

Submission on the Marriage (Celebrant Registration Charge) Bill 2013

I have been a celebrant since my appointment in 2005. At that time, the number of celebrants were capped and only a small amount were appointed each year, which allowed for attrition of celebrants through retirement and other factors. The appointment of celebrants was then opened up which allowed a large number of celebrants through. Given the number of current celebrants, each celebrant can now average 7 weddings per year (based on roughly 11,000 celebrants and 77,000 civil marriages a year). Not only has my income diminished considerably due to this but my fees per wedding have also reduced due to undercutting by celebrants competing for the scarce number of weddings. I currently earn well under \$20000 per year and have a family to support on this income.

The proposed fee for celebrants each year will have an impact on me in a number of ways:

- (1) reduce my ability to support my children and increase reliance on government benefits
- (2) reduce my ability to maintain celebrant insurance and participate in a celebrant organisation (which can be important for professional development and to ensure I am up to date with celebrant matters)
- (3) increase the possibility of becoming de-registered if I cannot afford the fee – celebrants are appointed for life but this fee will operate to override that life appointment
- (4) increase the probability that I will have to rely on unemployment benefits.

Since the number of celebrants have been increased by the Attorney-General's department, my weddings have dropped from 2 per week to 2 or 3 a month and my fee for a wedding has dropped from \$420 to \$350 and sometimes \$300. My overheads per wedding are roughly \$150 and the time I spend on each couple with meetings, paperwork, writing the ceremony, rehearsal, travel and delivering the ceremony, as well as registering it afterwards is 15 hours. Overheads include petrol, maintaining a car to get to ceremonies, cost of celebrant insurance and ongoing professional development, PA system (approximately \$2500 with a life of only a year or so more as the government has recently sold the bandwidth to media companies necessitating a replacement PA system) and consumables such as printer ink, paper, batteries and office equipment (as we are required to maintain a home office), official stationery which has tripled in price, telephone and postage costs. For example, next week I have a ceremony with a rehearsal (total kilometres will be 500km with the rehearsal and the ceremony the following day). My total fee for that ceremony is \$300. I have had three meetings with the couple as well as writing their

ceremony, communicating by email with them for ceremony changes and preparing their paperwork.

Since the Attorney-General's Department allowed so many celebrants to be appointed, I have applied for approximately 70 jobs without success. As I am over 50 (but still have young children, the youngest is 9), my job prospects are bleak. It has been thoroughly demoralising not to even be offered an interview. I have had two interviews only. I have applied for everything from supermarkets to government positions without any success.

If this fee for celebrants is introduced, it will further jeopardise my ability to provide for my family. So far, I have been avoiding unemployment benefits but this may well change should the fee be introduced. I am unable to get bank loans and credit cards due to my low income.

If this fee is introduced, I would ask that there also be an exemption for low income earners and that this exemption also take into account dependent children by making the threshold greater for each dependent child. I submit that anyone earning under \$20,000 per year should be exempt from paying this fee (this would certainly include me).

I also submit that the remote area exemption should still apply but that the committee should take into account that some remote areas such as the Whitsundays have an incredibly high number of ceremonies each year (some celebrants do as many as 200 weddings a year there). Therefore, a fairer exemption system would take into account the income of a celebrant rather than the location of the celebrant. Celebrants in remote locations that have few weddings per year would still be covered by an exemption, I submit.

Therefore, I would ask the committee to carefully consider the issue of the celebrant fee. Celebrants receive little from the Attorney-General's Department once they are registered and I do not anticipate that this would change. Since becoming a celebrant, the Marriage Celebrants section through their actions have decreased my income, increased my costs by reducing the providers of ongoing professional development and so increasing their fees, and has provided very little in the way of assistance or communication. I do not believe that a registration fee is justified. I do think a one off fee to cover their costs in considering a celebrant appointment is fair however.