

PO Box 653
BELMONT WA 6105
T: (08) 9277 1655
F: (08) 9277 1266
Email: wacni@msn.com
WEB SITE: www.cniwa.com.au

COUNCIL FOR THE NATIONAL INTEREST
WESTERN AUSTRALIAN COMMITTEE



A Submission to:

The Standing Committee on Education,
Employment and Workplace Relations
on Child Care in Australia

This submission addresses the following:

Term of Reference - The financial, social and industry impact of the ABC Learning collapse on the provision of child care in Australia.

The collapse of ABC Learning points to the folly of Government supporting a system based on profit making rather than on child care. The current system is in conflict with nurturing and development in the "best interest of the child", contrary to the Government's commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The fact that this "inquiry" into the provision of child care is being held by the Education, Employment and Workplace Relation Committee and not a Committee centred on families and children suggests that the Government is more concerned to treat infants as some kind of nuisance which prevents mothers from resuming their role as simply a unit of production as measured by GDP, rather than as the nurturers of the precious future of the nation.

The most important aspect of "child care" is what happens to the child and it follows what is the effect on the child's life and the future of that child in the community and therefore the outcome for the nation. The overwhelming conclusion to be drawn from world wide research over the past three decades or more is that the current "child care" model in Australia is a failure. It follows that the proposed government run parent and child centres' as flagged by the Government and promoted by Maxine McKew, Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Barbara Romeril, National Secretary The Community Child Care Association will also fail the best interest of the child and therefore is not in the national interest. This is demonstrated by Peter Saunders and Jessica Brown in the Australian Newspaper 18th April 2008, "Rudd's baby farms not great for kids" (Appendix 1) The claim by McKew "experts tell us this is the way to go" is not supported by the research.

The Council for the National Interest (CNI) in its policy discussion paper The Family Really does Matter 30/4/07 details significant research findings which demonstrate that the first three years of an infant's life are the most critical in terms of bonding, nurturing, learning and emotional growth and security and further that the current child care system fails in this regard. It is shown consistently that infants placed in child care centres for long periods during the ages 0-3 years are denied the infant/parent bonding and in later life are more insecure, more aggressive more prone to anxiety, depression, self harm and suicide. An extract from this policy discussion paper is attached at Appendix (11).

The following are further quotations from the research which show the failure of the current system in Australia and elsewhere.

Modern research stresses the critical nature of the first three years in a child's life and how crucial to it's future development is the mother/child bonding in infancy.

- As respected social commentator Anne Manne points out "almost all of the debate on paid maternity leave has taken place without the infant's needs - especially for the proposed 14 weeks of care - being considered.

* from 'Motherhood - How Should We Care for Our Children? By Anne Manne.

- According to Mem Fox, Children's literacy advocate and author, "Putting very young babies into child care is a form of child abuse." She says the comment was not intended to distress parents - "it was merely to speak up for all the babies in full time care under the age of 12 months. In most debates about child care including this one, it's all about the choices people have to make. It's about the adults and their needs and their situations. No one mentions the babies - no one at all!"
* 'Babies need a Voice, too.' Sunday Times 7/9/08.
- Dr Steve Biddulph, a researcher in child care for 3 decades in UK, Sweden, US and Australia says "the tendency in Australia to provide more day care subsidies than home-care assistance is extremely shortsighted and out of kilter with what research is finding."
- Raising Babies, Biddulph Steve Dr.
- Penelope Leach, co director of the largest ever UK Childhood Study: 'Families Children and Childcare,' says :It is fairly clear from data from different parts of the world, that the less time children spend in group care before three years the better.
- Professor Jay Belsky of The Institute for the Study of Children Families and Social Issues working in the late 1990s on the National Institute of Child Health and Development Study concluded that the more time very young children spent in child care, the more aggressive and disobedient they were between two and six years.
*Madeleine Bunting reporting for The Guardian on the N.I.C.H.D study. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,3604,1256>

Clearly a new model for child care in Australia must be developed. The collapse of ABC Learning provides the opportunity to do so.

