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Howard's Social Policies Concerning Relationships, Work and Families

Liz van Acker

Department of Politics and Public Policy

Centre for Governance and Public Policy

Griffith University

E.vanacker@griffith.edu.au

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In Australia, the federal government is attempting to strengthen families at a time when women and men have greater choice in terms of how they conduct their personal relationships. This article compares the 'soft' social policies that provide family relationship programs with the 'hard' economic policies of labour market reforms. It analyses some of the policies that affect work life balance, demonstrating that while the federal government is prepared to invest in programs to strengthen family relationships, it does not invest sufficiently in other measures such as family friendly work policies and paid maternity leave. The government's rhetoric promotes the well-being of 'the family'; its policies do not. On the one hand, the government attempts to encourage robust relationships by investing in early intervention programs. It has also recently invested in Family Relationship Centres to facilitate the process of family relationships breakdown. On the other hand, it is increasing the demands on labour. These policies are inconsistent in supporting families. In fact, there is a lack of whole-of-government policy development dealing with work and family issues. Consequently, individuals attempting to manage their private relationships and working lives often have inadequate options when endeavouring to balance the two.

Liberal welfare states such as Australia espouse the rhetoric of the importance of the free market, individual responsibility and choice. The Liberal National Coalition government emphasises letting the market rule, cutting back on government spending, contracting out services and self-help. It has pursued enterprise bargaining and deregulation of the labour market, supporting individual and workplace agreements. These strategies, however, have done little to promote job sharing, training and skills development and the capacity to bargain in the market place, especially for women and low-income earners.

This paper examines the distinctive case of social policies that affect relationships and families in Australia, arguing that there are inconsistencies in the Howard government's approach. In particular, it argues that while the Australian government is prescribing marriage education and relationship support services, it is simultaneously introducing workplace measures which will have a detrimental impact on many families and relationships. This paper explores the limitations and contradictions in policy measures which on the one hand attempt to improve

relationships, while on the other hand, often ignore the need to balance work and family. The Prime Minister famously declared in 2001 that attempts to balance work and family was a 'barbecue-stopper' - a burning issue for families. Nonetheless, this issue has not been adequately addressed by the government. The government continues to emphasise that citizens have the right 'to choose' how they live their lives, but could do more to assist families.

Choice, Social Values and Public Policies

When the Liberal National Coalition came to power in 1996, it gave life to a combination of economic liberalism and social conservatism. Prime Minister Howard underlined the value of choice in diverse policy areas such as family and work, health, employment and education (Johnson, 2006). Brett (2003: 185) asserts that Howard's social policies were built on sustaining homes and family and robustly championing the importance of 'family values'. The government acknowledged that individuals have a fundamental right to choose and make decisions about their intimate relationships, but also that it is in the public interest to keep families together. The Prime Minister has stated that the government's role is to sustain families

in the choices that they wish to make. It is never the role of government to impose some preferred model of behaviour. We are not in the business of telling people how to arrange their lives. The Liberal Party's philosophy is always to maximise choice (Howard, 2005: 2).

This statement suggests that the government supports people's self-realisation through their choices. Promoting choice is used in the common sense way here, associated with positive connotations. Choice is about privileging individual freedom and autonomy and people accepting responsibility for the outcomes of their choices (du Gay, 1996). There are many areas of intimate life, however, where the federal government does interfere. For example, it refuses to legally recognise same-sex unions, it has changed the law to prevent lesbian couples gaining access to state-funded IVF, it has overridden the laws of the Northern Territory which gave access to euthanasia and the Minister for Health has considered limiting Medicare funding for abortions. Nevertheless, a number of politicians and policy makers are anxious about the choices people are making in their personal relationships and the changing patterns of intimacy. For example in 1976, marriage rates were 63 per 1000 men and 61 per 1000 unmarried women. By 2001, this had decreased to 31 and 28 respectively. Cohabitation rates have risen 28 per cent

