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**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT AND
WORKPLACE RELATIONS

Reference: Employment: increasing participation in paid work

WEDNESDAY, 17 SEPTEMBER 2003

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT & WORKPLACE RELATIONS

Wednesday, 17 September 2003

Members: Mrs De-Anne Kelly (*Chair*), Mr Bevis (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Dutton, Ms Hall, Mr Hartsuyker, Mr Lloyd, Ms Panopoulos, Mr Randall, Ms Vamvakinou and Mr Wilkie

Members in attendance: Mr Bevis, Ms Hall, Mr Hartsuyker, Mrs De-Anne Kelly, Mr Panopoulos, Ms Vamvakinou and Mr Wilkie

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

Employment issues in both rural/regional and urban and outer suburban areas, with particular reference to:

- Measures that can be implemented to increase the level of participation in paid work in Australia; and
- How a balance of assistance, incentives and obligations can increase participation, for income support recipients

WITNESSES

CARTERS, Mr Graham, Group Manager, Employment Policy Group, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations..... 1

MATHESON, Mr Scott, Acting Group Manager, Employment Analysis and Evaluation Group, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations..... 1

McNALLY, Ms Carolyn, Assistant Secretary, Priority Groups Policy Branch, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations..... 1

PRATT, Mr Finn, Group Manager, Intensive Support Group, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations..... 1

TRAYNOR, Mr William, Assistant Secretary, Employment Exchange Branch, Job Search Support Group, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations..... 1

Committee met at 11.13 a.m.

CARTERS, Mr Graham, Group Manager, Employment Policy Group, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

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TRAYNOR, Mr William, Assistant Secretary, Employment Exchange Branch, Job Search Support Group, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

CHAIR—Welcome. I declare open this hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations. Who would like to lead off with your submission?

Mr Carters—Do you want us to go through the submission as an overview or in some detail? Do you want to ask questions along the way?

CHAIR—Perhaps an overview would be helpful. Your colleagues could then raise points in support of that submission. Perhaps we could then move to questions.

Ms HALL—I am particularly interested in hearing from the people we did not hear from last time. We gave some of you a bit of a workout last time. We would like to have a chance to question the rest of you.

Mr Carters—Okay. Maybe a good way to do that is if we just go through an overview of the submission. As we get to each element or segment of the submission that people have responsibility for, they could talk about that. Would that be a good approach?

CHAIR—That sounds fine, yes.

Mr Carters—I will start off. Basically, the submission deals with the role of the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations in terms of supporting strong employment growth and the improved productive performance of enterprises in Australia. We set out a number of different elements of that. Essentially, we are looking towards achieving an effectively functioning labour market and workplaces with higher productivity and higher pay. We, firstly, paint the picture of the strong economic growth in Australia that has been occurring over many years and focus on the Intergenerational Report, which has a very strong emphasis on participation but also, I guess, on what the Treasurer and the head of Treasury call the three Ps—population, participation and productivity. They are very crucial elements of future participation rates and economic growth.

We discuss in a bit of detail—and Mr Matheson can talk about it—the level of population growth, low fertility rates and how we need to increase participation to fuel future growth, particularly in the context of an ageing population. We talk about the welfare reform that has occurred until now and the measures which are occurring in the future. In that context, we started with the reference group on welfare reform headed by Patrick McClure in 1999. The first tranche of response to that from the government was the Australians Working Together package, which was about a \$1.7 billion package. Following on from that, very quickly afterwards we developed the active participation model, which commenced quite recently in July 2003, which further developed the concept of basically assistance, incentives and obligation, which are the three elements of it. Certainly the active participation model provides activity for individuals. It provides individualised assistance. There are obligations placed on most participants.

