

# The Australian Family Association (NSW)

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**Submission No 181**

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Committee Secretary  
Standing Committee on Family & Human Services  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee,

*Today we submit to you the original AFA submission with additional notes based on further examination of the issues. For easy identification, the additional material has been placed in boxes. We also submit two case studies that highlight some of the complex issues raised in our submission.*

*Additionally, we submit the full text of the Birrell Report – “Men and Women Apart”.*

## **PREFACE**

We would like to preface this submission by firstly exploding the myth that parents can be all things to all people at all times. In everything we do we have to set priorities, and there are times when, if we are faced with competing interests and obligations, we have to make a choice, and that choice should always be skewed towards the care of our families.

Secondly, although the title of this inquiry is “Balancing Work and Family”, as though “work” and “family” are flip sides of a coin, we suggest that these two elements can never be considered of equal value. We insist that in every discussion, the family needs to be the starting **and** finishing point. Work should be built around the family, not the family around work.

Thirdly, we must always remember that “work” should not be limited to paid work. Many people are engaged in unpaid work, and it is denigrating to infer that those people don't work. “Work” is how we engage in, and help build up society, and although much of it is hidden, it none-the-less has tremendous worth.

## **DISINCENTIVES TO STARTING FAMILIES**

### **Financial:**

Most responsible people would not wish to start a family without a certain sense of financial security. Continuity of employment and the ability to save for the future are critical to creating this security.

It is apparent that the new generation of prospective parents come through their early working life with few if any savings, and more often than not, carrying a HECS debt.

There may be a number of factors contributing to this:

Poor savings habits from childhood. The "instant gratification mentality" promoted by advertising, which targets the youth, results in high consumption of what are really passing fads and fancies. Children should be encouraged to wait for the things that they want, and in cases of luxury items, parents should realize that it may be beneficial in the long run if not all these wants are met. It is good for character-building to learn to go without, and it is a good habit to carry into adult life.

A recent ABC 4Corners programme called "How the Kids Took Over", although set in the USA, has some relevance in Australia. It highlighted the marketing assault that targets children.

In the Message Board many comments agreed that children are better off if they are not indulged.

"Maybe parents need to realise that even if they have the money, it is not a licence to give their child everything they ask for". jowa

"It has been my observation that children who are not indulged in everything they want, turn out to be less dependant on material things for satisfaction. Any amount of self-indulgence cannot guarantee happiness. It is personal inner resources and development of one's own abilities that provide the ultimate personal development and the ability to cope with whatever life has to offer". methusalah

A HECS debt coupled with the high cost of housing probably means that many young people will delay marriage, the purchase of their first home, and consequently will more likely delay having children.

In order to service a home loan it is now seen as essential to have two incomes. This is a major disincentive to starting a family, as most women would prefer to leave full-time work when they have children.

#### **Career:**

There appear to be two extremes affecting employment and family. On the one hand, there is a growing class of single low-income males (SLIMS) who, without full-time employment, are losing out badly in the marriage market. On the other hand, there are those who are in full-time work, working very long hours, or long rosters, leaving them little time for family life.

We would like to refer the Committee to the report, '*Men and Women Apart*' by Dr. Bob Birrell et al., which was commissioned by the AFA and released early in 2004. Based on 1986 and 2001 Census figures, the report identifies a growing proportion of men aged 25-39 years not in full-time work, with sharply declining marriage rates and much higher than average divorce rates. By 2001, 29% of men in this age group were not in full-time work. The decline in marriage in this group was found to be the major reason for the decline in

fertility between 1980 and 2001. Those males with post-school education and full-time employment experienced much higher marriage rates and much lower divorce rates. This indicates that higher levels of education and full-time employment correspond with higher rates of partnering and family formation.

It can therefore be extrapolated that Industry Policies and Labor Market Reforms should provide higher employment levels, increased job security, and adequate income levels in order to foster the formation of families, particularly among the low-skilled workers.

We would like to offer, as an example, two labor market trends which we believe have a negative impact not just on the formation of families, but on family stability.

First is the trend towards placing employees on short-term contracts. This pattern discourages couples from making the most important financial commitment – that of purchasing a home.

Two reasons may be offered for this. Firstly, the insecurity of not being guaranteed continuity of work means that couples would hesitate to commit to home repayments. Secondly, the concern that future work may require one to move from place to place means people may be more inclined to rent rather than buy. Renting does not provide the same sense of stability, conducive to family formation, as home ownership does.

We would like to refer to the case study contributed by Rebecca Scott whose husband was one of those recently laid off as a result of the Harden Abattoir closure. Matthew, along with over a hundred others, was employed under a system of individual 24 hour contracts.

This is clearly an anti-family employment strategy. Even before the Abattoir closed its doors, those employed under these conditions would be too scared to take time off to have a holiday with the family as there is no guarantee that they would be employed on their return.