between 1996 and 2001. The levels of divorce are high: divorces in 2004 represented an increase of 9.2 per cent on the number granted in 1994 and 22.3 per cent on the number granted in 1984 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). The paradox is that while couples have choice in terms of whether they marry or divorce and how they structure their personal relationships, the Howard government does little to support their choices that effect their work/family balance. It is facilitating programs which encourage people to work on strengthening their relationships and marriages to form enduring partnerships (see van Acker, forthcoming). It is also assisting couples in the process of separation and divorce; indeed, it has recently increased funding in this area. In relation to issues that support work/family life balance, however, the government could do much more to ease the stress on people's relationships.

Marriage and Relationship Education

The federal government funds marriage education and family services through the *Marriage Act*. It introduced a national *Marriage Act* in 1961 with the intention of promoting marriage. In response to the newly developing model of marriage guidance in the 1960s, the provision of funding for marriage counselling and education programs was written into this piece of legislation. The Family Services Program established in the 1960s provided government funding for marriage education and other support services. In fact this program was an aspect of national family policy which included taxation and a universal health scheme (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (HRSCCLA), 1998: 77). Grants went to Christian churches and secular organisations offering marriage counselling. Accordingly, a partnership developed between the government and the community. The program involved three main areas: preventive programs offering services such as marriage preparation and family skills training and parenting; programs such as marriage counselling to support marriage where problems had arisen; and programs aimed at harmonious separation offered via Family Court counselling and family mediation (HRSCCLA, 1998). Government policies tended to focus on the third matter because it deals with the most difficult problems and the highest demand for government services, involving high-conflict situations and families in distress.

Nevertheless, marriage education programs gradually increased. By the 1980s there was a significant change in the content of the subject matter. Besides assisting couples to reflect on themselves and marriage, courses began teaching marital

communication and conflict resolution. Pre-marital education was developing into an instructive practice in its own right responding to increasing community, church and government concern for marrying couples (Harris *et al.*, 1992: 12-3). A more commercial approach to marriage education has developed since the mid 1980s because of the increase in user pay policies, emphasis on training standards accreditation, and academic studies of counselling and education. In 1994-95, 28,173 people, three-quarters of whom were couples attended over 17,000 sessions in marriage education agencies (Andrews and Andrews, 1997: 113). However, public funding of the programs was not particularly generous. In 1989-90, the federal Labor government provided \$248,000 to 24 agencies; this increased to \$500,000 by 1991-92 (Andrews and Andrews, 1997: 111).

In 1996, the new Liberal National Coalition government was concerned about the consequences of marriage breakdown and the escalating rates of divorce. Consequently, it established an inquiry to examine aspects of family services and the role of governments in providing them. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (HRSCCLA) produced its report *To Have and to Hold: Strategies to Strengthen Marriage and Relationships* in 1998. The report acknowledges that unemployed and work related problems and a redefinition of gender roles and the feminist agenda of equality are factors contributing to marriage and relationship breakdown. However, rather than addressing ways to deal with these issues, the report advocates preventive programs of marriage and relationship education. The committee recommends that the primary emphasis should be on the marital relationship (whether *de jure* or *de facto*). Couples could ascertain whether their relationship was satisfactory - and if so - they could progress to marriage and children. Moreover, the committee recommends that marriage and relationship education should relate to three major life transitions – marriage, the birth of the first child and separation or re-partnering (HRSCCLA, 1998, p. 146). This targets educational programs for couples intending to marry, suggesting that the government increase financial support and provide more relationship advice and skills for those who want it.