The next stage of the welfare reform was to produce a consultation paper called ‘Building a simpler system to help jobless families and individuals’. Basically, that consultation paper looked at a whole range of approaches to improve the social support system—that is, both the income support system and the service delivery side—to get a less complicated, fairer and more equitable approach with better incentives to work and obviously to participate. That is an ongoing process. As well as that, the other elements which the government is working on at the moment are obviously the ongoing workplace relations legislative reform elements. There is a demographic task force that is chaired by Treasury, which we have membership of. There is a work and family task force which is chaired by Prime Minister and Cabinet, which we are represented on. There is the welfare reform working age payments task force, which is chaired jointly by ourselves and Family and Community Services. Obviously we are represented on that because we joint chair it. So there is a lot of developmental policy work going on there. Clearly, where that leads to and what happens is up to the government in the future.

I guess that is really a very short overview of what we cover here. If you would like to go to page 3, which deals with labour market data, trends, comments and key issues, Mr Matheson might like to take you through some of these elements. Remember that both Mr Matheson and I have given you quite an amount of detail in some of this basic data and in the presentation on the employment services.

Mr Matheson—I am happy to speak briefly about it if that would be of assistance. As Mr Carters said, we actually identify or draw on the framework that the Treasurer has spoken about. It is the three Ps framework for understanding what the real issues facing Australia are. As Mr Carters said, the Treasurer has identified that economic growth is really a function of three things—population, participation in paid work and productivity. We illustrate the dilemma facing Australia by drawing attention to the future of population growth. We refer to a couple of demographic projections, which are fairly standard and fairly commonly understood projections. They essentially say that given what we face in terms of declining fertility rates, we are likely to see a slowing of population growth in coming years with an associated impact on labour supply. So there will be a slowing in labour supply as a result of that slowing in population growth.

At the bottom of page 3, we actually speak about what demographers call the standard projection, which has Australia’s fertility rate declining from its current level of about 1.73 children per woman to 1.65 children per woman and stabilising at around that level. Combined with maintaining net overseas migration at about its current level of around 80,000 people per annum, that should see Australia’s population stable at about 25 million by the middle of this

century. Our labour force will also stabilise at a higher level than it currently is now. It is about 10 million at the moment. It will stabilise at about 11 million. But even at that level, which is higher than its current level, it will still mean that the proportion of the working age population as a share of the total population in Australia will be considerably lower in future than it is now. That means that labour force participation is likely to drop quite considerably over the period ahead.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I have a question about those figures. The labour force participation rate drops to 50.8 as opposed to the working age population being at 49.6. That is at the top of page 4.

Mr Matheson—It is 59.6.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Yes. Is the difference between those two equivalent to the current difference, or have other matters been factored into the gap between the working age population and the participation rate?

Mr Matheson—I would have to take a closer look at it. I suspect not in the sense that it has not factored in possible policy changes which might sort of influence what happens to labour force participation over the period ahead. I think we made the point earlier that the Treasurer has said that he thinks we should be able to achieve productivity growth and labour force participation rates above that sort of baseline projection in the years ahead provided we get the policy settings right. I can perhaps take the technical aspect of that question on notice and come back to you.

Certainly it would not be factoring in the possibility of significant policy change that could influence that. They are basically just ABS projections based on what the current situation is and what they might assume might happen to fertility, migration and mortality. That is essentially all that goes into it. That sort of feeds out these projections. So they are not meant to be forecasts in any sense. They are purely projections. They give us a feel for what might happen assuming migration stayed at current levels, assuming we still had these incremental increases in life expectancy and assuming fertility continues to decline but then stabilises. So it is nothing more than that, essentially.

We use them as they are commonly used to illustrate the issues, really, that Australia faces in the period ahead. Then we provide a discussion from near the top of page 4 on some of the factors which have influenced trends in labour market participation over the last decade or so. We note that there has been an increase in labour force participation of about 1.1 percentage points over the decades. When you look behind that—as we discussed at quite a deal of length at our previous briefing—female labour force participation has been increasing. Male labour force participation, while still above female labour force participation, has actually been declining. They are long-term trends that have occurred over several decades. We would expect them to probably continue in the future.

Mr BEVIS—Is there any qualitative research to explain the reasons behind that?

