

The Senate

Committee of Privileges

Persons referred to in the Senate

Mr Barry Williams, President of the Lone Fathers
Association of Australia Inc.

136th Report

February 2009

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Report

1. On 3 February 2009 the President of the Senate, Senator the Hon. John Hogg, received a submission from Mr Barry Williams of the Lone Fathers Association seeking redress under the resolution of the Senate of 25 February 1988 relating to the protection of persons referred to in the Senate (Privilege Resolution 5).

2. The submission referred to comments made by Senator Siewert in the Senate on 3 December 2008. The President, having accepted the submission as a submission for the purposes of the resolution, referred it to the Committee of Privileges on 3 February 2009.

3. The committee met in private session on 5 February 2009 and, pursuant to paragraph (3) of Privilege Resolution 5, decided to consider the submission. The committee resolved to recommend that the response be incorporated in Hansard without change. In considering the submission, the committee did not find it necessary to confer with the persons making the submission or with the senators concerned.

4. The committee draws attention to paragraph (6) of the resolution which requires that, in considering a submission under this resolution and reporting to the Senate, the committee shall not consider or judge the truth of any statements made in the Senate or of the submission.

5. The committee **recommends**:

That a response by Mr Barry Williams of the Lone Fathers Association in the terms specified at Appendix One, be incorporated in *Hansard*.

George Brandis
Chair

Appendix One

Response by Mr Barry Williams of the Lone Fathers Association of Australia Inc. Pursuant to Resolution 5(7)(b) of the Senate of 25 February 1988

I am currently the President of the LFAA, and have been a committed advocate for lone fathers and their families for over thirty years. I established the Lone Fathers' Association (LFA) in 1973. The Association is now a national organisation and peak body with Branches in most States and Territories. I am also the National Vice President and Welfare Coordinator of Parents Without Partners Australia (PWP), and First Vice President of the Shared Parenting Association (SPCA).

I have been a federal lobbyist in the Australian Parliament since 1976. I was instrumental in having the Single Mothers' Pension extended in 1977 to include single fathers, following personal representations made by me to the then Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser. This was an important move towards greater gender-equality in family law. Members of Parliament on both sides of politics have told us that the LFA is respected for the work it does, and in particular for our strong stand against discrimination of any kind. This support for our work has come, amongst many others, from Senators Joe Ludwig, Jenny Macklin, Gary Humphries, and Steve Fielding, and previous Senators Jocelyn Newman and David Brownhill.

Claims by Senator Siewert

As you are aware, Senator Siewert stated in the Senate on 3 December 2008 that Tanya Plibersek, now (ALP) Minister for Housing and Women's Affairs, had expressed the view some time ago that the LFAA is an "extreme group". Senator Siewert said that, "Minister Plibersek...stated that she was proud to belong to the ALP because if refused to deal with extreme groups such as the Lone Fathers Association. I wonder how proud Minister Plibersek is now?"

Information from the Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs indicates that no such statement was in fact made by Senator Plibersek. What Ms Plibersek actually said was that, "It makes me proud to be a member of the Labor Party when I hear that Bob Hawke and Paul Keating are not listening to extreme voices in this debate". The Lone Fathers Association was not mentioned by Ms Plibersek at all, nor would it have been at all appropriate to have done so.

Senator Siewert further stated in Parliament that, "During question time today, the Government justified this appointment (of Barry Williams as a health ambassador), saying they wanted a diversity of views. Is it the Government's intention to encourage anti-gay, anti-women, and domestic violence denial? How does this help men's health?"

Senator Siewert's statement that the Lone Fathers Association is anti-gay and anti-women and practises "domestic violence denial" is wrong, and in the LFAA's view is seriously defamatory.

The LFAA is not and never has been an extreme group of any kind. The Association is a moderate and "mainstream" group of fathers and associated family members and friends who wish to remain part of their children's lives after separation. It has been recognised as such for several decades, at the highest political level, by successive Governments from both sides of politics. During this time, the LFAA has made many well-regarded and influential submissions to government and the Parliament on family law and related issues.

The LFAA is not in any sense anti-woman. Women account for one third of its membership and half of its National Committee, and the LFAA has close links with the gender-neutral, Australia-wide organisation, Parents Without Partners.

Nor is the LFAA in any way anti-gay. It has conducted community services on behalf of government which fully recognised and respected the equal rights of gay clients, and was pleased to be able to do this. The LFAA does believe that, at least in the great majority of cases, children require for their proper emotional and moral development suitable contact with both their biological parents - but this is not an anti-gay position, merely a commonsense one.

The LFAA is very strongly opposed to violence against women, and has made this clear on many occasions. The LFAA is, however, *also* opposed to family violence against men and children, and has reservations about one-sided propaganda campaigns against men which create an unjustified anti-male climate of opinion in the community, encourage false accusations, and fail to provide the help needed by women, including women who use violence against their children. The "UN report on violence against women" which Senator Siewert referred to was considered by the UN representatives of a number of senior western countries, including Australia, to have displayed an unacceptably extreme gender bias against men, and was not adopted by the relevant UN committee for that reason. Failure to understand and accept that decision does indeed, in the LFAA's view, amount to "denial" of the reality of domestic violence.

Senator Siewert stated in her Parliamentary question that, "...two former prime ministers (refused) to meet with Mr Williams". This further statement is also wrong. In fact, I was appointed by the *Hawke Government* as one of the consultants advising on the development of the original Child Support Scheme, which was established in 1988. I was subsequently asked by the Deputy Prime Minister of the day, Brian Howe, to act as a roving ambassador for the Government, and travelled throughout Australia over a period of two years explaining the new Scheme. Mr Howe was complimentary about the work done on this project.

I was then subsequently appointed in 2004 by the *Howard Government* as a member of the Ministerial Task Force on Child Support, charged with advising on further reform to child support arrangements. Subsequent to that, I was engaged by the Government

to assist via the Child Support Communications Project by helping publicise the new Child Support Scheme, and have been complimented by the present Government for this work.

I was recognised my work for lone parents and their children as recipient of the British Empire Medal in 1980, ACT Senior Australian of the Year Award in 2005, and the Prestige Regional Rural New South Wales and ACT Achievements Award 2007.

Senator Siewert's incorrect statements have damaged the good name of the LFAA and caused me and other members of the organisation significant distress.

(Signed)

Barry Williams