The federal government views the family as one of the most important civil institutions and provides resources to assure that the family functions well for what they envisage as the common good. In 2000, it launched the Stronger Families and Communities strategy to support families. A key objective was to focus on early prevention in parenting skills and family relationship support. In addition, policy focus

and funding was dedicated to early intervention services such as premarriage education. However, in recognition of the changing nature of relationships, services have broadened the focus to include de facto relationships and step families. Through its Family Relationships Services Program (FRSP), the government funds services including family relationship counselling, family relationships mediation, family relationships education, adolescent mediation and family therapy, family relationships skills training, and children's contact services. Specific family relationships services catering for men are also available. In mid 2007, the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs released the *Keys to Living Together* kit which provides a DVD and information about relationships. Marriage is mentioned in the kit, but the main focus is on relationships as well as advice and tips on how to improve them. The government has increased funding for the FRSP from approximately \$20 million in 1996-1997 to approximately \$80 million in 2005-2006. While it allocated AUS \$3,893 million in 2002-2003 for family relationship education this is quite modest compared to the \$21,048 million provided for family relationship counselling services (Urbis Keys Young, 2004a: 9).

Through the FRSP, approximately 100 community organizations in approximately 400 locations deliver marriage and relationship services to more than 135,000 clients each year (Department of FaCS, 2003: 3). Programs are available for married or unmarried couples, designed in different formats and can be delivered in a range of settings by clergy, trained para-professionals, lay leaders and teachers. Markman and Halford (2005) argue that participating in premarriage programs 'seems to be most effective when offered to couples early in their relationship, when they are satisfied in that relationship' (2005: 142). Therefore, the sooner couples learn relationship skills, the fewer problems they will experience once married. Standard topics cover communication, family backgrounds; expectations of marriage; intimacy and sexuality and conflict resolution strategies. Programs such as Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) provide learning and relationship skills, while FOCCUS and PREPARE are self-reporting inventories which assess raise issues and identify strengths and concerns for premarried couples. The objective of these programs is to help women and men avoid making bad choices in marriage partners, teach them about the benefits of marriage for families and what to expect along the marriage path. The programs have been developed locally in response to couple needs, but face a range of client demands, and therefore adopt different learning approaches

and skill training (Halford and Simons, 2005). About one quarter of relationship education activities are embedded within courses which are designed with other goals such as parenting programs or supporting military families (Simons and Parker, 2002).

The federal government has recently shifted its main policy focus and investment away from early intervention to facilitating the process of family relationships breakdown. Prime Minister Howard announced a parliamentary inquiry into Australia's custody laws in 2003 in response to aggrieved fathers in the men's lobby groups who argued they should parent their children fifty per cent of the time, but that judges, lawyers and social workers are biased against them. As a result of the inquiry's report - *Every Picture Tells a Story* (see House of Representative Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, 2003), in 2005 the federal government announced major reforms to family law and the development of a new family law system. The objective was to provide mediation, counselling and dispute resolution services for separating couples and assist them in developing a viable parenting plan. The \$397.2 million package to support separating parents included the incremental establishment of 65 Family Relationship Centres (FRCs). It will be compulsory for couples to attend three hours of free counselling before taking a parenting matter to court (Attorney-General's Department, 2005). The purpose of the FRCs is to help couples maintain their autonomy and choice about family decisions and prevent escalation of conflict. Additionally, the FRCs provide pre-marriage and family relationship education. The government has also introduced a family relationships online website and toll-free telephone service which provide advice and information for families to build better relationships. As part of the package, a succession of early intervention services (operating under the FRSP umbrella) commenced in July 2007, offering family relationship education skills and training.

There has been some criticism of the FRCs, for example that they are a 'quick fix' for complex problems (Allison, 2005). Moreover, many of these programs are not new and it remains unclear why services are being duplicated which already exist through the FRSP (albeit with relatively small amounts of funding). The government opened 15 centres in mid 2006 and after five months of operation, more than 22,000 people contact the centres: approximately 18,000 telephoned and more than 4400 visited a centre (Karvelas, 2006b).

