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Commonwealth Parliamentary Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family

The recent publication, Diversity and Change in Australian Families, by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (2004), offers findings and comments relevant to the inquiry's terms of reference.

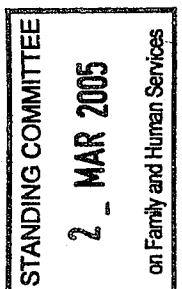
Specifically the publication substantiates the facts commonly promoted, such as; half a million children in poverty, couples with children represent 40% of all households in poverty and that the probability of living in poverty increases with family size (page 35).

The chapter on lone parents presents an even bleaker picture with lone parents comprising 32% of the poorest 20% of society and only 7.6% of the top 20% (page 53).

The research is also presented indicating what has been public knowledge for some time, i.e. People are delaying marriage and parenting and having fewer children.

While this demographic change can be presented, what is less clear are the factors supporting the difference. Generally there seems consensus that reasons such as the lack of universal paid parental leave, the lack of affordable child care, the rate and cost of divorce, financial burden of child rearing, cost of living and lifestyle, and increased insecurity around employment (high proportion of casual, low paid jobs) all contribute to people being cautious starting families.

Other speculative reasons include our cultural prioritising of materialism and consumerism where the purchase and consumption of goods are promoted as



equivalent to a successful and happy lifestyle. There has been for some time concern over the superficial emphasis on consumption at the expense of deeper, spiritual relationships and subsequent impact on human relationships.

If these concerns or trends are accurate it is possible to speculate what consequences may flow onto individuals. The concentration on personal happiness via consumption can place at risk concern for others, both from the point of view that self obsession reduces the capacity to consider others as well as more perniciously viewing others as competitors for the same goal (as personified in the mad rush of Boxing Day Sales).

If any of these complex factors are relevant then it clearly becomes obvious that a simple change to taxation or some other issue by themselves will have little impact on a multi factored, sophisticated social phenomena.

We are told that Australians work some of the longest hours amongst the industrialised countries, people report that they have no time/energy for family life, they are too exhausted from work. Technology with mobile phones, laptops, means you can always be at work, even at home, and this opportunity can easily slip into an expectation.

Productivity, flexibility are positive outcomes everyone wants but we don't usually ask, for what purpose and how much? There seems to be some natural tension between the needs of children (stability, routine, free time) and the needs of work.

Today with all our progress all the evidence suggests that women still do the vast majority of child rearing and family work, yet they desire and are expected to contribute equally in our paid workforce. This suggests that at least half our workforce is under enormous stress and something has to give, possibly at the moment that means having a job ahead of having a child or children.

The aging of our population is also creating a difficult burden on women as middle aged parents have to worry about the care of their aged parents. It is not unusual to find such women holding down a job, caring for their children and their own parents. Overlaid on this are the financial costs as well as the emotional ones. While we probably like the idea of living longer such carers can be faced with children at home in their 20's and parents alive in their 80's and 90's.

This is a challenge enough but consider the current messages in the market place, insufficient university places, higher education costs, not enough nursing homes, poor respite facilities. On reflection it's possibly a good thing most parents don't reflect on those things otherwise the birth rate would fall faster.

The above suggests a fairly depressing picture which is a little unfair. By any number of measures Australians enjoy a healthier and better standard of living than ever before. The question is probably about balance. We have

achieved this by working harder and more efficiently, using our initiative and creativity. The challenge now is how do we ensure that all the achievements don't have a higher cost than a benefit?

It seems from the demographics that Australians want a comfortable lifestyle which requires higher incomes, they also expect a certain standard of social services (taxation).

Perhaps some of the answers include an explicit public debate over the balance between taxation and public services. One of the factors in starting families is obviously financial, this can be addressed in only one of two ways, lowering personal income tax and expecting individuals to pay for their own services, or having personal income tax at a level whereby certain services are guaranteed (eg. Health, education, social services) thus reducing individuals anxiety about future needs. After all, when you think about it, starting a family is an act of faith, a promise based on trust. Surely it makes sense that this very personal act of commitment can be strengthened within a community that supports that trust and commitment by giving confidence that future needs will be provided for.

Luke Rumbold

CEO

Upper Murray Family Care Inc

PO Box 725

Wodonga Vic 3689

(02) 6022 8000

Email: admin@umfc.com.au