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**HOUSE OF
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STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES

Reference: Balancing work and family

MONDAY, 13 MARCH 2006

SYDNEY

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES

Monday, 13 March 2006

Members: Mrs Bronwyn Bishop (*Chair*), Mrs Irwin (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Cadman, Ms Kate Ellis, Mrs Elson, Mr Fawcett, Ms George, Mrs Markus, Mr Quick and Mr Ticehurst

Members in attendance: Mrs Bronwyn Bishop, Mr Cadman, Mr Fawcett, Ms George, Mrs Markus and Mr Quick

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

How the Australian Government can better help families balance their work and family responsibilities. The committee is particularly interested in:

1. the financial, career and social disincentives to starting families;
2. making it easier for parents who so wish to return to the paid workforce; and
3. the impact of taxation and other matters on families in the choices they make in balancing work and family life.

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Committee met at 9.33 am

CHAIR (Mrs Bronwyn Bishop)—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services into balancing work and family. The issues of work and family balance are familiar and meaningful for many Australians. In particular, child-care issues are now resonating in the media and in submissions received by this inquiry. Nearly two-thirds of submissions express frustration with the availability, affordability and flexibility of child care.

Today the committee will take evidence from a number of witnesses with a natural interest in the issues: a welfare agency, an association for infant mental health, a professional association of women lawyers and a family association of four Sydney mothers who will tell us about their experiences in balancing work and family. This rich cross-section of views will assist the committee to continue to explore potential solutions for the work-life collision.

The committee will examine the disincentives to starting a family and how to make it easier for parents who wish to return to the paid workforce after having had children. It will also examine the effect of taxation and government assistance on family and fertility decision making.

This hearing is open to the public and a transcript of what is said will be made available via the committee's website. If you would like further details about the inquiry or the transcript, please ask any of the committee staff here at the hearing.

[9.34 am]

EVATT, Mr Victor Raphael, National President, Australian Association for Infant Mental Health Inc.

Witness was then affirmed—

CHAIR—Welcome. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Evatt—I am appearing in the capacity of National President of the Australian Association for Infant Mental Health Inc. I am a parent and a father of two and at the moment I am an ‘at home’ father, being my primary consideration. Also, I am an early childhood teacher, working in preschools. I have worked for a number of years in the early childhood profession in intervention, long day care and other types of services.

CHAIR—We have your submission, for which we thank you. I invite you to make an opening statement.

Mr Evatt—Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. I would like to present the idea that the biggest luxury facing families today is time and how to get more of it. In view of representing infants and families, particularly parents and young parents, one of the concerns that the Australian Association for Infant Mental Health has is that parents are not provided with opportunities to spend more time with their infants in the early stages of their development into young children.

Today we would like to raise the issue of maternity and paternity leave and also the issue of influencing factors of brain development in child care and early childhood care settings and the impact or effects that this has on very young infants in relation to the quality of care that is given and how that relates back to families being at home and the impact that they can have on the overall wellbeing of their children, as opposed to the wellbeing of children who are in a care facility in that time frame. Also, we recognise that in this day and age there are certain economic restraints on families that mean it is necessary for both parents to be working, and that is where obviously the balance comes in, but we would like to see more support in areas that can provide time for these parents to give to their children before they go back into the workforce or, if they go back into the workforce, how they can have less time at work and more time at home.

So the key issues I would like to discuss today are maternity and paternity leave and also some of the concerns that we have, as I said, around the impact on early brain development of infants who have to face separation through going into care at an early age and what research we know through technology on brain development and how that possibly impacts in later life for many of those infants. I would also like to point towards a few statistics on some of the successes that have been happening in countries such as Sweden, which have one of the lowest crime rates in the world and one of the lowest rates in youth suicide and drug abuse in the world. This is reflected in their decision to eliminate corporal punishment to young children and also to provide

better incentives for parents to be at home with their young infants by way of maternity and paternity leave, keeping families together for as long as possible at home.

The organisation is made up of a number of people who represent different professions—early childhood teachers, child-care workers, child and family health nurses, nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, general practitioners, people from the media and parents at home. We mainly like to advocate for families and their infants and press the idea that attachment and relationships are the most important part of the beginning of children's lives and also that it is through these strong relationships that are built early that infants, children and families will have better opportunities to move forward into the community and represent a strong, social dynamic that is positive and ongoing in the way the community is best represented.

In recent years, the introduction of support through the child-care benefit and other areas of support that the government is offering—such as increasing maternity leave and industrial relations policies—that do as best as they can at present to allow parents to have more paternity and maternity at home days with their children and parental carer days and so forth we see as very positive steps, but we would like to see more of this.

When you look at the various curriculums being represented throughout the country—for example, the Department of Community Services in New South Wales, with its practice of relationships curriculum for children in early childhood; South Australia has a similar one and also Victoria—you will see that the focus really is on relationships. Also, for early childhood practitioners, there is a turning to meeting the needs of children's early education through relationships and understanding of how those relationships impact on their daily lives, be it with their families or with the children and the community that they are associating with in those early years. It is all positive.

There have been some fairly controversial points raised in the last few days, particularly today through the media, in relation to child care. I guess these are points that we are all aware of, but they are areas where, obviously, there needs to be a better or a higher level of regulation that represents in a fairer way people who work in early childhood in all capacities and with young families and parents so that these problems of neglect or disadvantage for children in care do not continue. That is a starting point.

CHAIR—Thank you. We appreciate your coming to join us this morning. You said that you are a stay at home father. Is that because your wife works?

Mr Evatt—After three years with young children, my wife has gone back to work. I work two days and she works three days. So I am at home for three days with my young children.

CHAIR—Do you mind if I ask what occupations you have that allows you to do that?

Mr Evatt—I am an early childhood teacher. I work part time as a pre-school teacher with KU Children's Services. I work as an admin release, which means that the teacher or director of a centre has been given five hours a day—time to take leave of the classroom and catch up with their administration responsibilities—and I am then in the classroom with the children.

CHAIR—What about your wife?

Mr Evatt—She works in the arts in film writing. She is currently developing a project, which means that we have to tread fairly carefully with our finances during this time. But we both feel that it is more important for us to maintain one parental figure—because our children are both three and under—at home with them rather than have them in a care facility. Mind you, we have scaled down our lifestyle to do such a thing.

CHAIR—There is a new phenomenon we are starting to see, and I am wondering if you fit that category, where it is the wife or the female who is the major income earner for the family rather than the husband. Is that the case in your family?

Mr Evatt—I would definitely say that is the case, as long as her projects get up and running.

CHAIR—The second thing I would like to ask you about is Sweden. Do you have those statistics on Sweden?

Mr Evatt—I have tabled some references which I gave to Anna. The ones that are from Sweden are from Joan Durrant of her studies of Sweden's ban on physical punishment. The title of the work is *A Generation Without Smacking: The Impact of Sweden's Ban on Physical Punishment*, and also *Trends in Youth Crime and Wellbeing Since the Abolition of Corporal Punishment in Sweden*. That is from a journal called *Youth and Society*. She has raised these statistics of these very positive outcomes that have been done in quantitative studies over a number of years since these decisions were made. Also the work of Bob Van der Kolk, who is also Swedish. He in his work *The body keeps score: Memory and the evolving psychobiology of post traumatic stress* talks mainly about brain development but refers back to the positive outcomes of less trauma in early infancy associated with separation from primary care givers.

CHAIR—I am interested in your statement that Sweden has the lowest crime rate. Is that in the Western world?

Mr Evatt—That is in the Western world. It has the lowest crime rate in Europe of a country which is a member of the EU.

CHAIR—Sweden is not a member of the EU.

Mr Evatt—Of European countries.

CHAIR—I am always fascinated when people quote Sweden because it has been quoted as being the panacea for so many things and, when you really look into it, it does not add up. And that is why I asked if you had the actual stats. It could be, for instance, that because it is so damn cold they only commit crime in summer.

Mr Evatt—That is right.

CHAIR—There are all sorts of figures that distort outcomes. I do not necessarily see how you have made the connect.

Mr Evatt—I can produce the statistics that I have quoted from. They have been given to me orally and I can produce them if you need them.

CHAIR—I just think, when we hear those statements, we need to look at all the factors that impact on it.

Mr Evatt—Absolutely.

CHAIR—Sweden is the highest taxed country in the Western world also, paying something like 54 per cent—it is very high.

Mr QUICK—Madam Chair, it is also interesting to note that on page 7 of the submission of Women Lawyers that they cite examples of paid maternity leave for those European countries. Denmark has 30 weeks on full pay; Norway, 42 weeks on full pay; Finland, 52 weeks on 70 per cent full pay; and Sweden, 64 weeks paid maternity leave at 63 per cent pay. So one additional thing might be that, if you have over one year at 63 per cent of your full-time average weekly earnings, that and other initiatives might contribute to quality of life.

CHAIR—But, basically, I want the figures substantiated before we start rationalisation.

Mr QUICK—I understand that.

CHAIR—The other thing I was going to ask about on that point is the birthrate in Sweden.

Mr Evatt—I would not be doing it justice if I was not absolutely clear, but from what I have recently heard I think it is 1.82.

CHAIR—I think we might double-check.

Mr Evatt—We need to double-check that.

CHAIR—We are looking at reasons why people are not having children at all and why people are dissuaded from having as many children as they otherwise may have wanted to have. It is starting to emerge that, if you use all your taxpayers' dollars to support those families who already have children, you are actually disadvantaging those people who are yet to have children. It will be interesting to compare the birthrate in Sweden before and after the introduction of maternity leave to see if it impacts on that question at all. In a sense we are looking at two questions here. In our terms of reference, that is the question we are looking at. The question of early intervention, development of children and their wellbeing is certainly relevant to us. It is an ancillary question, but I guess you could draw the link that if you are having trouble with children you are less likely to have more. So I will let other people ask some questions, but I will just foreshadow that the next part that I am particularly interested in is the work that you are doing on brain development and the evidence you have got there.

Mr Evatt—In relation to infants?

CHAIR—Yes, in relation to infants.

Mr FAWCETT—I am interested in your comments about Sweden and corporal punishment. You mentioned one study. Have there been other studies done in Sweden and is there any direct correlation between the reduction in crime and the banning of corporal punishment? On what

basis do you draw the correlation and is that the only study or are there others that have a differing point of view?

Mr Evatt—The reference by Durrant that I have presented suggests that there has been a noticeable decrease since the introduction. Mind you, this ban first came into effect in the mid-seventies. So you have had quite a long time to determine this through the studies. I do not have with me today any more studies that I could present to you, but I could certainly get them together if you would like to see more evidence of that. In terms of corporal punishment at home, smacking children and so forth, and it certainly happens here, we have an obligation under article 19 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child to protect the child from physical harm on any level. I cite Sweden because it is one of the countries where they have been able to ban corporal punishment to protect children. Yes, those studies do relate to that. But no, the answer is I do not have any more—

Mr FAWCETT—You mention:

- Early brain development and foundations for learning depend on ... someone to respond to infants' needs promptly, and holding and touching.

Do you think child care provided by a nanny would fulfil the same function where there is somebody there attending to the child's needs as another parent or relative?

Mr Evatt—AAIMHI believe that if the primary care giver of an infant from birth is the natural parent, the mother or the father, then that person is providing the most continuity of love and care for that child and reflecting that back to the child. There are situations of course where, because of people's busy lives and so forth, parents choose to have their children cared for from early infancy, as young as three or four weeks, and they are in a situation where they can afford to have a care giver at home, a nanny at home who can look after the children. We do not feel this is a fair replacement.

Mr FAWCETT—What do you base that feeling on—from the point of view that extended family, grandparents, aunts, uncles in many communities, provide that care where parents cannot and children do not appear to suffer from that?

Mr Evatt—That is right, with grandparents and other family members, if the care is totally hands-on; but also, if you want to look at breastfeeding and the recent changes in the World Health Organisation's recommendation that breastfeeding go for six months—it used to be four months until two years ago; it has increased to six months—the wellbeing of the infant because of what breast milk provides and also the contact, intimacy and security that breastfeeding in that relationship can give the child.

Mr FAWCETT—In your opening statement you said that the care was best provided by either of the natural parents and obviously you can no more breastfeed than a nanny can.

Mr Evatt—That is right. My second child was born with an abnormality, which meant she was only able to be bottle-fed, so my wife had to express and so forth. I was able to bottle-feed her and I was able to share a large amount of the feeding and care in her early infancy. But certainly the processes of attachment in breastfeeding and the stimulation provided within days of that mother and child intimacy sets off various chemicals in the brain, which help that brain develop in a healthy way.

Mr FAWCETT—Rather than let you go on, I do not have any problem at all with the concept of breastfeeding and the fact that is positive. My question was that you are saying here that mental development is best met for an infant by having somebody who can respond to their needs immediately in a focused way and with touching. I am asking whether, from the basis of your organisation's resources and research, you have any demonstrable evidence that would show that would not be adequately provided by people other than biological parents, whether that be an extended family member or a nanny.

Mr Evatt—There has been research, and there have been incidents of course, when children in the care of nannies and caregivers, where those people are other than family members, have been neglected and in situations where the care for them, although given by the caregiver as best as they can possibly give it, may not need meet the needs of that child because the child does not have the strength of the relationship with that caregiver. So the needs may be met but they may only be met on a level which we would consider fairly basic in terms of their sleep, feeding and—

Mr FAWCETT—But there are many studies that demonstrate the same thing about biological parents not particularly caring for the child very well either. What I am hearing is that you have no empirical evidence that says that those developmental needs cannot be met by another adult caregiver, whether they be extended family or somebody in a paid role.

Mr Evatt—I have to agree with you that such studies, on a positive level, have not been done. I guess we have to say we see it as positive.

Mrs MARKUS—I have a couple of questions and comments. Firstly, I do not disagree with your comments about the importance and value of the parents connecting with their children, but I would like to see more—and you may or may not have it—information about the bonding and attachment theory, on which there is quite a lot of research. It certainly would strengthen your case. Do you have with you anything like that or can you get some of that to the committee?

Mr Evatt—I can indeed. If you would like some material around attachment and attachment theory, I definitely can present that. My time constraints were such that I was only made aware on Thursday that I would be here today and we had to bury a family member over the weekend, so I have not been able to produce everything. It was just a short time period, but I would have liked to have presented as much information about attachment and the research around that. If we are talking about areas around trauma associated with separation and interruption in that attachment development in early infancy, then I can refer to some of the references in relation to the Bruce Perry studies. But I can definitely submit some material.

Mrs MARKUS—Some evidence to support your arguments would be helpful.

Mr Evatt—Sure.

Mrs MARKUS—Going back to some of the comments you made regarding Sweden, I have some questions about the research, which you may or may not be able to comment on, but has there been any research about what else was happening in the seventies and has happened since the seventies when that ban was introduced? Often there are other factors and variables that are happening. Sometimes one change in law or one change in an environment can contribute to the

reason but that does not necessarily correlate. On the removal of corporal punishment, various parents would agree and disagree with that being valid. Children still need direction and correction for their own safety as well as for them becoming valuable contributors to society. What alternatives were introduced in Sweden or what would your association recommend or promote to address those?

Mr Evatt—We have programs in Australia such as the Positive Parenting Program, which recommends alternative approaches to discipline, apart from smacking: the introduction of penalties around freedom, with children having to take ‘time out’ and so forth. The Positive Parenting Program strongly recommends approaches where the parent can address the issue with the child on a direct level. We are obviously looking at the concerns around families, dysfunction within families, things that contribute to those things and also your own past—the history of what has happened to you as a child and how you can repeat the way you were managed.

Mrs MARKUS—You allude to Sweden banning corporal punishment. Are you aware of any national program they have put in place to promote positive parenting?

Mr Evatt—I am aware that they have a parenting program which assists parents, particularly parents about whom the authorities have been alerted and about whom they have concerns—as is the case here, which is similar to the Positive Parenting program. I know the Positive Parenting Program exists in Sweden too, as does looking at alternatives to managing behaviour and challenging behaviours. I can provide you with some documentation on that if you are happy for me to submit it later.

Mrs MARKUS—I would be interested.

Mr Evatt—Okay, I can provide that.

Mr QUICK—I would like your comments on the perception that, with two people working, organising a crazy lifestyle and paying off a Sydney mortgage, the focus is on quality time, not quantity time. People argue, rightly or wrongly, that we spend a lot of quality time on our children, but is the issue really quantity compared to quality?

Mr Evatt—If quality time is—

Mr QUICK—Half an hour a day.

Mr Evatt—Yes, half an hour or an hour a day. Certainly nothing can replace having the time to sit down with your child and just read through a story before bed—even for 10 or 15 minutes. That is something which we know has very positive effects on early literacy development and other bonding areas. It is an important time of intimacy that is not governed by any other external responsibilities and constraints. It is time you give. But we are seeing parents working longer hours. Particularly if you have more than one child in your family, being able to share that time with or to give equal time to each child—or to give that time to just one child—is regarded not so much as quality but as a luxury that is pretty hard to find in this day and age, given the understanding we have of demands on parents who are both in the workforce and the reasons that they are in the workforce such as, as you said, to meet the expensive lifestyle and mortgage in a city like Sydney.

We rush kids around to get them to various extra curricula activities. The society trends are to provide children with as much opportunity to be exposed to a range of activities and programs that will benefit them in their development and in their understanding of life, but does that detract from the time that children can just be at home, hanging out and playing? Do they need to be running around to all these things? Parents may say that just getting them from one activity to another is spending time with them—which I think was what you were alluding to as being quantity—but quality time is that intimate time when you are not interrupted by any external factors and you are able to give that one-to-one attention to one or more children. We do not feel there is enough opportunity for creating that balance. Obviously, it really comes down to individual definitions.

Mr QUICK—You also mentioned in your opening statement the difference between the wellbeing of children in care and the wellbeing of children at home. Would you like to comment on that? Do you see one as being better than the other? Is there any evidence to show longitudinally that when kids start school the kids who have been at home—perhaps in occasional care but predominantly cared for by their mother or father—have a huge advantage over those who have been in care from the age of six months until they enter the education system?

Mr Evatt—There are studies that I would like to provide to you that show that children who attend centre based care or long day care from an early age are more socially competent and comfortable—so that is positive—and there are also studies that suggest that children who are put into care from an early age are more at risk of coming undone later on because of the effects of trauma associated with separation at an early age and being in a systemised type of care environment that does not reflect the care environment that they would find at home.

These studies have been done by Perry and others, looking particularly at measuring cortisol levels—cortisol is the chemical that is released by the brain under trauma—and how these levels are higher in children who are in day care than in children who are not and if, in the long term, these cortisol levels cause damage to brain development. These studies have also been done by Van der Kolk, which I have referenced. They all look at that neurological development in early infancy. They look at trauma on a very simple level in these children who are in care.

For children who do not go into any care, one thing we would like to see is the introduction, or the reintroduction, of free preschool the year prior to schooling so that those children could have that learning opportunity but also have a parent there to deliver them and collect them. There are studies that look at both sides of what you are saying. Both scientific and longitudinal studies have been done, and I can give them to you.

Mr QUICK—I have one last question. With the move to corporatisation of child care in Australia, do you see that as a worry, compared to what happens in some states where you have community based child care, which is focused more on the needs of the community rather than on the share price on the Sydney or Melbourne stock exchange?

Mr Evatt—There are concerns, obviously. In the paper on Saturday concerns were expressed on this introduction. We believe that the quality of some of these services is at risk because of taking away certain funds in budgets to provide a better bottom line than is needed to meet the needs of these children.

CHAIR—Is that not an emotional response, rather than one that is borne out? I am just playing devil's advocate, I guess.

Mr Evatt—Please do.

CHAIR—Is it not possible that something that is run more efficiently is better for the people who are there rather than something that is run by somebody warm and fuzzy but that is not very well structured?

Mr Evatt—Absolutely. Another concern that we have is about the people working in care environments. As you say, the management of certain services, particularly in these corporate services, has been tightened up and run to certain schedules, which does increase.

CHAIR—I simply say to you that a household that is run by the parents financially well is going to have better outcomes for children than a household that is run very badly in terms of money management and what is delivered to the child. My question would not be: what pleases the community or pleases the shareholder? It would be: how does it impact on the children? That would be my test. In answering the question, you said that there are studies. I have to say that there used to be studies around that said that children should not go to school until they were eight. That was just loony tune stuff, but it was the same sort of reasoning that you are giving. In all of that, I wonder if anyone has looked at what happens with children who are allowed to be in their own home, with care coming to their home, instead of them having to be institutionalised. The sheer physical picking up of a very young child and taking it off to an environment where there are lots of other children has to be very different from providing care in one's own home.

Mr Evatt—Yes; one to one. Absolutely.

CHAIR—There would be predictability as to who would be there. In your situation, you are only there for the institutionalised kids for two days a week and there is somebody else for three days a week. Do you have any studies or evidence about what happens to children in their own home where there is constant nanny care—and I use the term 'nanny' because people know what we are talking about—which is predictable and understood?

Mr Evatt—I will look into that. I believe that some studies have been done by the Institute of Early Childhood at Macquarie. They have looked at a number of families at home and the care given by carers of those children. I will have to look into that. Obviously, we have been looking at things that concern us. I believe there are some studies.