Mr Matheson—We provided some supplementary material on Friday afternoon. It was about some issues that I had undertaken to come back to the committee on after our earlier briefing. I

apologise that it was not given to you by Friday, so you probably have not had an opportunity to have any kind of a look at that. We do talk at several points in that material we have provided about some of the factors that have influenced the changes in labour force participation, particularly what has been behind the trends in male and female labour force participation. We identify, for example, the upward trend in the share of services in GDP or the share of the service industries in the economy as a whole. Industries which traditionally have perhaps employed more women than men are increasingly characterised by part-time, casual employment, which is often the kind of work that women seeking to balance work and family—

Mr BEVIS—I have only skimmed that today so the answer may be there. But the point of my question was more about whether we know their motivation. What you are explaining is there may or may not be a link between what you are saying and why more women are entering the work force. I guess my question, separate from that, is whether there is any qualitative research on women entering the work force and women not entering the work force or why women, at the time they make the decision, are making that decision.

Mr Matheson—I imagine there probably would be. I am just not sure off the top of my head. It seems such an obvious question for social researchers to investigate. We can speculate about what those factors might be. In fact, come to think of it, we may even quote some work by people from the University of Newcastle. If you go to page 7 of our submission, assuming you have the same pagination we have, there is a bit of a discussion about some research based on the Australian longitudinal study of women's health, which was done by Russell and Bowman for the Department of Family and Community Services in 2000. It refers to some of the motivations of women in terms of wanting to have both children and a good career. They do not choose to—probably on average—go into the work force purely for financial reasons. There are reasons of personal satisfaction, a desire for social contact and a desire to build a career. A whole range of factors like that will motivate women in their choice to join or rejoin the work force. This is the case even when you take into account that perhaps the returns to work for the second earner in a family can often be quite low when you take into account things like child-care costs and so forth. I do not know if that is the kind of—

Mr BEVIS—It goes part of the way to answering the question.

Mr Matheson—Perhaps it is another question we can have a look at. We will see if we can identify some further research that has been done in that kind of area.

Mr WILKIE—Following on from that, I would be curious to see areas—obviously there are women that want to have that part-time option—where there are a large number of women wanting to enter the work force but who cannot get full-time work because the only thing on offer is part-time work.

Mr BEVIS—It is the flipside of the coin. It is permanent part-time work or permanent part-time unemployment.

Mr Matheson—We can look at that. We will certainly take that on notice. As we discussed at the briefing some weeks ago, most people who are working part time are actually satisfied with their hours. In fact, levels of job satisfaction tend to be higher for people who are working part time. There are a small proportion—and the ABS collects data on this—of people working part

time who would like to work more hours. But for the vast majority of people, three-quarters of people working part time, they are happy with the hours and they do not want more hours. This suggests that a lot of those preferences are actually being increasingly met in the labour market as the incidence of part-time employment has increased.

Ms HALL—Have you got any data on job satisfaction with people working part time? Can you give us some qualitative data on that?

Mr Matheson—Well, I can give you the actual ABS data on that. I will do that.

Ms HALL—Thank you.

Mr Matheson—That is easily obtained.

Ms HALL—And data on those people working part time who would like to work more hours.

Mr Matheson—Yes. For the remainder of that section, we essentially just go through the labour market participation experience of particular groups, such as mature age workers. We identify that there has been a fairly strong increase in labour force participation amongst mature age people over the last 10 years. But we note that, notwithstanding that, levels of labour force participation amongst the mature aged in Australia are still considerably lower than in comparable countries, which suggests there is the potential for mature age labour force participation to be increased in Australia given that countries like New Zealand, the UK and the US are 10 or more percentage points above us in terms of their participation rate.

We also identify lower labour force participation, not surprisingly and frequently for perfectly good reasons, amongst people with disabilities. Again, there is scope, with the big increase in people on the disability support pension, for example, to increase labour force participation amongst those groups. Indigenous Australians similarly have significantly lower rates of participation in the labour force than non-Indigenous Australians. Part of that will be because they live in remote communities and the scope for labour force participation there is a lot lower than in metropolitan areas. Nevertheless, there is scope there. The other issue with the Indigenous population is while, as I said earlier, we will expect Australia's population growth rate to slow and in fact in time perhaps level off, the Indigenous population is growing quite significantly. There is a lot younger age profile amongst Indigenous Australians.

