

The Basics Card: A return to the 'Rations' days for First nations peoples of Australia?

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This paper discusses the controversial ways the Australian Commonwealth Government is enforcing the use of the Basics Card (BC) and Cashless Debit Card (CDC) (also known as Indue cards) as economic instruments, thereby preventing self-determination for many First Nations peoples and communities around Australia. Imposing these cards in communities has resulted in barriers to First Nations peoples' social, cultural and economic rights. I will draw upon literature that addresses the implications and obstacles associated with these cards for many First Nations peoples receiving income support. Addressing the Australian Government's historical and current involvement in the income management of First Nations peoples, this literature review considers the political contexts behind the decision to extend trials in communities and what this means for First Nations communities across these trial sites. In light of the Australian senate's recent approval for a two-year extension of the CDC, legitimising the BC or CDC without providing robust research or evidence is highly problematic. Enforcement of these cards has not explicitly proven to counteract social or economic disadvantages for First Nations peoples. Clearly, it demonstrates that government policy is unjust and considered by many to be racist and punitive. The final component of this paper briefly evaluates the policy implementation so far, and in closing, advocates for the revocation of the current legislation, which disregards the human rights of First Nations peoples and others.

Introduction

In 2014, the 'white card' or 'healthy welfare card', now known as the CDC, was initiated by the conservative Australian Government collaborating with businessman Andrew (Twiggy) Forrest. Incidentally, the card is sometimes known as the 'white card' by First Nations peoples as 'a response to the disciplining Whiteness of the welfare policy: a card devised by White people to condition Aboriginal people' (Dalley 2020: 52). Forrest was handpicked in 2013 by the then conservative-led Commonwealth government to review Aboriginal welfare, training and employment. The proposal was submitted under the *Forrest Review* (Forrest 2014: 100–8) to the Australian Government to improve employment opportunities for First Nations peoples, but also to restrict alcohol usage, drug dependency and gambling in some communities (Bielefeld and Beaupert 2019). Controversially, Forrest, a Western Australian mining magnate and former CEO of Fortescue Metals Group (with a current net worth of 22.3 billion AUD), has been involved in litigation around land rights, alleged coercion in Native Title disputes and conducting mining on First Nations peoples' lands without formal agreements being established with Traditional Owners.

Trials of the 'white card' were enforced as early as 2016 in Western and South Australian communities with high

populations of First Nations peoples. In Ceduna, South Australia, where the card's rollout first commenced, 24 per cent of the total population of just over 2,300 people identified as First Nations peoples. In Western Australia, in Kununurra and the Wyndham areas of the Kimberly, there were around 40 First Nations communities in the region, and approximately 50 per cent of First Nations peoples were forced onto the restrictive card. In the Northern Territory (NT) in 2007, before the introduction of the CDC, 73 First Nations communities in the NT were income managed and subjected to the distinctive BC introduced by the Howard Government in 2007 under the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) intervention (Jeffes 2020). It is estimated that there are now over 22,000 people in NT who have been placed on the BC extended trial, three-quarters of whom identify as First Nations peoples.

Most of the BC and CDC locations being trialled across Australia have significantly high populations of First Nations peoples. According to the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) (2018), nearly 78 per cent of those who have been compulsorily placed on the CDC are First Nations peoples. Non-Indigenous regions with high migrant populations and significantly high

populations of low-income earners receiving particular welfare benefits are also targeted by the CDC. The CDC has slightly different provisions to the BC in that the CDC can be used at any business. As such, there is no formal contractual arrangement between the trader and Commonwealth government around recipients' use of the CDC, whereas the BC only allows use through authorised stores approved by the Department of Human Services and where the trader has signed a formal agreement with the government (Arthur 2017).

These cards, sometimes referred to as 'Indue cards' after the corporation administering them, allow the Commonwealth government to manage the income of particular groups of people receiving welfare in particular demographic locations across Australia. In some cases, welfare recipients under both the BC and CDC may only receive 20 to 50 per cent of their income in cash, while the remainder is withheld and only accessible through the use of these cards (Mendes et al. 2021). Indue is owned and operated by large financial institutions and is an authorised deposit-taking institution. Indue is regulated by the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority and contracted by the Commonwealth government to manage these cards, meaning that certain welfare management now falls under the auspices of financial corporations (Nehme 2019). Many of those forced onto the card are First Nations peoples, people under the age of 35 years, single parents and those receiving welfare for over 12 months. The cost to the Australian Government is approximately 10,000 AUD per person for Indue to administer each card per year (ACOSS 2018), taking the total costs of the scheme to around 70 million AUD from 2015–2022.

