



Speech By  
**Melissa McMahon**


**MEMBER FOR MACALISTER**

---

Record of Proceedings, 17 September 2019

**MATTER OF PUBLIC INTEREST**

**Logan, Federal Government Welfare Reforms**

 **Mrs McMAHON** (Macalister—ALP) (2.41 pm): I rise to address an issue of concern to me not only as the member for Macalister but also as a Logan resident. In Logan we are used to being disparaged because of where we live. We are used to the sly and snide remarks and the broad generalisations based on postcodes. I live in Logan, I raise my family in Logan and I love it there. That is why I am absolutely appalled at the decision to make Logan a trial site for the federal government's proposed welfare reforms. We have worked hard to turn Logan around, to bring business to our city, to make it a destination, not just the place people drive past on the way to the coast. To have that all undone by declaring it a trial site for drug testing welfare recipients under some apparent attempt at benevolence by our federal overlords is a devastating blow for our community. It is a stark reminder that we have failed to change the public perception—even that of our own federal member—that we are more than just a welfare city.

Randomly selected Newstart and Youth Allowance recipients will be forced to attend appointments where they will be immediately required to provide saliva, urine or hair samples. This is not an opt-in scheme. Recipients will have to sign up to this regime or have their payments suspended or terminated. Those who refuse to concede their bodily autonomy in privacy will have their payments suspended until they submit to the test. This is all done under the guise of helping people get jobs. It falls into the easy and populist trap of labelling those on welfare as job dodgers who would rather sit at home playing video games and doing drugs rather than getting a job.

One in four Newstart recipients is over the age of 45—my mother is one, still looking for work after being 'Newman-ed'—so let us put that myth to bed, shall we? Next we can look at the notion that it is drug use that prohibits welfare recipients from getting a job, not the fact that there are 800,000 people on these allowances and a further one million underemployed all fighting for just 200,000 jobs. Sure, let us say it is the drugs that are stopping people from getting a job. Let me be clear: there is no evidence that random drug testing of unemployed people is an effective strategy in helping people either overcome addiction or find a job. What there is evidence for is that such measures create greater levels of harm, increase stigma, marginalisation and poverty.

The government would have us believe that this is not a punitive measure, but what else do you call immediately suspending a person's only income for refusing to urinate in a bottle in front of a stranger? There is no evidence that keeping people in poverty decreases consumption of substances or improves health outcomes. Addiction is a health issue. Addiction will only be successfully addressed when treated as a health issue, not as a compliance measure. Successful treatment programs need to start with a willing participant, not one mandated to attend against the threat of impoverishment. The demand for treatment programs currently outstrips supply and promises of \$10 million funding across three states will have little impact in meeting the demand for treatment services. It will also further clog the treatment waiting list with people forced onto a program to participate unwillingly at the expense of those who truly want to change their behaviour and outcomes.

These facts have been reiterated to the federal government time and time again—2017, 2018 and here we are again—but do not take my word for it. Try research groups like the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre or the Public Service Research Group or even perhaps professional organisations like the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, the AMA or the Rural Doctors Association of Australia. They are unanimous in their opposition to the bill. It even goes against the government's own National Drug Strategy, which identifies as an underpinning strategic principle to use evidence based research. Imagine that! This bill fails the federal government's own strategic principle.

I have been subject to random drug testing throughout my entire adult life, but I signed up for it willingly. I opted in. I chose that employment. Not only that but in those occupations, those who did identify with addiction or dependence issues were enveloped with support, not immediately discarded to fend for themselves. What this will do is increase the rate of criminal activity, as those experiencing physical withdrawal symptoms will seek other ways to acquire money. I will staunchly defend my city and its reputation. We do not deserve this kind of paternalistic treatment from Canberra. If it wants more people off drugs, fund the treatment. If it wants more people in work, create the jobs.