We then talk, as we have discussed before, about the significant differences between participation in states and across regions and between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. We also talk about the influence that family structures and the presence of children and the age of children can have on labour force participation. That is probably more than enough, I think, on that unless there are some questions.

Ms HALL—I have one question to follow on from information you gave us relating to a question I asked about the nature of casual employment. You were talking about the growth in it et cetera. In the last paragraph on the last page, you talk about the fact that a large proportion of casual employment has been long term. I notice you said that the casualisation of work was strongest in the first half of the decade. Is this similar? Was long-term casual employment stronger in the first half of the decade or stronger in the second half of the decade?

Mr Matheson—I might have to check.

Ms HALL—That is fine. I am happy for you to check because I am very interested in it.

Mr Matheson—I suspect the characteristics of casual employees have been fairly similar over time, but I would have to check that.

Ms HALL—I would like to get that information if I could.

Mr Matheson—Yes. We will see if there is any data on that, definitely.

Mr Carters—Pages 6 to 8 inclusive talk about workplace flexibilities. That is basically focusing on workplace reforms. Workplace reforms need to be very mindful of the ageing population and the need to adopt more family friendly workplaces and practices. So with the workplace reforms, the government's view has been that they should remain as flexible as possible and that the legislation supporting it be as minimal as possible to basically optimise the opportunities for individual workplace agreements and arrangements to be developed to suit the employer and employee. We have listed there that the result of this has been that there is quite a range of provisions in workplace agreements now that talk about flexible starting and finishing times and averaging hours over the longer term so there is flexibility in the hours people work, staggered starts and finishes, rostered days off and obviously other opportunities to balance work and family responsibilities. We also note that we have quite recently opened the new Workplace Advisory Service to better promote these flexibilities which can be included in certified agreements or workplace agreements.

We also mention the legislative program that the government has been running for some time. That is still looking at issues of the unfair dismissal laws, secret ballots, further simplifying awards and simplifying the agreement making processes. We emphasise the work and family arrangements. Mr Matheson has already spoken about that, and it appears on pages 7 and 8. There is a very strong push at the moment to have more family friendly opportunities available in the workplace to give families the choice of whether they return to the work force at particular stages through transitions from having families and looking after families or indeed while there still are families. So the government has very much emphasised the options of choice in that respect.

We note that there are significant opportunities for people on income support to work. For instance, the parenting payment single payment for lone parents enables lone parents to earn up to \$144.60 a fortnight before there is any reduction in their income support. The reductions thereafter are only at 40c in every dollar that is earned. Essentially that is saying that lone parents on parenting payments single can in fact very much hold down a full-time job on the federal minimum wage and still have the benefits of residual income support and the other benefits that flow from that. So there are certainly incentives there to seek out and find employment.

Basically, a few stats are provided in terms of the certified agreements and the employees covered. I will highlight a couple. Ninety-one per cent of employees covered now have access to at least one family friendly or flexible working hours provision. Sixty-five per cent have access to family carers leave, and 76 per cent have access to part-time employment provisions. There is

a provision that parents who have been employed permanently for 12 months on a continuous basis are eligible for 12 months of unpaid leave and a right to return to their job or a similar job with the employer. If we move on to—

Mr BEVIS—Before you do, I have a couple of questions. Can you give us an actual list of the sorts of family friendly measures that fall within the category that fit that 91 per cent or 80 per cent. Page 8 says:

In current federal certified agreements data indicates that:

- 80 per cent of agreements contain at least one family friendly ...

The next bit says:

Of employees covered by a federal certified agreement:

- approximately 91 per cent have access to at least one family friendly ...

I am not quite sure what the difference is.

Mr Carters—The difference is one is a count of the actual number of agreements and the second is the count of the actual employees covered by those agreements.

Mr BEVIS—If you could give us a list of the common practices that would be identified as family friendly, I would appreciate it.

Mr Carters—Okay. There is actually a database that has been produced which lists those measures to assist other employers and employees to think of new and innovative ways of doing that. We will do that, yes.

Mr BEVIS—It might be helpful if you could also provide us with a list of the materials and advice that is provided from that agency to employers to say, 'Here are things you can do that are family friendly,' so we can actually see what is being promoted out there.