Such contracts also leave the onus on the employee to set aside money for holidays, superannuation and sick leave. For many unskilled workers this is clearly a burden that they have not been educated to deal with.

The second labor market trend which we believe may have a negative impact on family formation and family stability is the trend towards 14 – 28 day rosters for shift workers.

Under this system, there is no longer a guarantee of having at least one day off in seven, and Sunday which was once considered a day of worship and a day of rest and recreation for the family, is treated just like any other day with no special penalties awarded which were once there, to in some way, recognize the sacrifice of those having to work on a Sunday. Also, there is no regular weekly pattern to the rostered days on and off work.

This pattern makes it very difficult for employees to commit to things such as sport, being on committees, and engaging in scheduled social activities. This impacts badly on one's ability to date and engage fully in family and community life.

### **Social:**

Career advancement has more kudos than being a mother, and so many young women, even though they may yearn to have children, don't see becoming a mother as being fulfilling, even though it is clear that being a good mother provides society with the greatest social good. Motherhood should be a highly esteemed role, and elevated above all other occupations.

The failure to have a parent at home caring for children and teenagers is a recipe for troubled youth. Troubled and delinquent youth are costly to the community in terms of crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and promiscuity. They are costly to the government in terms of policing, prisons, drug rehabilitation, and welfare payments, eg, unemployment benefits.

The following clipping supports the notion that not just the very young, but teenagers too, do far better when they spend plenty of time at home with their parents.

"For years, mothers that work full-time outside the home have argued that, even though they spend less time with their children than their stay-at-home peers, they enjoy "quality" time that allegedly compensates for the reduced attention. Yet a recent study on the extent and nature of family dinners in the lives of teenagers commissioned by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University clearly shows that quality time with children doesn't happen without large quantities of time.

CASA conducted a telephone survey of 1,000 teens, ages 12 to 17, and 829 parents of teens in the spring of 2005 to identify factors that increase the risk of adolescent use of cigarettes, alcohol, and illegal drugs, including marijuana. Confirming a more statistically rigorous study at the University of Minnesota (see New Research, September 2004, p. 2) that documented the protective nature of regular family meals in tempering risky behaviors, CASA discovered that teens who are home for dinner at least five times per week - relative to teens who have no more than two family meals per week - are also more likely to rate their family dinners as high quality.

Of teens that dine infrequently with their parents, 45 percent say the television is usually on when they do eat together, 29 percent say the family does not talk very much, and 16 percent lament that their dinners are often cut short. But among the teens who frequently eat with the family at home, only 34 percent say the television is on, only 12 percent say the family does not talk much, and only 5 percent think that their dinners do not last long enough.

The frequency of family dinners also appears to improve the quality of family relations, not just the dinners. Relative to teens who have infrequent family meals, their peers from families with a regular dinner time not only report less tension in the home, but are also more likely to approach their mother or father or both when confronting a serious problem. They also are more likely to say that their parents are "very proud" of them.

These documented benefits of the dinner table suggest that, building on the adage about the family that prays together, the family that dines together binds together".

(Source: "The Importance of Family Dinners II," The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, September 2005.)

Consumerism, exacerbated by sharp marketing strategies, has led to young couples not wanting to make the necessary sacrifices, nor forgo any comfort, in order to have a family. Many people think that they must 'have everything' before launching into child-rearing.

This is clearly a fallacy, as borne out by former generations, however many young people have no idea how to live frugally.

It must be added here that for those who become trapped in a spiral of debt, living very frugally becomes an absolute necessity (it is imposed rather than chosen) just for basic survival, without the "joy" of setting money aside to improve the family situation as should be the case.

We would like to refer once more to Rebecca Scott's case study in which she explains that her husband, having being drawn in by the marketing of "loan-merchants" in retail stores, quickly accumulated debts that still haunt him and because of his inability to gain full-time, secure, well-paid employment, the debt keeps rising.

It would seem that there is a very strong case for reviewing the techniques employed by retail "loan merchants" and the interest charged by them once the "interest free" period passes.

## **MAKING IT EASIER TO RETURN TO PAID WORK**

This term of reference appears to infer that it is a positive good for mothers of young children to return to paid work.

Such policy fails to take into account the very real needs of children and teenagers to be mothered and loved deeply in order to grow into trusting, loyal, self-reliant adults.

For thirty years, women have been sold the line that careers are all important and that institutional mothering is as good as, if not better than, real mothering.

We are now living with the social upheaval that has resulted – restless children, drug abuse, depression, suicide, promiscuity, vandalism, crime and homelessness.

The focus of policy should put in place the tax and family incentives to give mothers the choice of being full-time homemakers.

**Women who want to be full-time mothers should be the ones to now take centre-stage.**

I would like to submit my personal experience of a certain subtle stigma attached to having children. I am a mother of four, aged 24-17 years. When I was expecting our third child, I was faced with snide comments such as "haven't you worked out what causes it". It was considered fashionable to have two children, but more than that .... well, you poor thing!

