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WORK AND FAMILY SUBMISSION

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This submission by the Australian Family Association will be quite brief. It will first make a general case for the importance of two-parent families. Second, it will look at how economic pressures are making it harder for marriages to work and families to stay together. Third, it will offer some possible proposals on the work/family issue. Fourth, it will look at the option of paid maternity leave.

The main thrust of this submission will be to take one step back from the debate. That is, we want to focus on the bigger picture of which working motherhood is a part. We argue that it may be wrong to assume that most mums want to be in the paid workplace. Numerous surveys and polls have found that the majority of young mums would like to spend time with their children, but economic necessity often drives them into the paid workforce. It is that aspect of the debate that we are concerned about and wish to address here.

General concerns

The AFA has long argued a fairly straight-forward thesis: many of the social problems affecting Australia today (problems which State and Federal governments spend millions of dollars to remedy) are caused in large measure by the breakdown of families. Therefore, monies spent on preserving and protecting the institutions of marriage and family will save a lot of money down the track, money spent on picking up the pieces of family breakdown.

More specifically, a whole range of costly social problems, such as crime and drug use, can be found to stem from several core problems, chief of which is the disintegration of the family. And the costs of fixing these problems – welfare payments of various kinds, prison and police funding, and so on – is consuming an ever growing proportion of our budget.

If emphasis is put on affirming and supporting the family, many of these other costs could be greatly reduced. Prevention, in other words, is much better than cure. More money put on preventing the breakdown of families will result in the saving of money on the other end.

The data for the importance of marriage and family will not be presented here, but is found in two research papers produced by the AFA which are available on request. There the case is made with ample documentation for the value of marriage and family, and the benefits they bestow on the rest of society.

Economic pressures on families

If the evidence available on the importance of marriage and family is found to be accurate and credible, then appropriate considerations on the work/family nexus can and should be made. That is, if the case being made is correct, then that will affect how governments address the work/family issue.

For example, if dual income families put further pressure on marriages and families, then getting the right response will be crucial. If many families find that young mothers are compelled to enter the workplace to make ends meet, when in fact they would prefer to stay at home with their young children, then policy considerations should be aimed at making stay at home parenting more feasible for those who desire it.

If partnering rates are falling, along with marriage, then governments should examine the reasons behind this, and take relevant steps to correct it. The AFA commissioned a study on this very issue by Monash University, entitled *Men and Women Apart*. That too can be sent to your inquiry.

In sum, governments can certainly help where women are seeking to balance work and family responsibilities. But what about the many women who are more concerned about how they can make

ends meet while staying at home in the early years of their children's lives? In this case, governments need to address the economic factors leading to more and more two-income families.

Proposals

It is our contention that:

- Strong societies are made up of strong families.
- Strong families are made up of a mother and father, connected by marriage.
- When we weaken marriage, we weaken families.
- When we weaken families, we weaken society.
- To the extent that we put resources and commitment into helping strengthen families, we will have a greater likelihood of maintaining a healthy and stable society.
- Federal government considerations should therefore put a high priority on strengthening the institutions of marriage and family.
- Many young families feel compelled to have two incomes, when in many cases they would prefer to have a parent home in the early years of the life of the children.
- Research shows that children fare better with parental (often maternal) involvement in the early years.
- Governments should therefore offer real choice to parents who want to stay at home, instead of assuming all families fit the same size, and all want to be two-income families.

Several possible proposals for this inquiry can be mentioned.

In helping families who seek to have just one bread earner, at least when young children are at home, governments can do much to relieve the economic pressures families face. This can take many forms: income splitting, family unit taxation, child tax rebates, raising the tax-free threshold, etc.

Much can be done to reduce the economic pressure on families where young mums are coerced into the paid workplace when they would prefer to be at home. As to mums who wish to be in the paid workforce, undoubtedly many submissions will cover those options.

Since many will look at an option along the lines of paid maternity leave, I address this issue next.

Paid maternity Leave

Since many individuals and organisations feel that some sort of paid maternity leave scheme would address many of the problems faced in this inquiry, I conclude by offering some reflections on this issue from the perspective of the AFA.

Our basic contention is that while some paid maternity leave may be better than none, there is also a downside to the whole proposal. That is, we believe that the scheme is in effect a bribe to mothers. It really says, if you guarantee to stay in the paid work force, we will give you a few weeks of paid maternity leave in return.

We believe there are a number of problems with this.

First, it usually only applies to women in the paid work force. Why cannot stay at home mothers also be entitled to some financial relief? Not only do babies cost a lot of money for all women, whether working or not, but the stay at home mum chooses to forgo income for the sake of the baby and its well being. Thus the woman in the paid work force is getting a double set of financial benefits, while the stay at home mum receives none.

We suspect that far too many submissions to this inquiry will just assume that all or most mums want to work with young children, That may not be the case. Many may want part-time work, but the research seems to indicate that the majority do not want full-time work, at least at first. Thus as part of the overall government strategy on the work/family issue, this important element needs to be addressed.