The BC was originally introduced in the NT as a part of the NTER intervention into supposed child abuse and to reduce social harm in communities caused by alleged drug and alcohol misuse and gambling addiction. However, the Commonwealth government's kneejerk reaction to the *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle 'The Little Children Are Sacred Report'* in 2007 effectively stereotyped all First Nations people within these communities as complicit in these practices. All First Nations peoples receiving income support in these 73 communities were then forced onto the compulsory BC without any community consultation, thereby preventing independent financial management of their basic income allowance and arbitrarily discriminating against their individual human rights in the process. As Jeffes (2020: 2) suggests, 'Policy approaches have often rested upon the construction of representations of Aboriginality that support or justify the management, intervention, or control of Aboriginal affairs'. During her speech at the Maurice Blackburn Oration, former NT Chief Minister Professor Clare Martin stated that widespread punitive measures were recklessly applied to thousands

of Territorians, classifying all First Nations peoples as 'offenders' (Martin 2012).

Historical Implications of Welfare Management for First Nations Peoples

There has been much discussion and debate around the income management of First Nations peoples since the 2007 Commonwealth government first instigated the NTER. Compulsory income management was first trialled in 73 First Nations communities in remote areas of Australia (Bielefeld 2012; Hunter 2007; Moran and Go-Sam, C. 2015). During the NTER, the Commonwealth government called for urgent action to override NT legislation and suspend Part II of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (RDA). The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) stated that:

By suspending (excluding) the operation of Part II of the RDA, the members of the communities affected by the NTER legislation were effectively denied the protections afforded by the RDA to every other citizen to challenge legislation that they consider to be in breach of the RDA (AHRC 2011: 6).

The NT Government then threatened to quarantine welfare payments of recipients in the NT if their children did not attend school. The School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) policy was legitimised as necessary to combat non-attendance and disengagement of First Nations children from school in the NT (Buckmaster et al. 2012). However, no effort was made to investigate why children were not attending in the first place.

In 2009, the (then Labor) Gillard Government amended the *Social Security Act 1999*, effecting a direct link between school attendance and welfare (Cowling 2009). In 2011, the NT Government also changed the NT's *Education Act*, which complemented the Commonwealth government's stance on quarantining the welfare payment of parents who did not comply with the Government's SEAM policy. The NT Government did not only change the Act; the legislative change was accompanied by substantial increases in fines associated with non-compliance of compulsory attendance of children at school, from 200 AUD to 1,995 AUD for a first offence (Department of Education NT 2011).

Although the SEAM policy has been reviewed since its introduction, it highlights how both the Commonwealth and NT governments used neo-paternalistic intervention to control First Nations peoples in every aspect of their lives (Jeffes 2020). Essentially, those who the BC controls under current enforced legislation may be subjected to a loss of income or significant fines, which most could not

afford to pay. In some instances, financial disadvantage implicitly leads to First Nations peoples' criminalisation.

Historically though, income management of First Nations peoples occurred at a much earlier time in Australia. Daily ration depots, usually police stations, were set up around the country to provide First Nations peoples with rations of small amounts of flour, sugar and tea, and with items (such as nets and fishing lines) issued on an occasional basis (Foster 2000). When First Nations peoples were forcibly removed from their lands and placed onto missions or reserves under the control of the commonwealth, state or territory governments at the time, rationing was also implemented. Income management and rationing of food and clothing supplies on missions and reserves were instigated by governments across Australia during this period (Blake 1992; Foster 2000; O'Brien 2019).

At the time, many missions and reserves were managed and controlled by evangelical religious groups, and a number of these reserves were strictly controlled by police (Loos 2007). The missions and reserves received operational funding from governments or quarantined the wages from the labour of interned First Nations peoples to finance their operations (Gunstone 2012). The 'Stolen Wages' era occurred from the late 1800s until around the 1970s. On missions and reserves, First Nations peoples' wages were controlled and then administered either by police or clerical agents of the government as they saw fit (Blake 1992). However, it is now known that wages were withheld from many First Nations peoples who were forced to work under oppressive, enslaved conditions at the time (Gray 2007). Some of the wages held in trust funds were used to complete government infrastructure and never released to First Nations peoples. In contrast, others on missions and reserves received payment for their labour in food rations, clothing and blankets.