Mr Carters—That is the Office of Workplace Services.

Mr BEVIS—You made reference on page 6 to the fact that we need to be mindful of the ageing work force and encouraging older workers to stay in the work force for longer. I would be interested in the tools and methods you have employed for that or that are being considered. In other words, how do you cope with that? How do we cope with that? I assume that the basis of the reference to industrial relations is that it improves productivity and that it increases the wealth and generates employment and, therefore, it feeds into our terms of reference. Am I right in that supposition?

Mr Carters—Basically, yes.

Mr BEVIS—In that case, can you provide us with details of labour market productivity in Australia over the last 20 years, year on year, and some comparison with the OECD average?

Mr Matheson—Yes.

Mr BEVIS—Can you also provide total factor productivity over the same period. In other words, labour market productivity is, of course, only one factor in determining economic productivity. It would be useful to put that into some perspective so we understand total factor productivity over that period. Page 7 refers to the fact that the department promotes agreement making options. Which agreement making options are they?

Mr Matheson—The Workplace Relations Act does not discriminate between agreement making options, so it would be all the options available under the Workplace Relations Act, which would include certified agreements, either made directly with employees or with trade unions, and Australian workplace agreements, the individual agreements made between employers and individual employees. Indeed, the act also does not discourage informal agreements by any means. That is reflected in aspects of how the workplace relations system operates. For example, safety net adjustments can be absorbed into informal agreements or over awards in the same way as they can be absorbed into formal agreements. So essentially the Workplace Relations Act is about promoting agreement making in all its forms.

Mr BEVIS—So when the department promotes agreements, how does it promote an agreement given that there are four or six different models?

Mr Matheson—It promotes agreement making. It says that there are a range of options available. In the language used here, it is certainly not intended to give an impression that it promotes a particular type of agreement over another. It promotes agreement making through the various avenues and it promotes the scope within the agreement making to get the flexibility which will allow employee interests and employer interests to perhaps better meet.

Mr BEVIS—I do not have the quote in front of me but I could easily dig it up because I have used it often enough. It is from an annual report from the department a couple of years ago. It identified that whilst the economy's productivity and labour productivity had shown similar improvements at a similar time, no cause and effect could be established. I have wrongly paraphrased that.

Mr Matheson—Between?

Mr BEVIS—Between labour productivity and economic growth, it would have been. What I will do is dig up the actual reference. I say that by way of preface to ask whether or not you are able to provide us with material that supports what sounds on the face of it to be sound economic theory anyway but which supports the assumption that I started off with, which is to explain why this is here at all; that is, that different methods of labour market regulation impact on productivity. My recollection is that the most recent survey on that in the literature I know of was actually done in Adelaide from whatever university is down there.

Mr Matheson—The National Institute of Labour Studies perhaps.

Mr BEVIS—That is right. It was, thank you. It demonstrated that there was no discernible variation in the key economic indicators between a fully centralised wage fixing system and a completely decentralised wage fixing system. I am happy to provide you with the research for that. Given that this is obviously a core part of the department's submission, I would be

interested in any evidence you can provide that disproves that search of the literature done by NILS.

Mr Matheson—This is obviously quite a contentious issue. It is an issue of some debate in the labour economics field. It goes back particularly to the British economists, Nickell, Layard and Jackman. They did a study in the early 1990s where they attempted to look at economic and labour market performance compared to the type of labour market regulation. They came up with a kind of U-shaped distribution which showed that if you were fully centralised or fully decentralised, you tended to get the best outcomes. If you were somewhere in the middle, you tended to get the worst. That was never really a view that was universally accepted, although it has generated a lot of debate since then.

What we would point to—and we will provide the data you asked for on labour productivity—is that Australia's labour productivity performance has been very strong over the last 10 years over the last business cycle. It has been one of the strongest of all developed countries. We have been ahead of virtually all OECD countries. At least part of the reason for that, we would argue—a lot of others would argue it as well—is that labour market reform has been one of the factors, along with a whole range of other microeconomic reforms which have taken place over that period. The Productivity Commission, for example, has done work in that area. The Reserve Bank has done work in that area. We have looked at what happens to Australia's labour productivity growth. You do see it starting to kick up from the introduction of enterprise bargaining.

