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MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Budget 2005-06

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Plibersek, Tanya, MP

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Ms PLIBERSEK (Sydney) (3.00 pm)—I arrived at work today to find this letter from Nancy in my email:

I am writing regarding Peter Costello's budget delivered last night.

Once upon a time, being a mother and raising young children to be good and proud adults was considered a worth while job, and a job worth doing. It seems today that being a mum is a dirty word.

I have 3 children, 2 in high school and a toddler. I now have to consider the option of putting her in child care and leave the family home to work out side.

Why are women not given the choice. I believe that women who do work out side the home have every right to do so, but I also think that we should be given the choice of what is right for our families.

When we went back for our 3rd child, it was under the agreement that I would be there for her, during the day, before school and after school (when the time comes, as I was for my other children)

She is now not going to have that option, because being a mum is no longer good enough. I would hope that the Labor party will condemn this budget and support mothers (single or other wise) to have the options and choices that they rightly deserve.

Doesn't that say it all? Since when has 'mother' become a dirty word? This government talks about choice for mothers and choice for parents, and in this budget it shows that has always been empty rhetoric. When it comes to tax cuts, we know who is going to benefit most once again from this budget. No wonder the backbench of the Liberal Party were cheering on Tuesday night: they are going to do very well out of this. Unfortunately, their constituents are not going to do so well. How can a budget that delivers 45 per cent of tax cuts to the top 10 per cent of earners be considered fair? There is no fairness in this budget: there is no fairness when it comes to the tax cuts and there is no fairness when it comes to welfare reform. How can a budget that delivers a \$2½ billion superannuation surcharge tax cut to people earning over \$100,000 a year be considered a fair budget when so few people are paying the superannuation surcharge?

When we look more closely at the welfare reform measures, we see there are two great unfairnesses. The first is that there is for the first time a two-tier system for parents on parenting payment and a two-tier system for people on disability support pension. How can it be right that two different people with the same disability or with the same caring responsibilities receive two different payments, depending on when they went onto benefits? The unfair changes contained in the 2005 budget make life harder for the neediest Australians and they fail to deliver on the real need for welfare reform.

For months the government has been trumpeting its plans for welfare reform. The centrepiece of this budget was supposed to be about moving people from welfare to work. Those of us who are concerned about the poorest Australians were watching very carefully, hoping, in a triumph of optimism over experience, that this government would invest in the child care that these parents needed and in the training that these parents needed and help them find work. What a sad disappointment it has been. What a huge let-down. What a tragic waste. What a wasted opportunity this budget is. When it comes to tax cuts, with \$22 billion to spend, it is mind-boggling that the tax cuts for the lowest paid Australians are so low.

The government says that it believes in the rights of all mothers to stay at home and look after their kids, but this budget makes it clear that it is only married mothers who are allowed to stay home and look after their kids. Why is a woman who stays at home and looks after her children called a homemaker? She is employed in domestic duties. She is rewarded with family tax benefit part B because this government says that it believes in choice for stay-at-home mums. But if her husband dies or leaves, suddenly that changes. If she is doing the work of two parents because her husband has died or left her or is violent and has driven her and the kids from home, then suddenly she is a bludger. The government's rhetoric about women is: 'It's great to be a homemaker and we'll give you tax cuts to stay at home. What's more, we'll make child care so expensive and so hard to find that it's not worth your while working.' But if the father of your children leaves or dies or you cannot live

with him and you cannot find work overnight, then suddenly you are a bludger. The Prime Minister pretends that he values the work of raising children, but this budget shows that he does not. The Treasurer is out there encouraging us to have more children, but if women do their bit for our declining population and then end up alone they get treated like shirkers and bludgers.

Labor believes—and this government used to say it did—that the most important job of any parent, partnered or not, is looking after their child. Some parents choose to combine this with working outside the home; some do not. Many would dearly love to but cannot. When I grew up, my mum was there every day after school with a snack and a question about how my day had been and what had I learnt at school. I choose to work and I cannot offer that lovely experience to my children. But for this government to tell mothers that they are not allowed to make that choice because they have no man to support them beggars belief.

It would be nice if single parents had more choices. It would be great if they could simply choose to engage in fulfilling part-time work between 9.30 am and 2.30 pm and then run home to pick up the kids from school. But where are the jobs for these people? The Howard government has done nothing to increase the number of permanent part-time jobs. New jobs are mostly casual, meaning parents cannot plan child care. They cannot knock back shifts either. Who is going to care for the kids at irregular intervals and short notice? Casual jobs are insecure. How can parents who have a responsibility to put food on the table week after week be expected to give up social security benefits and start paying for child care, transport and all the other work expenses for a job they could lose tomorrow?