The government's current enforcement of income management parallels that of the 'ration days' on missions and reserves and like the mission days, this arguably affects First Nations peoples' 'food security' and health conditions. Spencer (2018: 5) highlighted that 'people who depend upon social security benefits are already at heightened risk of food insecurity and its associated adverse effects'. Yet, it is evident that those First Nations peoples in remote areas have very little choice where they can purchase their goods under the current restrictive BC. Inevitably, income management and control of First Nations peoples have always had a place in the policy agenda of successive governments of Australia, directly resulting in oppressive consequences and the stigmatisation of many First Nations peoples across Australia (Miley and Read 2018).

Implications and Stigmatisation

Marston et al. (2020) and Vincent (2019) conducted substantial investigations into the government's administration of compulsory income management and the quarantining of payments for those on the BC or CDC. Findings suggested that many people who are compulsorily forced onto the cards feel stigmatised and have a sense of shame when presenting their card to purchase goods within the community (Marston et al. 2020: 37). Bielefeld (2017) claimed that:

Some Indigenous elders [sic] and community members indicate that the broadly applied mandatory CDC was not the targeted scheme they had supported in consultations and assert that they do not want the card in their community because it fosters shame and causes suffering.

Many First Nations peoples have expressed feeling like 'third-class citizens' (Davey 2017) with little control over their own financial management. Buckmaster et al., (2012: 18) asserted that 'underpinning new paternalism is the idea that disadvantage is primarily a result of a deficit of necessary social values and norms'. Research conducted by Marston et al. (2020) also revealed the removal of independence for users of the BC, which was corroborated by non-government agencies providing support within the community. Marston et al. (2020: 60) argued that:

There was a strong view among NGO welfare service managers that the BC acted as a disempowering mechanism in cardholders' lives by removing autonomy from people who already had limited life choices.

First Nations peoples, particularly those in rural or remote areas and who are income managed, experience disempowerment through inequitable access to basic necessities such as healthy food, clothing and services. Being unable to purchase goods at certain stores where their card is not accepted has also been a significant issue. This may then mean travelling for substantially long distances, therefore incurring further expenses in petrol consumption for First Nations peoples. Usually, the cost of goods in stores sanctioned by the government are exponentially higher than those in urban stores (Ferguson et al. 2016; 2017).

Ferguson et al. (2016) found that food prices across the NT were significantly higher in remote areas compared to in the capital cities of Darwin in the NT and Adelaide in South Australia. Of 443 grocery items examined, in remote areas 'products were, on average, 60% and 68% more

expensive than advertised prices for Darwin and Adelaide supermarkets, respectively' (Ferguson et al. 2016: 4). Consequently, this may result in the least expensive or nutritious items being purchased, equating to poor health outcomes (Brimblecombe et al. 2010). Ferguson et al. (2016) suggested that although their research was based on price variations and not affordability, the extreme poverty experienced by First Nations peoples living in remote communities in the NT is explicitly linked to the high cost of food items. Therefore, First Nations peoples who are income managed and are restricted to purchasing their food supplies from specific stores may be experiencing indirect discrimination because of the constraints of the BC.

Another area of concern raised by Marston et al. (2020) was access to adequate health services or medications not easily obtained through the BC at certain pharmacies. It was found that the cards were not accepted at particular locations, or the electronic payment system was down in some cases. Therefore, the cards could not be used to purchase the required medicines.

Justification for the BC and Policy Alternatives

There has never been a direct justification for placing certain individuals on the BC or the CDC. The Commonwealth government has conveniently categorised whole groups of people within the Australian community as unable to manage their social security income and classified people as financially incompetent. People using the card have been labelled as drug or alcohol users or affected by gambling addiction. Politicians and the media consistently assert this damaging discourse from the government, portraying the card as a worthwhile intervention and much needed to save the public's tax dollars. Politicians and the media tend to sway public opinion in favour of the government's controversial BC and CDC policies and influence the public perception that income management decreases the effects of 'anti-social behaviour associated with alcohol and other drug abuse and problem gambling on individuals, families, particularly children, and communities' (Mendes et al. 2021: 154).

While several recent studies have been conducted in Australia on the use of the BC and CDC, there is no definitive evidence that these cards have directly helped counteract social problems or harm within communities. Many of those compulsorily forced to use these cards identified that they did not depend on alcohol or drugs before the cards were introduced (see Maher 2020; Marston et al. 2020; Mendes et al. 2021). In their study, Mendes et al. (2021) found that less than a quarter of respondents identified they did not have a pre-existing alcohol problem.