While family relationship education programs and services have the potential to improve people's relationships, the government faces a range of challenges. First,

organisations delivering the programs are often church affiliated, yet many couples have little interest in religion and have different expectations about relationships than the churches (Harris et al, 1992). Second, assessment and evaluation of this plethora of diverse programs and providers has been slight. While studies have found that most clients found the education programs a satisfying experience (Harris et al, 1992), there has been little systematic evaluation of the effects of programs on couple satisfaction or stability (Halford and Simons, 2005). Funding for various programs has increased and there are plenty of programs to choose from; however there is a dearth of ‘published, peer-reviewed research as to their effectiveness’ (Parker, 2007, p. 6). Therefore, the long-term benefits of the programs remain unclear at this stage. Third, there is substantial evidence demonstrating the lack of services for particular cohorts. This was predominantly the case for culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous families as well as those living in rural and regional communities. These ‘at risk’ groups have not been sufficiently targeted. Recent reviews of the FRSP found that there were considerable areas of unmet need (see Urbis Keys Young 2004a and 2004b). Findings from a 2006 report by Catholic Welfare Australia and the Department of FACSIA reinforced the dearth of adequate services for these groups.

Marriage and relationship programs are diverse and participation is voluntary (except for premarriage education which is required by the Catholic Church). Another challenge for the government – and service providers – is that potential clients may not be interested in and do not think they need relationship education. Indeed, awareness of relationship services was ‘almost non-existent among non-users’ (Urbis Keys Young, 2004b: 143). Couples exercise their choice not to participate. Hence the government is now considering the development of a ‘quit-smoking-style’ campaign to promote the value of education for enduring relationships (Karvelas, 2006a). This may well raise community awareness, but cannot force people to attend classes. More critically, however, even if couples have been trained in skills and behaviour to strengthen their relationships, the lack of family friendly policies in the workplace will impinge on the quality of their home life and relationships.

The Impact of Labour Market Policies on Families

The federal government has made numerous changes to the labour market that do not particularly benefit relationships and families. It has pursued enterprise bargaining and deregulation of the labour market, supporting individual contracts and workplace

agreements. Prime Minister Howard's policy agenda has done little to promote job sharing, training and skills development and the capacity to bargain, especially for low-income earners has declined. While employment and incomes have grown for many people, for those on low wages Award protection has declined. Many new jobs have been created in the service industries, using casual employment. Employers can hire and fire as needed and workers often receive poor pay, erratic hours and insecure jobs. The Howard Government's *Workplace Relations Act 1996* introduced individual contracts - Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs). While the previous Labor government had introduced non-union agreements and reduced the power of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC), it had resisted implementing anti-union legislation. The 1996 Act moved into this area, restricting union activities, including the right of union officials to enter workplaces and of unions to be involved in negotiations. It also limited the scope of awards, the traditional regulatory instruments and restricted the powers of the AIRC (see Isaac and Lansbury, 2005).

In an attempt to enhance productivity, strengthen the economy and improve international competitiveness, the latest industrial relations changes were legislated in the *Workplace Relations (WorkChoices) Amendment Act 2005*. The government justified the reforms as a way of simplifying and lessening the amount of regulation in the labour market, as providing greater choice for families and enhancing work-life balance.

WorkChoices is a new, national workplace relations system that will provide more choice and flexibility for employees in the workplace. The system will offer better ways to reward effort, increase wages and balance work and family life (Australian Government, 2004).

The federal government argues that this legislation offers an improved process for setting minimum wages and conditions, guarantees minimum conditions, simplifies agreements, provides award protection and implements a national workplace relations system (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2005). The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) supports *WorkChoices*, arguing that award regulation is the 'product of 20th century thinking' and that 'it is time for regulation to move on' and 'recognise the pre-eminence of bargaining over arbitrated awards. The result of further reforms will be better performing businesses' (ACCI, 2006: 14). In contrast, Ellem (2006: 211) argues that despite the government's claims that its policies are about freeing up and simplifying industrial relations, the legislation

is in fact long, dense, complex and prescriptive. *WorkChoices* removes basic entitlements from awards and instead establishes four minimum conditions to be known as 'Australian Fair Pay and Conditions Standards', which Waring et al (2005) claim wither away fairness for workers. These cover annual leave, sick, unpaid parental (including unpaid maternity) and maximum (but annualised) working hours. Together with the minimum wage, this set of conditions constitutes the basic standards of employment (Jolly et al, 2006).