CHAIR—So they are Macquarie University studies. We might see if we can find them.

Mr Evatt—They were done by the Institute of Early Childhood. I can give you the name of the person who would be best to contact in relation to those studies.

CHAIR—That would be helpful. Thank you very much. Thank you very much for coming and for giving us the benefit of your thoughtful deliberations. We appreciate it very much. I hope your under-three-year-olds continue to prosper.

Mr Evatt—Thank you very much. I hope your day goes well. Congratulations—this is an excellent inquiry that you are conducting. All the best.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Evatt.

[10.20 am]

GRIFFIN, Miss Sharen Maree, Service User, UnitingCare Burnside

LAZONBY, Ms Gayle J, Service User, UnitingCare Burnside

PANNELL, Ms Jennifer Margaret, Policy Officer, UnitingCare Burnside

SIMMONS, Ms Sandra Jane, Senior Manager, Social Justice, Partnerships and Communication, UnitingCare Burnside

CHAIR—Welcome.

Witnesses were then sworn or affirmed—

CHAIR—Would you like to make an opening statement? I think you have tabled a copy for each of us to have.

Ms Simmons—Yes. I am the Senior Manager, Social Justice, Partnerships and Communication, UnitingCare Burnside. UnitingCare Burnside works primarily in disadvantaged communities with vulnerable children and families across New South Wales. Sixty-two per cent of our service users receive a government income security payment as their main source of income. A significant number are homeless and 30 per cent live in public housing or receive rental support. Over 46 per cent of the families that use our services are single parent families. Jenny Pannell was previously the policy officer of child poverty at Burnside and is now working at UnitingCare Australia. Sharen Griffin and Gayle Lazonby are both single parents who have used the services of Burnside.

We welcome this opportunity to speak with you today about some of the ongoing difficulties many of our service users, particularly single parents, face when trying to balance work and family responsibilities when entering or re-entering the paid workforce. We are also concerned that in the end these issues ultimately impact on children, their life chances and opportunity to contribute positively to our society. The responsibility to provide financially, materially and emotionally for children in sole parent families weighs heavily on one adult. In Burnside's experience, the bulk of low-income sole parents take these responsibilities very seriously despite having to contend with trying and difficult circumstances.

Difficulties single parents have to overcome in order to find work can include a lack of education and training; no or limited recent work experience; a lack of transport, whether public or private; insecure housing; demanding family responsibilities related to childhood illness or disabilities; finding available and affordable child care; and a lack of family-friendly jobs. Our service users have first-hand experiences of the difficulties they face when trying to balance work with family responsibilities. With your permission, we would like to ask Sharen Griffin and Gayle Lazonby, both single mothers of school-age children, to read a statement detailing their experiences with the dual roles of parent and employee.

Miss Griffin—My name Sharen Griffin. I have two sons: Mitchell, aged eight years, and Hayden, who is 10. I live in Coffs Harbour, a regional centre in New South Wales. I was working full time, raising my two boys as a single mother. One son has a mental health disorder. The pressures around raising my boys led me to having to resign from full-time employment and to pick up casual work when and where I could. Parents of ADHD children find it difficult to raise their children and work as well, as there is not enough help in the school system.

I then could not afford to pay rent for the three-bedroom house with a yard that we were living in while I was working, so I was forced to move into a two-bedroom townhouse with no yard. My boys now have to share a bedroom. This took away two very important things that assisted my parenting, the boys being in their own rooms. Behaviour, sibling relations and general harmony had improved while the boys had their own rooms and there was an ample safe play area for my boys to play in.

I feel that the government does not recognise the daily challenges faced by single parents. We receive a small payment which has to cover rent, vehicle costs, fuel, food, sport, tuition, clothing, uniforms, school supplies, excursion costs et cetera. When my children have not been able to attend activities due to cost issues, they have been ridiculed by their peers. This is damaging to their self-esteem and contributes negatively to their school experience and therefore their learning experience.

When trying to meet the high costs of moving, I was initially rejected when I applied to the Department of Housing for bond assistance. I had only worked two weeks over the last three months but, as those two weeks fell into the last three weeks prior to my application for assistance, my application was rejected because I had earned too much money. If not for the advocacy provided by the Burnside family centre, my boys and I would have been left homeless. I sometimes feel that I would be better off not continuing to seek casual work as then I would gain more government assistance. This puts me in a difficult position as I would rather be a good role model to my children by working and doing the right thing by my community. I read that legislation that is coming in will force single parents back to work. It seems we are being penalised for working and for doing the right thing.

Transport is a big issue in regional and country areas. It is difficult to get children to care. There is also a shortage of out-of-school-hours care and respite care places in country and regional areas. Due to the problems with child care, it is difficult to attend courses—such as parenting courses or courses that will help my work prospects—and work as well. These are all big issues for a single parent. I was lucky to get help so that I could come here today to speak to you.

Ms Lazonby—My name is Gayle Lazonby. I am a mother of two sons: Joel, aged 20, and Curtis, aged nine. We live in a Department of Housing house in the Sydney suburb of Rydalmere. I am aged 45. I grew up in a violent household and left school in year 10.

Before my son Joel was born, I was employed by the Department of Social Security for almost 10 years. I had to resign from the Department of Social Security because I was then a sole mum. In 1985 there was no child-care relief, let alone a child-care centre equipped to care for a newborn child. The only affordable housing that I could obtain was from the Department of

Housing. I had no relatives who could look after my baby while I worked. Being on the pension was the only way I could care for my child.

After my second child was born, I was introduced to the Ermington Burnside family learning centre, where over the next nine years I attended playgroup and parent education classes, became a volunteer and obtained assistance through Burnside's family and youth services for my son Joel, who was difficult in his teenage years. During this time I was unable to look for work as my family needed all my attention. My volunteer position, community development liaison officer, helped me to develop new skills and the confidence that I needed to seek employment again. I had various casual positions due to the fact that Curtis was now at school. I found it very hard to gain permanent employment during school hours. I enrolled to seek employment with AMES job network. Within a couple of months they employed me during school hours for 15 hours a week as a reverse marketer. My position was to try to help migrant mothers who had little English and had previously in their country been doctors, mechanical engineers et cetera. They would do any type of work until their qualifications were recognised in Australia. It was very hard for them due to their lack of English and the fact that they were hoping to find employment during school hours.

Whilst I was there I applied for my present position—receptionist at William Green Pty Ltd. I could not ask for a better employer. William Green is an Australian owned family business, the world's best dental equipment supplier. At the end of the year my supervisor agreed to work around my hours—8.30 am till 3 pm and 30 hours per week—considering I had my son to take care of. William Green Pty Ltd understand if I ever need to take time off to take care of my son. I am also lucky to have family members and friends to call on if I need them. William Green were also considerate of my lack of computer skills, allowing me to do a 0-10 TAFE computer course during my working hours so that I could improve my skills.

There is a downside. Since returning to work, my Department of Housing rent has increased from about \$90 a week to \$200 a week, plus \$10 per week for water. I only bring home about \$400 per week net from work, and I receive part-parenting payment family benefit of about \$130 per fortnight. After paying the rent, I am left with about \$250 per week to pay for electricity, gas, phone, clothes, food, school excursions et cetera—general living expenses—and work brings added costs such as fares, less time to economise with good shopping bargains and for house-running activities.

It can be a case of moving from a low income from Centrelink to receiving a low income in paid employment. I do not have the money when unexpected costs arise like appliance repairs. There is nothing to put away towards a holiday or savings for household purchases, family outings or a car. I have only just started paying superannuation at the age of 45, which does not look good for when I will be 65 in 20 years time.

If I am one week behind in my rent, the Department of Housing starts sending notices threatening eviction. It is not easy. But I am one of the lucky ones to be employed at my age and have the support of my employer, friends and family and Burnside. Without all that I would not be able to balance my work and home life. I do not think I could work at all.

Ms Simmons—In our experience, sole parents want to parent well and work well, but they need support to do so. The capacity to parent effectively is one of the most important

contributions they can make, as it nurtures the healthy development of our children. No social policy should undermine that role. Most sole parents also want to work but do not want to endanger hard-won family stability in the process. Parenting is difficult enough; sole parenting is even tougher. Being a sole parent on a low income means daily facing issues and obstacles that would try most two-parent families. In these circumstances, sole parent families do not need blame or coercion about resuming paid work. They need understanding, support and practical assistance to combine employment with their family life. In particular, they need more vocational education and training, access to affordable and convenient child care and flexible, secure work in family-friendly work environment.

CHAIR—Ms Lazonby, you negotiated your working hours yourself and you earn a part-time salary of about \$20,000 a year or so. Is that right?

Ms Lazonby—Yes.

CHAIR—You get family tax benefit part A and part B?

Ms Lazonby—Yes.

CHAIR—You say that the parenting payment and the family tax benefit part A and part B amount to \$130 a fortnight.

Ms Lazonby—No, that is a week. One week I get the parenting part payment pension and the other week I get the family allowances. I receive fortnightly payments, but one comes one week and the other comes the next week.

CHAIR—So you get about \$260 a fortnight?

Ms Lazonby—Yes.

CHAIR—I am very surprised that that amount is so low. Is your family tax benefit taxed?

Ms Lazonby—No, the family tax benefit is not taxed, but the part pension is.

CHAIR—How much tax a week do you pay?

Ms Lazonby—\$105.

CHAIR—You pay \$105 in tax, but you in fact get another \$130. So you are not paying any tax at all; in fact, you are getting a net payment.

Ms Lazonby—Yes.

CHAIR—Because your children are older than eight, how will the Welfare to Work changes affect you? You are in the paid workforce, but you are still getting a part-parenting payment as a sole parent.

Mrs MARKUS—It will not affect Gayle; it only affects new people coming in.

CHAIR—Because she is already in the system. But it will affect somebody else who is coming into the system.

Ms Lazonby—Yes.

CHAIR—Because the parenting payment will not apply, will it?

Miss Griffin—No, because it becomes a Newstart allowance, which is a lower payment.

CHAIR—That is right. You have got two children?

Ms Lazonby—Yes. The 20-year-old is independent, on his own, and the nine-year-old is in my care.

CHAIR—How did the 20-year-old do? Did he do well at school? He had some troubles in teenage years, you said.

Ms Lazonby—Yes. He was very good at school, but then he also got into the wrong crowd. He had to leave home at the age of 15 because in the environment we were living in in Rydalmere there was nothing for teenagers or youth. He was just getting into more and more crime. So he was virtually forced to move away from home. To go back to school he had to move out of home and go and live up Newcastle way with his grandmother and uncle. Then he went back to TAFE and furthered his education. But he could not stay in Rydalmere to do that because of the influences around him.

That made it very hard for me and my eight-year-old. He is eight now, but he was about two or three at the time. So Joel went away and he has come back in the last six weeks. Things are still a bit tender there because of his attitude and age and things, and we are trying to sort things out. But he is doing well. He did go and get his year 10 certificate. I am sure he was going to do his year 12 certificate as well. He has been working. He has not been in trouble with the law since he was 15. So he virtually had to move out of the area to improve himself and help himself, and also to help me.

CHAIR—What sort of work does he do now?

Ms Lazonby—At the moment he has a broken foot and is at home. But before that he was doing shelving for factories and things. He was also doing a traineeship to be a pool technician.

CHAIR—And you felt that where you could have done with help in that period was in early intervention?

Ms Lazonby—Yes. If I had attended the early intervention programs for Joel that I have for Curtis, I could have been a much better parent for Joel, I think, at that stage in his life. Also, we needed access to a youth worker. That was very hard to get as well. At Burnside at the time, we had a counsellor who looked after children only up to the age of 12. I fought very hard with

federal and state politicians to try to get a youth worker and youth services. I came to a brick wall after nine years.

Mrs MARKUS—Was that because the funding restricted the worker to working with children up to that age?

Ms Simmons—That particular program at Ermington deals with children who are of primary school age. We did not have funding for youth services.

Mrs MARKUS—How is that funded?

Ms Simmons—That is mainly self-funded by Burnside's programs—by Burnside's funds. We are also embarking on community business partnerships as well, so we do have some support from local businesses in the area. There is some funding that we do receive from the department of education for one of the programs that deals with the children.

Mrs MARKUS—Was limiting it to children to the age of 12 done because that is how Burnside decided to structure the funding or was it also to manage waiting lists and demand for services?

Ms Simmons—It was really an organisation that was already there working with the local primary schools. The focus was on primary school education. So that was really an historical thing. We had youth services in other areas, but not in the Ermington area. That was due to funding.

Ms Lazonby—That is why I had to get access to the family and youth services of North Parramatta. To be eligible for that, I had to have either my son homeless or my youngest child homeless or myself homeless. That was the only way to get access to a youth worker. That was one of the criteria. The child had to be virtually homeless or on the verge of homelessness before I could get a youth worker.

CHAIR—Where did the youth worker come from?

Ms Lazonby—North Parramatta Burnside.

Ms Simmons—That was a particular program in Burnside that deals with those people.

CHAIR—It was something that you were funded for?

Ms Simmons—Yes.

Mrs MARKUS—So it meant there was assistance down at the tertiary or crisis end, but in terms of prevention, where someone was having a few problems and a child could end up in a crisis, the services were not available?

CHAIR—You did not have a program—isn't that the problem?

Ms Simmons—No. Joel did not fit into a particular program within the Ermington area.

CHAIR—So it is silos—this is the program and you cannot step over the edge?

Ms Simmons—For those young people who have actually started off in the Ermington program, we are now introducing some work with them during high school. We have already caught them at the earlier end in primary school. There is a lot of early intervention and preventative funding coming out now but, historically, the funding has been around crisis intervention.

Mr QUICK—Talking about family, what advice would you have for Centrelink and also the Department of Housing about the problem you raised about earning too much money in a particular time frame which excluded you from a whole lot of benefits? I and, I would imagine, most members of this committee hear constantly about this problem. With part-time casual work and the like, you occasionally get a payment and because it does not fall within various boundaries the Department of Housing and Centrelink belt you and you end up taking money, time and resources from organisations such as Burnside which have to help you over the hump. What advice would you give to Centrelink and people in the housing department not only here in New South Wales but also in my state of Tasmania?

Miss Griffin—I think it is very hard. The Department of Housing and also community housing have very long waiting lists. They themselves are funding based and they obviously do not have the funding that can extend to accommodate everybody. Maybe we have to look at another way of assessing the income, extending the period, maybe having a look overall at a six-month period, because again I worked two weeks out of the three-week set period and therefore it cut me straight out. By the time Centrelink had taken out their 40c in the dollar and everything else, I was left with the same amount of money that I would have had. Centrelink do the best they can. I know working part time is more beneficial to me and it does help me out more financially because they do have the income-free area. So that does help. It is really hard. We do need to have a look at it over a longer period of time.

Mr QUICK—Centrelink is one department and then you have the Department of Family and Human Services. They all have their own budgets, but if one gives you a hard time you have to then rely on another one. There is a social cost to you and your family.

Miss Griffin—The Department of Housing does not actually set its boundaries on income estimates. I do not know how long it is since the Department of Housing have changed their income assessment. It has been the same for a while now. They rely on the income from the Centrelink income statement to say how much you have earned in that period. It all needs reassessing and they all need to start working together.

Mrs MARKUS—I have had lots of people come to me, for example, when their pension increases. Often the Department of Housing rental assessment kicks in and they often lose all of what they have gained.

Miss Griffin—I think the biggest thing again is that to get access to the Department of Housing is based on an income assessment from Centrelink. But because the Department of Housing or community housing is government funded and they already get subsidised housing they are not entitled to rent assistance from Centrelink because they have already got the subsidy. When you go into private rental you get rent assistance from Centrelink, but again the

Department of Housing rentals are based on Centrelink incomes. Their actual assessment amounts do not rise with the CPI increases or anything like that but their rent does. Every time there is a CPI increase, the Department of Housing rent rises but their income thresholds do not rise. There is a bit of a conflict, as I see it, which can make it very hard.

Mrs MARKUS—There is an inequity there.

Miss Griffin—Yes.

Ms GEORGE—I want to raise an issue that was in the original submission. Thank you, Sharen and Gayle, for your personal stories; I think that always makes for a more interesting report. One thing that worries me is that in my electorate I have a number of suburbs where there is no out of school care at all. Often it depends on an organisation locally having the wherewithal to make the submission to get the funding. I drive around and see all these schools closing at three and 3.30. We have underutilised capital facilities.

Combine that with the new laws that will force many single mums into the workforce when many of them, as they tell me, would not mind doing it but they have been out of the labour market for so long and they want some kind of transitional program to assist them. I think you pick up on that in your submission. I am just thinking aloud. Why could we not recommend a combination of both those issues? Instead of having public schools sitting vacant from three o'clock onwards, we might come to some arrangement with the states where we can use that facility and have some program where mums returning to work—

CHAIR—A lot of schools are already doing this.

Ms GEORGE—But many are not.

Miss Griffin—Many are. It also comes down to community based and private based care. Community based care is government funded; therefore the child-care benefit comes in based on the income. If they are private based, they set their fees. If you cannot get into community based after school care, then you cannot work because you cannot afford to pay those private based fees. There are a lot of the problems, especially with after school care. For instance, you may have a job that starts at seven o'clock in the morning and finishes at four o'clock in the afternoon, but there is no care before eight o'clock in the morning. You may be able to get into day care, depending on the age of the children, but that, again, is a long waiting list.

The other side of that is with children who go into high school. They are 11 or 12 when they start year 7. Once they get out of year 6 and hit high school, they are no longer eligible for outside of school hours or vacation care. Under the Department of Community Services, a child is not able to be left at home until the age of 14. So it is a very contradictory—

Mrs MARKUS—It is a fact I have raised several times.

CHAIR—Yes, you have.

Miss Griffin—It is a really hard call—

CHAIR—And they are very vulnerable.

Mrs MARKUS—They are very much at risk at that age.

Miss Griffin—Yes. I do not have family support where I am. I am estranged from my family. I am very lucky that I had two good friends to mind my boys so that I could come down here. But, for me, when it comes to working and being offered a job to start at seven o'clock in the morning, I cannot take it because I do not even have the option to put my children into care. It makes it very hard. In two years, when my eldest son hits year 7, I am not going to be able to work in school holidays because there is no care for him. Therefore, again you are limited in where you can work.

Ms GEORGE—But if you were working with before school, after school and vacation care you could manage your responsibilities as a parent—

Miss Griffin—That is right.

Ms GEORGE—and be getting some paid employment, performing a useful community service and getting skills along the way.

Miss Griffin—That is it.

CHAIR—But you cannot work full time because of the ADHD that your younger son has?

Miss Griffin—Yes. Again, that comes down to him, but he has inappropriate funding through the school. He got himself suspended from school in February last year because the school did not have enough funding and did not have implemented programs to help him. He got himself suspended from school for a week, so I had to take a week off work to look after him because there was nowhere that I could place him. I ended up getting pressure from my work and I had to resign because they were not happy about me having this week off, but I have to put my son first. Again it comes down to the lack of school funding, because ADHD is not recognised for funding in schools. If they have OCD or ODD, they are recognised.

CHAIR—What is ODD?

Miss Griffin—ODD is oppositional defiance disorder. OCD is obsessive-compulsive disorder. Based on that, they get 15 minutes of funding a week. He has ADHD. He is not entitled to funding, so therefore he is not entitled to an aide to help him through the social or learning side, which all has to be done at home. Therefore, I really cannot work because I have to continue his schooling when he gets home.

CHAIR—What problems does he have in his schooling that you have to attend to? Can you tell me precisely what his condition results in?

Miss Griffin—Basically, the left and right sides of his brain do not communicate. Therefore, he is on medication; he takes Ritalin to try to get them to communicate properly for concentration. He is really good at maths, and most ADHD children are. He cannot read. He is doing year 2 for the second time this year because he has never been put into the appropriate

reading programs to help him to learn to read. He does not know the basic hundred-word list that is usually given in first class that we all have to know to further our education. Because he cannot read, he cannot write properly; therefore we have trouble with homework. A page of homework can take me two to three hours, sitting down and trying to get him to understand it. They do not have as wide a thinking range as we do; they are very literal in everything that they do. You therefore have to think, 'Okay, if I say it this way, in what way is he going to take it?' because they think in a very black-and-white way. I remember the teacher saying to him, 'Pull your socks up,' and he turned and said, 'I don't have any socks on,' and the teacher was furious with him. That is the way these children are. He will be nine at the end of this year and the day-to-day chores are still on a board. I have a picture board at home. I have them stuck everywhere so that he knows what he has to do: toothbrush and toothpaste—you put the toothpaste on the toothbrush. They are very visual.

CHAIR—And he does not retain that knowledge?

Miss Griffin—They do not retain the knowledge. So with everything that he learns at school, and because he does not have the funding to access the appropriate programs at school, I have to continue with that at home.

CHAIR—Do they say to you that there will ever be a point when he will actually retain knowledge?

Miss Griffin—Probably 50 per cent of the children, as they get older, will learn to deal with the concentration and they learn to retain knowledge; 50 per cent do not. It is really hard. I dreaded having to go back to a two-bedroom home because the reason we went to a three-bedroom home was that—

CHAIR—To give the other son a benefit.

