to cater for the needs of humanity is apparent, with turbo charged inequality during the pandemic.⁴² However, the pandemic provides an opportunity for reflecting on the purpose of social security.

Alternative mechanisms for resource redistribution are needed – dignity enhancing alternatives to the punitive, stigmatising, expensive and intensive welfare conditionality policy cycle. The quest for unconditionality in social security has much to recommend it, and the people who are currently made more vulnerable through intensive welfare conditionality measures⁴³ could certainly benefit from a reprieve, and even more so from a permanent change in approach.

40 Australian Human Rights Commission (2012) *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Engagement Toolkit 2012*, Australian Human Rights Commission.

41 David Taylor (2020) ‘Some jobs lost forever as coronavirus pandemic accelerates structural change’, ABC News, 19 Aug 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-19/some-jobs-lost-forever-as-coronavirus-pandemic-drives-change/12571648> (accessed 19/10/2021).

42 Oxfam, *Power, Profits and the Pandemic: From corporate extraction for the few to an economy that works for all* (September 2020).

43 Shelley Bielefeld (2018) ‘Cashless Welfare Transfers for “Vulnerable” Welfare Recipients – Law, Ethics and Vulnerability’ *Feminist Legal Studies* 26(1): 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-018-9363-6>

Compassion and unconditionality are popular. Let's tell that story

Across Australia, North America, and much of Europe, income support is becoming more and more conditional. Australia has been at the vanguard of this trend, adapting many conditional programs from overseas and pioneering some at home. Australians in need of support now find themselves in one of the most conditional and tightly targeted systems in the developed world.

Many of these changes have been opposed by Australia's welfare sector. Yet despite the efforts of leading charities and much of civil society, conditions and obligations continue to expand. From Work for the Dole to drug testing programs, conditionality has become firmly entrenched into Australia's social security. The Coronavirus pandemic offered only a brief reprieve, with mutual obligations re-starting as this paper goes to print. In private, much of the sector has accepted this trend as a permanent reality.

Real change is possible. To achieve it, advocates need a better understanding public attitudes to conditionality and universalism. Understanding these attitudes, and the values that underlie them, is critical to changing the conversation. Anglicare Australia, one of Australia's largest charitable networks, has embarked on a series of landmark studies to better understand attitudes and what they mean for efforts to build a universal, unconditional support system.

Contrary to assumptions, the research has uncovered that people are sympathetic towards those in need. It also shows that the more universal and unconditional welfare payments are, the more popular they are. Telling that story, and leaning into it, is how we can make change.

Perceptions shape reality

Anglicare Australia's work began in 2018 with a nationally representative survey which found high levels of compassion towards people on government payments. All demographic groups thought that more must be done to support people on government benefits, wanted live in a country that looks after people in need, and believed that poverty can and should be eradicated. Only a small minority disagreed



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with the idea that people experiencing poverty are the same as them.¹ That work has continued in the years followed, culminating in a recent Anglicare Australia survey showing strong support for a liveable, unconditional income for all.²

So why haven't there been demands for action? Why is Australia's social security system more conditional than ever? And why, if public attitudes are sympathetic, do so many advocates believe that the public is apathetic or even hostile to people in need of help? These questions are more relevant than ever as lockdowns come to an end and mutual obligations are reintroduced.

The research shows that people are influenced by their perceptions of what other people think.

The 2018 attitudinal study found that only a small minority of people (10%) agreed with the notion that those who rely on government support deserve to live in poverty. 78% rejected the statement. A greater number (79%) agreed that anybody could find themselves experiencing poverty, with only 8% disagreeing.³ People understand the impact of circumstance, and believe that those who need help still deserve to live a dignified life.

This is in stark contrast with what people's perceptions of others. Only half of those surveyed agreed that Australians are sympathetic to those experiencing poverty.⁴ This gulf between perceptions and reality can have major implications. For example, studies cited by Common Cause show that people who hold this inaccurate belief are much less likely to act on their own compassionate values.⁵

Perceptions influence how we as human beings relate to other people. How many of us have told friends or family that we're volunteering because it would be good for our career, perhaps thinking they wouldn't understand our real motivations? Or explained moving into a more rewarding, lower-paid job by saying it will help us gain experience? This is probably driven by a false perception that other people are not as compassionate as we are. It is this same perception that drives some anti-poverty activists to couch their campaigns in the language of economics and self-interest instead of care and support. This only perpetuates the false notion that people are not sympathetic to those in need. Breaking this cycle is crucial to ending conditionality. People are much less likely to volunteer, sign a petition, make a donation, or even cast a vote for changing the system if they believe that nobody else cares.

1 Anglicare Australia (2018) The real story: What Australians think about poverty and how we shape the debate. *State of the Family*, Volume 18. Anglicare Australia, Canberra.

