

SUMMARY

Social Policy and Social Integration in an Era of Neoliberalism: An Analysis of Income Management of Welfare Payments in Australia

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The Australian Government has repeatedly restructured its social policy since the 1980s, making welfare payments conditional and increasing work incentives. This welfare reform, influenced heavily by neoliberalism, has been legitimised by the problematisation of “welfare dependency,” emphasising the obligations and the responsibilities of welfare recipients. The Howard Coalition Government in particular promoted an insistent neoliberal turn in social policies, asserting the importance of a social welfare system encouraging “responsible behaviour.” In 2007, the Government introduced a measure called “income management” or “welfare quarantining” which linked welfare payments to the “socially responsible behaviour” of parents. Income management was taken over by the Rudd-Gillard Labor Government, and eventually by the Abbott Coalition Government, and has been a prominent feature of welfare reform, indicating the importance of analysing income management in the context of welfare reform from the perspective of parenthood.

This paper analyses the policy process of income management and the logic that has supported it to consider the issue of neoliberal welfare reform and social inclusion/exclusion. Income management, introduced by the Howard Government as a part of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), was actually a scheme to advance welfare reforms based on the principle of “mutual obligation” by urging parents to show responsibility for the care and education of their children. While supporting the NTER and echoing the Howard Government’s arguments on parental responsibility, the Rudd and Gillard Governments more obviously referred to income management as a significant welfare reform scheme and broadened its application. In that whole process, welfare dependency and its intergenerational cycle have been problematised, and individuals “depending on welfare” have been referred to as “bad parents” who behave “against normal community standards.” Parenthood has been the core element of this welfare reform by connecting normative parental behaviour with provision of welfare payments and thus making parents subject to intervention. Furthermore, attributes such as Aboriginality, class, age and family type have had a close relationship with representation of welfare recipients as “bad parents.” Whereas income management intends to encourage welfare recipients to achieve social inclusion, this very process excludes them from social citizenship by referring to vague norms of parenthood.