Miss Griffin—That is right. He took a knife to his brother. He was going to kill his brother because he just had a rage. They had to have their separate bedrooms. His brother was trying to sleep and he was going to kill him. They cannot control the anger and the outbursts, and if people do not have an understanding of them they suffer throughout society and fall through the cracks.

CHAIR—How are you managing? Does the Ritalin help?

Miss Griffin—The Ritalin helps concentration wise; behaviour wise it does not. When I was working full time, I was never able to attend the programs. Some of the programs that I have wanted to attend have been at night and, because I do not have family or anybody I can rely on on a permanent basis to look after the children, I have not been able to attend any of the programs. Therefore I have a case worker who comes once a week and he helps me through. We talk about different parenting styles and programs that I can try at home, but I would love to attend the programs. For a lot of the time, if they are on, I may pick up a day's work, which I have to do, and then I cannot attend the course. I am stuck in a catch-22 situation with it all. It does make it very hard.

CHAIR—Sandra, what do you do to help Sharen?

Ms Simmons—Sharen is at Coffs Harbour, with one of our programs. I imagine it is attached to the family centre at Coffs Harbour. As Sharen mentioned, there is a case worker that she works with. The Coffs Harbour family centre has a range of programs available: everything from supported play groups to parenting programs to a range of other programs that deal with families in crisis or families in very disadvantaged communities. There would be isolation, lack of education, lack of transport, housing issues and those sorts of things. We provide advocacy.

CHAIR—That would be very particular to Sharen. Sharen, if you had a fairy godmother who could wave a wand and provide you with the back-up that you need, what would you ask for, aside from getting rid of all—

Miss Griffin—I think re-education is a big thing for parents. We are entitled to only one course through the Centrelink program—you can have one course free. I would need to be re-educated to get myself back into the workforce and have a decent job. I would need to have a family orientated or family understanding employer who would understand that I may only be able to work school hours because I do not have the care or I would need to be offered care before and after school.

Transport in the rural areas is not as good as it is here in the city, and that is another issue. It is a hard one. What I would most love to see would be support programs like Big Brother, Big Sister or grandparent programs. My eldest son is really suffering. He feels that he does not get enough attention and he does not get enough quality time with me because his brother is always taking up my time. That is not something that we can fix. But he gets into trouble and does things as a call for help.

But there are not any of those types of programs that I could send him to so that he could have a positive male role model to teach him about what males do. From all the research that I have done, he needs to end up in the juvenile justice system before he will get any help—there are no preventative programs. That is what I would like to see more than anything: preventative programs for before kids take actions that make it too late for them.

Mr QUICK—Sharen, people perceive that because we have a casual workforce and lots of people are working part time or casually there is enough flexibility in the system for you to work around your children's school hours. Is that not the case?

Miss Griffin—If we had the child-care facilities for before school and after school, with job sharing you could work around it. I can see it.

Ms Simmons—A lot of the people whom we work with do not have the vocational training to even access part-time work. We advocate that, even before that—as Sharen was saying—there needs to be some training and re-education. That is an important part of getting people ready for even being able to do part-time work.

Mr CADMAN—So you have done a course and now you cannot do another one. Is that right?

Miss Griffin—I am in the middle of doing a course. I do not know if I am even going to be able to complete it, because it is two nights a week and therefore I am relying on my children to

go here, there and everywhere. If it gets to a stage where I cannot find someone to look after them, I cannot attend the course. It goes from six until nine two nights a week, and I am finding it really hard.

Mr CADMAN—What have you chosen to do?

Miss Griffin—Medical administration. I have done administration. I worked for Centrelink for 5½ years and basically felt compelled or forced to resign from there last year when I had all these problems.

CHAIR—That is an irony, isn't it!

Ms Simmons—Gayle did the same thing.

Mrs MARKUS—What I am hearing is that if you had before and after school care for 11- to 14-year olds, if with every parenting program or course there was child care—which could be subsidised or something for people in your situation, although there would be some parents who could pay for it, such as if there were two incomes—if there were re-education for you where you could do maybe more than one course and if there were an employer who understood, you could do this. It seems that there are some understanding employers around, Gayle.

Ms Lazonby—Yes, mine is very good.

Mrs MARKUS—Further, if there were additional programs through which your sons could have positive male role models, that would be good.

Miss Griffin—They would be my biggest wishes. If I had all of those, I would not have half the problems that I have. I was diagnosed with depression when I had to resign last year, and I am only just pulling myself out of it now.

CHAIR—I am not surprised.

Mr FAWCETT—I have a question, and feel free to not answer it if this is too personal. One of the things that Sandra has said, and it has come through in the submission, is that the majority of people whom Burnside is helping are single parents. It does not show whether they are widowed, divorced or have never been married. If you had a partner, do you feel your circumstances would be different?

Miss Griffin—In some respects I do, because I would have support. The other person may have a job, so we would have a little bit more income, which would take some of the burden from me and mean that I would not have to try to extend my income to cover everything. I also think it would make a huge difference for the boys. A two-parent family is always good, because the children then have two role models to look up to. But there is nothing I can do about my younger son and his behaviour, so it would take a very tolerant partner to deal with that.

I left their father because he was abusive. I left an abusive relationship to be a single mum. It is not a choice that I really wanted to make. He does not really participate in the upbringing of my children. When he does have them, all they see is a computer screen and him drinking

alcohol. That is not a good role model for my children. He does not participate in their sporting programs; he does not participate in anything. For them to sit there and see that, I think, 'Yes, if I had a partner who was having an input into my children's lives, half of my problems would be gone.'

Mr FAWCETT—Sandra, you were talking before about the lack of preventative and pre-emptive type programs. Would it be fair to say, then, that a lot of the issues that you are dealing with through Burnside would be at least assisted if not prevented if the government were to be more proactive about investing in relationship education so that men would not have to resort to violence? Men would resolve conflict by having communication skills and understanding how relationships work.

Ms Simmons—I certainly think that would be part of it. Another part would be early education. I think education is an important part. I do not have a statistic, but the majority of sole parent households are the result of separation and divorce, so assistance in early intervention and prevention around that is important. But education is just as important.

Mr FAWCETT—Based on what Sharen was saying, recognising that an ongoing healthy relationship—obviously something dysfunctional and violent is not good, albeit that most of us have issues we have to work through—is a better outcome. Therefore, it would be good policy to proactively invest in helping kids at high school age through to people looking to get married through to people having their first children learn to cope and communicate. That would be a sensible investment.

Ms Simmons—I think also access to support and people being aware of the support that is available is important. Often when people are in crisis they are not necessarily able to find those sorts of support, or even know that they are available, particularly the people we work with.

Mr FAWCETT—You say that the majority of people accessing your services are single parents. Is that a 51 per cent majority or a 90 per cent majority? What is it?

Ms Simmons—It is over 46 per cent.

Mr FAWCETT—So of any given group, the majority is single parents?

Ms Simmons—Yes.

Mr FAWCETT—It is not an absolute majority.

Ms Simmons—It is the majority of all our services users.

Mr QUICK—I would like to offer congratulations on what you do, and I hope that our recommendations will go towards helping you solve some of your problems.

Ms Simmons—Thank you for giving us the opportunity.

CHAIR—Sharen, you said you left an abusive relationship. Supposing the relationship had not been abusive—supposing it had worked out like a bride’s dream—would you have had more children?

Miss Griffin—As difficult as my youngest child is, I probably would have had at least another one.

CHAIR—Gayle, can I ask you a similar question: would you have liked to have more children?

Ms Lazonby—Yes, and with not such a big difference in age as there is between my two boys. One is 20 and one is nine. I would have liked to have had a girl in between.

CHAIR—It just did not work out that way.

Ms Lazonby—No. Now it is too late at my age.

Ms Pannell—Didn’t you read the paper the other day!

Ms Lazonby—No.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming. I think you have identified a real dilemma that people such as yourselves face. Someone in your position who comes in under the Welfare to Work provisions will actually have less support, won’t they?

Miss Griffin—That is right.

CHAIR—Do you get child support from your husband?

Miss Griffin—No. When we separated he fell into the lowest category—he does not work. He was paying \$5, but I think it has just gone up to \$6. In saying that, it is definitely not enough to buy bread and milk for the week.

CHAIR—But that is the amount that he pays.

Miss Griffin—That is the amount that he pays because he chooses—

CHAIR—Not to work.

Miss Griffin—to stay on the system in which he does not have to pay maintenance—

CHAIR—for his children.

Miss Griffin—and I think that is really horrible.

Mr CADMAN—He might find things a bit harder in the future.

CHAIR—What about you, Gayle?

Ms Lazonby—My elder child is 20 now, but I can call upon the father of my nine-year-old if I need to. He still plays a role in his life. Really, I am mainly doing it on my own. It is my pride as well: I do not like to have to ask him for help, either, because if we were together there it would be wonderful. At the same time, too, he is not really there, so it is my job.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming.

Proceedings suspended from 11.05 am to 11.28 am

KEECH, Ms Claudia, Chief Executive Officer and Editor, MotherInc

BURCHSMITH, Mrs Elise, Private capacity

HAWKER, Ms Clara Karen, Private capacity

SOMERVILLE, Mrs Julie, Private capacity

CHAIR—Welcome. Do you have any comments on the capacity in which you appear?

Ms Keech—I am appearing for myself, as an individual, but also as a spokesperson for about 80,000 mothers who log on to motherinc.com.au, which is an online magazine for modern mothers.

Witnesses were then sworn or affirmed—

CHAIR—The committee received your submissions, but I invite you to make opening statements.

Mrs Somerville—First of all I would like to thank the government for undertaking this inquiry and acknowledging that it is a real issue for working families. There is a real need to attempt to balance work and family life. I refer the committee to my submission, No. 61. It addresses each of the terms of reference and my opinions on those. They are based only on my personal experience, obviously, and from speaking to other people who have gone through the same situation that I have been through and am currently going through.

My situation has changed slightly since I made the submission. At that time I made a lot of my comments based on the fact that I had two children. I now have three and I am currently on maternity leave. So some of the issues I have raised, particularly in relation to financial disincentives and the cost of child care, are even more exaggerated for me now that I am dealing with three children rather than two. I do not intend to go through all of the points I have made in the submission in much detail. I just want to stress a few key points that I feel particularly strongly about.

Firstly, one of the terms of reference is whether there are career and social disincentives to starting a family. Personally I do not see there are disincentives to starting a family, but for larger families I think there are definite career and social disincentives. But today my focus is primarily on the financial side of it. I think there is a real issue that needs to be addressed as to the availability of quality, affordable child care. The waiting lists for child care are enormous. I am in a situation which I am sure others are in—the committee would have heard others describe their experiences. When I found out I was pregnant I called my obstetrician, my private hospital and my child-care provider before I even told my family, because the child-care centre needs to know before anybody else does. The cost of child care is exorbitant. It is not a cost that I am averse to paying, though some government assistance would be greatly appreciated. On the financial side of things, I am in a situation where the occupation that I work in is well paid, so I

have the benefit of being able to pay this level of fees and still bring home a wage at the end that makes it worth while for me to go to work.

I have had a copy made for each of the committee members of my statement of account for our child-care centre last week. It is entitled 'Seaforth Childcare Centre'—I believe you have it in front of you. The point of it is not necessarily to show the fees. This is care at the moment for my four-year-old daughter to go three days a week to a preschool readiness program and for my oldest child, who is 5½, to be cared for after school hours. This does not include the baby's care, which—child-care place willing—will commence in the middle or towards the end of the year. The point of bringing this before the committee is to show the level of benefit that we receive. For the after school care, I effectively receive about \$2 a day from the government and for the preschool program I am effectively getting \$6 a day.

I do not have any personal desire to necessarily get huge amounts of government benefits myself, because I acknowledge that I am in an occupation that does pay reasonably well. What I find personally offensive and a misallocation of the government's resources is that the family tax benefit part B is not means tested. I work in the legal profession where, because a lot of the partners are in sole-income families, they receive the benefit, even though those partners are taking home probably three times the amount of my combined family income. My husband is not in the legal profession. He is in a reasonably paid profession, but not at the same level as the legal profession. Our combined income exceeds the means tested amount, so we do not receive anything from the government. I personally do not have a problem with that, but I think family tax benefit part B should be going to people who are in occupations where they could not afford to pay \$480 a week for child care, whereas we can afford to pay it and still bring home money at the end of the week.

I also find it difficult when I hear of people in other industries who, if the mother is not working, receive the extra benefits—more than the \$2 or the \$6 that we would receive for child-care fees—when the husband may be bringing home three times our combined family income. I find that hard, because it is a real juggle, we work hard and it feels as though the government is giving the money to the wrong people.

From my personal point of view in relation to my career, I work because I enjoy my job, because I think it brings a sense of satisfaction and because I can contribute something to the working community. I am in a position where I can continue to work, despite having to pay child-care fees. I think it is a good role model for children to see that people can juggle everything, but it is definitely a juggle. I like the fact that my daughters can see mum going to work, that they can see that it can happen.

I work part time; I do not work full time. That has meant that my career has plateaued, but that is the choice that I made. While my employer has been very accommodating, I am in a career cul-de-sac, as I call it. I have good clients, but I do not know whether those clients are going to continue or whether there is somebody more junior who is happy to work full time or to take my clients and go on to do the extra yards. I have chosen to have a family and to work part time. I am put off on the side with my career, but I personally would not let that stop me from having a family. Other than that, all of the other issues are outlined in my submission.

CHAIR—If anything happened to your partner and suddenly you were a sole parent, would you then go back to work full time?

Mrs Somerville—Hopefully, his life insurance would cover us for a little while. I do not know whether I would have any other option but to go back full time. Living in the location I live in and dealing with the expenses that I deal with, I would probably have to. But I would then make the decision about whether I would go back full time or whether I would move to a cheaper area of Sydney where I did not have to pay the same level of expenses. That would take me away from family support, and I do get a lot of family support with child care. For example, one of the children is being looked after by a grandmother and I have a friend here looking after my baby today. If I were to move to another part of Sydney, I would not necessarily have that. I might be able to work part time, but it may still be the same juggle.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Mrs Burchsmith—I also want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. It is an issue that I am passionate about. When I put in my submission, it was my baby's first birthday and I remember thinking, 'I talk about this so I really should do something.' It was like a stream of consciousness when I re-read it the other day.

I would like to share some of my experiences. My situation has changed a little from when I put in the submission in that one of my children started kindergarten this year. That has added another level of complexity to the juggling which I had probably never really fully appreciated. I focused very much on thinking that finding a child-care position was the difficulty. I had not realised what was actually involved when your child starts school—for example, the shorter hours and the before and after school care. The school that he is going to has 13 weeks of holidays per year. We do not have family in Sydney. I can see how staying in the workforce becomes a whole other level for consideration when you try to factor in all those things.

Fortunately, the school that he is at does provide before and after school care, so we pay for a 15-minute slot from 8.15 to 8.30 in the morning so that he can be looked after. I work part time, and we pay for after school care four days a week. I think the difficulty that I had not realised was that when there are 350 children at the school and your child is one of about five remaining when you pick them up at 20 minutes to six in the evening that they must really feel the impact of that. It is very different from child care, because at child care everyone is still there. A lot of the parents are trying to make that six o'clock or 5.30 cut-off. That is just one level that I had not really appreciated until now. It is the empathy that you do not have until you have the experience yourself.

CHAIR—What time do you pick them up?

Mrs Burchsmith—I try madly to get there at 5.30, because psychologically it makes me feel better that at least it is 5.30 and not five to six. Sure, they are lovely carers and it is wonderful, but I still have that feeling that it should be me and not someone else doing that. I also work as a lawyer in the field of employment law, so I am familiar with a lot of these issues and with what difficulties there are. I will address some of my submission. When we were considering child care, one of the things we did was weigh up the options between a child-care centre and nannying. We were not able to substitute it with family support but, saying that, we have

wonderful grandparents who we have flown up from Victoria on many occasions to help us out with situations where we have needed them—where a child is ill, or whatever. That is really our first recourse, especially if we are working on a particular matter and we cannot be there.

We looked at child care and nannying. We thought that a child-care centre would better suit our needs because there is the support of a centre and a lot of other carers. I did not want to be in a situation where I am reliant on one person only to look after my children, and there is some benefit—from my perspective—when there are other people around. I think children are wonderful individuals, and it can be quite lonely for them just being there on their own. So we thought a child-care centre would be preferable for us, and in the long run probably cheaper as well. So financially it was a better option for us. Like Julie, I am in a fortunate position in that both my husband and I work and are on good incomes. The only thing that has changed slightly from when I put in the submission is that the child-care fees increased at the end of last year. We were paying, for four days a week for two children—one of whom is in that magical nought to two-year-old, difficult age group—about \$502 out of our own income, and receiving a partial child-care benefit, which is the minimum benefit for assistance.

One of the things I would like to address is that remaining in the workforce was very important to me. I had done my degree part time while working full time and had not qualified until 1993. I did not want to just give it all away when I had gone through the hard slog, and I feel that I can add something meaningful to the workforce. I think my children get a better-balanced mum, and there is a range of reasons why I have chosen to remain in the workforce. But it goes down to not just the organisation that you work for; it is also very much a subjective thing based on your individual manager, as to whether you are able to access part-time work or not. It is very hard for people to access meaningful part-time work, and anecdotally you probably have a better chance of accessing part-time work if you are a known quantity and have been in an organisation—if you have some runs on the board and have proven yourself. They are then more amenable to considering that request. It is extremely hard for someone who is not in that position. I always look anyway, to see what jobs are out there. I think you should; you do not ever know what is going to happen. I think I have seen about two part-time jobs in the last six months, and not necessarily in the area that I specialise in. So they are not openly out there and that is a really important consideration.

The other thing that I now realise very much is that I would love to be able to access greater leave—even if it is unpaid leave. Now that I am working part-time, I get four-weeks leave, but that is pro rata. There is a big shortfall between that and 13 weeks of school holidays. I must admit that we have already arranged for nana to come up before Easter and mind our little one so that we will not be putting him into some centre for vacation care when he is five. As it is not at the school that he goes to, I think that would be a bit of a difficult situation to plonk a five-year-old into. I know that children cope, but it would be another thing that I would not want him to have to deal with just yet. So it is grandparents for us.

CHAIR—What would happen if you did not have any grandparents or, indeed, if they were all working?

Mrs Burchsmith—We would have to make inquiries about what vacation care was in our area and go with that option. We do not have an alternative to that. I am very fortunate in that where I live backs onto a cul-de-sac where there a number of mums and, coincidentally, seven of

their children have started kindergarten this year. We are wondering whether there is some way between us to take care of each other's children—

Mr CADMAN—You could set up your own family day-care centre—

Mrs Burchsmith—Exactly.

Mr CADMAN—and get paid for it. Why not? That makes a lot of sense.

Mrs Burchsmith—We are just juggling options at the moment. For me, it is probably a whole new added dimension to the juggling exercise. In terms of a social disincentive to having children, I absolutely adore my children and I am very glad that I have been able to have them, so any of these things would not dissuade me. I guess we are on a journey. I appreciate being able to offer something today, and I pretty much stand by what I said in my submission. Sorry if I have gone on too long.

CHAIR—No, you have not at all. That was excellent.

Ms Hawker—I have only one child so I am a little bit behind these two! I have an almost 2½-year-old girl. I wanted to put in a submission with my husband because, since I have had a child, I have become aware of a whole new world of issues that obviously you would not have been aware of beforehand about how very difficult it is. I do not feel that there is enough support from the government. My husband and I are in a pretty good position—we both work; we have pretty good jobs; we are lucky enough to have a mortgage in a nice area; and we have great family support—and I have found it difficult. So I cannot imagine what a lot of other people in Australia have to deal with.

My husband's parents look after our daughter two days a week. That saves us \$160, which is a good proportion of my wage. I am also lucky enough to work for a government department that is very family-friendly and flexible. I work four days a week. A little more than what I am paid pro rata for the four days is taken out of my salary as purchased leave so that I am still considered full-time. I also pay extra into my super and holiday loading so that I am not considered part-time. It is a detriment to your career to work part time. I am very lucky that I am able to do that, but not many people are.

The biggest thing for me was finding child-care for my daughter. Most families have to go back to work. Most families need two people working to pay a mortgage in Sydney. So it is not that much of a choice to go back to work, but to do that you have to have someone to look after your child. My in-laws could not do that for five days. They are not as young as they used to be. They are not in fantastic health. Two days is as much as they can do. So we had to get child-care. We were on about 12 different waiting lists for about 14 months. The only reason we got child-care in the end was that I was diagnosed with postnatal depression and given a priority placement. That should not have to be the case. That is ridiculous, but that is what the situation has come to. The waiting lists are just phenomenal. I did not have the wit to put my name down when I was six-weeks pregnant—maybe I should have and maybe I will next time.

I see the availability of child-care places as the biggest issue, but I also see cost as an issue. We pay \$75 a day; I think we get \$4 a day back. It is pretty expensive but you have to pay it. But if I had to pay full-time child care it would almost not be worth going back to work.

I have done a little bit of research on the internet, looking at what other countries have. Some have paid maternity leave. I have that because I am a public servant but a lot of people do not get paid maternity leave. We do not get a tax deduction for child care.

CHAIR—You would all be eligible for the rebate.

Ms Hawker—Yes, we have just got to hang on to our docket for two years.

Mr CADMAN—Touche!