Vincent (2019) identified important measures that the government should focus on to move forward. One of these is the possibility of exiting from the card. The mechanisms of doing this are clearly explained to First Nations peoples, who are the majority of people forced onto the BC or CDC by the government. More holistic and culturally responsive support services and funding must be provided to First Nations-led organisations within communities experiencing social or health issues.

A blanket approach to income management is punitive and, to date, has not realised the outcomes that the government initially set out to achieve. High unemployment rates still exist within communities in remote, rural and urban areas where the card is enforced. Overcrowding in housing still exists, as do poor health outcomes and difficulties accessing culturally appropriate support services. Recommendations have been made by organisations such as ACOSS to eliminate income management cards. They instead argue for directing the substantial amounts of money currently used to administer these cards into providing adequate health and social services that will assist those on welfare to feel that they are a collective part of society. Many people believe the card is reminiscent of past racist and discriminatory policies enacted by governments to prevent the self-determination of First Nations peoples (Vincent 2019).

There is a political shift to blame and penalise First Nations families for current situations that exist due to previous racist policies and legislation instigated by the Commonwealth government. There has also been a tendency to shift blame from government to government, confusing interagency processes. There has been very little success with the reactive top-down approaches governments use to reduce social and health concerns within communities. Identifying the challenges from the ground up and sharing specific community expertise is necessary to formulate policies that will be successful. Rather than the government outlaying considerable expenditure on proven practices, they have elected to discharge huge amounts of money into unreliable policy solutions such as the BC and CDC.

Morris (2011) acknowledged that there must be clear causal factors, which would support legislation or policy, to justify discrimination against a particular race within society. Such a policy should not disadvantage them by its implementation. Morris (2011: 9) suggested that 'such disempowering structures inhibit the realisation of socio-economic equality and perpetuate notions of Indigenous inferiority'. Overriding First Nations autonomy perpetuates hegemonic colonial-settler power structures within Australia. The Commonwealth government, or the incoming government after the upcoming election, should

urgently consider the abrogation of this legislation and end the extension of the BC and CDC trials, which disregard the human rights of First Nations peoples of Australia.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed discriminatory practices implemented by the Commonwealth and NT governments when setting and developing a policy agenda around compulsory income management and implementation of the BC and CDC, which has excluded key stakeholders in the process. The policy should not be based on unsubstantiated evidence that has adverse and damaging consequences for First Nations people within communities. Governments must use expert knowledge and include robust consultation with First Nations communities in their policy development to reach more holistic solutions, rather than enforcing punitive and restrictive measures such as the compulsory BC.

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Heart Goes Out

But where does it go when it goes out?
 Does it dress for the occasion; high heels

painted face, designer wear, stiff smile?
 Does it wave polished fingers, flashing

white teeth and platitudes from a secure
 location? Does it go out and read picture

books to children, sometimes dirty ones
 in immigration camps, for perfect photo

ops? For hearts know not to judge people
 by the colour of their skin, the contents of

their bank account, the God they worship.
 Hearts know that a rose garden, lined with

crab apple trees needs supplanting. Best
 to replace history with cold hard concrete

a perfect stage to don a mask, deadpan some
 despair, and reiterate how hearts and prayers

go out all the time even when dressed in jackets
 that claim, *I really don't care, do you?*

KATE MAXWELL

In Reverse

My grandfather is a figure
 chiselled from stone at the end
 of the kitchen table
 his voice in rare contributions
 ground through a lifetime
 of roll-your-own fags drawn
 between his mouth and a balance
 on the edge
 retrieved each time in the moment
 before the ash's fall to the floor

When my grandfather's mother
 died of extreme old age
 nothing more, a photograph
 never seen before made
 a final journey down the line
 to stop
 on our wall in a solid frame
 sure sign of a treasured keepsake
 the identity of the sitter only
 half-believed lore

My grandfather at a tender age
 stares with innocent eyes
 into the studio camera
 Murray of Brisbane and Gympie
 signed below this sepia
 shot
 sanctioned by his wharfie father
 the boy blond, hair shoulder-long
 cut only after school bullying
 breaking his mother's heart

My mother carries the story
 without the image's details
 the square buckle, leather boots
 borrowed perhaps like
 the Little Lord Fauntleroy jacket
 and shorts
 the vulnerable knees his own
 sitting posed on rough hewn rock
 a nod to his origins
 on the other side of the tracks

My grandfather's rosebud mouth,
 his soft eyes are now spent
 framed till death in folds of skin
 puckered as a caterpillar
 though humans are not butterflies –
 life is no metamorphosis
 grub to soaring state
 and the husk of the chrysalis
 speaks
 only of a coffin in the wings

JANE DOWNING