



Uniting Aboriginal &
Islander Christian Congress



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Parliament urged to reject expansion of the cashless debit card

The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) and UnitingCare Australia are urging the Senate to oppose legislation to expand the cashless debit card, saying the scheme will only further entrench disempowerment and disadvantage among those on low incomes.

“Forcing people onto the cashless debit card is ineffective, impractical, and undermines First Peoples’ rights and self-determination,” said Pastor Mark Kickett, Interim Chair of the UAICC.

The *Social Security (Administration) Amendment (Continuation of Cashless Welfare) Bill 2020*, which is scheduled for debate in Parliament this week, will make the cashless debit card permanent in existing sites, lifting the cap on the number of participants, as well as expanding the card to over 25,000 people in the Northern Territory and Cape York. More than two-thirds of those affected by the Bill are First Peoples.

“The imposition of the cashless debit card is the very antithesis of self-determination and is fundamentally at odds with the Government’s stated commitment to partnership and co-design under the Closing the Gap agreement,” said Pastor Kickett.

“As with the Intervention, the cashless debit card is being imposed on communities without proper consultation or consideration of what might work best for people on the ground. Despite the official rhetoric, top-down policies such as the cashless debit card indicate that First Peoples still do not have a seat at the table as equal partners.”

Clærwen Little, National Director of UnitingCare Australia, said that while a voluntary, opt-in form of income management may have a place, the evidence is clear that the social, emotional and economic costs of continuing with a compulsory scheme outweigh any benefits.

“We have had six Senate Inquiries into the cashless debit card, numerous evaluations and independent studies, and yet there is still no consistent or compelling evidence that compulsory income management is effective,” said Ms Little. “The Government has overlooked evidence of harms and instead cherry-picked contested findings from a flawed evaluation to justify the cashless debit card’s continuation and expansion.

“While we support a voluntary approach, forcibly restricting how and where a person can spend their money will not tackle the underlying causes of poverty, unemployment or drug and alcohol misuse,” said Ms Little.

Pastor Kickett added that the continuation and expansion of the cashless debit card risks doing more harm than good, including in communities that have endured more than a decade of paternalistic policies under the Northern Territory Intervention.

“We are tired of governments doing things to us, rather than with us. Once again, First Peoples are disproportionately targeted and stigmatised as not being capable or worthy of managing their own affairs.

“The exorbitant cost of rolling out the cashless debit card would be better used to fund measures that are grounded in evidence and developed in genuine partnership with communities.

“We urge the Senate to reject this Bill, and urge the Government to invest in local solutions to inherently complex social issues, rather than impose a top-down measure that disempowers people and communities,” said Pastor Kickett.

*The **Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC)** consists of Aboriginal and Islander members of the Uniting Church in Australia and members in fellowship who may also be members of other denominations. The UAICC aims, in collaboration with other people, to bring to an end the injustices which hold Aboriginal and Islander people at the fringes of Australian society and to help Aboriginal and Islander people achieve spiritual, economic, social and cultural independence.*

***UnitingCare Australia** is the national body for the Uniting Church’s community services network in Australia, supporting 1.4 million people every year across urban, rural and remote communities. We give voice to the Uniting Church’s commitment to social justice through advocacy and by strengthening community service provision.*

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