

National Human Rights Consultation Submission

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Submission Text:

I'm noticing among submissions to this inquiry many suggestions that people have a right to adequate food and shelter. I find this suggestion ludicrous because of its gross impracticality. I urge the Consultation to avoid consideration of such nonsensical suggestions for the following reasons:

POLICY & POLITICS: How a government looks after its citizens is a matter of policy, not rights. In a democracy, policy is fought out in the court of public opinion. Unlike rights, policy is not a matter of endowment and entitlement. Rather policy is about what people deserve and what taxpayers are prepared to grant. Policy should reflect the values of citizens.

Australians are generous toward people in need. Just consider the hundreds of millions donated to bushfire victims. And Australians are great supporters of worthy causes in their communities. This reflects Australian values of generosity and compassion toward those in need. But too many Australians are also shameless takers and exploiters unworthy of Australians' generosity and compassion.

Australians aren't stupid. They know when their taxes are being wasted and when they aren't getting the intended results for their investments in social justice. The welfare lobby doesn't like to talk about who "deserves" support, which is why they want support enshrined in rights. But not everyone deserves to be on the public teat, even if they are hungry or homeless.

Of course people who can't look after themselves or who are the victims of circumstances beyond their control -- the mentally ill, the physically disabled, the recently unemployed, children, maybe even refugees -- deserve support on purely humanitarian grounds, no strings attached. Likewise carers who save the taxpayer a lot of money by looking after relatives or foster children who would otherwise be dependent on the state for their care. No taxpayers would begrudge them enough money to live a decent, dignified life.

But you'll notice I haven't included the elderly, single mothers, the long-term unemployed or victims of domestic violence in that deserving group because many of them have put themselves into their needy positions by their own bad decisions. The welfare lobby would have us overlook the self-inflicted nature of such poverty, but Australians recognise it and resent it, which is why they'd never support rights that reward bad decisions. Let's see how those bad decisions work.

The elderly poor today are the children of the Depression. They grew up learning to be frugal, to save, to expect the worst. Yet many did not save for their old age. They spent every cent they earned, just like my parents did, at the pub, on the pokies, on smokes, on cars and boats, on holidays. They did not buy homes for their families but opted for public housing. And they did this in the good times, in the flush 1950s, 1960s and 1980s. Further, many of the women, despite being in their 30s and 40s during the feminist revolution of the 1960s, did not work, remained dependent on their husbands for everything, and were passive in (mis)management of family finances. Now they face old age in poverty. Whose fault is that?

And lest the elderly poor claim they were paying their taxes all those years and deserve to get something now in return, we need to remember (1) that few of today's poverty-stricken old women were paying taxes because few of them were working; and (2) while workers were paying taxes, they

were also enjoying all the benefits of those taxes and a lot more, including schools, roads, hospitals, public housing and huge infrastructure projects. In fact, the modest taxes they paid on their modest incomes did not come close to covering those costs. Older generations got all those benefits on the never never, leaving my generation to repay their massive national debt in the 1990s and in this decade. Politicians they elected met their ravenous appetite for socialist handouts and subsidies by running up huge deficits and debts. Hardly a taxpayer contribution worth rewarding now with generous pensions.

And what of the youthful and long-term unemployed and single mothers? How did they come to live in poverty? They left school early, they didn't look for work, they over-indulged in drugs and grog, they burned their bridges with families and friends, they didn't pay their bills, they choose violent and irresponsible partners, they had too many children and some never bothered to learn English. Now they have no prospects, no community ties and no future. And whose fault is that?

Do they deserve the same good life that people enjoy as a result of sticking it out in school, finding and holding a steady job, continuously improving their skills and qualifications, paying their bills and saving up for a home, being moderate in drug and alcohol use, avoiding gambling, crime and get-rich-quick schemes, cultivating family and friendship ties to rely on in times of trouble, selecting reliable partners or going it alone, and planning their families. Why should hard-working people, competent at life, not have better lives than those who are incompetent at life and who stuffed up many of the same chances that others seized with both hands? Talk about moral hazard!

If we endow Australians with rights to food and shelter, the takers will never work for anything again. They'll be in court suing governments for bigger cheques. But if you are incompetent at life, no amount of money will get you out of poverty. You'll always spend it unwisely, you'll never have enough, and you'll never have any motivation to get competent.

I think any money paid to youthful and long-term unemployed and single mothers should require not only job searching but also full-time attendance at life-management courses plus job training until they become self-sufficient. If we are going to give them taxpayers' money, then let's also give them the obligation to get their lives together and become productive members of society and good role models for their children.

PRACTICALITY: How does any government guarantee adequate food? Unless the government is going to do people's grocery shopping and cooking for them, there is no way to guarantee people adequate food any more than one can guarantee that no child will live in poverty. For every well-intentioned government providing the money, there are ill-intentioned receivers of that money spending it on everything but food. Snorting it, shooting it, drinking it, smoking it, putting it into the pokies or wasting it on takeaways.

If we are going to guarantee rights to food, then perhaps we need to adopt the American model of food stamps to ensure that welfare money intended to feed a family is spent only on food.

Certainly children have a right to food, but that is best honoured through policy. I would support the idea of feeding children at school, to save them from their irresponsible parents, but every meal provided to a child at school must be deducted from parents' non-food welfare or from parenting payments, so it doesn't reward the irresponsible who can't be bothered to feed their children.

Alternatively, perhaps a program to provide a substantial breakfast, a hot lunch, a nourishing after school snack and a couple pieces of take-home fruit and a carton of milk should be funded for every school and every student out of a uniformly reduced parenting payment, so all kids can access this food, no questions asked. Then no child has to go hungry. And a

few more might actually turn up in school!

Governments might also fund soup kitchens to allow homeless people or others to access three healthy meals a day. But that funding must come out of dole payments and not from another bottomless pot of taxpayers' money. If people have a right to food, then governments must fund food delivery directly.

Providing shelter is an even bigger nonsense because we can't force people who want to sleep on the streets to live somewhere else, nor can we force needy people to live with anti-social animals, and we can't afford to give everyone a nice three-bedroom bungalow to trash when they are on a bender or have their bikie mates over for tea or when they let their ADHD kids smash up the walls and toilets. Unless we want to forget about defence and health care, we can't afford to house everyone too lazy or incompetent to put a roof over their heads.

And what exactly would be "adequate" shelter? A tent in the park? A humpy in the outback? Of course not. It would be a nice brick home with all the mod cons, the same things other taxpayers struggle to acquire through hard work and saving. Why should people who have stuffed up their lives enjoy the same benefits as hard-working people who have their act together?

Of course, children should not be living on the streets or sleeping in cars because they have incompetent parents. In my view, if a parent can't provide adequate shelter for their children, they should not have their children. Kids deserve a comfortable and safe home. Their parents, not so much! We don't need people having kids to get housing, just like we recently had people having kids to get flat screen TVs, thanks to the baby bonus.

Again, if we are going to give people a right to shelter, we may have to invest in big dormitories for singles and couples, and a lot more foster homes for children. And dole payments must be reduced accordingly.

Unproductive but perfectly capable takers and exploiters cannot be allowed to expect the same standard of living as hard-working people who contribute. If you stuff up your life with bad decisions and self-destructive behaviour, you have to expect to lead a life of deprivation. And if you subject your children to that deprivation because of your selfishness and lack of discipline, your children should be given to people who will put them first and teach them to be competent at life.

Rights to food and shelter or to be free of poverty are not realistic unless we can convert the undeserving poor to being productive citizens. And that will never happen as long as we continue to foster a culture of entitlement without effort and treat productive members of society with envy and resentment.