It is not something that I think you can make an absolutely definitive statement about, but there are some very strong reasons to conclude that labour market reform—not just under the current government, of course; you can go back to enterprise bargaining under the previous government and award restructuring under the structural efficiency principle—has really picked up from the introduction of those changes. But we will provide a range of material about that.

Mr BEVIS—I am aware of the view and some of the research you are referring to. What I might do through the secretariat is give you the reference to that Adelaide research which had, as far as I know, the unique benefit of actually not being a research piece in itself as original research but in fact a review of the then available research from like countries and from Australia. Its conclusions, therefore, are pretty useful as distinct from the individual bits of research, which point to both ends of the argument and can be cited by whoever in the debate wants to substantiate their point of view.

CHAIR—Mr Bevis, I do not mean to cut off what is a most absorbing discussion, but we will probably have to keep moving on, if we could.

Mr BEVIS—Yes.

Mr Carters—The next segments move into the employment services and assistance which are provided. There is a short mention of the Transition to Work program, which is a small but very valuable program and which is targeted. It is targeted primarily at women returning to the work force and mature age workers and carers. The commencements in the last year were 13,700, but it has had very positive outcomes. There were 51 per cent positive outcomes over that time. It is basically a low-cost program. It is very good at providing short, sharp assessment,

skills training and support and advice on moving back into the jobs market after being outside the labour force for at least two years. It is focusing on things like basic IT training skills et cetera, which people lose over that time frame. As I have just said, it is achieving very impressive outcomes.

As for the Job Network employment services, basically we went through them in significant detail in the presentation I gave last time. Rather than going through those again, I think we could just move to questions on that if it would suit. Mr Pratt is the manager of that area. We would be happy to answer questions.

CHAIR—Thanks, Mr Carters. Do we have questions from committee members? It must be a very comprehensive submission, Mr Carters.

Ms HALL—We went through it last time.

Mr Carters—We did. We had a very good go. Something that is quite recent is the fee-for-service arrangements, which are just coming into being. They are the arrangements which we put in place in areas where the general active participation model may not be appropriate, particularly in more remote areas and in Indigenous communities and so on. Maybe we can give you a bit of an overview of where we are at with that.

CHAIR—That would be very helpful, thank you.

Mr Carters—Does Mr Pratt or Ms McNally want to do that?

Mr Pratt—Thank you, Mr Carters. It was good of you to raise that. As you are probably aware from Mr Carters' briefing last time, there are relatively few locations in Australia where, during the purchasing process for the active participation model or the employment services contract, we came to the view that the active participation model as it stood was probably not the best service that could be purchased in those locations. There are probably half a dozen of them, and the submission identifies them.

What we chose to do in those areas, rather than awarding Job Network contracts at that time, was to go to the local communities and consult them about the sorts of employment services which might work best in their local community, taking into account things like the very high Indigenous populations, the distances involved, the lack of infrastructure and so forth. So we have progressively contracted organisations in those locations to put in place quite different services in each area. They might be ones that are very similar to the active participation model but which might include greater resources in the job seeker account, slightly different outcome fees and that sort of thing, all the way through to services which are based around community needs rather than individual job seeker needs; that is, what sort of community needs might be dealt with through the employment services.

In them, we have attempted, to the extent possible, to take very much a whole of government approach in trying to look at what it is that the Commonwealth government is offering in those areas not only on the employment side but also potentially on the health side and with education. We are also looking at state governments and what they might be doing to see where we can get

better services in those locations based on a more holistic approach to the services. I think that describes what we have done.

CHAIR—Are there any questions related to that? Mr Carters, it seems as though your submission has been well received. Thank you. That being the case, I would like to thank our witnesses today, Mr Carters and his colleagues, and thank the department for its time. We look forward to meeting with you again.

Mr Carters—Thank you very much.

Resolved (on motion by **Ms Vamvakinou**):

That this committee authorises publication of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 12.09 p.m.