

Everybody Counts

 Samaritans  
your local **ANGLICARE**  
election 2010

## Children Are Not Political Pawns / A comment on compulsory income management

The news that opposition leader Tony Abbott plans to quarantine 50% of unemployment benefits if he wins the election fills me with apprehension. We already have a labour government which plans to extend this income management scheme across the Northern Territory and beyond without any real evidence that it has in (anyway) been effective. Tony Abbott's scheme appears to be going one step further and in my view both major parties are heading in the wrong direction.

Income management is supposedly being introduced to improve the welfare of children. There is an assumption that if you can pay people in kind rather than money then children will be better fed, will attend school more regularly and their parents will smoke fewer cigarettes etc. It's our experience at Samaritans that this is unlikely to be the case.

We see a thousand families every month who are on the lowest income, who don't have enough to survive on and need some support to get by for the next few weeks. These tend to be families who have tried to manage on their benefit or their allowance and something unexpected occurred in their lives, like an unexpected bill or a sickness in the family and they're struggling to cope. When they come to us, we don't give them money, we may give them a food voucher and we may give them a voucher to help them pay their electricity bill. We at least give them a food parcel so that they have enough food to feed their family until their next cheque comes in, but we do not give them money.

We see 150 families a week who can't afford their electricity bill, again we don't give them money, we give them a voucher to help pay off the bill and we introduce them to the concept of income management – voluntary income management. We suggest that they could get their electricity bill paid directly by CentrePay and this may be a way for them to begin to manage their finances better and they can take control over their lives. We find that families readily accept this advice and readily put themselves onto this type of scheme, unless they are ravaged by addiction, when sometimes even that doesn't work. When people are ravaged by addiction, what you tend to find is that the coupons, the vouchers become used instead of money, so income management may not work for them even if compulsory

One of the joys people in our emergency welfare centres have is the joy of seeing the people who come to us with major financial problems who, with a little support sort through the issues and get back on their feet.

Many other people come to emergency relief with little or no financial management skills and we find that linking them with our financial counsellor is very beneficial and a very empowering way to deal with their situation. They then have the skills to manage better in the future. Having no choice in where these dollars are allocated

would further prevent the building of these financial management skills. We should bear in mind that Samaritans sees only those people who have problems. We see 1000 people every month and help a thousand people every month, but these are the people who are having problems and are in serious financial situations. They don't have families to turn to, but many others survive and manage quite well to pay their rent and feed their families whilst living on unemployment benefits. So why bother them if they are managing already, they will find having their payments quarantined a humiliating experience. We have heard reports from the Northern Territory that you have to go to a certain checkout counter to pay for your shopping and people feel demoralised when they're treated differently from everyone else. This will cause further damage to the self esteem of parents and their children.

So, we must be careful when we introduce new policies which are supposedly designed to help children to ensure they really do.

Organisations like Samaritans support paid work as a better option than unemployment benefits and we look forward to the day when we have a federal government that puts full employment at the top of its policy agenda. In the meantime lets allow people who are unemployed the dignity of managing their own finances and raising their own children in the way they think best supported by welfare organisations which help them in times of difficulty.