

The Hon Jim Chalmers MP and The Hon Amanda Rishworth MP  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

10 December 2022

To Minister Chalmers and Minister Rishworth,

## **Re: Concerns about the recently announced Economic Inclusion Committee**

The Antipoverty Centre is a collective of activists, advocates and researchers with direct experience of poverty and disadvantage, established to counter problems with academics, think tanks and others in the political class making harmful decisions on behalf of people they purport to represent. Our goal is to help ensure the voices and rights of people on the lowest incomes are at the centre of social policy development and discourse. We believe there should be no decision made about us without us.

I am writing to express our concerns about announcements made regarding the proposed composition of the Economic Inclusion Committee, and to urge you to engage meaningfully with our recommendations below.

In your statement of 28 November you said, *"The Committee will include social security academic experts, representatives from key relevant advocacy organisations, unions, business peak bodies, the philanthropic sector and economists."*<sup>1</sup>

We are deeply frustrated that this approach is setting us up to repeat the failures of the past.

While these organisations have a role to play in increasing economic inclusion, they are not experts in the needs of those of us suffering the consequences of existing social policies that leave us behind.

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<sup>1</sup> See: [ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/jim-chalmers-2022/media-releases/expert-committee-advise-tackling-disadvantage-and](https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/jim-chalmers-2022/media-releases/expert-committee-advise-tackling-disadvantage-and)



Who you choose to consult and who you choose to listen to matters. Time and again governments have ignored what people who are economically excluded – the real experts – have to say. Advice to government about people in poverty must come directly from people in poverty, not those who speak over and for us. We should be viewed and treated as equals, not subordinate “lived experience” objects.

Even the peak body for social services has itself highlighted the the need for people with direct experience of poverty to be included in policy development at the recent Jobs and Skills summit, to which unemployed and low income people were not invited. ACOSS Acting CEO Edwina MacDonald said, *“We need processes that meaningful [sic] include people directly affected – experts by experience – and ensure their voices are at the centre of policy debate and development.”*<sup>2</sup>

People in poverty are the most important stakeholders for the Economic Inclusion Committee because we are the ones you are failing the most. Existing approaches to consultation either completely exclude, marginalise or tokenistically include us.

An Economic Inclusion Committee that does not address this will have no legitimacy from the outset.

## Recommendations

1. Make the committee itself inclusive by ensuring it is majority-comprised of organisations run by and for people with direct experience of economic exclusion instead of relying on those that have traditionally not had people with this expertise leading policy or strategy. In addition to the Antipoverty Centre, some examples of other organisations that meet this criteria are: RISE Refugees, People with Disability Australia, Anti-Poverty Network SA (not affiliated with the Antipoverty Centre) and the Australian Unemployed Workers’ Union.
2. Every member appointed to the committee who is not currently experiencing economic exclusion themselves must have demonstrably contributed to improving economic inclusion in the past.
3. For the public to have any confidence in the committee its processes, discussions, decisions and advice must be fully transparent.

In the longer term, we do not believe a committee with the remit to provide advice to government in the weeks leading up to the federal budget can ever have enough power to achieve economic inclusion for everyone in the country.

The government should work towards establishing a well funded, truly independent body that can take the lead on developing a new, sophisticated measure of poverty that is appropriate for the

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<sup>2</sup> See: [acoss.org.au/media-releases/?media\\_release=statement-to-jobs-and-skills-summit-by-acoss-acting-ceo-edwina-macdonald](https://acoss.org.au/media-releases/?media_release=statement-to-jobs-and-skills-summit-by-acoss-acting-ceo-edwina-macdonald)



21st century. It should have the powers similar to the Fair Work Commission, which is able to make independent decisions that affect government expenditure based on evidence. We need a robust Social Security Commission that has power to assess government decisions, to ensure that policies uphold human rights and guarantee dignity to those on social security payments, and those who need income support but are currently excluded from it.

We have seen through the Disability Royal Commission that Disability Employment Services have been gamed by providers to ensure they maximise the profits they extract from disabled people who have few pathways to challenge or advocate for their rights. An independent commission would have the ability to investigate and monitor programs to examine their effectiveness – a task the ANAO, Commonwealth Ombudsman and Administrative Appeals Tribunal are not set up to do. It would provide leadership on developing policies and recommendations to meaningfully address economic exclusion beyond the short-term cycle of elections, federal budgets and the whims of government.

We hope to meet with you both to discuss our concerns further, and our proposals for a future independent commission that would monitor, assess and protect people affected by federal social policies and particularly income support policies. You can reach me via [jay@antipovertycentre.org](mailto:jay@antipovertycentre.org) or 0403 429 414.

Regards,

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