



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Work and Family

SPEECH

Monday, 23 May 2005

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Questioner
Speaker Plibersek, Tanya, MP

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Ms PLIBERSEK (Sydney) (4.53 pm)—I want to thank the member for Dunkley for raising the very important issues that he has. He has gone through a lot of the services that are in his electorate, and I know that he takes a great interest in these issues. It is a shame, however, that the government he is part of has really dropped the ball when it comes to domestic violence, which is one of the issues that he mentioned. The Partnerships Against Domestic Violence program, which initially got \$50 million in funding, has been cut back to a \$16 million program, and I fear that many of the excellent prototype projects that were set up under Partnerships Against Domestic Violence will not have their funding continued. For a social ill that costs Australia a great deal in terms of heartache and broken bones and also \$8 billion a year in financial terms, it is a shame that the member for Dunkley has not been able to convince his colleagues about the importance of some of the issues that he has mentioned.

The issue I want to raise in the grievance debate today is the Prime Minister's failure to address the barbecue-stopper issue of work and family balance. It was an issue that the Prime Minister identified prior to the last election as one of those that Australians were talking about all over the country. He called it a barbecue-stopper, and that term has really stuck because it is so evocative of the fact that so many Australians are really struggling to balance their caring responsibilities with their increasing workloads. We are some of the longest-working people in the OECD. We work more unpaid overtime and longer hours than people in most other countries in the OECD, and that is really showing when it comes to people balancing their caring responsibilities with that increased workload.

It is unfortunate that this budget—which, through child care, could have done so much to address one of the major problems in balancing work and family responsibilities—has been so disappointing when it comes to new funding for child care. There are around 84,000 extra places for out of school hours care, and Labor, of course, welcomes those extra places. The bad news, unfortunately, is that we estimate—and Treasury suggest—that there are 35,000 children already on waiting lists for out of school hours care. With the increased number of single parents and disability support pensioners being encouraged to find work with the government's welfare to work changes, those extra 84,000 places will be eaten up very quickly.

Identifying the need more broadly for child care in this country is very difficult to do, because the last child-care census figures that were released suggested that there were 174,500 kids that needed extra care in Australia. That figure is occasionally contradicted by the Minister for Family and Community Services, who says the figures are old; they are 2002 figures. That is true, and the shame in all of this is that there was a child-care census conducted last year, in 2004, but when Labor asked about the child-care census in the last lot of budget estimates we were told that the data was being 'cleaned' and the census would be released imminently. We are now at the next lot of estimates and we still have not seen the census. It must have been very dirty data indeed if it is still being cleaned! Strangely, the next census will be in 2006. We are only six months away from the time of the next census and we still have not seen the 2004 figures.

There is a shocking lack of extra child-care funding in this budget. It is also interesting to note that one of the less frequently told stories about the budget when it comes to child care is that the JET program, which has been one of the most effective programs for moving single parents from welfare to work—a program initiated by Labor when we were last in government and continued by the current administration—has been contracted so that parents who are undertaking training courses that go for more than a year will not be eligible for it anymore. So all those single parents who would like to be training in an area of skill shortage—in hairdressing, child care, refrigeration mechanics or any of the traditional trades where we are facing such looming shortages any day now—will no longer be eligible for JET funding. That really beggars belief, considering all the rhetoric about moving people from welfare to work and, incidentally, all the rhetoric about the skills shortage we are facing.

While on child care, I also want to draw the House's attention to the upcoming release of the broadband overhaul of child-care funding that the minister has been planning for some time. We know that there will be a number of very badly affected centres. One of those is represented by the member for Ballarat, Catherine King,

who is in the chamber now. She has presented a petition of 700 names asking that the Daylesford Community Child Care Centre not lose its funding. It is looking at losing funding of \$87,000 a year because of Minister Patterson's review of how child-care funding is distributed. The Daylesford centre is an excellent multifunction centre providing a number of different services in the one child-care centre. The petition received by the member for Ballarat came from residents, friends and community members who support the Daylesford centre. The irony is that the Daylesford centre might close—and the member for Ballarat will say more on this—while it is helping single parents stay in the work force. Government changes to the funding model will lead to increased costs for parents and may well mean that this centre will close or at least that many of the parents that currently use it will no longer be able to. Instead of being able to work, in fact they will be pulling out of the work force.

The government has spoken many times about its vision for the new industrial relations regime under which this country should be run. The notion that anything in the government's plans in the arena of industrial relations will actually make it easier for families to balance their work and caring responsibilities is just laughable. We see that the government has opposed the suggestions of the Australian Council of Trade Unions in the work and family test case before the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. There were things in the ACTU's suggestions that the employers but not the government agreed with. The government is more hardline than employer groups when it comes to work and family balance. That is very disappointing for parents. As well there is unfair dismissal. How fair is it that a parent who had been working in a small business and was unfairly dismissed could no longer support their family? How does this level of insecurity make it easier for parents to balance their work and caring responsibilities?

We had a question today from the shadow minister for industrial relations about the collapsing of classifications in awards so that some workers might lose \$100 or \$150 a week from their pay packets. We know that the government has opposed all of the national minimum wage cases. If the government had had its way, workers on minimum wages would be \$44 a week worse off than they are currently. In every instance when this government has had the opportunity to make it easier for families to balance their work and caring responsibilities it has not just shirked the opportunity but has in fact acted against the interests of families by making it more difficult for them to balance their work and caring responsibilities.