These developments have been widely criticised because workers can be put onto individual contracts that remove conditions like overtime, penalty rates and weekend rates. They will also remove workers' ability to act collectively and the yearly review of minimum wages will be abolished. This will affect people's families and relationships, as the stresses of the workplace spill over into the domestic sphere. According to the Australian Council of Trade Unions, 'these laws will remove basic rights for working people, cut the take home pay of workers, reduce their job security and hurt families' (2006: 2). Pocock and Masterman-Smith (2005) argue that the *WorkChoices* package will lead to more family unfriendly agreements, lower work and family standards for those in the federal system and no prospect of general advances in family friendly conditions (2005: 131). As they point out, provisions such as holiday leave, sick leave or long service leave have been important measures for sustaining the family. The new option of exchanging up to two weeks annual leave for cash will impact on time that 'is crucial to healthy family relationships' (Pocock and Masterman-Smith, 2005: 135). Gaze (2006) contends that the changes 'remove the base-level conditions protecting vulnerable, low-paid workers and strip back conditions necessary to the resolution of conflicting work-family demands' (2006: 106). *WorkChoices* therefore offers little choice or alternatives for many families.

Family-friendly Policies

The federal government has implemented various policies which impact on families. Access to good quality, affordable child care is an ongoing challenge to provide support which is family friendly. In her study, Pocock (2005) argues that there is a strong need for improvement in institutional supports beyond labour law and workplaces. Childcare clearly illustrates the institutional lag in Australia – many families can neither find, nor afford, quality childcare. For example, in 2003 there was an unmet demand for over 160,000 places (2005: 57). Pocock contends that it is difficult to achieve gender equity

and fairness when the driving principles of public policy are market based (Pocock, 2005: 67). Jaumotte (2004) ranks Australia seventeenth out of twenty in its total support for working women with children (including paid leave, childcare and child benefits).

Strategies to manage the work/family balance and provide families with choice have been explored in a range of policy documents. The problem is that the federal government has not considered sufficiently how its labour market policies have negative effects on families. While funding information services and skills-based relationship programs is useful, this learning could be well tested by the stresses and strains of balancing work and family relationships. Many studies illustrate that while marital contentment is connected to factors such as realistic expectations and emotional maturity, adequate income and satisfaction with work and children are also important (Baker, 2001: 107). Several recent reports have indicated the link between relationships, work and domestic responsibilities, demonstrating that managing paid work with family life generates stress.

That the government has not sufficiently acknowledged the different life stages and changes that effect people's relationships is evident in the lack of publicly funded maternity leave (let alone paternal leave) for all parents. This is necessary, however, if women, particularly those on a low income, are to participate in the paid labour market. The birth of the first baby is a challenging time for relationships, as this is a major life transition event. Indeed, the preface of the *To Have and to Hold* report acknowledged this fact (1998: vi). Surely it follows that paid maternity leave would alleviate some of the stress for new parents.

While the debate has been going on for some time, the government has not shown any commitment to paid maternity leave as a way of supporting families Baird and Litwin (2005) claim that an estimated 40 per cent of working women still have no access to paid maternity leave.. The Prime Minister again draws on the choice argument:

There's a range of families and there's a range of financial and particularly female aspirations in this area and we should have policies that fit the range, not say 'you will accept paid maternity leave' or 'you will accept something else because that is our view as to how you should organise your life'. We don't do that. We exist as a government to facilitate and support choice, not tell people how to mould the nature of their family life (Howard, 2002).