Term of Reference - alternative options and models for the provision of child care.

The whole focus of this new model must be:

- (i) support for motherhood as a profession
- (ii) payment to mothers or fathers who stay at home to care for children full time. This could be a Home Child Care Allowance. It is not equitable for government to pay parents to help with child care costs whilst they both work and not pay parents where one stays home to provide care. This is an investment in the future and an insurance against the possible deleterious effects of the current system of child care.
- (iii) Less formal less institutional type small community based child care centers' based on not for profit model
- (iv) Government financial support for 'family' member child care rather than formal child care services.
- (v) Encouragement for mothers to defer career options by government and business focusing on - paid parental leave
- flexible working hours
- return to work security in the future.

Term of reference - the feasibility for establishing a national authority to oversee the child care industry in Australia.

To set up a national authority will further erode the autonomy of the States within the Federal system. Such an authority will not be necessary if the recommendations of this submission are adopted.

Recommendations:

The overwhelming conclusion to be drawn from research in Australia, United Kingdom, United States/America and Europe is that the Australian Government and business must rethink child care policies. The damaging effect of long periods in day care for infants from 0-3 years is building a huge future problem of anxiety, depression suicide and self harm, insecurity, attention deficit, violence, eating disorders, binge drinking and illicit drug use as these infants become teenagers and young adults.

The importance of infant/parent bonding and nurturing in the first three years dictates that mothers and fathers must be widely informed of the consequences of day care and being informed, given true freedom of choice as to whether or when to return to the work force.

Accordingly CNI RECOMMENDS:

- 1 that the Australian Government takes heed of the research findings and recognizes that the current child care system in Australia fails the national interest test in both the long term and the short term;
- 2 that the Australian Government mounts a community wide education and information programme informing mothers and fathers and the broad community of the research findings so that being informed parents are given true freedom of choice as to whether or when to return to the work force and what form of child care to choose, if they do return;
- 3 that the current system of child care be replaced with a system which:
 - (i) supports motherhood as a profession;
 - (ii) pays a home child care allowance to the parent who stays home to care for the children;
 - (iii) redirects child care into a less formal less institutionalized, small community based not for profit models;
 - (iv) provides Government support for family member childcare rather than taxpayer funding of large corporate groups;
 - (v) encourage mothers to defer career options by government and business focusing on
 - * paid parental leave
 - * flexible working hours
 - * return to work security in the future including refresher courses
 - * a major commitment to 'trainees' to service any vacancy needs;
 - (vi) abandons the proposed national chain of government run parent and child centres;
 - (vii) strengthens the infant/child health community services and funds for enhanced early intervention services in the fields of both child health and parenting skills.

Denis J Whitely
 Executive Director
 CNI - WA
 28th January, 2009

APPENDIX (1)

Rudd's baby farms not great for kids

The PM's child centres smell of command economies, warn Peter Saunders and Jessica Brown

KEVIN Rudd's big idea for this weekend's 2020 Summit is a plan to help working families by setting up a national chain of government-run parent-and-child centres.

Let's call them PC centres, for with universal child care at its core, this is every PC idea. The Community Child Care Association's national secretary Barbara Romeril could hardly contain herself when she heard the news: "It's very exciting to finally have a government that gets it," she told the ABC. "We know this is what parents want and we know this is what's good for children." This is classic PC rhetoric, based on shaky evidence but repeated so often that people now assume it must be true.

Rudd wants these PC centres up and running by 2020, although he has no idea how much they will cost. While their core business will be child care, they will offer an all-encompassing range of services to all parents with children under five.

There will be health checks on babies, child vaccinations, advice for mothers, counselling for parents, long hours day care for infants, and preschool early learning programs for toddlers. All of this will be underpinned by national quality standards, so every centre will be run in the same way and will be staffed by experts with lots of certificates and diplomas to their name.