2 Anglicare Australia (2021) Valuing Every Contribution: What a basic income would mean for Australians. *Australia Fair Series*, Volume 2. Anglicare Australia, Canberra.

3 Op cit: Anglicare Australia (2018)

4 Ibid.

5 Crompton, T., Sanderson, B., Prentice, M., Weinstein, N., Smith, O. and Kasser, T. (2016) *Perceptions Matter: The Common Cause UK Values Survey*. Common Cause Foundation, London.

Seen in this light, the tendency to assume opposition and blame the public for the state of Australia's social security system is harmful. Those who hear these messages are less likely to act on their supportive attitudes.

Universalism is popular

The second factor shaping public debate is the design of Australia's social security system, which works against those who depend on it most. Australia has one of the most targeted welfare systems in the world, and Anglicare Australia's research found that benefits become less popular as they become more targeted.⁶

The most popular aspects of Australia's safety net are Medicare and the age pension. They are also the most universal. Everyone is eligible for a Medicare rebate, and all but the wealthiest retirees receive a pension. These have proven to be some of the hardest benefits to cut. A deeply unpopular freeze on increases to Medicare payments was introduced in 2013, only to be abandoned two years before it was set to expire. Proposals to raise the pension age, also floated in 2013, were quickly abandoned after a major public backlash. This is in contrast to targeted payments, such as JobSeeker and Youth Allowance, which have become less popular as they have become more targeted. They have also stagnated over time and become subject to more stringent conditions.

6 Op cit: Anglicare Australia (2018)



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 ”

Targeting and conditionality have become two sides of the same coin, with governments drawing on both strategies in tandem to undermine social security. It is not a coincidence that Medicare users have not been targeted for debt-raising efforts or extreme automation. Such moves would be deeply unpopular given the sheer number of people who rely on the system, showing how universalism can guard against stigma and conditionality. When more people get a benefit it becomes normalised, and that constituency becomes more politically powerful. Importantly, universalism also makes it harder to divide groups. People who use Medicare services can't be pitted against taxpayers because most people are both. The Abbott government tested the limits of this approach and was punished for it.

These findings highlight a major tension for anti-poverty advocates, charities, and other civil society groups: government rhetoric about scarcity has pushed much of the welfare sector away from supporting universal programs and towards benefits that are targeted to people at the margins of society. This may seem like a rational approach, focusing efforts on those in greatest need. Yet the more entrenched this approach becomes, the more vulnerable these constituencies become to scapegoating, cuts, and tighter conditions on their lives.

The role of language in shaping debates

Looking closely at the use of language reveals a great deal about how the debate on welfare has evolved. It also points to how narratives can change.

