



Senator-elect
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FEDERAL MPs MUST FOCUS ON GIVING FAMILIES GENUINE CHOICE

Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family

I urge the federal MPs investigating work and family issues to make a major focus of their inquiry how the Federal Government can enable families to have genuine freedom of choice. Specifically how families structure their paid work and family life.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services, chaired by Liberal MP Bronwyn Bishop, is conducting an "Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family".

All governments talk about 'family-friendly' policies, but it seems that pro-family policies are simply pro-employer policies.

Professor Neil Gilbert, Professor of Social Welfare from the University of California, Berkeley, recently said government 'family-friendly' policies should perhaps more aptly be labelled "market-friendly policies".

In his paper, "*What Do Women Really Want?*", Prof Gilbert talks about the "unyielding tension between a life centred on family – meeting the continuous demands of marriage, child rearing and household management – and a life centred on paid employment and meeting the continuous demands of a full-time career."

We all know balancing paid work and family life is extraordinarily difficult. We know raising children is the toughest job of all and parents make great sacrifices.

This perception that families have to bow to the market is reinforced by bosses and employer organisations.

Last month, Tom Poulton, the managing partner of Allens Arthur Robinson, made the remarkable comment that staff did not have a right to any free time and should treat the client "as if they were God". (Australian Financial Review, 22/3/2005)

The Australian Industry Group's Tim Piper was reported as saying that family-friendly policies "should not be forced on businesses" and must be "linked to productivity".

And David Gregory, from the Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said VECCI opposed any "blanket rights or entitlements" and added: "It's important individuals have their life in a reasonable balance so they are focused on the job." (Both Herald Sun, 7/3/2005)

If Australian families are going to have genuine choice about how they structure their paid work and family life, such as whether both parents need to be in the paid workforce, employers have to recognise they have social responsibilities as well as shareholder responsibilities.

Business has an important role to support their employees with genuine family-friendly policies; to help their workers become better parents, partners and family members.

Life is much more than making bigger profits and long hours in the paid workforce. Family life should not be sacrificed for the market. It's time to change the corporate culture, to challenge this notion that the market reigns supreme, and to put the Australian family first. ■