CHAIR—Well, until you get your tax return.

Ms Hawker—I know we will. Is that not going to be means tested?

CHAIR—No.

Ms Hawker—I was trying to find that out. I could not find out whether it was—

CHAIR—It is capped at \$4,000 out-of-pockets, but it is not means tested.

Ms Hawker—Yes, and I think that is great. I am looking forward to that.

CHAIR—What would you think if it disappeared and you never got it?

Ms Hawker—I have not had it yet, so—

CHAIR—You have not had it, so you would not miss it?

Ms Hawker—That is right. I think it is a great thing but I have not had it yet so if it disappeared my situation would not really change.

CHAIR—What do you think you ought to have? Do you think you should all be entitled to some help?

Ms Hawker—Yes.

Mrs Burchsmith—I would like to see some ability to deduct child-care expenses.

Ms Hawker—Yes, I think it should be tax-deductible.

Mrs Burchsmith—I do not understand the Australian Taxation Office requirements but I understand that if—

CHAIR—The High Court did it.

Mrs Burchsmith—If you work for an organisation where you have got a child-care centre on base, I think you can salary package. There seem to be, to my way of thinking, some anomalies there and I would like to see a different approach.

CHAIR—The situation now is that there is the possibility of salary sacrifice where the employer gets an exemption from the fringe benefits tax. That can be done in accordance with a public ruling by the tax office. Employers that are doing it, however, seem to have got their own tax ruling, because you know how the commissioner likes to change his mind! There is a whole ruling on it; a very thick one, as usual. So it is not government policy, it is tax interpretation. With regard to tax deductibility, the rebate, at 30 per cent, is the equivalent of a tax deduction for 80 per cent of taxpayers. That is why it has been capped, I think, at that.

The other thing is that the High Court said that, although it may be essential to have child care to do your work, it is not sufficiently attached to the production of assessable income to make it comply with section 51. In other words, they see this as a political problem not a legal problem. They said that way back in the eighties—it might even have been the late seventies—and they have said it several times since. So, we would like to hear from you as to what you think is fair, bearing in mind that you are higher income earners but equally you are paying a lot more tax and are juggling just as hard as everybody else.

Ms Hawker—I appreciate that we are up at the top end of income earners but we are still finding it difficult. I feel we should be getting something—

Ms GEORGE—I was just looking at Julie's costs and the \$480 before child three is the equivalent of what some women would earn on the minimum wage.

Mr QUICK—That is right.

Ms GEORGE—So you can see what an appalling disincentive that is. A mum would look at that and think, 'I'm going to earn \$500 so what is the point of working?'

Mrs Somerville—Child-free is the way to go today.

Ms Keech—I have not yet said my piece. I am quite different in the sense that I am a decade on. My son has just turned 11. So I have lived through a decade of change, though perhaps not enough of a change. I am also a single parent, I have also been financially responsible since the outset and I also work full time.

I sometimes feel like a bit of living, breathing research. I can definitely identify with you as you transition through the stages. I am really proud to be here. Thank you for allowing us to be here to tell our stories. We are the generation of change. From living through what we live through we are making those changes. Being in this situation—a modern mother and single—I did not even think twice about not working. It was a case of, 'I'm single; I need an income; I need to work.'

In that first time frame, which the other mothers here are transiting through now, I had to make a decision as my pregnancy was growing to work harder and to put more money in the bank, because I knew that at the other end I wanted time with my child and that I would not be able to work full time. I used my income to pay for a carer and to keep working part time, but I did not make any money to bank during that time frame. I call myself one of the savvy modern women who looked ahead and thought, 'I have to plan for this.' I was also reasonably well thought of in my career in media, so I was able to retain a three-day a week job at a reasonable amount of money.

As it transited on, I did not have any trouble in child care. Again, that is probably because, thinking ahead, I had booked in not quite but almost at conception. The other thing that I did was use a service of occasional care, where a mother donates her time. As such, that care is available to you. At that time it was at quite a nominal fee for me. So in an emergency, if my job suddenly needed me, I would ring up occasional care and say, 'It is Claudia here, your volunteer mum, can you help me?' and they would take Callan, my son. But I must tell you the realities. One day I dashed in with a tin of baked beans and a spoon for his lunch. You can imagine the mother guilt: you are racing to your job, you need the money and you are thinking, 'I know baked beans have great protein and I think this will do.' They were so supportive and nurturing. That is the council run occasional care, which I found a godsend.

In my personal situation, I do not have family support. I am an older mum. Like many parents, I am in a different state to any family I do have. I was the last kid on the block in my family to have a child. My sister's children are much older and they are out nightclubbing and do not want to help with babysitting. So the reality is that I have had to look at all of those modern day solutions for myself. When my son was about four—and I would be very happy to answer any questions you may have of me about this—my job was researching and looking into social issues and forward thinking, things like the launch of a men's health magazine, restructuring a magazine called *Marie Claire* and creating a concept called 'What women want'.

My job was about looking at the social change of our country. But I found myself living as the modern mum and saying, 'There is something really wrong here.' My experiences in my career and in my life as a single mother made me look towards a solution to the issues that face modern mothers. That was the website that I mentioned earlier, motherinc.com.au. My role in speaking to you today from there is that I am privy to the opinions of a lot of women who are not at a higher level of income. Many of them are like the four of us sitting here, and the majority are not. Because of the privacy agreement, they can talk to us quite freely and I can share some of their feelings with you today.

Essentially, part of motherinc made me, in 2003, put out the book that I have given you each a copy of. As you might imagine, those sorts of books cost a lot of money, so I needed commercial assistance to put the book out. About 30,000 copies of the book *Balance—A guide for mothers balancing work and family* went out and were gone within a couple of months. We reissued the book, reflecting a few more fathers' opinions, early last year. Again, all of those copies have gone. With that book, as you will see, we went to specialists in child care, GP workplaces and so on. All of them are parents, so their opinions are quite practical. They are not out there in the cosmos; they are reality. The other thing that I would be happy to share with you at a later stage, so as to not make this go on forever, is that we research our database regularly. As I have said,

because of the privacy agreement, women are very honest and fantastic with their opinions today. We have a lot of dads who log on as well.

I have with me—but also it is accessible online—the results of research on maternity leave, which I do know ended up on our Prime Minister's desk because the results were so overwhelming. As Clara has said, maternity leave-wise we and the USA are the only two nations out of our 20 trading partners who do not have appropriate maternity leave. At this stage I would like to say that Westpac are doing a jolly good job, from what I have read. We also have research, which is brilliant for us to take on board to date, on the health and wellbeing of modern working families. Ninety-four per cent of dads tell us today that they do more with their children than their dad did with them.

I did not put in a submission, but my role today is to say that their very health—mental and physical—the juggle and the success of our marriages in this country are dependent on the findings and recommendations of what we are doing here today. That is the real issue as I see it. I work with an online medium, and people communicate to us so frequently it is exhausting. I invite questions to me or the other mums at this point, because we have so much information at motherinc. I would also be happy to answer any questions about me as a single working mum.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for that. I must say that I look at this and I think, ‘What did I rely on?’ Dr Spock.

Ms Keech—I sat there and thought, ‘There is something basically wrong here; we need more help.’

CHAIR—We are talking about options in care. Westpac does salary sacrifice. You have given the good reason why you chose to use an institutional type of care. Other people we have heard from said they have chosen to use in-home care—the nanny answer. Most of you are excluded from receiving much government assistance at all. There is a presumption that somehow it is fine to eliminate women who are high earners from assistance and take no notice of their struggle. It is quite interesting that you are the dominant earner in your family. Is that correct?

Ms Hawker—Yes.

CHAIR—You are the second witness today we have heard that from, yet in policy-making terms you can see that they all still think that the man is the major breadwinner. That is changing all the time.

Ms Keech—Absolutely. While I was married I was the main breadwinner at that time too.

CHAIR—So the presumption that the man will earn this money, therefore you are not entitled to any assistance, seems to me to be a very unfair bias. There should be recognition that you are paying a lot of tax, you are contributing, and therefore you should not be put in a category that says, ‘You are earning a higher income; therefore we do not care about you.’ We do care about you. We need your skill and expertise in the workforce, yet we are really saying from a government point of view that we do not think you matter.

Mrs Somerville—Which is contradictory when you look at the government motivations and incentives to get people, particularly women, studying, doing further education. You pay for us to go through and do professional jobs. We all pay our HECS, just like everybody else does. We are encouraged to be professionals and then, when you have a child, the attitude is: ‘That’s it. Sorry.’

CHAIR—It is all a man’s world then.

Mrs Somerville—The attitude is: ‘We do not need your brain anymore.’

Ms Keech—That is something we were discussing casually just before we began today. We are the generation that was encouraged to have a good education and a career, and we are doing it. Yes, you are quite right: there is a penalty for this at some level. Through mothering I have had people talk to me. One particular person was a head anaesthetist and a leader in her field. She has had two or three children. She spoke to me almost as a depressed woman—in fact, her demeanour was that of a depressed person—because she was losing status in her career and it was hard to get back in. She actually described herself as a lackey now. You could tell that emotionally it was a real struggle for her. It was a very sad conversation to have with a woman who was incredibly gifted in her career.

CHAIR—Clara, you intimated that you were diagnosed with postnatal depression. Did going back to work help you?

Ms Hawker—Yes, it did. I would have gone back to work sooner. I would have gone back, probably, at six months. I needed to go back to work for myself. I was not able to because I worked shift work and my employer at the time, which was a government department, was not flexible enough to allow me to work standard hours, shorter hours or anything. I could not afford child care, and I could not get it anyway, so I actually could not go back to the job. In the end I did get child care and I managed to get the job where I am now, which has been fantastic. They were both government organisations but they just had different ways of dealing with the situation. Again, I think a lot of it comes down to individual managers.

CHAIR—If you, as a shift worker, had been able to access care in your home and had some child-care benefit and, say, tax rebate, could you have gone back to work then?

Ms Hawker—Yes, I think so.

Ms Keech—To be honest, the only reason I could continue working was that I had the skills to re-create my career. I find for a lot of women your solution is to almost re-create how you work or it becomes an issue. I work online because I cannot actually work normal hours. I have a young son who is at school with all different issues now. Last week there was a fabulous example. I thought, ‘We’ve got it sorted now, he’s old enough to catch the bus.’ But then he had an injury on the sports field and I had to leave and drive right across the city to get him because he was in a bit of a bad state. My job means that I can work at night and I can work on weekends. In fact, it is the only way I can create my income. Again, obviously the majority of the population cannot do what I am doing, but I have no choice. I am actually happy with it because I enjoy my work and I want to go and pick up my son when he gets injured on the sports field.

Ms GEORGE—But, as you were saying, Claudia, you do have that choice. For a lot of women there is no choice.

Ms Keech—Yes, there is no choice; so what do you do?

Ms GEORGE—You have all touched on the issue of part-time work. One thing that worries me is that adjusting and having more flexibility in your working life really does depend on your supervisor. I think you have all mentioned it. Clara has mentioned here, and I think Elise as well, that we ought to legislate so that all women have the right, say, to up to two years unpaid leave, paid leave or a combination and then a right to return for some part-time hours when the children are young.

Ms Hawker—Mine is until the child is six.

Ms Keech—All of the mothers who work for me are permanent part time. It is done in a job share capacity. It has to be a family-friendly workplace on the basis of who we are and what we are trying to do.

CHAIR—The reality is that many women work for small businesses, which cannot sustain paying for that sort of employee to be maintained because they would go broke themselves.

Ms Hawker—Do you mean a maternity leave payment?

CHAIR—Yes.

Ms Hawker—I think that in the UK the government subsidises employers about 92 per cent.

CHAIR—Governments have no money. You mean other taxpayers subsidise.

Ms Hawker—Sorry.

CHAIR—It also means that single people are subsidising all the people. You have got to think about them too. For single people who are yet to have a family, who are currently subsidising those people with families, it becomes a disadvantage to have a family.

Mr QUICK—I have a view that when you become a house owner you start paying rates to your local council and in those rates are library levies, fire levies, sewerage, water—the whole lot.

CHAIR—Fire levies come off your insurance.

Mr QUICK—But there is nothing in there for community service. I would argue that if a small portion of the annual assessment of your house were set aside for ‘community service’ then there would be child care available for your child with a disability or for your children when you had them and, as you aged, there would be aged care services—and it would be in your community. I am lucky that in Tasmania most of our child-care centres are community based, and they are responsive. We are horrified by what we hear and see of the corporatisation

of child care in this country. It is being enlarged at a great rate. To me, if you handed it back to local government, which gets its fingers in every other pie except community development—

CHAIR—God help us.

Mr QUICK—it would be a great thing because everybody would pay.

CHAIR—Local government is of a very varying quality and ability.

Mr QUICK—This committee heard evidence about the Home and Community Care program. People actually move suburbs in Melbourne depending on the local government.

CHAIR—But Victoria is the only state in Australia where local government contributes to home and community care. It happens in no other state.

Mr QUICK—These people here are saying and all the evidence we have heard says that you cannot get child care. There is this guilt by association.

CHAIR—That is what I am saying. If we acknowledge that some people would want to have it in their own home where we are not paying for bricks, mortar and land costs but they are getting the same sort of assistance that they get if a child is institutionalised, isn't there some equity in that?

Mrs Somerville—There is. If I can say one thing in relation to another reason we chose a centre rather than an individual nanny as such, there is obviously a vast difference in costs but I personally think the social interaction for children is very important. I am very happy with the child-care centre which our children go to. If someone were to offer me a nanny tomorrow I would say, 'No, I want them to stay in this centre.'

CHAIR—How old are your kids?

Mrs Somerville—One started school this year; she is 5½. She has been in that centre for the last three years. I have a four-year-old who has been there for the last three years as well.

CHAIR—What about the nought to two-year-olds?

Mrs Somerville—The nought to two I am waiting on. The youngest one started off as a nine-month-old baby in that room. Again I was happy. I had the standard issue with the first month when you have all of the illness that you have when you get there, but you expect that. I can understand why people do not want to expose a nought to two to infections in childhood and so forth. But my nought to two-year-old, who is now four, is an articulate, socially aware child. She interacts incredibly well with other children. I have had none of the standard issues that I had with my now 5½-year-old of separation anxiety or of sharing. I have had the standard things, but generally her social skills are fantastic for somebody who has been in that setting for quite a while. I would choose to have her in that environment. Things change again now as they start school. With before and after school care I have the same issue. My 5½-year-old loves the thought of going to after school care at the moment, which is great. I pick her up and see that there are five of them there and I find that really hard. In terms of the cost of before and after

school care, it is almost more cost effective to have someone come in just for that 3½ hours after school.

CHAIR—Then they could be in their home doing the homework.

Mrs Somerville—Yes. I am more inclined to do that at the school age. Preschool age, I like the social interaction. At the kindy she gets exposed to Japanese and health classes, they have language classes and music classes. I could not do that at home and I think it would be a rare individual nanny who would offer all of that to a child. In three days they program all these things in for them. I think that is probably unlikely.

Ms Keech—I think a decade later I would still totally agree with every single thing you have just said about the social interaction. In fact, my son met his best friend at the age of 20 months at his child-care facility. His mother is a chatterbox and he learnt that.

Mrs Burchsmith—I think there is also that whole community aspect of a child-care centre. Particularly if your child is going to a centre in a local area, you meet other families and that is important.

Mr FAWCETT—You mentioned the benefit for your child from a socialisation point of view. Some of the evidence we have received looks at the pressures particularly on the mum often but sometimes the dad. You get up at five in the morning to get ready to get the child ready to get out the door, to get to the child-care centre, you go off to work—let's hope the child does not get sick in case you have to race back and pick him up. You do finally leave work right on the dot because you do not want to pay the excess fees. You get back, you pick him up, you get home and you wash and feed and then you collapse into bed yourself. So, in balancing work and family, many people say, 'Child-care centres may be great for early education for our children but it is ruining me and it is ruining our marriage.' So the whole balancing is one side where people have been saying the concept of supporting in-home care is valid because, although you do not quite walk out relaxed, you walk out far more relaxed given that someone else is walking in to do all those things with your child.

Mrs Somerville—It is effectively a two-hour round trip. I start my day two hours before I actually sit at my desk. In terms of the balancing side of things, in my relationship with my husband I am very lucky in that I do the morning shift and he does the afternoon shift. That is how we have balanced it. I do not get into the office generally until 9.30, but I can stay there until as late as I need to. He starts early. He gets into the office at seven, but he walks out his door at five o'clock and does the evening shift. There is only one of us going 'Here we go' at each end of the day. When he has been overseas for work, it is really hard. Those weeks kill you.

Mrs Burchsmith—Something I have found particularly difficult is when my husband has a project with an anticipated date—he is in the field of IT—and that date keeps going on and on. At one point it was two weeks on, two weeks overseas and two weeks on, and that always spanned across two or three weekends. That is quite difficult because you do feel that there is a lot of pressure on you to get everything done. I know there are lots of people in far worse circumstances than I am with different financial pressures and whatever, but you get a snippet of what it must be like to be a single mum—and I do not think that is a choice that most people would make.

Ms Keech—It is okay! You make it work.

Mrs Burchsmith—I do not mean that with any disrespect. I have grown up in an era where the title of ‘single mother’ is bandied around a lot. It takes two people to get in the family way, and it is not easy to have all that.

Ms Keech—The image of the single mum with a carton of cigarettes and not doing much work is long behind us.

Mrs Burchsmith—I do not think it is a fair representation of reality.

Ms Keech—Through my own work, generally speaking, there are a lot of single women out there who are working extremely hard, who do not fit that picture that was so long ago and who are having a great time.

CHAIR—The other thing that is interesting in this is the statistics. In the kindergarten and early years of school, the single mum status is unusual—most children will have two parents—but by the time they leave school at year 12 the family that remains intact will be unusual.

Mrs Somerville—One of the points that was made earlier is something that I think we will do: as school progresses I will use the child-care centre in the early childhood years and then have somebody come into the home for the 3.30 to 6.30 time shift. It is very difficult to come home when you are both exhausted and do the routine of bath, dinner, homework, readers, blah, blah, blah.

Ms Keech—One of the issues mentioned earlier was exhaustion in the morning, and Julie mentioned how there is a lot of sharing. Unfortunately, based on the high volume of information we receive, it is still mostly the woman who does the majority of the work. You can actually hear the exhaustion in my voice! Generally speaking, on behalf of other mothers, the majority of the workload is still with the working mum. It is still a huge juggle. No-one wants to be a supermum—and we hate that term—but how do we get around this? It is not that the father is not being supportive; it comes back to the workplace enabling the father to perhaps be more like Julie’s husband and not be discriminated against if he has to do the picking up on a Wednesday or a Friday to help his wife out and recognising that there are two people working. The workplace needs to be more supportive of fathers, who are willing to be more helpful. We also need to recognise here today that it is most definitely still the woman who is doing the majority of this—juggling the workload and having the health issues that go with that. I am talking about happily married families, not single mums.

Mr QUICK—Should we mandate child-care centres to be in certain areas per head of population? I would hate to think what it must be like in Sydney if you have to travel backwards and forwards. I live in Hobart where there is 260,000 people and you can drive from one end to the other in 10 minutes.

Ms Hawker—Some people have to travel a long way to get to their child-care place.

Mrs Burchsmith—I read that there was a big article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on the weekend about the corporatisation of child care. There has to be money in it.

Ms Keech—They do not get paid much.

Mrs Burchsmith—I know that child-care workers have had an increase recently, but they do not seem to get very much pay. There has to be money in it; there are people out there making a lot of money. I do not understand how the community child-care centres work. I could not get into one, so I got into one where you take what you can get.

Mr QUICK—My understanding is that it is a bit like McDonald's: they go where they can make the most money and, necessarily, they are not in areas where they are not going to make a great return.

Ms Keech—Some of the ones near me are charging \$110.

Ms GEORGE—Councils are withdrawing from this. It is about the cost of land. Years ago they might have contributed to a local centre, but now the cost of land is prohibitive for many councils to actually get involved in establishing centres without some incentive from the federal government.

Ms Keech—What is the feeling on family day care as another choice, given that—

Ms Hawker—But the thing about family day care for me was that the hours were till five o'clock. That was the cut-off.

Ms Keech—Without scaring you, I must say that I found that the creche aspect when my son was much younger was good. When I look right back now I find that was a cruise ship compared to now. You had an 8 or 8.30 am drop-off and a 5.30 or 6 pm pick-up—so they were your job hours—whereas when schooling begins you find some of the quality of the after school care is brilliant and some of it is not brilliant at all.

Mr QUICK—In Tasmania we have an enlightened education minister and she is siting child-care centres in every primary school so that there is a seamless transition. We heard today of that 15-minute period that you have to pay for. That is ridiculous.

Mrs Somerville—It is funny—and I did not realise this—that you pay for this 15 minutes and all the children have to sit there on a step because officially—it is about insurance—they are not allowed to be playing.

Ms Keech—They are in limbo.

Mrs Somerville—Yes. So I have got this absolutely energetic child and it is the longest enforced 15 minutes he has ever had to sit for. He says, 'I'm in the school, it's open,' and I say, 'Well, it's not officially open.'

Mrs MARKUS—It is like having no teacher in the playground. It is an issue. There are safety aspects.

