

Australian government refuses to release its own youth report

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The Australian government has failed to release the Prime Minister John Howard's own Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce report, even though it has had the document in hand for months. The report remains hidden because a small section sheds some light on the desperate plight of many young people receiving the Common Youth Allowance, a welfare payment that covers students and young unemployed.

The taskforce's official brief was to "examine young people's transitions from school to work, further education and active participation in community life". Compiled by handpicked business figures, charity leaders and government officials, much of the *Footprints to the Future* report predictably agrees with the thrust of government policy, endorsing a narrow vocational framework of training youth to serve the requirements of big business.

One section, however, provides a glimpse into the impact of the government's measures. Under the heading "Income Support," the report makes mild criticism of the practice of "breaching"—whereby Centrelink and other government agencies cut or stop welfare payments for breaches of official procedures.

"Some young people are having breaches imposed on their payments without sufficient account taken of difficult personal circumstances," it states. "Some of these breaches are being imposed by Job Network agencies who have no youth-specific knowledge or service expertise."

The report continues: "Disconnection from income support often precedes a more general disconnection from the community and must be examined seriously... Marginalised young people indicated that, in some circumstances, they had turned to petty theft or drug dealing to survive."

The report does not give any statistics, either about

the extent of breaching or the hardship created, let alone attempt to make a systematic analysis of the issue. That is hardly surprising. Stripping young people of welfare entitlements is not the result of inexperience in Job Network agencies. It is an essential aspect of the government's program of "mutual obligation," under which welfare recipients are required to perform work or other activities.

Young people are having their benefits slashed for failing to adhere to the most minor regulations. Breaching penalties range from \$280 to \$350 for failing to reply to an official letter and from \$630 to \$1,300 for failing to attend an interview. The average penalty for rule infringement is \$763.

About 53 percent of all welfare penalties are imposed on people under the age of 25, including 58 percent of all purely administrative breaches, such as missing an interview. This is because most mutual obligation requirements are targetted at young people.

Breaching is particularly high for participants in Work for the Dole schemes. Nearly half the participants in these schemes—7,000 out of 18,000—were breached in the 15 months to March 1999.

These penalties have left increasing numbers of unemployed youth and students destitute, given that the Youth Allowance is currently only \$140.50 a week, which is about half the officially-recognised poverty line for a young single person.

Homeless people are also acutely vulnerable to breaching. They often miss mail instructing them to attend an interview.

Although the *Footprints* report devotes considerable space to the problems facing young Aboriginal people in the transition from school to work, it says nothing about the high rate of breaching inflicted on Aboriginal people. Research reveals that administrative breach

rates are consistently twice as high for Aboriginal people receiving employment-related payments.

Alluding only indirectly to this situation, the *Footprints* report recommends that government agencies "ensure that preparing-for-work agreements take into account the individual situations of young people, are culturally appropriate and focused on local community circumstances".

Even these limited references proved too sensitive for the government. In parliament, Community Services Minister Larry Anthony claimed that breaching had diminished under the Howard government. Only 9,500 people "lost that total entitlement for breaching" and the government had introduced a "gradual regime to ensure that we did not penalise people unfairly".

Anthony's figures clearly misrepresent the true situation. In the financial year 1999-2000, according to official statistics, 13,647 people—or 7.7 percent of those receiving an allowance—received three breaches, for which the penalty is total loss of allowance for eight weeks.

Far from the punitive system lessening, there has been a 250 percent increase in the number of people penalised since 1997. In 1999-2000, some 302,000 breach penalties were imposed on 200,000 people, cutting government spending by \$170 million. Another 172,000 penalties were imposed, but were revoked on appeal.

This regime is specifically aimed at reducing government expenditure on welfare, forcing the jobless into low-wage employment on sub-standard conditions and using their desperation to drive down the wages and conditions of all workers.

The Community and Public Sector Union revealed last year that the Business Partnership Agreement between Centrelink and the Department of Employment contains breaching quotas for the unemployed. Centrelink has its annual departmental funding of \$120 million increased or decreased by 5 percent depending on whether these quotas are met.

The *Footprints* report was drafted during 2000 while another taskforce was drafting the Welfare Reform Report, known as the McClure Report, which recommended the extension of mutual obligation measures to sole parents and mature-aged unemployed people.

The government adopted that recommendation in this

week's Budget, anticipating that it will save \$923 million over four years by cutting welfare payments or driving people off them altogether. The breaching regime that is already shattering the lives of young people will be applied to ever-wider layers of the working class. That is why the *Footprints* report, which politely criticised the system, could not be released.



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