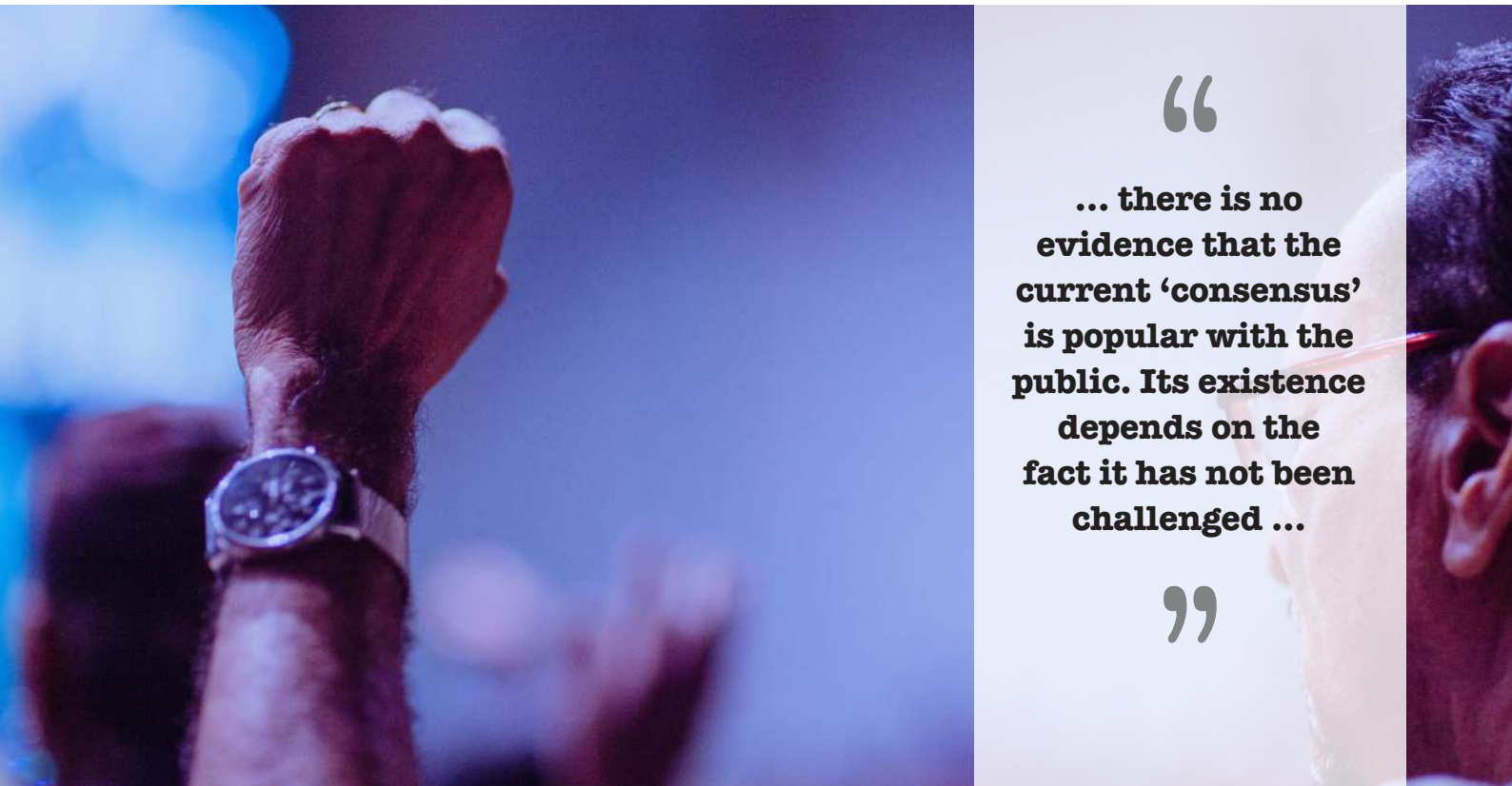
A recent Anglicare Australia study into the history of welfare conditionality in Australia and overseas aimed to understand how people felt about the welfare state when it was being watered down, and language that the leaders of the day were using. Conventional wisdom is that these conditions were a response to public opinion, with politicians 'getting tough' on benefits because doing so was popular. The research shows that this perception is false.

In the UK, the welfare state was popular throughout the 1980s and early 90s. This is in spite of the fact that the Conservative government spent much of that time trying and failing to dismantle the safety net. These early attacks on benefits were unpopular. Research shows that attitudes didn't harden until the late 90s.⁷

So, what drove this change in attitudes? An analysis of parliamentary speeches found a clear pattern. Once the Labour Party under Tony Blair changed its rhetoric on welfare, the public changed its mind. From the mid-90s and onwards, Labour spent less time talking about the benefits of social security and more time talking about problems with the system.⁸ This was a critical factor swaying public opinion.

7 Curtice, J. (2010) Thermostat or weathervane? Public reactions to spending and redistribution under New Labour. In Park, A., Curtice, J., Thomson, K., Phillips, M., Clery, E. and Butt, S. (Eds.) *British Social Attitudes: the 26th Report*. Sage, London.

8 O'Grady, T. (2017) *How politicians created, rather than reacted to, negative public opinion on benefits*. London School of Economics and Political Science, London.



“
... there is no evidence that the current ‘consensus’ is popular with the public. Its existence depends on the fact it has not been challenged ...
”

Anglicare Australia has not been able to replicate this research in Australia as very little is known about Australian attitudes towards the social security system before the 2000s. It does seem clear that the consensus on mutual obligation and welfare between both sides of politics was forged in the late 90s, around the same time as Blair's ascension in the UK.

There are many ways to interpret this research. In one interpretation, it suggests that labour parties and other progressive actors are more influential in debates on income and welfare than their conservative counterparts. However, it also shows that governments cannot shape attitudes on their own without a political consensus. This consensus is critical. It is the sum of the language used in the public domain, what is said on purpose, and what is implied by omission.

In Australia, much of civil society does not see itself as part of this process. Many advocates and organisations instead see themselves as passive actors, reacting to shifts in opinion instead of shaping them, acting within what they assume is inevitable consensus on mutual obligation and scarcity. Yet there is no evidence that the current ‘consensus’ is popular with the public. Its existence depends on the fact it has not been challenged.

The belief in this consensus comes through in the sector's language. As part of its study of social attitudes, Anglicare Australia conducted an in-depth language analysis that looked at how the welfare sector and

anti-poverty advocates communicate with the public. It found that advocates spent more time repeating opposing arguments instead of making their own.⁹ This can be seen when studying statements like *'Let's not replay the same old inaccurate story – that Australia's young unemployed people are lazy and don't want to work.'*

Examples like these stem from the idea that the public supports tough conditions for people in need of help. That idea was debunked by Anglicare Australia's own studies, and by countless others. It also stems from the idea that an opposing idea needs to be repeated in order to be challenged. This is at odds with research showing that drawing attention to opposing arguments makes people more likely to accept them.¹⁰ When advocates accept an opposing position as their starting point, and then repeat it, they are adding to a false consensus. Instead, they should be doing everything they can to avoid repeating messages about scarcity and conditionality.