Mrs Burchsmith—There is a lovely lady, and she talks to them. But you pay for it. I am grateful for it, but you just think, 'Gosh, it is really a funny set-up.'

Mrs Somerville—Going back to what you were saying about whether there should be child-care centre figures per head in each area, I can speak only from my own experience but Sydney is already fairly heavily populated, which is probably why it is so expensive because there are no land or houses left for anybody to buy.

Mrs MARKUS—There is out west.

Mrs Somerville—Yes. But there is already a vast amount of child care. For my area alone I could reel off the top of my head the names of a good five or six child-care centres that are all within a five-minute drive for me. They do not all offer nought to two, because not everybody—

Mrs MARKUS—There are some state issues that impact on nought to two.

Ms Keech—There was mention earlier of single people paying taxes. I wanted to comment at that time that this has been brought up a lot with me when there is talk about family-friendly policies and when single people are saying, ‘But nobody’s doing anything for me in the workplace.’ When I was a single person I was happy to pay my taxes. When someone was unemployed and needed a benefit, I thought it was fine for my taxes to be paid for that. If through some unfortunate circumstances they needed to go on a disability pension, I paid for that via tax. All of us pay taxes for the benefit of the entire community. We should not be penalised because we do or do not have children.

CHAIR—What was I saying was slightly different from that. In doing the comparisons, you see that somebody—a single person—who is earning \$40,000 a year pays \$8,172 in tax while a partnership earning \$40,000 a year—with one partner earning \$26,666 and the other earning \$13,333—pays \$5,419 in tax. Two parents with two children under five and earning \$40,000 a year pay no tax at all. In fact, they get a top-up of \$1,500. So they have a net disposable income of \$41,500 as distinct from the cases of people in a partnership who are paying almost \$5½ thousand in tax and a single person who is paying over \$8,000. That is a big gap, isn’t it?

Ms Keech—And the percentage of couples who are earning income under \$40,000?

CHAIR—I can give you figures for all the way through.

Ms Keech—I just do not know. That is why I am asking.

CHAIR—The biggest band of people, from memory, is somewhere between \$40,000 and \$50,000 a year.

Ms Keech—I mention it only because it became such a huge issue for a while. You think that you pay your taxes to benefit the whole of the community, not just those people or yourself.

CHAIR—The figures are—and it is true—that 38 per cent of families now pay no tax at all. That is very family friendly.

Ms Keech—Yes.

CHAIR—Is that impacting on people who are at the stage of saving up to have children? They are paying a big whack of tax and they cannot even get into the game.

Ms Keech—Yes, they do not have enough money to have one.

Mrs Somerville—What about people who are at the other end, who may be on one income of \$200,000-plus—admittedly, they are the vast minority of the population—and they have, say, two dependent children.

CHAIR—They receive \$24. If there is only one person earning, they still get family tax benefit part B.

Mr CADMAN—What sort of tax are they paying?

CHAIR—It does not matter.

Mrs Somerville—Once they are on \$200,000 they would be on the top bracket.

Mr CADMAN—More than half their income.

Mrs Somerville—True.

Mr CADMAN—That is a lot more than the \$3,000 or \$4,000 they get.

Mrs Somerville—It is a lot more. They may pay half their income in tax, but they still have a disposable income of, say, \$100,000, using crude figures. Look at a middle-class family earning two incomes. Say their combined income is \$150,000. They pay two lots of taxes, so there would be two tax-free thresholds. If they were just over the upper limit, they would get nothing.

CHAIR—They would get \$24.

Mrs Somerville—Somebody in our situation, for example, does not get anything. We are above the cut-off for family tax part B, I think it is. I get \$2 for my after school child care and \$6 for my four-year-old, but they still get that as well, plus they get their \$24 a week.

Mr CADMAN—You would rather be paying their tax?

Mrs Somerville—No, I just find the situation personally offensive. Our family juggles hard, works hard and there is somebody that has just bought a \$2 million property bringing home \$200,000 a year. I do not want that \$24 a week, because I think there are other people that need it more than I do. But I do not understand why they should get it when we are the ones working hard. They still use child care and their nannies so that they can go off and play tennis. I find that offensive.

ACTING CHAIR (Mr Cadman)—I find that hard to get into. Are there any more questions?

Mr QUICK—We have to come up with recommendations to try to make a family-friendly society. I have two daughters, one who is 29 and has just married and is thinking about having children and one who is 26 and is teaching. How do we put in place for them and for you and for each of the generations something so that you do not have this guilt? That must weigh enormously on you. You are at work and suddenly you get a phone call. You ring your husband to see who is deeper in the hole.

Mrs Burchsmith—You have the dreaded child-care number come up on your mobile phone just when you are about to go into a meeting and you feel terrible.

Mr QUICK—So what do we do to ensure that everyone, irrespective of where they live in Australia—not just Sydney or Melbourne or the other capital cities—can access child care that is affordable and flexible enough to cater for your needs? I would suggest that ethnic communities cope a lot better because of their stronger family structures. But we are all individuals. My family is spread across about four states. You are talking about grandparents having to fly in. What recommendations would you have us make?

Mrs Somerville—I do not think it is just as simple as increasing the number of places.

Ms Hawker—It is a good starting point. You need to make more available.

Mrs Burchsmith—I think it is an awful shame if people need and want to return to the workforce but they can't. Julie, you mentioned that you are waiting for a place to become available. That is a huge worry when you are trying to return to the workforce. You have lined up your role, but you cannot say to your employer, 'I have a firm date,' because you are reliant on somebody else. There is a lot of choice removed from you in those circumstances. You end up living in an area and you create community in that area and your children end up going to school. I know that it is not realistic to up and go to another area.

Mrs MARKUS—No, it is not—that is right.

Mrs Burchsmith—It just is not realistic.

ACTING CHAIR—I agree with my colleague Mr Quick—I cannot understand why there is the imbalance.

Ms Keech—There is a need—there is a demand. I am a small business owner. One of my workers would like to work three days a week and I need her to, but she cannot get the child care. I do not want to lose her, but then do I go and get somebody for a day a week? Actually, what we are doing is working really hard and waiting until October when she has her third day.

Mrs MARKUS—A lot of employers would not do that, though, would they?

Ms Keech—No, they would not. But I do not want to lose her. I value her. We will just muddle our way through. The pressure is not just on her but also on the employer.

Mrs Burchsmith—I think the child care places are one thing. The traditional award structures used to mandate nought to two. To me that does not really go far enough. A lot of people access

12 months parental leave or maternity leave, so they have one year to make the transition for that child, from looking after them part time or whatever to full-time care. They are still very little. That may get you through the first hurdle, but there are still shortages of places outside of the nought-to-two group.

Mr FAWCETT—Are you talking about out of school hours care or all day care?

Mrs Burchsmith—Just day care. There is a lot of focus on nought to two, because a lot of centres do not provide for the nought-to-two group. Our centre sent out a letter last year saying, ‘If you want to change your days or you want increased days, I’m sorry but we cannot accommodate you because we have so many people piled up behind you.’

Mr FAWCETT—Part of the problem, though, is that it is not uniform across Australia. There are many places where there are vacancies in day care centres. In fact, I have a day care centre in my electorate that is complaining bitterly about new day care centres starting up. They are saying, ‘We won’t have enough people to actually stay viable in terms of the places we are offering.’ Part of the problem is that, if you come to somewhere like Sydney, property prices in terms of acquisition or rent are so high that the charges people have to charge to actually, firstly, afford the premises and then, secondly, pay their staff, who also have to actually live and pay rent et cetera here, are also high. The cost to provide child care here is hugely higher than it is in some other parts.

Julie, you just mentioned the discomfort you have at the inequity of paying more to one group of people versus another. Is it therefore equitable that we subsidise people who choose to live in a certain part of Sydney to a far higher extent through government subsidies to a child-care operator or the parent rather than saying, ‘If you are short of child care, move to Western Sydney or go to South Australia or Tasmania where there is lots of child care available.’ It is an intractable issue.

Mr Hawker—Then you are losing your family and your social networks. You cannot tell people to do that.

Mrs Burchsmith—Also, you increase your commuting time. Most of my work is going to be in the city. There are not going to be very many areas outside of the city where I can perform my job. Living too far out would mean valuable time away from my family that I want to spend with them. The kids are little and they go to bed at seven o’clock. There is not a lot of flexibility in the workplace about what your hours are and when you can leave. You almost have to educate yourself that, if you walk out of the door at five o’clock, it might be that you are walking out of the door at five o’clock so that you can get to the centre on time and spend at least an hour with your child or children. You may well log on and do extra work when they are in bed, and lots of us who are working part time do that, I would suggest. That is our choice.

I think there does need to be that greater recognition of what it actually involves. I think there needs to be some kind of public awareness campaign to show what it actually means. You have a lot of uninterested senior leaders who do not actually appreciate this. I do not mean this disrespectfully, but if you had a stay-at-home partner and you raised children in a different era—or unless you have your own children or some really great empathy and understanding—you do not really get it. I did not get it until my child had to start school. Then you wonder, ‘What do I

actually do now?' You know it is looming, but what do you do when there are 13 or 14 weeks of holidays?

Mr FAWCETT—Elise, in meeting what you are talking about there, which is getting more meaningful time with your child but also addressing this issue of equity, is the approach that we should be pursuing more to look at ways to encourage business? So if a business wants to operate in Sydney—

Mrs Burchsmith—I want to incentivise them. I reckon it has to be an incentive scheme that makes—

Mr FAWCETT—where Sydney's workforce is required to have high mortgages and high all rest of it, if I am a business owner and I want to retain a workforce, I then have to make a provision. And we are doing it. There are things like private rulings that the ATO has given for banks, where they can have child-care centres and people can salary sacrifice. Is that the direction we should be pushing, because we do not need that in some regional areas, but we do need it here?

Mrs Burchsmith—I was going through this last night and giving it some thought, and I thought of making an incentive for people. We all know that, as soon as there is any suggestion that something is mandated, everybody jumps up and down—the family provisions test case or whatever: 'This is outrageous'—without necessarily looking at what is leading to the need to explore all these options. I work in a corporate environment—I am well aware of what goes on and what is said—and many of my friends do as well. I think there needs to be incentive for business, for example, to employ women and men who want to return to the workforce part time or on a job-sharing basis.

We live in an age where we have the technology. I attended a conference just recently, and we are one of the slowest countries to take up teleworking as effectively as you can. In Silicon Valley or whatever, they do it out of necessity, and the States has a much higher take-up rate. There are things we can do, but it is a mind-set you have to change, and that is sometimes very hard. Sometimes it needs a bit of a boot to propel it along, but you do need to change senior people who are in positions of leadership and authority, and educate. We are talking about the fact that you have to change a culture, and it has to be—

Mrs MARKUS—But also increasingly identifying what families want, how they want to do it.

Mrs Burchsmith—Yes. And we all know that families are no longer necessarily just a nuclear family—

Ms Keech—There is no traditional family as such.

Mrs Burchsmith—There is no 'traditional' anymore. You have to recognise people who have backup support or who do not have backup support for whatever reason. I think we have to move away from, 'You choose to live in Sydney; you choose to live in that area.' It does not necessarily work out that way. I did not even know where I was living when I came from Melbourne; it was just where I ended up being.

Mrs MARKUS—But I think incentives that will create more options.

Mrs Burchsmith—I think incentives for business—job share, part time.

Mrs MARKUS—For example, you can have in-home care, and these are the incentives for certain ages.

Ms Keech—I think also, speaking on behalf of mothers who do not earn as much as the four of us sitting here, people are moving. They will move to the Central Coast. They will move to where the facilities are for them raise their young family in what is called the 21st century. If this is what is required for them to look after their kids, they will do that.

Mrs Burchsmith—And I am one of those people.

Ms Keech—I have lost employees from mothering on that basis.

Mrs Burchsmith—My husband and I have also considered moving to be closer to families so that we can have more of that support. It is cheaper.

Ms Keech—So it is across the board. Where there are not enough child-care centres in a densely populated area or an area of demand—as we have discussed, Sydney is one of those—then what can be done to help that? Definitely incentives to the workplace where it positively impacts the bottom line. If you are an employer with valued staff members that you can support with child care and if the government can support that and a family-friendly workplace for mum and dad, not just mum, then perhaps, whether it is the Central Coast or out west, families will be very happily moving there. Is there enough child-care support and also workplace change there to support those families? Families are actually almost looking for what used to be. Something we often talk about is creating the modern village, because the village of so long ago is gone and it creates these problems for us. The government will be able to solve a lot of the issues but not all of them. The seven mums in your street and how you can all support each other sound like a dream come true to me. We should not expect the government, as I am sure we all agree, to solve everything. But they are some of the solutions.

Mr FAWCETT—Claudia, can I just make one comment. You said that the nuclear family is no more. In the 2001 census of all Australian households that had children in them, 90.1 per cent had both biological parents at home.

Ms Keech—I find that unbelievable, given the divorce rate.

Mr FAWCETT—But, remember, you are talking rates. When you are talking about statistics and rates, you have to look at what base sample you are comparing against.

Ms Keech—Was that census in 2003?

Mr FAWCETT—2001.

Mrs MARKUS—There is a census this year.

Ms Keech—Great. I look forward to reading it!

Mr FAWCETT—No, 90.1 per cent of households with children have both biological parents at home.

Ms Keech—I find that information completely staggering. You might have heard the recent debate about whether the stay-at-home mum is going to be extinct. I do not think certain parts of society will ever be extinct, but the stay-at-home mum is absolutely going to be the minority, and I would say it has to be the minority now. Maybe it was not by the 2001 census, but it will be very interesting to read the next one. I do not think there will ever be an extinct anything; it is just that we are a changing society, which is why we sit here today, and it is moving so fast.

Mr FAWCETT—If you grab all the census data, you will find that from 1901 to 2001 there was a steady increase in the total number of people married to almost half the population and in the number of people who have never been married or who are now widowed to about 38 per cent—a significant number. The number of people who are divorced or separated is around 10 per cent. Even most those who go out of the divorce pool and remarry—they subsequently separate or divorce at a two- to three-times rate—come back into that bottom group. So, in a snapshot, about 10 per cent of the population is separated or divorced, and that has been pretty consistent over the decades. It is really important, when we are talking about family policy, that we keep in mind that whilst it is a significant issue for that large chunk of people—10 per cent of our population; that is two million people—the vast majority of our families are still mum, dad and a couple of kids together.

Ms Keech—I guess this would support your statistics, but I find that a lot of us—and I am one—have moved into a blended family environment. I am still financially responsible for my child, but I am in a blended environment so that if we were to do that census we would say there are two people in the home. A modern snapshot of my situation is that my partner is financially responsible for his son, I am financially responsible for my son and we would now register as a couple in a house. I think in an ideal world everybody likes to be able to share their lives with someone and share the raising of children, and perhaps this is what the census is reflecting.

Mrs MARKUS—That is biological parents, though.

Ms Keech—I find that extraordinary, and I look forward to the next one.

CHAIR—As I said, it changes as time goes on. The total number of children living in an intact family is 1.7 million. The total number of children is 2.5 million. At ages nought to two, at any point in time, you have 516,000 children living in an intact family; three to four, 205,000; five to 11, 611,000—that is a bigger age range; 12 to 14, 234,000; 15 to 17, 207,000.

Mrs Somerville—The suggestion from that is effectively that the stress of having a family is affecting marriage rates. As time goes on, it cumulatively becomes more stressful and relationships break down. That is what the statistics show.

Ms Keech—And lives generally. Part of the whole balance of work and family is having time for the couple to communicate. My feeling is that the mental and physical health of the individual and the health of the relationship suffer because of this incredible juggle.

Mr CADMAN—Having cakes and eating them too is not easy.

Mrs Burchsmith—It is interesting. I doubt you can run your own business part time very easily—

Ms Keech—No, you cannot. You just sleep strange hours.

Ms Hawker—Something has to give, and it is your career.

Mrs Burchsmith—Three of us have obviously wanted meaningful part-time work.

Ms Keech—My preference is to work three days a week.

Mrs Burchsmith—I still think access to part-time work or job sharing is very—

CHAIR—One way male doctors are very critical of female doctors is in saying that one of the reasons for the shortage of doctors is that more than half are female and they like to work part time, and, because of the Medicare system, they can and do.

Mrs Somerville—Why because of the Medicare system?

CHAIR—Because they have a guaranteed stream of income.

Mrs Somerville—I see.

Mr QUICK—So, if they can do it, why can't lawyers and teachers—

Mrs Somerville—I do not know of any Medicare lawyers!

CHAIR—Because they are not paid by the government; they are paid on performance!

Mr QUICK—If there was a general understanding that part-time work contributes just as much to society as full-time work, I know lots of full-time people who hate going to work and would love to work part time.

CHAIR—There are a lot of part-time people who would love to work full time.

Mr QUICK—Yes, but there should be that—

CHAIR—Quite frankly, if you are dealing with people and you want to have access to them Monday to Friday, if you have that sort of business, you do not want to have a different person that you are dealing with.

Mrs Burchsmith—I have just dealt with a particular matter with two job-sharing lawyers. I have not previously encountered it, so I thought it was quite innovative. They told me upfront which days each worked and which was the crossover day and so on, and it worked perfectly. There was an article on it in the *Australian*, and they sent it to me. It is that mind-set: when you

initially hear of it you think, ‘Who am I ringing today?’ but it is only a very slight thing to actually know who you are dealing with. You can get that continuity. It is not that difficult for a lot of jobs and a lot of professions—

Ms Hawker—If you want to make it work, it can be made to work.

Mrs Burchsmith—It can be made to work. There is an element of risk in anything. There is an element of risk when you take on a new person, but you get people who are very committed and really want to make these situations work so it does allow them to take the pressure off a little bit with the juggling. When you go part time, you do accept that you are going to reduce your income and have benefits pro rata. That is your choice. From my perspective, the trade-off is far better because I know that that time is better utilised to prepare meals and do the washing so that on the weekend—we are fortunate that my husband has weekends off when he does not have to travel—we can spend time together.

CHAIR—The point I was making about doctors is that what it means, and what we have not bitten the bullet about, is that we need to train a lot more doctors. If one half of the cohort is only going to work part of the time, you need more of them. That has not happened, and they are very expensive to train.

Ms Keech—There has been a ceiling on that number.

CHAIR—When I went to law school there were 12 of us who were female—

Mrs Burchsmith—I looked up your profile on the internet this morning and I thought, ‘I bet there weren’t many in law.’

CHAIR—We had a reunion the other night—very interesting. But, when you went to law school, more than half.

Mrs Somerville—That is right.

CHAIR—And that is the change. And, when I went to law school, there was one law school.

Mrs Somerville—It is very different now.

CHAIR—So we are letting the market sort it out. You are trained and you go out and are competing and employers are saying, ‘All right, we like your skills,’ and the market is met. But there are enough people out there competing for that to be met.

Mrs Somerville—Competition is lost because, as I think was mentioned earlier today, part-time jobs are very few and far between. If I wanted to change as a part-time senior associate in a major law firm, jobs are not advertised. My employer can pretty much say, ‘This is what you’re going to do,’ and I just say, ‘Okay, that’s fine,’ because I know I cannot. There is no competition anymore.

Mrs Burchsmith—There is no market in law.

Ms Keech—The legal community is perhaps one of the more tough ones for part-time work, whereas, from what I know, statistically the bulk of working mums are—please correct me if I am wrong—part-time workers at the moment, so there are a lot of part-time positions. Yet you do compromise your career if—

Mrs MARKUS—It depends on the occupation.

Ms Hawker—But it is very difficult to get a part-time job. You can start off full time and then negotiate maybe to part time, as in my case, working for the government, but I think—

Mrs Burchsmith—That is what I was saying before.

Ms Hawker—you have got to—

Mr QUICK—Have the runs on the board.

Ms Hawker—have a foot in the door before you have that ability to negotiate. You cannot go to a job interview and say, ‘Yeah, but I’m going to work three days a week.’ You will not get the job.

Ms Keech—But that is the education of the mum or dad, if he is going to be the primary carer, to ask the right questions of your employer before planning a family. If you choose to stay there and if you are a valued employee, what are your options for part-time work? I am thinking of all different jobs, not just legal, not just—

Mrs Burchsmith—In an organisation managers change. For a lot of people what has been negotiated with one is not acceptable to someone else who comes in and says, ‘I don’t want someone working part time, I don’t agree with this,’ or, ‘I don’t recall that discussion; I was not privy to it’—all sorts of things.

Ms GEORGE—The system seems to be working in the UK. For the last couple of years they have had the right to request a return to part-time hours.

CHAIR—We do not really know that, Jennie. It is a bit new.

Ms GEORGE—The evaluations that I have seen—

CHAIR—France might tell you that their 35-hour week is working, but it is not.

Ms GEORGE—I would not argue that as a comparison. The UK legislation is working.

Ms Keech—With regard to the general education of the public, there is a magazine that is coming out that I was asked to contribute to. I went to Pru Goward’s office and said, ‘Could you please give me the questions that you suggest a mum-to-be asks her employer?’ This magazine is being given to women in their second trimester at a time when, hopefully, they are feeling well enough to think about what is next on the agenda. Part of all of this is the education process of the parents-to-be so that they ask the right questions at the appropriate times before they have exited left.