This suggests that all families are able to make choices in their own best interests with no constraints such as their social or economic circumstances. Moreover, as Cass (2005: 204) argues, the Howard government's policies emphasise 'an apparently gender-neutral discourse of providing 'choice' to couple families', but paid maternity leave is available for only a minority of employed women, entrenching inequality of access. Consequently, the government's emphasis on choice 'actually reduces choice, and does this most harshly for those with least resources' (2005: 222). Even those who are relatively well-off need to provide affordable housing, education and health care for their families and juggle work and home life.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) has consistently argued for paid maternity leave. It published its interim paper *Valuing Parenthood: Options for Paid Maternity Leave* in 2002. In this report, Goward argued that Australia's paid maternity leave arrangements were limited, haphazard and fall significantly below what could be considered a national system. At the time of the HEROC report, 38 per cent of women workers were entitled to paid maternity leave, mainly in the public sector or in large corporations. Therefore, 62 per cent of working women did not have access to paid maternity leave. A woman could take twelve months unpaid leave and their employers must protect their jobs. This also applies to part time and casual workers who have had twelve months work. In her final report released later in 2002, Goward recommended a fully government-funded paid maternity leave scheme for women in paid work.

The government opposed paid maternity leave, as evident in 2004, when the Treasurer, Peter Costello, announced a new maternity payment. In an attempt to tackle the decline in Australia's fertility rates, the payment aimed to assist all mothers of new babies, whether at home or in paid work.¹ Costello declared that it was a 'good thing' for married couples to have children – 'one for your husband and one for your wife and one for the country'. The payment of \$3,000 for each baby born after July 2004, increased to \$5,000 in July 2008. The benefit would be available for all families, regardless of the family's income, incorporating the existing maternity allowance and baby bonus. However there is little evidence that this paltry sum will lead to women having three babies, or be able to afford the expense of raising them.

¹ According to Bob Birrell, marriage offers the strongest likelihood of having a family (cited in House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services, 2006: 17).

Some feminists condemned these policies encouraging motherhood, emphasising the importance of choice. For example, Summers argues that women will have babies ‘when it is right for *them*, not when a magazine, a movie or a government tries to tell them so’ (2003: 231). Nonetheless, fertility rates have increased marginally since the baby bonus was introduced; in 2005 the fertility rate was 1.81, an increase of 2.2 per cent on the number of births registered in 2004 and the highest since 1993 (ABS, 2005).² Ross Guest, an economist, claims in his recent study that the current bonus of \$4,000 is an expensive way of increasing the birth-rate because it pays for babies that people were planning to have anyway. Moreover, the payment is unnecessary because Australia ‘is on or close to an appropriate demographic path’ (cited in Taylor, 2007). The lump sum payment of a few thousand dollars, however, offers little to entice women to get pregnant. As Whitehouse (2005: 27) points out, while the government’s maternity payment introduced in 2004 is welcome, it is no substitute for paid maternity leave. The government, however, has not been convinced by arguments advocating universal maternity payments. While the debate has been going on for some time, the government has not shown any commitment to paid maternity leave as a way of supporting families.

In another HREOC discussion paper, Goward (2005) explores ways of providing families with choices for balancing their responsibilities, and argues for more flexible working hours to cater for family needs and obligations. She argues that the combination of family payments, other benefits and tax thresholds results in a complex system that influences the decisions that families make about whether a secondary earner re-enters the workforce. Her report continues:

The costs of child care, loss of government payments and the prospect of high effective marginal tax rates will all affect these decisions. The challenge for government is to ensure policies do not unfairly promote certain family arrangements over others (Goward, 2005: 106).

Thus for all families to have real choice in how they manage paid work and family responsibilities, family friendly workplaces are crucial. Particularly those in lower socio-economic groups are less likely than those in professional employment to feel they have any choice or control over their working arrangements or hours (Families

² This can be explained by a range of other factors such as delayed childbearing due to higher standards of living, housing and education.

