

Beat: Politics

How cashless welfare policies turned into ethnic discrimination in Australia

Ethnic discrimination in Australia

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USPA NEWS - Imagine, if you will, that you were forced to walk with a label on your shirt. The label indicates your financial situation, and if you are not doing well enough, you are looked down on and threaten with less respect than others. Actually, this is exactly how recipients of cashless welfare cards in Australia feel.

This attitude may not be expressed publicly, but you know what they say: just own in polite company that you can't afford to provide your family with groceries, and see what will happen. The entire popular culture and cultural codes are built on the axiom that the wealthier a person, the more he is respected. And it turns out that a person with small income is permanently under constant psychological pressure.

Modern Australian culture is no exception, and this is confirmed by evidence from direct participants in the cashless welfare cards trial period: "For some Aboriginal people, being on the cashless welfare card is akin to wearing a dog tag around their neck"⁽¹⁾, told Jody Miller, a member of the Aboriginal community council in Koonibba, a town in outback South Australia. But what did he mean by dog tag?

That was the name of Certificates of Exemption. In fact, these were licenses issued to Australian Aboriginals for them to acquire the rights of white people. Those who had the Certificate could freely walk around the city, buy alcohol in bars and enjoy some other freedoms. The Certificate was nicknamed "dog collar/dog tag" because thus the state could manipulate people, just as an owner controls a dog with the help of a collar.

These certificates are now things of the past. But why did Mr. Miller think back to them? Well, maybe because the new social experiment once again affects the rights of Indigenous people.

Going back in time

The Guardian Australia reports (2) that the trial has been rolled out in communities where most welfare recipients are Aboriginal. Why was preference given to Australian Aboriginals? Human Services Minister Alan Tudge explains (3): "Bundaberg and Hervey Bay [regions mostly populated by Indigenous people] has particularly high levels of youth unemployment and intergenerational welfare dependence"⁽⁴⁾; this is despite some jobs being available."

At first glance, this explanation looks plausible enough. Obviously, officials do their best for the benefit of the population, and they are not to blame for the fact that the majority of Aboriginal people are poor. Indeed, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) revealed (4) that in 2014-15, less than half (46%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over were employed.

However, is this really their fault? Let's take a look at a study conducted by Australian National University. The researchers found (5) that typically an indigenous-named applicant would need to put in 35 per cent more applications than an Anglo-named applicant to get the same number of calls back when looking for a job. At the same time, websites for backpackers are full with job ads. Employers are willing to pay for meals and accommodation, provide visa support and, in some cases, even refund travel expenses. That is, they are ready to complicate their own lives in every way, despite the fact that there's plenty of available hands nearby. Discrimination is evident, and even the United Nations recognize (6) this fact.

It turns out that those who derive their origin from Indigenous peoples of Australia have lesser chance to get a job. The inability to ensure a better future exerts tremendous pressure on the individual. Some cannot stand it and break down, resorting to alcohol and drugs to escape worries - all because they were not lucky enough to be born in the "right" skin. The world has already seen something similar - it is enough to go back in time a bit and remember African Americans in the US about a century ago. And in Australia itself, the situation was no better.

At the same time, cashless welfare cards only aggravate the situation. People are forced to lower their eyes and use various tricks in order to get cash. Many don't need this money to buy alcohol. They just want to pay for their children's lunch at school, help older parents... There are a thousand and one reasons, because people who are in need for cash aren't necessarily criminals or addicts. Matthew Biggin, a father of three and a participant in the cashless welfare card trial, says (7): "We wanted to go on a trip to see my Dad in Victoria, and without cash it will be really hard"; It makes me feel really down and out, and like I can't support my family properly".

Good meanings without good works

Thus, seemingly innocent cashless welfare cards did not solve the problem, and also created new troubles due to the paternalistic and ill-conceived approach.

In pursuit of newfangled trends, politicians did not take into account the fact that non-cash systems are not a panacea. Cashless transactions did not cure crime (look at the statistics of cybercrime) and did not save us from tax dodgers (think about Panama Papers) even though proponents of the cashless society promised so.

The story that happened in Australia puts cashless society on a par with other initially brilliant but further questionable ideas. Among them are nuclear power, GMOs, surveillance technologies and other things that have been causing a lot of debate to this day. Do we want another such problem, which is gradually growing as cashless technologies are coming our way?

"While this may sound like a paranoid doomsday scenario to some, as a real world finance professional, I believe that this [problem] scenario is not only eminently possible, but most of the technology is already available "" albeit not yet fully marshaled "" to frighteningly make it reality"[2], comments (8) Signature Bank Chairman Scott Shay.

Perhaps we should hold off a little before breaking into the new era headlong. Quick march does not guarantee successful arrival at the destination - on the contrary, the chances of getting lost increase with every new step. A more balanced approach, combining freedom from total supervision and working on fundamental problems, would be more effective than hanging out "No Cash Accepted"[2] signs at every corner.

- 1) <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/jan/09/ration-days-again-cashless-welfare-card-ignites-shame>
- 2) <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/jan/09/ration-days-again-cashless-welfare-card-ignites-shame>
- 3) <http://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-21/welfare-quarantine-on-the-cards-for-thousands-of-queenslanders/8965774>
- 4) <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4714.0~2014-15~Main%20Features~Labour%20force%20characteristics~6>
- 5) <http://www.smh.com.au/national/australian-bosses-are-racist-when-its-time-to-hire-20090617-chvu.html>
- 6) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/australiaandthepacific/australia/6099785/UN-criticises-Australias-treatment-of-Aborigines-as-racist.html>
- 7) <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-21/cashless-welfare-card-wide-bay-centrelink-recipients-crime-rise/8967018>
- 8) <https://www.cnbc.com/2013/12/12/cashless-society-a-huge-threat-to-our-freedomcommentary.html>

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UPA United Press Agency LTD

483 Green Lanes

UK, London N13NV 4BS

contact (at) unitedpressagency.com

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