Mrs Somerville—If you are already pregnant, it is too late.

Ms Keech—You can do it before that. I am saying that is part of the education process. If it helps, we have some research running at the moment. We ran some research in the year 2000 on the value of motherhood from the perspective of the general populace and how mothers help.

ACTING CHAIR (Mr Cadman)—That might be very helpful. Could you make that available to the committee?

Ms Keech—Five years later, we are running it again. We think the results are going to be a little different.

ACTING CHAIR—That would be very helpful. We need to draw this to a conclusion. Elise made part of her submission confidential. These are confidential hearings, so it is covered and you can rest assured about that. There is this item. Julie, this is your personal stuff. Should we receive this an exhibit or not?

Mrs MARKUS—I do not think so.

ACTING CHAIR—That is up to Julie.

Mrs Somerville—Only if you want it. I would not want my name or the centre's name on there. I have no problems with the—

ACTING CHAIR—So that is purely for the committee's information.

Mrs Somerville—That is fine.

ACTING CHAIR—Is it the wish of the committee that the document from Claudia be accepted as an exhibit? There being no objection, it is so ordered. Thank you very much.

Proceedings suspended from 12.52 pm to 1.35 pm

CARR, Mrs Bronwyn, Committee Member, Women Lawyers Association of New South Wales

SAW, Ms Lee-May, Treasurer, Women Lawyers Association of New South Wales

Witnesses were then sworn or affirmed—

CHAIR—Welcome. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms Saw—Good afternoon, members of the standing committee. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this public hearing. The Women Lawyers Association of New South Wales is the peak representative body of women lawyers in New South Wales. We have been established since 1952 and our membership is diverse and includes members of the judiciary, barristers, solicitors, government bodies, corporations, large and small city and country firms, legal centres, law reform agencies, academics and law students. Our oral evidence to this inquiry has two major underlying themes. The first is the need to address the diversity of the legal profession as illustrated by the diversity of the profession amongst solicitors. The second is the need for an immediate and extensive policy and legislative reform.

I begin with the financial, career and social disincentives to starting a family for lawyers in the government and community sectors. The legal profession is often painted as a profession in which financial and social disincentives are uniform, and for this reason disincentives peculiar to each sector within the legal profession are easily overlooked. A common misconception is that the community legal sector is part of the government sector. By the community legal sector I mean community legal centres and legal staff within non-legal community organisations.

On page 5 of our submission we address the issue of segregation by area of law and practice type. While the government sector is a sector in which women lawyers outnumber their male colleagues, the community sector is even more so. The community legal centre in which I currently work is a legal centre for disadvantaged women across New South Wales. This legal centre only employs women. The previous legal centre in which I was employed had three male members of staff, including one male solicitor, compared to 13 female members of staff.

The community legal sector is what could generally be said to be the lower status, lower paid sector. A community sector lawyer with two years experience earns an annual salary of \$50,000 to \$60,000 compared to an average of \$60,000 to \$70,000 for a lawyer with the same level of experience in the public sector generally. While both the government and community sectors are workplaces in which formal and informal flexible working arrangements are available to assist women lawyers to balance their work and family responsibilities, many of the pressures involved arise from the need to achieve this from within a work environment with limited resources and high-volume work. Community legal centres do not have the budget to provide facilities such as a paid internet connection at home for a woman lawyer to work from home, or an onsite child-care centre. Most women lawyers working in community and government organisations are fortunate to be working for people who understand family responsibilities, but more resources and government support devoted towards the specific needs of the government and community sector lawyers when it comes to work and family balance would certainly go a long way.

I will now address the second of the terms of reference: making it easier for parents who so wish to return to the paid workforce. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission stated in its discussion paper *Striking the balance: women, men, work and family* released last year that legal, workplace and social policy frameworks all significantly shape behaviour and attitudes towards men's and women's paid and unpaid work. To ensure that employers and organisations who are responsible for administering and implementing workplace and social policy frameworks are adequately resourced to shape behaviour and attitudes towards men's and women's unpaid work, Women Lawyers New South Wales recommends that government funding and subsidies for education and training programs be increased, as addressed on pages 7 to 9 of our written submission.

Adequate workplace and social policy frameworks require an adequate legal framework to support them. For this reason, Women Lawyers New South Wales advocates for legislative reform, particularly in the form of amendments to the Federal Sex Discrimination Act. We have put our case for reforming the Sex Discrimination Act to HREOC in the additional document that we have provided to the standing committee today. We are not the only lawyers who think that the Sex Discrimination Act is an out-of-date piece of legislation which does not adequately provide for family responsibilities in the modern context. To ensure that family responsibilities are not entrenched in legislation as only a women's issue, we have made several recommendations in our submission to HREOC to make the provisions of the Sex Discrimination Act more accessible to men.

One of the impacts of having a national fertility rate below replacement level and increasing numbers amongst the aged and disabled populations is that many parents returning to the paid workforce will have caring responsibilities that extend to caring for people other than their own children. To allow for the diversity of family compositions that are found in the community today and for the growing imposition of responsibilities involving elder and disabled care on both male and female employees, we recommend that the term 'family responsibilities' be replaced by the term 'responsibilities as a carer' and that consideration be given to expanding the definition of responsibilities of a carer, as addressed at pages 9 to 10 of our submission to HREOC.

Currently under the Sex Discrimination Act employees are only protected against discrimination on the ground of family responsibilities where they are dismissed from their job. It will certainly make things easier for parents to return to the paid workforce if, in addition to protection from being dismissed, they were provided with protection from being discriminated against on the grounds of their family responsibilities in other situations. Our final recommendation is that the objects of the act and sections 14, 15, 16 and other relevant sections of the act be amended so that parents with family and other caring responsibilities are protected from being discriminated against in situations apart from dismissal. My colleague Mrs Carr would like to say a few words as well.

Mrs Carr—In my opening statement I will summarise just a few of the key points raised in the Women Lawyers' submission to the committee but I will be supporting them by real life examples and feedback I have obtained from 14 female colleagues, all working mothers, employed at a range of levels across the legal industry—within corporate and private firms, and at the bar.

The first financial disincentive to starting a family is the lack of paid maternity leave. Most private law firms do not provide any paid maternity or paternity leave, hence a lawyer looking to leave private practice for children must be financially able to cope with a significant period with no income or alternatively to place a very young child into child care. Obviously the same limitations apply to all self-employed lawyers. Only 28 per cent of respondents to a Law Society survey reported that paid maternity leave was available to them, and of that only nine per cent had accessed it. That is referred to on page 3 of our submission.

My research suggests that there is a very, very slowly increasing trend among larger and some mid-tier firms to introduce maternity leave for around eight to 12 weeks only for employees who have served for at least four years with the firm, and that is tiered down to approximately two to four weeks paid leave for employees of one to two years previous employment with the firm. Having said that, to date I have been able to personally identify only six mid-tier firms in Sydney who have that policy, with another providing paid maternity leave to female partners only. Paid maternity leave is much more common within the corporate culture. Every corporate lawyer I surveyed was given or was able to access paid maternity leave ranging from three to six months.

The second financial disincentive is the very limited prospects of increased future earnings—this is dealing with private practice. It is usual for a female employee in private practice to have her career prospects and her income plateau from the date upon which she announces her pregnancy until she returns to full-time employment. This is compounded by the fact that there is already a significant gender gap in pay between men and women in private practice—again, that is referred to on page 4 of our submission.

Furthermore, my survey found that any hopes of future partnership or promotion were, without exception, perceived to be non-existent from the date of announcing the pregnancy or at least on hold until the woman could return to work full time, which in the case of private practice will mean working 10 to 12 hours per day minimum, exceeding the budget and networking with clients outside of work hours. These are the usual prerequisites for partnership. As I think you could probably appreciate, for most women who have had a child it may be some years before they are prepared to put that sort of commitment into their careers again.

Every colleague I surveyed who was employed in private practice had that experience. Not one of them received a pay increase for the entire period during which they were employed part time, except for CPI increases in two instances. Most women in the private industry were so grateful that there was any part-time work available to them that they simply did not consider themselves to be in a position to negotiate any kind of pay increase. Unfortunately, two of the respondents I spoke to personally experienced being retrenched while they were on maternity leave or being given the opportunity only to return to work full time, failing which there was no position available for them. It is notoriously difficult for women in the private legal profession to then locate part-time employment or flexible work arrangements with another firm unless the firm has already had the opportunity to test them full time.

In the corporate sector, again this appears to be less of a problem. My colleagues generally considered their income in the corporate sector likely to plateau for a short period after returning to work but otherwise expected their income and career progression to continue in an upwards trajectory—by reason of their years of experience, primarily. In the corporate sector quality part-time work and flexible work arrangements also appear to be more readily available.

The third disincentive is the cost and unavailability of child care. Every colleague I surveyed reported a 13-month to two-year wait for child-care placement. The cost of day care was reported to be between \$65 and \$120 per day per child. Most lawyers are expected to work at least 10-hour days—in the best-case scenario, that would include travel time—which means they usually incur very significantly late fees, often charged by the minute after five o'clock or 5.30. That significantly raises the cost of child care to the point where only three respondents I spoke to used it as their primary source of child care.

For women who could not remain at home for two years waiting for placement, or for those who found day care prohibitively expensive or inadequate in caring for a very young child, the only option was a private nanny, generally costing \$17 to \$22 per hour, or \$220 on the average working day. Alternatively, they could use combinations of part-time work for both parents, day care, shared nannies or au pairs. Many colleagues have found the cost of full-time nannies prohibitive and have been forced to make arrangements to employ friends or family members on a cash basis as an alternative. In my observation, the prohibitive cost and unavailability of child care appears to be sparking a flourishing tax-free industry, which is news I am sure the federal government is really pleased to hear!

On career and social disincentives to starting a new family: from the point of view of a private firm, the point has already been discussed that one can expect their career to plateau. Future career prospects are generally perceived by female lawyers to be severely curtailed or non-existent unless they are self-employed, as in the case of barristers or sole practitioners, or unless they are employed as a corporate lawyer within a corporate organisation. Many women who have invested 10 or more years in establishing their career in a private firm will understandably consider forgoing or delaying having children rather than risking losing or hampering the career they have worked so hard for.

Another disincentive is workplace and managerial culture. The greatest problem voiced by lawyers in private practice was a lack of flexibility upon their return to work, whether it be full time or part time. I will quote from our submission:

- Within the culture of the legal workplace, as with other workplaces, attitudes that flexible work options belong on the “mummy track”¹⁹ or “never-to-be-promoted daddy track”²⁰ persist, as do the attitudes that balancing work and family is a woman’s concern,²¹ the field of the less ambitious, slack or soft.

That is from page 6 of our submission. All of my colleagues experience this and resent being perceived by their employers as been less ambitious or less committed simply because they now have family priorities to contend with. The problem, in my personal view, is that this cannot be legislated against. There is probably very little that can be done whilst ever the vast majority of partners in private firms continue to be drawn from the ranks of Anglo-Celtic middle-aged males.

Finally, there is a social disincentive—a very significant one, it would seem. Every female lawyer I surveyed lamented the fact that they experienced constant guilt. They are unable to care for their young children sufficiently. They are unable to be as committed to their career as just about every one of their colleagues expects them to be. This alone may be a fairly significant disincentive to many lawyers, who often have the tendency to be perfectionists and sensitive to criticism about their career commitment.

I am going to speak briefly now on the impact of taxation on family care choices—firstly, the family tax benefit. Unfortunately, all of my colleagues, without fail, commented that they considered the family tax benefit to be laughable. It was hardly worth their time completing the 23-page form and providing complex amounts of supporting documentation in order to receive what they understood to be a \$3 to \$5 per day reduction in child-care costs, which as I think you will have seen from my earlier submission are quite significant.

Secondly, there is the issue of government funded paid maternity leave. All OECD countries other than Australia and the US, as far as I understand it, have generous paid maternity leave packages, including the UK and most European countries. In the words of one colleague: ‘The federal government has to consider at the very least paid maternity leave in order to bring Australia up to the standard of every European country. It shocked me, coming from the UK, that there is no statutory maternity pay in Australia.’ Both I and the committee strongly advocate—and we do so in the strongest possible terms—that the 14-week ILO standard should be set as the universal minimum standard for paid maternity leave across Australia for all primary care givers.

Next I will turn to tax deductions for child-care costs. Both I and the committee endorse the finding of the task force on care costs, which supports the introduction of a scheme for tax deductibility of care costs. From a personal perspective, if something as obscure as a handbag or a briefcase is deemed to be a necessary tax-deductible cost of employment, I struggle to see how child-care costs for a working parent could sensibly be interpreted otherwise.

CHAIR—That is what the High Court did.

Mrs Carr—My personal view is that an even better alternative than tax deductibility may be to make child care a cost that is able to be salary sacrificed, hence payable from the worker’s gross rather than net salary, resulting in a more instantaneous up-front benefit for workers rather than a need to wait for a reimbursement at the end of the financial year. Again, why should the cost of a vehicle or a computer be salary sacrificeable, yet child care cannot be? I understand there may be some difficulties in applying that across an industry as broad as the legal industry but, nonetheless, it may be a good suggestion.

CHAIR—They can if they comply with the tax office ruling.

Mrs Carr—Across the industry?

CHAIR—Anyone can.

Mrs Carr—The steps that we suggest could be taken and should be taken immediately would be, firstly, to draft legislation to be released for consultation to implement the promised 30 per cent rebate for care costs; secondly, to extend the child-care rebate to cover elder and disability care costs; thirdly, to extend the 30 per cent rebate to a more meaningful level and remove the proposed \$4,000 cap; to introduce reforms to assist in the cost, accessibility and quality of care; and, by June 2006, to release a public report identifying the steps taken to implement tax deductibility or other taxation concessions for child care. Finally, a couple of my colleagues indicated support for the immediate implementation of a proposal that I understand was yours, Mrs Bishop, for a one-year or perhaps even two-year working visa to be put in place for au pairs,

thereby reducing the disruption caused to families and children by the current three-month visa limit.

CHAIR—From looking at your submission and listening to your opening remarks, it still seems that despite the fact that we graduate so many women in law these days they are not really up there in the partnerships, are they?

Mrs Carr—No, not in my experience. In private practice I think I have only known about eight female partners.

CHAIR—Why is it so?

Mrs Carr—The industry has changed a lot over the last decade. It is very hard for anyone, including men, to fight their way into the ranks of partnership. Partners are seemingly less willing to share the pie than they were previously. That generally means that for women, unless you can reach partnership by 35, you are unlikely to get there at all if you choose to have a family. Even for men in most cases they would be struggling to make it by 35 unless they have some family connection or access to a large client. So I think for women it is primarily a timing issue. If women had time to wait until perhaps 40, we might have a chance of making partnership. But in most cases that leaves it too late.

CHAIR—Do you think that the legislative changes that have taken so much legal work away from law firms have made it more difficult for new partners to get admission?

Mrs Carr—It has in private practice in the insurance sector, definitely. Insurance was historically a sector where more females made it to top tiers. Unfortunately I have not known a partner of either sex to be appointed in the insurance sector.

CHAIR—Since we passed the legislation that put them all back in the black in one year.

Mr CADMAN—Exactly right.

CHAIR—It is remarkable. With regard to tax deductibility and salary sacrifice, one of the things we come across in policy discussions is that women who have professional skills and are therefore earning more money than the mean are not considered worthy of having any consideration for taxation relief. They are sort of put over there with the class that should not be considered. I personally think that is wrong. There has been a ruling by the tax office for salary sacrifice which sets out a whole lot of conditions as to when and how it can be done. Basically it relates to either owning or leasing the property. That is the first requirement. They often bring in someone like ABC Learning to then manage it. It is only really being done by big organisations like banks at the moment. But I do not see why it could not be done if it became government policy, as distinct from the whim of the commissioner. A child-care rebate was going to give you a toe in the door in terms of tax deductibility because that was not to be means tested. But we got a recommendation from one of my colleagues today—he wants to get rid of that too.

Mr CADMAN—No, I want to pay it up front instead of waiting for it.

CHAIR—That is only for nought to fives.

Mr CADMAN—Yes.

CHAIR—Kids actually go on a lot longer than five. Do you have a preferred position as to tax deductibility? Do you think that that should be a basic right? As you say, it can be for a car, computer, whatever, but not for child-care expenses. Is that a priority?

Mrs Carr—Absolutely I think it is a priority. If you are asking me whether I believe that salary sacrificing, as opposed to tax deductibility, is a better choice, from a personal perspective, if it could be made across the board I think it would be more equitable than any tax deduction, because of having to wait the 12 months and so forth to claim the costs back. But I think it has to be a priority. We are realistic. We know that we are in a profession that probably earns a lot more money than the rest of the general community, for which we are eternally grateful. We have also worked very hard to get to that point and have given away a lot in our lives to get there and will continue to do so if we want that career to continue. I appreciate that there may be other sectors of the community suffering to a greater degree. Personally, I am shocked as to how mothers in a lower socioeconomic position can even afford to return to work—I find it mind-boggling, when people of our stature in society and of our income potential are still struggling to this degree to afford the child care.

Ms GEORGE—Doesn't the proposal about tax deductibility heighten the inequity? If your child is in a child-care centre and a worker on a minimum wage uses the same centre, you are going to get a substantially bigger benefit out of your tax deduction than she is. I worry about the inequity that is contained in it.

Mrs Carr—You mean that the person who is earning less will thereby receive a lesser tax deduction because they earn less to begin with?

Ms GEORGE—Yes, even though they might be paying the same as higher paid professional women for the place at the centre.

CHAIR—But they are not because they are getting child-care benefit whereas higher paid professional women are not getting any as it is means tested and they are above the payment level.

Ms GEORGE—So you are saying tax deductibility for out-of-pocket expenses?

CHAIR—Yes.

Ms Saw—From discussions between me and Mrs Carr today, I think one of the problems, demonstrated by the legal profession, is that salary sacrificing does not apply across the board. Speaking for myself, in the community sector and the government sector we are able to salary sacrifice. Larger corporate organisations are also able to salary sacrifice. Where the gap is really found in the legal profession is in the private sector, in private firms.

CHAIR—But it is the individual choice of employers as to whether they want to do it or not. They then rely on the ruling of the tax commissioner. In other words, the government has not come down with a policy and said, 'Salary sacrificing will be available in the following away.' The commissioner has interpreted the existing law as saying, 'If you do the following, then we

will allow that to occur.' But, as with all public rulings from the tax office, he could change his mind tomorrow. That is why many of the firms have gone to the trouble of getting a private ruling—so that he is bound it. It would be more likely to happen in private practice if the government actually made it policy and enacted law to do it rather than rely on the whim of the commissioner.

Mrs Carr—To address your point on inequity, Ms George, I cannot sit here and suggest that there would be no inequity. I think that you are right, that a tax deduction across the board may result in inequity. But I think there are also issues in that lawyers in particular, as I pointed out in my opening statement, work very, very long hours. Often they cannot use a child-care centre anyway because they simply cannot be there in the hours that are necessary to collect their children, so then they are paying a nanny, which of course is going to cost quite a lot more.

Ms GEORGE—But airline attendants are in exactly the same position.

Mrs Carr—This is true.

CHAIR—So is the lady who is packing shelves in Woolies.

Ms GEORGE—Yes, people doing night stacks.

Mrs Carr—If they are working unusual hours.

Mrs MARKUS—It is a challenge for shift workers as well.

Mr CADMAN—So you would rather make the salary sacrifice than get a rebate if you had a choice.

Mrs Carr—If it could be implemented across the board. That means that there would need to be some legislation requiring companies to allow it.

Mr CADMAN—My approach is more that a payment up front would allow you then to choose the child-care access that you want. When the child reaches school age there are other alternatives, but we are talking about the child-care area of the nought to fives probably being the most difficult one. Is that right?

Mrs Carr—In my experience, yes, it is the most difficult, because you need to have care all day as opposed to school being able to care for the child between nine and three. But the difficulty does go on—

Mr CADMAN—Of course.

Mrs Carr—because you still need to get au pairs, nannies or someone to handle the before and after school.

Mr CADMAN—Before and after school care still remains a problem.

Mrs Carr—Yes.

CHAIR—The point that Louise makes again and again which I agree with, and David makes it also, is that children who are in their first and second year at high school particularly are very vulnerable.

Mrs Carr—Absolutely.

CHAIR—They are just as vulnerable as someone who is five, in my view, because they are going through all sorts of other changes happening to them. There are all sorts of other temptations. That is a time that is quite crucial.

Mrs Carr—To answer your point, I think an up-front payment would have to be preferred to relying on it being reimbursed in due course, provided that it does not mean that in order to get that up-front payment it is going to be so severely means tested or something that you are not going to really get any benefit.

Mr CADMAN—My view is that the child should be valued and it does not matter what family they happen to live in.

CHAIR—Yes, but that is only until five.

Mr QUICK—But wouldn't that drive up the price of child care?

CHAIR—You betcha.

Mrs Carr—That would be a concern.

Mr QUICK—Every witness today has said it is like trying to get a gold bike—you cannot get into child care. We can make all these legislative changes but if you still cannot get into child care what are we going to do about that?

Mrs Carr—Accessibility is a massive problem.

Mr QUICK—How do we sort that out?