Rudd assures parents they won't be compelled to use these PC centres, although they will be compelled to pay for them through higher taxes. This extra spending is OK, though, because it is an investment. As Maxine McKew, the Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Child Care, explained to Sky News: "All the experts tell us this is the way to go. You provide that intervention early on, through the early years, and that's how you get healthy children and, I think, less stress for parents as well."

But is there no downside to this idea? Perhaps Rudd, his ministers and the childcare cheer squad should take time to reflect on some of the problems before they plough ahead. There are at least seven to consider.

■ The core business of these centres will be long hours child care, but despite what McKew and the Community Child Care Association claim, it isn't true that this is necessarily good for children. McKew suggests parents' stress levels can be reduced by long hours care, but she ignores evidence that cortisol (stress hormone) levels among young children spending long periods in institutional care are often disturbingly high, and this is surely what should concern us more.

they use these local resources it strengthens the social ties that create strong communities. Concentrating services in government centres may be more efficient, but it will erode local relationship networks.

■ These centres will weaken the third sector and strengthen the power of government. There is a worrying trend for government to enlist voluntary organisations as its agents and then enslave them.

Welfare charities, for example, now depend on money from government contracts to run employment services, and the recently established Family Relationship Centres have effectively nationalised family counselling services previously run by groups such as Relationships Australia.

has gone but and you are strapping your toddler into the car for the daily commute across town in your nearest PC centre, remember this change was supposed to make life easier.

■ The PC centres will redistribute income from poorer to richer parents by making the former contribute to the childcare costs of the latter. A couple sacrificing some of their joint income by having one parent stay home to look after the kids will now have to pay more tax to subsidise other couples who choose to keep working and earning while parking their kids in the PC centre.

This violates the principle that government should remain neutral between parents who stay home and those who go out to work, as it represents an extensive intervention in favour of the latter at the cost of the former.

■ These centres are going to be expensive. Even Rudd doesn't know how much they are going to cost, but Crisley estimates a horrific annual bill of about \$2 billion. Based on past experience, we can be sure they will get even more expensive over time as people's expectations and demands continue to rise. For a government that says it has inherited a budget blowout and needs to trim expenditure, this seems an odd way to cut costs.

Before it commits to a huge expenditure such as this, the Government should take a deep breath and tell us the ultimate objective of its family strategy. Is it to get more mums back into work to ease the labour shortage? If so, government-run baby farms may be a good plan. But if the objective is to give parents real choices about how to balance work and family, to support a vibrant community sector, or even to improve long-term child wellbeing, this PC proposal may not be the best way to achieve it.

Jessica Brown and Peter Saunders are social researchers at the Centre for Independent Studies.

The Government should look at the evidence before spending billions of dollars herding children into government institutions

It is true that older children from very disadvantaged backgrounds can benefit from good quality formal care, but this is because the care they get at home is so appalling.

Most very young children are better off raised by their parents, and the Government should look seriously at the evidence on this before spending billions of dollars herding them into government institutions.

■ The new PC centres will destroy social capital (something the Rudd Government claims it wants to strengthen). At the moment, most of these services are already available to parents, but they are scattered rather than concentrated in one place, and they are unco-ordinated rather than being organised according to a single centralised formula.

■ People get help from neighbours, family members, community clinics, churches, local play schools, and when

The proposed new PC centres will likewise absorb existing community-based and commercial childcare providers. Open, democratic societies rely on a strong and vibrant third sector as a check and buffer against government power. In Australia, this is fast disappearing.

■ These centres will further erode the autonomy of the states within our federal system. Many of the services they will provide are presently the responsibility of the states. As in health care (where the pressure is to nationalise hospitals), so too in child care, Canberra is shifting more power to itself in the name of efficiency.

■ Rudd says these new centres will save money and avoid duplication. This is another way of saying they will be big, and there won't be many of them, in which case they will create more inconvenience for users. When your neighbourhood childcare centre