The government has not supported a claim before the Industrial Relations Commission for the lowest paid casual workers who have been with an employer for more than a year to request permanent part-time work. With permanent part-time work these parents could plan their child care. They would know how much was going to be in the pay packet at the end of the fortnight. It would make it possible for those parents to combine work and family responsibilities, but does this government support that? No way. It is not interested in helping; it is just interested in punishing. The government will not provide incentives to employers or even show any moral leadership in offering work during school hours.

Most Australians at some point in their lives rely on government benefits or receive a payment to help them make ends meet. For most the period is short and the amount is modest. Welfare recipients are not a breed apart; they are not a separate species. They are our neighbours, our sisters, our parents and our children, and this government has relied on false stereotypes of teen mums and bad backs to justify these cuts. The reality is different. Over 64 per cent of single mothers are working or looking for work, and most would love to be in the work force if we gave them the help with training and child care that they need. Their children are the poorest in the land. They are already missing out on meals and school excursions. Make no mistake: this attack on mothers is an attack on their children.

It is also worth noting—and I note with a sense of shame—that, under this budget, two single mothers get two different payments and are subjected to two different regimes depending on whether they go onto benefits before or after 1 July 2006. This applies to disability support pensioners as well. They will be required to undergo regular updates on whether they are still disabled. There are two different regimes. A parent whose youngest child is over six and who already receives the sole parent pension will continue with the same entitlements and burdens as they have currently, but an Australian whose marriage breaks up and who goes on the sole parent pension after 1 July 2006 suffers an income drop of \$44 a fortnight when their child turns six years old. It is incredible that two parents who do the same work at home and face the same barriers to employment will receive two different benefits. I am sure that the government, in the name of streamlining, simplicity and efficiency, will decide sooner or later that disability support pensioners, who receive two different levels of benefits—\$77 a fortnight different—should receive a streamlined payment, and you can bet your bottom dollar that it will not be the higher payment that everyone receives; it will be the lower one.

This budget's other great lack is that it does absolutely nothing to provide the child care or the training that these parents need to re-enter the work force. The government has made much of the 84,000 out of school hours care places that it has provided. We heard the figures today. There will be 190,000 extra people moving into the work force and 35,000 people are already on waiting lists for those out of school hours care places. Where are the extra places coming from, and what does the Prime Minister think those extra kids are going to do? They will go home to empty houses. They will be a new generation of latchkey kids.

When it comes to training, the government has done nothing to help with the training needs of welfare recipients. Many of them have not finished high school. They need training to be employable, to make them

attractive to employers. Everyone agrees on that. At the same time that the government is talking about sending people back to work, it has turned 400,000 young Australians away from TAFE and universities. At the same time as we have a skills shortage, it has turned 400,000 Australians away from TAFE and universities. There is only one Job Network place for every seven parenting payment recipients. What are the others going to do? They will suffer the punishment and they will suffer the cuts to their benefits, but they will receive no help, no aid. When it comes to disability support pensioners, again it is only cuts the government has in mind.

We should not be surprised, though: it is a Liberal budget. It is a budget for the wealthy, the natural constituency of the Liberal Party. No wonder there was cheering and clapping here the other night from all those people up there in their black ties and cocktail dresses, the backbench of the Liberal Party here—all on over \$100,000 a year. They are doing really well out of these tax cuts. They are doing really well out of the cuts to the superannuation surcharge. Let them go home and explain it to the people on minimum wages in their electorates.

This government has accused us of class warfare, but this budget makes war on the poor. It is a budget that does so much for so few and so little for so many. It benefits the minority at the expense of the majority. As I said, 45 per cent of the tax cuts go to the top 10 per cent of earners. The superannuation surcharge of \$2½ billion goes to a minority of high-income earners. It goes to only one per cent of women workers, incidentally. These tax cuts are the most unfair proposed by any government in recent history. It is the same government, mind you, that has opposed every pay increase for workers on the minimum wage since it came to government. This government is happy to give tax cuts to its wealthy mates, but it will oppose to the death any wage increase for workers in the hospitality industry who are turning down beds in great big hotels that government members are happy to spend the night in.

If the government had its way, the poorest workers in this country would be \$45 a week worse off than they are at the moment. Let's put a human face on this: Louise from Victoria, a single mother with four kids, still has three living at home studying. She does not drive a car. She cannot afford it. She ran a small business from home designing mirror frames. She is terrified by this attitude to single mothers and she is offended by the stereotyping. She knows that the lack of apprenticeships means that her kids cannot get jobs. She does not have a husband or a father for her kids. She does everything for herself. Why does she deserve to be punished? (*Time expired*)