

## Executive Summary

Discussion Paper by Patrick Murray, Aug. 2004, ver. 1.02

### Family Relationship Shop Fronts Proposal

A proposed solution by the Federal Government to the Family Law parliamentary, hearing known as the joint custody inquiry.

Moving forward on the findings of the parliamentary review of the family law is a political hot potato. The main recommendation was to establish a new family tribunal to arbitrate enforceable parenting plans for warring couples. The Prime Minister has side stepped the issue by proposing a feel good solution with a position paper due in two months time thus placing it outside the current election battle zone.

He is proposing 65 family relationship shop front centres, with a range of information, advice, education, counselling and mediation services. Three hours of free counselling or mediation would be compulsory for conflicted couples. These shop fronts would be tendered out to the existing relationship agencies, such as Relationship Australia or Centacare. Is all this just palliative care for terminally ill relationships or a breakthrough cure?

Avoiding band-aids and fire fighting involves taking a broader view as does Professor Denis Ladbrook from Curtin University. He sees us in a brave new world of family stripped of traditional roles, structures and sanctions. There is no longer one dominant model (patriarchy), but a general expectation that it can be a negotiated relationship of equals. This requires the acquisition of more effective personal skills that women and especially men are yet to achieve. It also requires a society that models the new behaviour (by treating men and women as equal in relationships). The stripping of traditional roles leaves us faced with significant losses of personal and social identity particularly for men. This brings with it fear, insecurity, pain anger and violence. Should we step back and take a fresh look at how to deal with this? Rushing in with new solutions that appear to be more of the same may look good to a confused and hurt society, but will it help?

It is not new. We already have a 55 million-dollar government funded relationship agency industry (100 organisations 400 locations). It is already under its primary dispute resolution programme doing the bulk of what is being proposed. Has this been working? Will more of it work better? A major review of the industry was done in June this year titled 'Review of The Relationship Services Programme' (available on <http://www.facs.gov.au> ).

The question as to whether **the increase in government spending has resulted in a decrease of the divorce rate or disputed family breakdowns with associated damage to children has not been asked?**

The review raises a number of critical issues: the lack of clarity around objectives and outcomes, the lack of access for rural and regional areas,

men, indigenous and new migrant groups, victims of family violence and low income groups.

Studies published by the American Psychological Society are quite scathing about claims of effectiveness for marriage and family therapy models used by agencies. They use words like 'professional scandal' and 'not a scintilla of evidence for the general superiority' of these particular therapies.

There is no significant scientific research on the effectiveness of outcomes for clients using these agencies compared with those attending private therapists or no therapists at all. There are no stated outcomes for this government funding, which can be effectively measured. Staff competencies are stated in terms of therapist inputs and not linked to effectiveness for the client. The \$55 million is presumably about preventing a problem. Without answering that why is more of the same being proposed.

It seems to be accepted that fathers and their children are not receiving equitable access and treatment under the current system. Any new proposals should clearly attempt to remedy this. Research in this area has shown that many men are suspicious, skeptical or threatened by human services generally, as they expect them to be judgmental, patronising and not male friendly. This is particularly so with men from lower socio-economic groups. It has also been shown that where services are demonstrably male friendly, men use them and outcomes are positive. Parliamentary inquiries for a number of years now have stated that there are a lack of experienced and mature male counsellors available in the broader family law system. Nothing has been done to rectify this. Male counsellors make up less than 10% of most agencies counselling staff numbers. Government needs to address this imbalance with a pro-active labour market programme aimed at getting more male counsellors. Much of counsellor training industry dominated by women has a pro female and anti male bias which does not encourage male students. This also needs to be considered.

There is a strong culture of portraying men as 'the problem' in this field. It is called pathologising the male or using the deficit model of men. I have coined a syndrome for this, MDM, the morally diminished male. This syndrome has infected many counsellors in this industry. As soon as men seeking help sense this, therapeutic effectiveness goes out the door. These problems are addressed in recent reports, conferences and by many men working at the coalface. They are not isolated observations.

So what are some positive elements for consideration:

- National access for help and resources through a relationship support line
- Subsidised services to low income clients via private and agency therapists. (which could be partly funded by ceasing subsidising funding in high income areas)

- Providing Internet based centrally accessible training and other resources, courseware etc., available to any potential provider.
- Providing relationship mentor training for regional and rural areas, where almost no services exist.
- Providing transparent and public feedback of client satisfaction for all services.
- Getting more male counsellors. Putting some quotas for an acceptable minimum percentage of male counsellors for government subsidised services.

A service with these ingredients would be flexible and modular, capable of being adapted to feedback. Rigid relationship agency contracts as proposed may not work and not be readily changeable. If any such initiative is seen as a failure it will entrench the current perception of bias and lack of equity for men and their children

The current proposition may well be a feel good diversion that avoids many of the hard issues. Both parties are frightened of tabling concrete policies that effectively deal with the serious lack of services for men in family law and other areas. Where are the brave Aussie politicians and bureaucrats?

*Note: this is a summary of a longer discussion paper by Patrick available from him by email. [Padriac@hinet.net.au](mailto:Padriac@hinet.net.au)*