Because I had tertiary qualifications there was also the perception that it was a waste of an education to "give it all away" to stay at home with the children. Somehow ones self worth was gauged by ones paid work.

I worked part-time on and off between children, but found that getting children out of bed early to take them to care, arriving home late, all of us tired out, and then maintaining a warm and welcoming atmosphere which I believe the home should be, was a Herculean task.

The day that I said "enough - I just want to raise my family well" was a very happy day. I felt I had shaken off years of feminist/capitalist brainwashing. Mary-Louise Fowler

## **IMPACT OF TAXATION ETC**

Currently, taxation and policies regarding child-care benefits, favor mothers who return to paid work and relinquish the care of their young children into the hands of institutional care.

### **Child Care Policies:**

When child care centres were first being promoted some 25 years ago, they were used by women who were full-time mothers who saw the benefits in having a little time out to do shopping, attend appointments and so on, but who had no family living close by to provide this relief. Child-care policies are now skewed to almost totally disregard the needs of these women.

The clear message sent in this type of policy is that the Government does not value mothers who are full-time, unpaid homemakers, who forgo a second income, as much as women in paid work.

There needs to be a dramatic shift in this attitude if the Government wants to be called a "family friendly" government.

Childcare payments should become a family payment to all families, giving mothers the choice of whether to be in the paid workforce or full-time homemakers.

Recently in a piece that was supporting more child care provision that it made good economic sense for the government to increase child care places as for every \$1.00 spent on child care, the government would receive \$1.80 back in taxes.

This is the typical logic of a purely "finance-centred" model of thinking. It neither factors in the benefits of a secure and loving child-parent bond, nor the real social cost (and subsequent financial cost) of out-sourcing the day to day tenderness and affection that should rightly be built up through the intimacy of the family home, and which should be the prerogative of parents, and not outsiders, to communicate to their children.

It is now coming to light that children in *other-than-parent* care are at risk of being sexually abused by female child predators - refer to the article "Pedophiles among female carers" in the Australian 7.3.06.

Surely this is evidence enough that more effort needs to be made to assist families to care for their own flesh and blood without their facing the financial penalties which currently deprive them of this choice.

### **Income Splitting – Taxation Relief:**

In order to truly recognize the great contribution made by single income families, full income splitting should be introduced without further hesitation.

Income splitting which is available in Australia to family businesses, the self-employed and so on should be made available to PAYG taxpayers.

Full income splitting recognizes the number of dependents supported by the income – the family unit and not the individual is the centre-piece of this taxation model.

"The tax system, family assistance benefits through Centrelink, etc do not help single income families but are skewed towards two income families. My husband's salary, as it improved over the years, became too high for us to qualify for assistance, and also went into the higher marginal tax rates. Had we had two incomes which gave us the same family income we would have paid less tax, qualified for family benefits and received rebates for the childcare that our children would have needed. Hence financially we would have been better off." Denise Hamstead

In addition to personal tax disincentives we would submit that the GST being a regressive tax has a negative impact on low income families and large families. These families pay a much higher proportion of their income in paying GST on basic items, than do small families or high income families.

## **CONCLUSION**

In a climate of a falling birth-rate and a shrinking work-force it is clear that the government is rightly concerned for the future prosperity of our nation. It would however be short-sighted to "patch" this problem with an effort to get more women, especially those with young children, into the paid work force.

A woman who is pushed back to paid work because the family cannot survive on one income, cannot be expected to also provide the emotional and physical support needed by

**the family, and nor can she be expected to contribute in hundreds of little ways to her neighbour, the school, and community, and so the nation is the poorer.**

Refer again to the case study contributed by Denise Hamstead: During this time I have given much of my time to help them in these pursuits (sporting and cultural activities), and by volunteering my services at their schools in reading programmes, computer assistance, officiating and coaching sport, canteens, etc - time which employed parents cannot give.

**It must also be recognized that a woman who is fatigued and emotionally stretched will be less likely to have the inclination, nor the physical capacity to conceive and bear children.**

The family home should provide the best environment to nurture the changing needs of a husband and wife and the growing family. It should be orderly, well maintained and should provide a warm and welcoming atmosphere which allows everyone to unwind and talk. Such an environment cannot be achieved in haste at the end of gruelling daily schedule - children and spouses need time to continually fortify the bonds of love to which they are committed. Love takes time, and children and spouses have a right to expect to be loved in the intimacy of the family home. Unity in the home is our nations most valuable asset.

**A healthy nation will be one where families thrive, and contentment is restored.**

**What is needed is a vision - a long-sighted vision.**

**We commend this submission to you, and eagerly await your response.**

Mary-Louise Fowler

President  
Australian Family Association (NSW)