Australia, 2005: 7). To encourage family well-being, workplaces require, among other things, flexible working hours, paid parental leave and access to good quality child care.

A recent House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services (2006) investigated 'Balancing Work and Family'. It argued that while paid work will not be the choice of some parents, policies should support the diversity of families and the complexity of caring arrangements (2006: 37). Choice and flexibility in child care is an important provision, the report notes that for most families, the approved care category offers only group care in a centre-based environment (2006: 200). The report continues: 'for some parents, problems in accessing care mean that they may have to choose an imperfect option which creates stress for the family, although it allows parents to take on paid work' (2006: 201).

The report demonstrates that working long hours can increase stress related to balancing work and family.³ It also points out that the effects of work and family eventually impact on children's well being. It cites a submission from Relationships Australia: 'competing commitments at home and in the workplace are significant factors in increased stress and conflict in families and in marriage and relationship breakdown. It is well known that conflict in families has a detrimental impact on children' (2006: 127).

One of the report's recommendations is to offer relationship education programs at different stages of people's relationships through the FRSP and to produce a multimedia campaign advertising the availability and benefits of these courses (2006: xxiii). Other recommendations include conducting evaluations of the immediate and long term effects of AWAs and awards in terms of how workers balance their work and family responsibilities and to develop a public campaign highlighting the benefits of family friendly work arrangements in *Workchoices* (2006: xxiv).

HREOC's final paper – *It's About Time: Women, Men, Work and Family* was released in March 2007. Similar to earlier HREOC reports, it proposes various changes to legislation, workplace policy and practice and government policies and programs. This includes paid maternity leave for 14 weeks, addressing the gender pay gap, improving conditions for part time work and developing community resources to assist

³ Data from *Australia Social Trends* (2006) illustrates that in 1985, 22 per cent of men worked more than 50 hours per week. In 2005, this increased to 30 per cent of men working more than 50 hours per week. This supports the suggestion that families are becoming increasingly 'time poor' [although part-time workers and the unemployed may have time, but be poor].

women with workplace negotiation and individual bargaining. These various policy measures have been recommended before, but with little positive response from the government.

Challenges for Managing Relationships, Work and Family

Several studies have illustrated how work stresses and the quality of family relationships are intimately connected. For example, the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economics conducts the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics Survey in Australia (HILDA). Its 2004 study illustrates a negative correlation between parenting stress and relationship satisfaction. It showed that 28.7 per cent of mothers and 20.3 per cent of fathers with high levels of parenting stress report high levels of relationship satisfaction. This contrasts with 53.6 per cent of mothers and 60.4 per cent of fathers with low levels of parenting stress reporting high levels of satisfaction in their relationship. Work family stress is also related to marriage satisfaction, for both fathers and mothers, as there are weak negative correlations between work-parenting stress and relationship satisfaction. Only 39.7 per cent of fathers and 38.7 per cent of mothers who report high work-family stress also report high levels of relationship satisfaction, while 62.9 per cent of fathers and 53.6 per cent of mothers with low levels of work-family stress have high levels of relationship satisfaction (Melbourne Institute of Applied Economics, 2004: 27).

A 2003 Relationships Australia (RA) survey of over a thousand people found that 89 per cent of respondents agreed that relationships suffer because of work-life conflict. Additionally, 40 per cent of parents feel that they have 'no real choice' in their ability to balance paid work and family (2003:22). When asked how this balance could be redressed, the highest response went to an increase in government financial support (47 per cent), more flexible working hours (46 per cent) and more part-time work for women (39 per cent) (2003: 23). The survey also showed that the biggest negative influence on partner relationships was 'lack of time spent together' (38 per cent). RA's survey in 2006 found that balancing work and family life continues to be a major issue, with a majority of respondents (88 per cent) agreeing that finding a balance can cause difficulties in their relationship. As in the previous study, 'lack of time spent together' (36 per cent) was the most commonly cited negative influence on the quality of the relationship (2006: 9). This is supported by a Families Australia poll, released in 2006,

which shows that two-thirds of those surveyed said that achieving a balance between work and family life is now more difficult than five years ago.⁴