Saying what we mean, meaning what we say

Anglicare Australia's research found that people on government payments are spoken about by advocates in ways that are defensive and qualified. Advocates tend to focus on those who are sick, incapacitated, or already in paid work. These groups are often singled out, with the emphasis that such people should not live in poverty.¹¹ This perpetuates existing narratives surrounding conditionality, and buys into the idea of a 'deserving poor' by equivocating on the question of who deserves help.

This approach is unnecessary and misguided. Far from supporting conditionality, the latest Anglicare Australia research shows that a strong majority of people support a liveable income for all, without conditions attached (77%).¹² Previous studies also show that equivocation doesn't work. Of all the value statements in Anglicare Australia's 2018 attitudinal survey, the one that drew the most support was the statement that *nobody* deserves to live in poverty (86% agreement).¹³ Statements that were more qualified or focused on specific groups attracted less support.

This might seem like a surprising result. Many advocates have been led to believe that a person's employment or disability status would make people more sympathetic to their plight. Instead, the clearer value statement proved to be much more powerful. It's a strange contradiction that so many people, including professional communicators and campaigners, are taught to qualify their beliefs to attract support. This is a mistake. Advocates should not shy away from simply and clearly communicating their belief in unconditional support.

⁹ Op cit: Anglicare Australia (2018)

¹⁰ Lakoff, G. (2004) *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*. Chelsea Green Publishing Co, Hartford.

¹¹ Op cit: Anglicare Australia (2018)

¹² Op cit: Anglicare Australia (2021)

¹³ Ibid.

Making the case for change

Perhaps the biggest change that civil society will need to make is to see the political debate surrounding social security for what it is, and join it. Much of the material reviewed for Anglicare Australia's language analysis showed a tendency to focus on evidence and research, speaking to politicians rather than building support among the public with values-led arguments. This has been a losing strategy for decades.

This is not to say that the sector's work should be anything other than evidence-based. Nor is it to say that the research is not amply available. There is no evidence that cashless welfare cards are helping people, despite a decade and a half of extensions to the program.¹⁴ Work for the Dole leaves its participants less employable than when they signed up, and the government's own reviews have described its Aboriginal Work for the Dole scheme as pointless and harmful to the communities who take part.¹⁵ Jobactive has been little more than an opportunity for private companies to skim government money, with inquiries reporting that "participants are gaining employment in spite of Jobactive, not because of it."¹⁶

14 Department of Social Services (2017) *Cashless Debit Card Trial Evaluation. Final Evaluation Report*. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

15 Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2018) *The many pathways of the Community Development Programme – Summary report of community voices and stakeholder perspectives from eight communities*. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

16 Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment (2019) *Jobactive: failing those it is intended to serve*. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.



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Much of this evidence has been commissioned by and for the government itself. Yet while governments frame these debates in terms of discipline, responsibility, and reciprocity, many advocates have eschewed values-based narratives in favour of technical arguments that erase the human experience. For example, the government's recent efforts to subject jobseekers to drug tests were framed around social responsibility,¹⁷ while the welfare sector responded by highlighting the exorbitant cost of the program.

In many ways, this is puzzling. Charities exist to deliver a social good. Their responsibilities extend beyond their service expertise to community, civic and moral spheres. These public goods can't be captured in the impoverished language of cost and logistics. By avoiding the question of values, advocates are abandoning their area of natural strength.

With much of the public already on side, there is little to lose from telling a values-based story about what our welfare system could look like. Australia's regime of punishment and compliance can and should be replaced with a system that looks more like the one people say they want,¹⁸ with less busywork, more support, and real help for people who want it. Poverty is a structural crisis, not an individual one, and Australians know it. It is a diabolical problem that so many have accepted a narrative that so few believe.

For too long advocates have viewed the public as a problem to solve. But research shows that the public are allies. For civil society, the challenge is to develop a language that embraces and engages them.

17 See, for example, the Minister's second reading for the introduction of the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Drug Testing Trial) Bill 2019.

18 Anglicare Australia (2020) Asking Those Who Know. Anglicare Australia, Canberra.



Can we imagine a future in which welfare is unconditional?

Can we imagine a future where anyone in Australia who needs help to make ends meet gets that help from government, without having to jump through flaming hoops to prove they deserve it?

Can we imagine a future where we simply say that nobody deserves to live in poverty, where we agree that poverty is a political choice, and that by making a different political choice we can eradicate it?