Mr FAWCETT—It is only in some areas, though. We were talking about this with previous witnesses. There are many places in Australia—

Mrs Carr—Geographically.

Mr FAWCETT—geographically, where there are child-care places going begging and centres complaining about new centres opening up and diminishing markets. So there is also an equity issue, in terms of whether we subsidise families in inner Sydney more than we do in Western Sydney, Tasmania or South Australia.

CHAIR—But you get it when you come back to the question of being able to have in-home care when you are not investing in bricks and mortar, because they already exist.

Mrs Carr—True. I know that a lot of the respondents that I spoke to were very supportive of in-home care, be it via a nanny, an au pair or even—I do not know the formal term for it—the assistance that is available at the moment whereby a parent can mind up to five children.

CHAIR—That is right—family day care.

Mrs Carr—That sort of thing was a popular alternative. A number of my colleagues, most of whom returned to work within four to 12 months after giving birth, also stated that they felt very uncomfortable with putting a child that young into day care all day when there are—in my experience—at least five other babies being looked after by that particular child carer.

CHAIR—To me it seems silly that we try to find one solution to fit all.

Mr CADMAN—That is insurance.

CHAIR—The government says, ‘Here is the institution; that’s all we’re going to provide.’ What is the matter with having all sorts of choices?

Mrs Carr—I agree entirely.

CHAIR—Like with superannuation where you can salary sacrifice, we could do it another way and have tax deductibility. You can have choice.

Mr QUICK—There needs to be some sort of safety net—

Mr CADMAN—You have to have regulations.

Mr QUICK—and regulation. We can see in today’s *Sydney Morning Herald* examples of buildings that are substandard. There is no state supervision of the industry.

CHAIR—It is that sort of regulation that drives the costs way up.

Mr QUICK—Yes. We did it with aged care centres when you were the Minister for Aged Care.

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr QUICK—We have weeded out the nasties and, in most cases, when you put your aged parents into centres you can be guaranteed that there is quality of service. I think that at the moment lots of parents, out of dire need and necessity, are putting their children into some substandard child-care centres. The guilt that they suffer anyway is compounded by the fact that they know they are not getting the best value for money.

CHAIR—Which is why you can go back to the solution that came out in this very room on nannies day when we said, ‘If nannies could get registered and have, say, a certificate II, when you used them that would attract both the child-care benefit and the rebate.’ The rebate is going to still be with us. Maybe you could simply have a tax deduction.

Mrs Carr—But isn't it going to be absolutely necessary to have flexibility of that type—

CHAIR—Absolutely.

Mrs Carr—until we can be certain that there is going to be accessibility, good quality accessibility, amongst child-care centres?

CHAIR—We had a sole parent here this morning who is really struggling. Full marks for her courage: she was trying to retrain to get her skills up. The courses are six till nine at night. She cannot get child care, so she cannot do the course. Where is the equity in that? There is no child-care centre that will be open for her to put her children into care at that time.

Mrs Carr—So in-home caring is just necessary.

CHAIR—Yes. As I said, it is not about the top end of town all the time; it is about people who are really struggling in very difficult circumstances.

Mrs Carr—I was amazed to see that two of my colleagues had actually raised that it may be better for them to have two parents working part time rather than even trying to make all of these child-care arrangements work. We are talking about a lawyer and a tradesman with a private business. They would be towards the upper end of the socioeconomic scale, I would think, and if these two people are talking about looking at part-time work—

Mr CADMAN—They ought to get together and establish child-care centre just to suit their own kids.

CHAIR—Family day care still does not cover the hours.

Mr CADMAN—I know a child-care centre where you can log in on the web and watch your kids in the child-care centre during the day. There are all sorts of processes that use modern technology and accessibility. Surely it is not beyond our wit to provide services that meet the needs of specialist professional groups.

CHAIR—Surely it is not beyond our wit, in a government that talks all the time about choice and work choices, to be able to have child-care choices.

Mr CADMAN—Absolutely.

Mrs Carr—I believe flexibility is key, particularly in an industry like ours. Between us, we have shown just how very different lawyers are in the industry.

Mr CADMAN—Do you both have children?

Mrs Carr—No.

Ms Saw—Neither of us.

Mrs Carr—I am expecting, but I do not have any at this point.

Mr QUICK—You are articulate university graduates and you are finding enormous difficulty. As the chair said, we had evidence today from sole parents who are struggling to re-enter the workforce and retrain. Both of them had worked for Commonwealth government departments and were forced out of the workforce.

CHAIR—One worked for Centrelink; I found that a bit—

Mr QUICK—Both previously worked for Centrelink.

CHAIR—She took a week off to look after her child and they told her that she really could not measure up to being a full-time worker. I found that unbelievable.

Mr QUICK—So you can imagine what it is like for the dispossessed of the world.

Mrs Carr—I can. I can only sympathise with them.

Mr CADMAN—I do not understand, if I may say so, you putting your careers on hold. If a surgeon or anybody else, such as a professional teacher, drops out of the system, they all expect that there is a catch-up process when they come back.

CHAIR—You never catch up.

Ms Saw—Often laws change. Work Choices just changed this year. I work in a legal centre where we do a lot of family law work. I recently graduated from university, only to find that new changes to family law are about to come through.

Mr CADMAN—There would be a lot of changes.

CHAIR—You can thank us!

Ms Saw—Working with the pressures that we have, trying to constantly retrain yourself so you are on top of an area of law or, heaven forbid, finding that you are in a workplace where you are unhappy and you want to move to a new area of law—to do that after you have graduated from university and have a family at the same time is a challenge. You will really struggle, particularly if you want to take night classes and things to fit things around your work hours.

CHAIR—And just to do your compulsory points to keep your practising certificate.

Mrs Carr—In the private sector I would not complain—and I do not believe any colleague I know would complain—about our career being on hold for a period of years, even the period during which we had to work part time. I do not think anyone would complain about that. But it means that I have no prospects of becoming a partner—none. If I had been able to hang on for perhaps another few years and made that partnership, then I would have had a career. There is certainly a ceiling.

Mr CADMAN—It is a hard choice, isn't it?

Mrs Carr—It is a hard choice.

CHAIR—Bronwyn, what about the bar?

Mrs Carr—I think that that is a much more flexible option—

CHAIR—You are your own employer.

Mrs Carr—and many women are taking that option for that reason, because they do have some future in the career that they have put so much into up until that point. Also, again, they are able to have a lot more flexibility with child care in terms of working part time.

CHAIR—How many women have we got at the bar now?

Mrs Carr—I do not know offhand.

Ms Saw—It is an interesting comparison, because there are more women going to the bar but if you look at the bench the calculation is not happening. Having more women at the bar does not necessarily mean more women judges or magistrates coming through.

CHAIR—There is the intermediate step: how many are taking silk? That is the real test.

Mrs Carr—Again, the numbers are incredibly low. I do not have the statistics in front of me but I know that every year, every time we see the appointments that come through, there would never be any more than a one to 10 ratio.

CHAIR—Do you think that would change a bit if it were not the Attorney-General doing the final pick?

Mrs Carr—I have no idea. There are many quality women at the bar to choose from, I am sure of that.

CHAIR—Going back to the way we might look at the ultimate recommendations, from the survey that you did of your members did you find that different people want different solutions?

Mrs Carr—Actually, no. I would say that the solutions they were looking for were remarkably consistent. Paid maternity leave—statutory paid maternity leave—was consistent.

CHAIR—For how long? Let us look at 14 weeks. It is a lot of money for 14 weeks for what is a 14-year problem. Does it really help or would it be better to use that money in a different way that would give you longer relief for a longer period of time?

Mrs Carr—Certainly the people that I spoke to thought that it would help them because of the difficulty they face at the moment of having no paid maternity leave and therefore being in a situation like I will be in of returning to work when my child is four months old.

CHAIR—Yes, but it is only 14 weeks.

Mrs Carr—I appreciate that, but still—

CHAIR—It is not even four months.

Mrs Carr—Still, having four months with no income: anything that can be done to offset or reduce that pain—even if I had to make myself live on that 14 weeks pay for as long as I could manage—would still make that initial period, that initial 12 months, somewhat easier.

Mrs MARKUS—Would that change how soon you had a child? If you knew that that was available to you, would you or any of your colleagues have chosen to have had a child sooner or to have more children?

Mrs Carr—I have not asked my colleagues that, so I can only speak from my personal perspective. To be perfectly honest, no. It has been a case of trying to get my career as advanced as I could while playing against the clock in terms of how long you can afford to leave it before choosing to start a family. I cannot honestly say that knowing that that was there would have changed my timing.

CHAIR—What mattered to you was establishing yourself first.

Mrs Carr—Doing what I could to continue my career as far as it could go in the period that I had.

CHAIR—Going back to the option in the law of going to the bar and literally being in charge of your own life, a lot of that always depends on how good you are at networking and how many people are going to send you briefs, how many firms are going to think you are any good. How are women currently able to do that networking task to then go to the bar, because that takes up a lot of nights and other times too, doesn't it?

Mrs Carr—I personally think that greater networking skill is necessary to become a partner in a private firm than to go to the bar.

CHAIR—I think that is right.

Mrs Carr—I know many women at the bar who do not have excellent networking skills but who are very bright and very hardworking and, as a consequence, make a good living at the bar. I think the danger and the difficulty with going to the bar—the disincentive—is that you need to have sufficient capital to fund yourself for a period of years. In my experience that is what stops most women from giving it a go. It is like anyone going into their own company, running their own business; I am sure it is the same.

CHAIR—It is more particularly at the bar because it does depend on networking to firms who are going to send you work.

Mrs Carr—Absolutely. And also you need to accept that, as a woman going to the bar, quality briefs are going to be much less available to you than they will be to a male counterpart, even a male counterpart that may be less experienced. That is a fact.

CHAIR—What percentage of women at the bar are doing family law?

Ms Saw—I do not think we have any statistics on that.

Ms GEORGE—Not many are doing industrial law—I can vouch for that.

Mrs Carr—I do not have many statistics on that; I personally do not know of many. I think there are more women doing family law, if you were to break down the various categories. I have been an insolvency litigation lawyer for 10 years.

CHAIR—We just changed the law on that too!

Mrs Carr—I act for a major bank that now has a policy of equally briefing men and women at the bar, which is a wonderful step forward. A problem is that in 10 years I have never briefed one woman in one commercial litigation file. They are there—they do exist and they are talented.

CHAIR—Why aren't you briefing them?

Mrs Carr—Male partners in law firms make decisions on who gets briefed. In firms that have female partners you often find that you get a good stable of female barristers to work with. It is very difficult to make that transition until that time, but I am hoping that, as a very prominent bank has established this type of policy, it will eventually flow down.

CHAIR—As there are no further questions I ask that somebody move that the submission to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission be received as an exhibit.

Mr QUICK—I so move.

CHAIR—I thank you for your evidence and for a very good discussion. Mrs Carr, I understand you are expecting this year.

Mrs Carr—In October, yes.

CHAIR—We wish you every success.

Mr CADMAN—Both in your career and with the birth.

CHAIR—I hope you realise that we are not discriminating against woman who are skilled; we are concerned about all women and their attitude to the work-family balance.

Mrs Carr—That is encouraging to hear. We thank you for the opportunity.

[2.24 pm]

CONWAY, Ms Angela, Research Officer, Australian Family Association

FOWLER, Mrs Mary-Louise, New South Wales State President and National Vice-President, Australian Family Association

Witnesses were then sworn or affirmed—

CHAIR—We have your submission. Thank you very much. I wonder if you would like to make an opening statement.

Mrs Fowler—I would like to first ask if you have actually read the submission. I understand you have probably had many.

Mr QUICK—Yes.

Mrs Fowler—You have read the original submission. I have handed around some additional information. The original submission is something styled like this. I have added some extra notes interleaved at various paragraphs—some additional information.

CHAIR—I think the easiest way to do it is for you to just speak to the work you have got here.

Mrs Fowler—I will just explain the notes. There are two case studies. The Birrell report, which is referred to, is this document I am holding up.

CHAIR—How come Bob Birrell gets all the accolades when the other two members of it are women and get none?

Mrs Fowler—I think he did the statistics. I do not really know. I was not involved in it, to be honest.

CHAIR—There seems to be a pattern here.

Ms Conway—They might be research assistants to him or something like that.

Mrs Fowler—That is probably what it is; he is the boss. In considering our overall submission, one of the main points we want to stress is that to raise families and to have a good home environment requires a great investment of time and energy. It is not something that can be squeezed into the end of a day in a few short minutes. We believe that investment of time is critical to the stability and the happiness of families, and not just considering the parent-child relationship, either. We think that we should be considering the spousal relationship. That is a very important element for social stability. We can see by the divorce rate and so forth that marriages and relationships are under a lot of stress. In balancing work and family sometimes those things fall apart because sometimes it is impossible to do it well. We want to stress that

from the outset. We want to look at a model or some way of viewing the family and viewing work that assists the family to stay united.

Flicking through this, some of the points made were in relation to debt. People have a view that they like the stability of a family home. By the way, just to put this together, I did in fact survey our membership for ideas for this submission; it was not just my own handiwork. HECS debts were considered a big factor—that young people these days start out in life with a big debt. Sometimes that, coupled with entering a marriage or wanting to buy a home, is all compounding—it is all coming in together. So they have got a lot of debt to confront, and sometimes that seems impossible to overcome, especially for low-income people.

We also mention things like the instant gratification mentality and the lack of savings because advertising targets people to think they need things that perhaps they do not. We fall for that a bit. Children are particularly being targeted. This is not good for their patterning in life. It is carried through to their adult life, and they do not seem to be able to say no—while others struggle to get the basics; we recognise both ends of the spectrum.

One of the big issues we want to raise in our submission is related to this document, *Men and women apart: partnering in Australia*. Single low-income males—we call them SLIMs—are a rising proportion of our population. The Birrell report shows quite clearly that men who do not have a great education and who are on low incomes have poor prospects for partnering and marriage. If they do marry or partner, they are the most likely to be divorced. So, in terms of society and social stability, we do think their plight needs to be rigorously looked at.

CHAIR—We did hear from the Institute of Family Studies that the people who are most likely to be divorced are from lower socioeconomic groupings and that the women in those partnerships are the least likely to repartner.

Ms Conway—I can talk about that in a bit more detail. Bob Birrell addresses that issue a little more with some of the research.

Mrs Fowler—Andrea is much more au fait with the Bob Birrell report than I am. I come from Young. I met a chappie a couple of weeks ago who was put off work at the Harden abattoir. The Harden abattoir employs about 120 or 140 people. In the little town of Harden, it is a big employer. Those people lost their jobs with five hours notice. They were on 24-hour contracts. I maintain, as part of our submission, that this style of contracting of people is not conducive to family formation or building a home and creating the sense of stability that we really need in order to want to have children. These are issues the Australian Family Association finds of concern.

CHAIR—Evidence shows that, if people have alleged stability by being on welfare payments, that is also not conducive.

Mrs Fowler—No. This gentleman rented a house he normally would not have been able to afford, but he had to shift to get closer to the work because they were told it was going to be a sure thing. The abattoir was opening again and everything was fine. It closed down after six months and they all lost their work. He now has a very poorly paid job. But his case study is there—actually, his separated wife wrote the case study. She raises a lot of issues and she has

expressed herself very well. In terms of industrial relations and industry policy, these SLIMS would probably be best employed. They do not have a great education. We need to have a sound industry in order to be able to give work to those low-skilled workers. They need to be able to participate in the community. Work is how we contribute. It is a great esteem builder to be able to work. I am sure we all realise that. The lack of that impacts very badly on family formation.

I am not a specialist in labour market trends, but a member of ours works on the railway and he told me there seems to be a trend towards 14- to 28-day rosters for shift work. He said that, under this system, there is no guarantee you will get one day off in seven and no particular day off will be guaranteed. I maintain that that is very bad for families because they cannot commit to be at home for their wife or children on any particular day of the week and they cannot commit to things that contribute towards the local community. These things, I think, will have a bad impact on happiness at home. Happiness and the time you have to invest with your spouse and children have to be factored in when we are considering balancing work and family. Social engagement—being able to commit to football training on Tuesday night or whatever—needs to be considered.

CHAIR—Considered by whom?

Ms Conway—By policy makers.

CHAIR—You are not really suggesting that governments would legislate that everybody must be able to commit to football training on Tuesday?

Ms Conway—It is not just legislation. I think a whole range of policy settings can provide incentives and disincentives.

CHAIR—‘Policy settings’ is jargon. What are we really talking about? Are you really going to script people’s lives to that degree? You cannot do that.

Ms Conway—I do not think we are suggesting that. We are raising concerns.

CHAIR—That is what you are saying when you say ‘should be considered’, and that is why I ask, ‘By whom?’ We make a lot of statements that do not really have an endpoint, and that is what we have to get to.

Mrs Fowler—I am not an expert in this legislative side of things; I suppose it is an attitude thing. Who legislates that we are allowed to have 14- to 28-day rosters? Is that something that is legislated?

CHAIR—We do not legislate it.

Mrs Fowler—So it is allowed to just happen. I am saying that that sort of thing should be—

CHAIR—But there are lots of people who are away for chunks of time doing different things.

Mrs Fowler—I know there are.

CHAIR—That is the flexibility of the market.

Mrs Fowler—But it is not good, and we need to say that that style of employment is not good for families. That is not a family-friendly style.

CHAIR—No, but it may be a way of somebody getting a job who otherwise would not have one and who would be on welfare, and that is not good for families.

Mrs Fowler—No, it is not.

Ms Conway—That is true. When people are talking about the formulation of public policy, we need to acknowledge that there are outcomes that are more helpful or less helpful to families.

CHAIR—We have to consider what makes it more likely that people can be gainfully employed—what will make the economy prosper so that more people can have jobs.

Ms Conway—Jobs are very important, but the way the jobs are structured can also have a big impact on the quality of communities—

CHAIR—When government starts to try and regulate the way that happens there are fewer jobs, so there are more people on welfare. That has been shown up in the last 10 years through our policy shifts.

Ms Conway—That may be the case. There may be issues with the policy settings in freeing up and creating greater flexibility in the labour market. There is probably some controversy on that point as to whether that is delivering outcomes that people would value. Today, we just want to raise some of the issues. In relation to long shifts and so on, there was some comment in the media—I think it was last year—about some of the mining towns that are basically running down because people are flying in and out—

CHAIR—That is a different question.

Ms Conway—Again, it is about the structuring of work—how it is being structured and arranged in accommodating families. Some of the people involved in the mining towns were saying that they felt it was better for families to be living in the mining towns but that, for various reasons, families and workers were electing to fly in and out. There was also comment about that being the case even despite the fact that, in many instances, people were putting extra strain on their families and marriages when they were doing this flying in and flying out for extensive periods of several weeks running and things like that. That was discussed. It is hard to know how you would solve that problem, but I think we need to all be aware that certain ways of structuring work are more conducive to balancing family needs than others. We need to be aware of those things so that when we—

CHAIR—That is always going to be true. People who work in the armed forces have different lifestyles. We are not all the same. We do not have one model that fits all. We are all different.

Mr FAWCETT—Another thing I would mention is overtime rates on weekends. I have heard the argument many times that we should retain overtime rates for the weekend because there is a

disincentive for people to work on the weekend. I was speaking to an employer just last week who said that, in fact, his employees were basically fighting each other to be able to work on the weekend because they earn more per hour. In the end, he sat down with them and they agreed to shift to an AWA situation where they all earned a higher hourly rate of pay. The pressure to work on the weekend to help meet budgets and things in the family went away. They earned the same rate of pay whenever they worked. They have found that they are working more during the week and not as much on the weekend and that they have the flexibility to fill in for each other without concerns like, 'Am I getting paid double time if I take your job on the weekend?' So what was seen as a disincentive to giving people more family time was encouraging them to look for those jobs on the weekend because they were paid a higher rate per hour. The workers and the boss got together to discuss this and now the boss is viable on the weekend and the workers are all happy because they are getting a higher rate of pay throughout the week.

Ms Conway—Obviously, there are variations across industries, and within industries different businesses have different needs. We did not want to get into a detailed analysis of every industry and every business within each industry and their particular needs for flexibility; we just wanted to raise some of the issues in balancing work and family that we think should be part of the consideration when people are engaging in policy decision making about how much flexibility to allow industries, what the taxation incentives and the rebates are, how the welfare is delivered and all of that. These are all policy decisions that provide a framework of incentives and disincentives for people to make good decisions that assist the flourishing of their family lives.

Mrs Fowler—I think, too, we need to consider that strong families are better for the economy. Fewer social services are needed and so forth. We all look at the money that we have to expend on broken families and families that are not coping, so we seriously need to knuckle down and look at employment and whether this style of employment is going to take into consideration the family needs. If we do not, we do it at our peril.

Mrs MARKUS—The stronger the economy, the more beneficial it is for families. I have seen what 10 or 15 per cent unemployment in an area can do to families, so I think, conversely, we need a strong economy and opportunities for business to create flexibility for families.

Ms GEORGE—Flexibility is usually on the employer's terms. More often than not it is flexibility that suits the employer.

Mrs Fowler—There are a lot of people here who I would have thought would consider a 24-hour contract very flexible. The people employed at the Harden abattoir, had it not closed down, would have been too scared, they told me, to take a holiday with their families, because when they came back there would have been no job. Somebody else would have stepped into their boots. That is not conducive to family life.