This data supports Pocock's (2003) analysis. She argues that there are 'hidden costs of work' due to the unequal distribution of unpaid work and insufficient family time. For women, the pressures were significant when they bore the greater responsibility for unpaid work as well as working in the paid work force. Conflicting demands affected intimacy and were a source of anger, tiredness and unhappiness in many relationships. These clashes constituted grounds for divorce for some couples who experienced guilt, frustration and resentment (Pocock, 2003: 113). Pocock promotes the idea of a new work/care regime, so that policy supplies 'a menu of options that accommodates diverse situations' (2003: 244). This involves developing manageable shifts between care and paid work, quality affordable child care and further support for lower income families. It also indicates that governments and employers should make larger contributions to the cost of maintaining and caring for the labour force. However, the Howard government's current *WorkChoices* agenda suggests that these types of reforms will not be forthcoming in the near future.

Conclusion

The Australian federal government espouses choice and family values from a perspective of economic neo-liberalism. Its conservative social policy agenda has attempted to prepare individuals for family life at a time when relationships are becoming more complex and fluid. Marriage and relationship programs have potential, but these educational activities and services have not been located within the context of increasing work demands and lowering protection for working families. Thus the government has not recognized the correlation between working patterns and family breakdowns.

⁴ A study by Pocock and Clarke (2005) found that working parents were not necessarily a problem for the 10-12 and 16-18 year olds who were part of their focus groups. They found that children had a preference for 'time over more money', with their parents, concluding that:

It is not whether parents go to work or not, but the state in which they come home, that really affects children. This 'state' reflects objective characteristics of jobs (like hours and intensity) as well as the extent to which parents' preferences match their jobs. The debate about whether to work or not needs to be reframed in Australia... In particular, less attention should be paid to the issue of whether mothers have paid jobs, and more to the work of fathers (2005: 76).

Thus, good working conditions, rather than work per se, affect children's well being. They advocate policy measures which address problems such as long or unsocial hours of work.

There are a number of problems with the government's celebration of choice for families in its policy development. First, the policies view women and men simply as individuals who make their own choices and are responsible for their own actions. In doing so, it cannot force people to utilise relationship services particularly in an era when marriage, family and relationships are changing. Second, strategies such as promoting marriage and relationship education programs and establishing the FRCs can only go so far in improving family life. This is related to the third point: the government has neglected the connections between the well-being of people's personal relationships to their well-being as workers in reforms such as *Workchoices*. This ignores the links between the private and the public spheres, and thereby avoids tackling the challenges of improving the interaction between relationship policies with other policies regarding labour laws, workplace conditions and universal entitlement to maternity leave. Marriage and relationship support services are not coordinated with other policies, for instance childcare, welfare payments and job training. Fourth, while the Australian government is developing policies to support families, its labour market policies may actually undermine the quality of life for many working families.

There is an absence of a shared framework to support families which could develop the full range of services incorporating relationship education, paid maternity leave, good quality, affordable child care and decent working conditions. Political constructions of family relationships therefore have been based on contradictory policy assumptions because the government has not sufficiently recognized the connection between work and personal issues. Many families experience frustration in attempting to juggle work and domestic responsibilities. Many women still face the double burden if they work in the home and the paid work force. The latest labour market changes do not appear to support life choices in people's relationships and workplaces. The continuing challenge of balancing work, relationships and family are important considerations for sustaining family life. If family friendly measures are not provided, many couples will find it difficult to nurture their relationships as well as struggle to meet the many demands of the workplace, especially if they are not wealthy. If governments are serious about providing families with choice, they need to consider this wider context.

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