

Preamble Noel Pearson



Empowerment of Indigenous people—of individuals, families, leaders, Elders, and respected persons at the local level—is not a ‘nice to have’. It is vital to address entrenched and multigenerational disadvantage. Broadly speaking, all Australian governments now recognise this, and are seeking to pursue more empowering approaches to work with Indigenous people and Close the Gap, including for health, crime, child safety, education, employment, and housing outcomes.

The Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC), however, remains one of few examples in Australia of a structural reform embedded in legislation, genuinely empowering Indigenous people at the local level to take responsibility for their futures. The Crown has vested powers in Indigenous people to act as decision makers about the lives of their own people.

In a watershed moment, this year saw the FRC decisively recognised across the political spectrum as Australia’s leading model of self-determination, welfare reform and development.

The FRC’s 15 years of operation was scrutinised as the Australian Parliament considered passage of the Social Security (Administration) Amendment (Repeal of Cashless Debit Card and Other Measures) Bill 2022, facilitating a move away from the Cashless Debit Card, to replace it with ‘enhanced Income Management’. The Cashless Debit Card was the second-generation card technology introduced by the previous Coalition government to facilitate income management or welfare quarantining, improving on the first generation BasicsCard supported by previous Labor governments. The card blocks a protected portion of a person’s income support payments from being withdrawn as cash or spent on harmful goods such as alcohol, illicit drugs, and gambling.

In considering the change, parliamentarians grappled with the on-the-ground realities across the diverse regions and communities impacted, including the four Cape York communities and Doomadgee where the unique FRC model operates. Compelling evidence of the FRC’s success in building personal and family responsibility was considered, including the strong uptake of voluntary income management by those previously income managed by the FRC, who now elect to have income management in place to help manage their finances and ensure there is money available for children’s care.

Ultimately, politicians from all sides—including the Australian Greens, Senator Jacqui Lambie and other independents, the Labor Party, the Liberal Party and National Party—united to endorse the FRC’s model of welfare reform. They each supported the need to enable and empower communities to solve their own problems by building capabilities needed to exit disadvantage, rather than continue to pretend governments can provide one-size-fits-all top-down solutions.

The Government has now invited other relevant regions across Australia where ‘blanket’ models of income management have been in place—including Ceduna in South Australia, the Goldfields and East Kimberley regions in Western Australia, the Northern Territory, and Queensland’s Bundaberg-Hervey Bay region—to consider if they want to retain a more nuanced and self-determined model of income management, like that which operates under the FRC.

I congratulate the FRC and its Local Commissioners for your ongoing leadership and determination to pioneer a new, more holistic, locally-led response to entrenched disadvantage. Your efforts have been rewarded with broad recognition of the empowering and effective approach taken. I look forward to seeing the future evolution and expansion of your successful model.

Noel Pearson