



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**COMMITTEES**

**Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee**

**Report**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 22 June 1998**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 22 June 1998  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Andrews, Kevin, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr ANDREWS** (Menzies) (12.44 pm)—On behalf of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, I present the committee's report entitled *To have and to hold: strategies to strengthen marriage and relationships*, together with the minutes of proceedings and evidence received by the committee.

Ordered that the report be printed.

**Mr ANDREWS**—This report arises from a reference given to the committee by the Attorney-General (Mr Williams) in August 1996 to inquire into the factors contributing to marriage and relationship breakdown, and the most effective strategies to address these matters. In almost two years, the committee held public hearings in all states and territories, received 177 submissions from family service providers, held informal discussions with the Tiwi people on Bathurst Island, visited family service agencies, observed information and mediation sessions conducted by the Family Court, examined marriage education course materials and spoke to educators, and discussed the issues with leading researchers both in Australia and overseas.

The focus of the report is the strengthening of marital relationships. In the report, the committee has noted a series of demographic trends, including: people marrying later and more never marrying; an increase in single-parent families, with more than 25 per cent of children today born out of wedlock; a quadrupling of the divorce rate; and a reduction in the remarriage rate. We also reviewed and spoke to a number of leading social scientists about the considerable and mounting evidence that marriage brings health benefits for both men and women and, conversely, that separation and divorce are problematic for men, women and children.

This report is about preventing marital distress and the consequent breakdown of relationships. It arises from our concern for children—for their future, their happiness and their ability to form their own loving and fulfilling relationships. The central theme of the report is that the family relationships services program within the Attorney-General's Department should recognise in its objectives and funding mechanisms the programs of prevention—namely, marriage and relationship education and family skills training—as distinct from programs of therapy, counselling and mediation.

The committee believes that the priority areas for marriage and relationship education relate to three life transition events: getting married; the birth of the first child; and separation, including the formation of new relationships. Amongst the 55 recommendations are the following: a national strategy to help strengthen marriage and family in Australia in light of the cost of marriage breakdown, which we estimate at between \$3 billion and \$6 billion a year; an increase of \$1.6 million in funding to the preventive programs of marriage and relationship education; and a new, fairer and transparent funding system that will help to encourage more people to participate in these programs.

The committee also recommends the following: a new council for marriage, relationships and parenting education to be established as a peak body in the field, both to represent educators involved in this work and, where appropriate, to provide advice to government; a 10 per cent increase in funding of about \$1.5 million for programs of marriage counselling; and the relocation of the Australian Institute of Family Studies in the Attorney-General's Department, with a refocusing on its initial objectives to look at factors contributing to marital stability and instability in this nation.

The committee also recommends the wider promotion of marriage and relationship education and a new range of financial incentives, including the provision of complimentary vouchers to be made available by family relationships agencies and marriage celebrants to encourage access by both engaged and de facto couples to marriage and relationship education programs. The committee supports the work of the family relationships agencies and believes its recommendations will assist them in their valuable community work.

The committee recommends that the maximum notification period for intention to marry be extended by law to 18 months to encourage more people to seek marriage education before their wedding. The committee recommends no change to the minimum notification period of one month.

I thank the members of the committee for their interest and work, especially the deputy chair, the honourable member for Barton (Mr McClelland). I also thank the committee secretary, Claessa Surtees, for her sterling efforts, particularly over the last three months in putting this report together, and our researcher, Mary Anne Neilsen, who capably picked up the work midway through the inquiry.

For the past two decades, much attention has been given to strategies to lessen the consequences of marriage breakdown. Much time has been spent and many reports have been written on separation, divorce and family law. We believe it is timely to renew our attention on the causes of marital stability and instability, and to promote programs of preventive education. I commend the report to the House.