

NCSMC

National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc.

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Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs
Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Email: legcon.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary

**Re: The Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Veterans Affairs
Legislation Amendment (2006 Budget Measures) Bill 2006**

We are pleased to submit our brief response to the proposed legislation. Unfortunately, due to significant time constraints we have been unable to provide anything more than a synopsis of our concerns. However, we would welcome the opportunity to provide oral evidence at public hearing.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Elspeth McInnes AM
Convenor

Ms Jac Taylor
Executive Officer

The National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Incorporated was formed in 1973 to advocate for the rights and interests of single mothers and their children to the benefit of all sole parent families, including single father families.

NCSMC formed to focus on single mothers' interests at a time when women who were pregnant outside marriage were expected to give up their children for adoption by couple families and there was no income support for parents raising children alone. Today most single mothers are women who have separated from a partner. Issues of income support, child support, paid work, housing, parenting, child-care, family law, violence and abuse continue as concerns to the present day.

NCSMC has member organisations in states and territories around Australia, many of which also provide services and support to families after parental separation.

NCSMC aims to:

- Ensure that all children have a fair start in life;
- Recognise single mother families as a viable and positive family unit;
- Promote understanding of single mothers and their children in the community that they may live free from prejudice;
- To work for improvements in the social, economic and legal status of single mothers and their children.

NCSMC is alarmed and deeply concerned about the proposed Schedule 2 to grant Centrelink Officers the power to obtain warrants to enter premises to search for evidence and then seize this if found. It is our understanding that these powers will be utilised most typically by Centrelink staff during their investigations into Marriage Like Relationships.

We are highly conscious of many existing concerns about how Marriage Like Relationships are conducted and hear frequently from our constituents about their horrendous experiences of such investigations. We are aware that National Welfare Rights Network does an enormous amount of work in this area, both acting on behalf of individual single mothers and also in working directly with Centrelink to address the systemic shortcomings of the current system. We are also aware of the Commonwealth Ombudsman Own Motion Inquiry into this issue. As such, it seems to us to be a

highly dangerous move to provide Centrelink Officers with new and much wide powers when there are such serious community concerns remaining unaddressed.

Our constituents' experiences of investigations into Marriage Like Relationships indicate that Centrelink officers make highly subjective decisions that demonstrate their lack of understanding of experiences of sole parents (most especially in relation to domestic violence) and are underpinned by their own personal prejudices. We are aware of decisions made by both Original Decision Makers and Authorised Review Officers within Centrelink that indicate they have made their findings based on their own assumptions and have completely disregarded anything the single mother has said. We also receive many reports about such investigations being conducted on the basis of no (or very scant) evidence.

We understand that if enacted, Centrelink officers will have the power to enter and search the homes of our constituents and seize materials they deem as "evidence". Such acts would be highly intrusive and distressing to not only the sole parent but also their children. That children will be exposed to such violation is deeply disturbing.

NCSMC recommends that Schedule 2 be omitted from the bill.