CHAIR—What are the options? You do not open the abattoir; you do not give them a job in the first place?

Mrs Fowler—I do not think any business should have opened and employed people on 24-hour contracts. Those men are low skilled and could not fight for what they really wanted. I think that was terribly unfair. You have someone who has the power—I cannot believe I am saying this; I come from a rural background—

Mr CADMAN—You cannot close an abattoir down on a weekend if you are in an export market. Everybody would lose their jobs, including the farmers.

Mrs Fowler—They contracted everybody on individual 24-hour contracts. They arrived at work one day and the place had shut down.

CHAIR—Do you mean they were on 24-hour notice?

Mrs Fowler—They were employed from day to day.

CHAIR—Daily hire.

Mrs Fowler—They were all individually contracted, so there were no holiday entitlements, no insurance—nothing.

CHAIR—And it did not work, so it closed down.

Mrs Fowler—They decided to shut the doors because sheep got too expensive, and so those men are left without jobs in a little town.

Mr QUICK—I will go to your second case study, because it highlights a lot of concerns for me representing a rural area in Tasmania. The vast majority of our population is in five big cities, and people in cities are arguing the toss about not having access to this and not having access to that, but they seem to have services in abundance. Or they happen to be in the wrong suburb or do not want to drive across town because it is terribly inconvenient as they have to go through the tunnel and pay a toll. But people in rural and regional areas of Australia do not have the services, and I think that is highlighted in this case study by Rebecca Scott. The family is split, and the kids—

Mrs Fowler—It is a fairly complex case study—

Mr QUICK—Yes, I know, but there are issues with the Child Support Agency and people's ability to access university courses and get child care. There are a whole lot of issues if you represent an area like I do and Mr Fawcett does. How do we get an equitable distribution so that people from all walks of life can organise their lives? This family here has obviously fallen through the cracks. What recommendations do you have for rural and regional Victoria or Queensland, for instance?

Mrs Fowler—I did not come specifically representing rural families. I just said that I find that I am saying things that perhaps 20 years ago I would not have said, and certainly that I had not considered.

Mr QUICK—But you highlight this case study about balancing work and family and here is a 29-year-old with a couple of young children who obviously has some academic ability and wants to contribute to society; her husband was in the armed services and obviously had career potential; the kids are traumatised. 'I would be in my mid- to late-30s with no super and residual effects of almost two decades of stress, anxiety and hardship.'

Mrs Fowler—She is highlighting some issues there—for instance, the early onset of a debt. Her husband fell for the Harvey Norman line ‘Pay nothing now,’ and so forth. She started having a nervous breakdown because she could not finish her degree. In fact, she got no financial assistance going through university because her parents had an asset—a farm—and she was not entitled to youth allowance. Because she had been home educated and she had never had a job and never left her little country town before she went off to a university town, she could not compete for a job. So debt is a big issue. She was raising that as an example of, ‘Gosh, if you fall into debt’—and HECS was one of the debts—‘at an early age, when you really don’t understand the full impact of all that, then how on earth do you get out of it?’ It is just a spiral.

Mr FAWCETT—Let us also be reasonable, though. You do not start repaying HECS until you are earning above a certain income level. Yet the fear factor that a lot of people put out there about HECS is that all of a sudden it is like a mortgage—you have got to pay it off every pay. Depending on the degree you have done, you do not actually start paying back HECS until you are consistently earning above a certain level of income. And for people to actually have the opportunity to get an education in certain areas is a huge bonus.

For instance, my background is in aviation. Nobody would even consider asking the taxpayer to fork out \$100,000 so that somebody could get their commercial pilot’s licence. And yet somebody flying for Rex Airlines as a first officer only earns \$45,000 a year. That is hardly a high-paying job, and yet the taxpayer would not consider subsidising that. People get free education, with a loan that, yes, they pay back when they are earning income but that they do not have to pay back if they do not earn the threshold. I do not think that is a huge burden to stick around people’s necks.

Mrs Fowler—It is just one of the factors that she is raising and that we would raise. We are not particularly badgering over the HECS thing; that is not something that we are highlighting so much. It is just a series of things. At that early age you have people who are not used to saving; so it is an issue of a lack of savings and a lack of the habit of saving in their youth, together with an accumulation of debt and purchasing things they cannot afford. So it is complex. It is not just HECS on its own.

Another thing we have highlighted—and I feel strongly about this—is that career advancement is seen as having more kudos than being a mother. And I guess the AFA is saying, ‘Being a good mother is in fact a very good occupation. It is important for children to have good mothers, and good fathers, and to have a home where time is invested in caring for children and caring for the home and managing a home properly.’

CHAIR—But why is it in competition? Why are you not sitting here saying that it is bad for fathers to have an ambition to have career advancement because that makes them bad fathers?

Mrs Fowler—Because I have hormones that tell me that I want to be close to and bonded with my children and I am not going to deny my hormones.

CHAIR—But they are not mutually exclusive.

Mrs Fowler—No. Good fathers are absolutely essential.

CHAIR—But good mothers can have good career paths and also be good mothers.

Mrs Fowler—Yes, but what I am saying is that for years—

CHAIR—You do not have to stay home all day every day.

Mrs MARKUS—But is it not the choice of the woman?

Mrs Fowler—But women do not feel like they have the choice now. They feel pressured.

CHAIR—I do not agree with that.

Mrs Fowler—Well, I am telling you what I think. I thought I was here to say what I thought.

CHAIR—You are and you are saying it.

Mrs Fowler—Thank you. I grew up in the seventies when, psychologically, we were being pressured to follow a career path and that the choice of being a mother was not necessarily a good choice. I am saying that, no, we need to balance that. Women are telling us that this is a competing psychological war all the time. We think it is time we said, 'No, if you want to take time out and be a full-time mother, you should be looked after well.' We are talking about child-care subsidies for people in the workforce. I believe that child care should be paid to mothers who stay at home and look after their children.

CHAIR—They are the only ones who should get any help?

Mrs Fowler—No, I am not saying they are the only ones, but I believe they should be given equal value.

CHAIR—So you think they are better?

Mrs Fowler—I am not saying they are better women, but I am saying that mother care is—

Ms GEORGE—But they do get it through the family tax system.

Mrs Fowler—I do not think it is enough to keep them at home. If they want to stay at home, they are now saying they do not have the choice to stay at home.

Ms GEORGE—If they go to work, some of them are paying nearly all their wage—

Mrs Fowler—That is right. There is the social pressure that they feel they have to return to work, but they may not be that much better off financially and then they are torn. I just think it is crazy.

Ms Conway—There are a whole lot of underlying issues, but we can touch on only a few things today. One of the obvious things is the rise in house prices and the need to have two

incomes now to have any reasonable prospect of being in the housing market. Many commentators have talked about this issue. It is not going to go away in a hurry unfortunately.

Mr QUICK—Come to Tasmania.

Ms Conway—But the prices there are going up too now.

Mr QUICK—No, not like elsewhere.

Ms Conway—Many women know that they want to work and many also know that they need to work to make their marriage and their family work. A stable family home is pretty important to the wellbeing of children and it helps a lot with a stable spousal relationship. Many women feel very much that they need to keep their career options open.

CHAIR—Absolutely.

Ms Conway—Taking time out of the workforce is a risky business for women. Many women express anxiety about taking time out. This was alluded to in the previous submission and was discussed a little bit as well.

CHAIR—And the one before that.

Ms Conway—Women feel that they have to go into the workforce often before they would really like to, because the longer they stay out the more difficult they perceive it to be to get back in. There is a very basic problem: the most obvious problem of obtaining current referees. If you have been out of the workforce for five, six, seven or 10 years, how do you obtain current referees to then return to your previous career? It is extremely difficult. Many women feel a great deal of anxiety about that, so they go back to work sooner than they might have otherwise preferred. I suppose this comes back to one of the points that we really want to emphasise: working, looking after your own children, looking after a household, helping a family to run smoothly and enabling the family members to have time together to invest in cultivating loving relationships with each other is incredibly important work in the economy that is not usually counted in the GDP and so on. The wellbeing of our children is very much dependent on the quality of our family lives. We feel that this needs to be part of any discussion about balancing work and family.

Mothers and fathers should not feel like they are asking for special favours to be able to have enough time to give to their families and spend with their children. That goes back to whether a woman wants to go out and continue working. She needs to know that her children can have access to quality child care. She does not want to go to work thinking that she is leaving her children in a second-rate situation, where they might be crying in the corner for three hours or have a dirty nappy for hours. And men need to know that their children are well cared for, if they decide that they want to arrange their work-family balance in a way where each partner is extending themselves and using their skills, their education and so on. So we want to emphasise that families need the choice of being able to have both partners working full time or part time, not having to beg for special favours from the workplace, which is often the case now. Men also feel the pressure to be up-front more than the allotted hours a week. You are always expected to be there for a bit longer than is on the books, because that is the way you demonstrate your

commitment. Requesting to be home for a school event or because somebody is sick and so on is always something that parents feel anxious about.

We think that if our society and our governments fully acknowledged the time that is needed for creating good quality family situations that would then flow on to educational efforts. It would flow on to employers and the Australian community in general so that people did not feel that they were asking for more than they deserve when they asked for that little bit of time off or asked to work part time. That is one of the main points we wanted to stress.

You were talking about the importance of employment. I also want to talk about the balance of work and family in terms of winners and losers in Australian society at the moment. In this report, *Men and women apart: partnering in Australia*, there was a close examination of census statistics and various other studies. It looks at what is happening in different socioeconomic strata in Australia and at people who have different educational levels and so on. I do not know if you have all had a chance to study this. The key findings are that, for tertiary educated people who then have higher incomes, marriage rates are pretty stable and have been pretty stable since 1986.

This is a finding that they say runs against some of the discussion about marriage and well-educated women. One of the theories was that well-educated women are not meeting enough men to marry; therefore, they are having problems marrying and the marriage problem is in this group in society. This report, *Men and women apart*, is saying that, while there are issues to do with work and family balance for these families who seek collaborative marriage arrangements and partnerships, there is another big issue that we really need to attend to—that is, that unskilled men in particular are being dealt out of any capacity to form stable partnerships or establish families. We are talking about a significant group in Australia who are essentially being deprived of what is really a pretty basic expression of their humanity.

Professor Birrell, Virginia Rapson and Clare Hourigan talk about the way statisticians have been comparing the present situation in partnering to earlier periods in our history. They make the point in the report that—and I also want to emphasise it—when you compare the statistics on partnering and fertility in Australia with, say, 1911 you find that at that time we had similar partnering issues, with people feeling unable to form marriage relationships and establish families because of unemployment, underemployment and low skills. At that point in our history, it was considered a tragedy that a whole swath of that generation was lost to marriage and family.

We need to look now at the situation we have, particularly in regional Australia. The problem is concentrated more on the outer edges of our cities and in regional Australia. A swath of our generation have been frozen out of marriage and family. Many women are struggling as sole parents and the men are unable to participate in family life, marriage or even de facto relationships. They are not seen as good prospects for that sort of long-term, committed partnership.

A whole lot of issues come out of that, including a rising number of children living in sole parent families. The majority of lone parent families are from this unskilled group. This report argues strongly that the majority of lone parents are in that situation because of failed marriages and failed de facto relationships. They started out hoping for the best. The marriage and de facto

partnership failure rates are much higher amongst the unskilled. The majority of lone parents are in that boat.

Another small proportion of the group are single mothers who have consciously gone into the motherhood decision alone. That has been a constant proportion over the time from 1986. It has not really changed much. We have seen an increase in the amount of lone parenting as a result of relationship breakdown and a substantial decline in marriage for low-income groups. That decline in marriage is one of the major factors contributing to the decline in fertility. Tertiary educated, married couples are continuing to have about the same number of children as they had been having, but we have seen this dramatic drop-off in marriage for other members of the community and that is the big contributor to the decline in fertility.

This report is a fairly in-depth study and points to some major social issues and very worrying trends. We can look back on history now and say, 'After the 1890s, the Great Depression and so on, when there was a massive social disruption, coming out of World War II Australia had a sense of putting that behind us. We weren't going to go there again. We weren't going to have this massive social disruption and dislocation. We weren't going to have this swath of a generation lost to marriage and family.' I think we as Australians need to be aware that we are looking at continuing this downwards trend here and that this—

CHAIR—We are not the same as the rest of the developed world. It has always intrigued me that we who won the war had a very good baby boom and the countries that lost the war did not. We were very confident in that period, and that is why we had the boom. It started in 1941 and ended in 1961. Germany, Japan and Italy went much slower than we did, and that is showing up today. But I am interested in the statement you made about 1911. The stats that have been published have been published from 1921 on. Are those figures in here?

Ms Conway—They discuss the 1911 comparisons in here, so he does actually—

CHAIR—So he has access to the 1911 trends.

Ms Conway—He actually discusses the comparisons, because these comparisons have been made by other social commentators.

CHAIR—Does he also deal with the survival rate? About then you were still having one in four children die under four. Was it as high as that? What was the death rate for under-fours?

Ms Conway—It was not much higher. He is focusing very much on the partnering issue when he discusses those figures. He is saying that we do a lot of our comparison off that 1950s and 1960s high and that we need to keep a longer term perspective. He says that some social commentators are saying, 'Look, we don't need to worry about this low partnering rate because we've had it all before,' but I would like to strongly recommend that people realise that those declines in partnering that we have had in the past were looked on—

CHAIR—For different reasons.

Ms Conway—Our society did not see them as a good thing, and we saw that that involved a lot of human suffering and deprivation.

CHAIR—We had a low partnering rate after World War I because 60,000 men were killed out of a comparatively small population base.

Ms Conway—We also had a low partnering rate because of economic downturn through that period. Many Australians were experiencing economic difficulties after the war and right up until the Great Depression. That economic downturn with low employment levels and underemployment was also a direct contributor to low partnering rates. People were not able to commit to marriage if they did not have a stable job. Men were the breadwinners back then and if they could not enter into a marriage in good conscience with that promise of a reasonable—

CHAIR—That is still the position, you are saying, with regard to lower socioeconomic males.

Ms Conway—Interestingly, the report discusses the way a lot of tertiary educated couples aspire to a collaborative marriage arrangement, where they want to combine professional work, child care and the household. They want to work it out together, whereas a lot of the less skilled members of our community still aspire very much to—

CHAIR—Males still want to dominate.

Ms Conway—Many women still see that as a good insurance policy. While they have got to take time out to have their babies and they have got to care for the babies, they need to know that somebody is there—

CHAIR—Not really, because the baby sticks around and they are only one husband away from welfare—to quote Betty Friedan, who I might add is not one of my favourite authors.

Ms Conway—This report talks about the issue of a lot of single mothers not partnering up with unskilled men because the welfare payments cut out. I am not sure that that is currently the case, but he is talking about the study period. If they partner with a man, then they lose welfare payments. So there is a strong disincentive for single mothers to partner at that level. That is separate from the problem of men feeling unable to commit to these relationships because of their economic circumstances—their long-term underemployment.

CHAIR—So you are saying that the reason for the lower likelihood of a woman from that socioeconomic group repartnering is simply that she is so dependent on welfare that she would lose those welfare entitlements if she did repartner?

Ms Conway—This report postulates that that is a significant issue for single mothers, but it is not the only issue. The other big issue is the men who cannot bring stable employment and reliable full-time employment to the partnership. There are two big issues there for unskilled Australians in the 25 to 40 age group, which is the prime time for partnering and family establishment. The two big issues are that the woman feels it is a financial risk to become involved with the—

CHAIR—But you are talking about someone other than the father of her child, aren't you?

Ms Conway—No, it might not be actually. It may be the father of the child. Presumably the father of the child is paying—

CHAIR—\$5 a week.

Mr QUICK—It is six now.

CHAIR—It is six now—right.

Ms Conway—That is just one of the issues. The other big issue is the chronic and long-term underemployment and lack of reliability and security for employment of these men. They are not seen by the women perhaps—

Mr CADMAN—They are not a good bet.

Ms Conway—The women do not feel that they are a good bet, and also the men themselves, in good conscience, do not feel that they are able to commit.

CHAIR—What percentage of the male workforce are we talking about?

Ms Conway—We are talking about non-tertiary, non-trades and a diploma.

Mr QUICK—There is a high suicide rate in country areas, too.

Mr CADMAN—Absolutely. There is a high suicide rate in country areas.

Ms Conway—There is massive depression and high suicide rates amongst the men of this group—

Mr QUICK—It is the highest in the world.

Ms Conway—and if they do form a relationship there is a very poor prognosis of success. The marriage and de facto breakdown rates are much higher in this group as well. You are looking at men who do not have tertiary qualifications, diplomas or trade certificates. They are the unschooled. They have just got through school.

CHAIR—They would be lucky to get to year 10.

Ms Conway—No, they might have got through to year 12, but they have not gone beyond that. They have gone through to year 12—some of them may have only gone to year 10—but they have not gone beyond that.

CHAIR—They have no postschool qualification?

Ms Conway—That is the sector of the community where we have seen this significant downward trend, which does not seem to be stopping.

CHAIR—Does it quantify it? When I went to university I think about five per cent of school leavers went and now it is 30 per cent. There has been a whacking great jump and then you have

got the next group of people who are doing vocational training, which is another big swag. I have not seen published figures telling me what that cohort is.

Ms Conway—Yes, I am not sure whether they are in here; I would have to go and study it a bit more carefully for the actual breakdown.

Mrs Fowler—We need to look at some solid industry incentives to get some industry going that requires these men to be employed.

Mr CADMAN—I think we need to go back further than that. In the study that a couple of us did on the education of boys, the appropriateness of that education system can almost predict the outcome.

Mr FAWCETT—I represent an electorate in South Australia where there are large rural areas. There is also outer metropolitan manufacturing. I have one of the highest unemployment rates in Australia, in pockets, but I also have one of the largest job vacancy rates. There are jobs going begging rurally—unemployment is 1.5 per cent. Outer metropolitan unemployment is up around 10 per cent. But I have lots of factories which are looking for everything from skilled tradesmen right down to people who all they want them to do is to come in and knock off the plastic extrusions from mouldings—so half a day's training—and they cannot get people to come and take those jobs. The people would rather be on welfare.

One of the things that I question about the study is how much is cause and effect, in that I would argue, looking at the demographic in Wakefield, that many of the people are caught in a trap because of their family of origin. They have not had the support or the encouragement to get through school, hence the low education level, but neither have they had the mentoring or the role modelling to learn good relationship skills and to learn how a family could or should work, so their ability to form and maintain a relationship that could lead to marriage is also marginalised. So it is not necessarily the low education in and of itself but the combination of what has caused the low education, which is also causal in terms of their poor family of origin et cetera. Particularly when you are talking third or fourth generation, there are a number of these hurdles that collectively reach that outcome.

So all I would say is that, whilst I accept the statistics, it is not necessarily that the marriages fail or they do not get married in the first place because of the low economic situation as a direct cause. It is more likely to be a combination of factors, particularly when you look at some of the other studies that have been done by the Institute of Family Studies and others that say, 'Look, it is not really your circumstances that dictate whether your relationship will last; it is the skills you have to form a framework of communication to work through those difficulties.' Most of these people who you are saying are in the low education area would also be very low in the ability to form those skills to keep the relationship together. So it is an issue we need to address, but I would say that, given what I see in terms of available jobs, available workforce and the two not meshing, it probably even steps further back to saying that we need to help people with their ability to form and maintain relationships. Flowing on from that will be educational and skill outcomes and better marriages.

Ms Conway—I think Professor Fiona Stanley spent a year, a couple of years ago, running around the country trying to highlight the issue that we have large numbers of children now

growing up in less than optimal situations. Families are destabilised. There is a lack of financial and economic resources, for whatever reason. All of this area is highly complex, but she has been alerting us to the fact that we need to act because we already have the problem but we are going to get a bigger crop, a bigger cohort, of kids who will come through the system with a range of psychiatric and emotional issues or problems because of experiences in childhood. They will also be coming through with poor health, and she has highlighted disturbing trends in child health over recent years. These children coming through now are going to end up arriving at the workforce but unable to engage in the workforce for a whole range of reasons. This is a serious issue that we have to address; otherwise, it is going to cost Australia a lot of money and we are going to have an even bigger problem to solve later.

CHAIR—Have you done any international comparisons?

Ms Conway—I have not got them on me. I certainly started to look at some of the international studies. There is a lot of controversy about interpretation of statistics and so on. I think this study discusses some of the varying approaches to some of these stats over the years and some of these questions. Overseas there is a bit of controversy around some of these issues as well, but certainly in recent years there have been a few new perspectives being brought out, in the US in particular, on some of those issues. I do not have that stuff with me today—I am sorry about that.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming. I think this will be a most useful document for us to have. Can I have a motion that these documents be accepted as exhibits?

Mr QUICK—So moved.

CHAIR—Thank you. I have some submissions. Can I have a motion that the committee accept submissions from the Australian Family Association—documents 1, 2 and 3?

Mr QUICK—So moved.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Quick**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

CHAIR—I thank you for your attendance today. We have had a good exchange of views. We are looking for all types of views. I also thank Hansard.

Committee adjourned at 3.16 pm