



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (AUSTRALIANS WORKING TOGETHER AND OTHER 2001 BUDGET MEASURES) BILL 2002

In Committee

SPEECH

Thursday, 12 December 2002

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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Page 7938
Questioner
Speaker Cherry, Sen John

Source Senate
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Senator CHERRY (Queensland) (5.07 pm)—The Australian Democrats oppose schedule 1 in the following terms:

(1) Schedule 1, page 3 (line 6), to page 27 (line 4), items 1 to 53, **TO BE OPPOSED**.

We seek to delete schedule 1 from the Family and Community Services Legislation Amendment (Australians Working Together and other 2001 Budget Measures) Bill 2002 because it imposes activity test requirements on sole parent families with teenage children. The Democrats believe that these provisions should simply not be in this bill. We do not think that imposing a flawed, failing and discredited breaching and penalties regime on sole parents is the best way we can progress welfare reform at this point in time. The Senate has heard an awful lot about the breaching regime and the penalties regime and Centrelink's management of breaching and penalties. As the Minister for Family and Community Services has asked me to do so, I will acknowledge on the public record that the government has tried to address these issues and has released significant policy changes at the administrative level to try to improve the breaching regime. But it still has not gone far enough. It has left significant penalties in the system, which it now proposes to knock on to sole parent families. The Democrats simply cannot see any merit in this.

We see merit—great merit—in encouraging sole parents to engage in the labour force on a voluntary basis if they feel they can do so. ABS data shows that sole parents already participate in the labour force more than any other beneficiary group. About 50 per cent of sole parents already participate in work. There is plenty of evidence to show that, as a general rule, sole parents want to engage in the work force and want to find the extra economic boost to improve their family situation if they can possibly do so. The impediment is not so much willingness but issues about child care, access to retraining, the huge waiting list for the JET program and trying to ensure that people are job ready and get their self-esteem up. The government should be addressing these issues rather than trying to impose a compliance regime which is clearly failing for other groups of beneficiaries. Now they are seeking to impose it on sole parents as well.

The Democrats believe that by putting this regime into place for sole parent families we are devaluing the significance of caring for children. The provisions in this schedule do not sufficiently take into account the link between the work and family responsibilities of sole parents. It is almost as though this government has two rules—the rule for two-parent families and the rule for one-parent families. The Prime Minister announced only two weeks ago that work and family balance would be one of his key priorities for this term, but when it comes to sole parents the balance is about trying to force them into work with inadequate safeguards to protect their family responsibilities. We find that principle offensive. It discriminates between two-parent families, which appear to be approved under the government's model, and one-parent families, which are somehow odd. This attitude comes through quite strongly in the reform paper released by the minister today. It includes somewhat misleading figures about the extent to which sole parent families rely on income assistance as their primary source of income. There are also suggestions that the pension payments at the moment encourage them not to repartner, stop them getting married and a whole range of other things. I talked with the Sole Parents Union earlier today, and they said that they cannot find a single person who has refused to take on a new partner because of the pension arrangements. It is something which, frankly, is quite offensive to find in a government document.

The amendments in this schedule will directly impact on the welfare of children. It should be up to the parent to decide whether the balance between their work and family responsibilities is such that they should not participate in the work force in order to ensure that they are there for their children when they come home from school or when they are going through particular difficulties. We do not believe this is adequately reflected in the legislation and in the safeguards the government is proposing, and we just do not trust Centrelink to run a decent exemption program. The Commonwealth Ombudsman's report contains scathing criticism of Centrelink's administration of the penalties procedures. It says they are ignoring their own policies and their own legislation and that they are cutting corners and not giving sufficient attention to the individual circumstances of the cases they are dealing with. From that point of view, I do not believe it is time to impose a discredited system on sole parents. I

understand and acknowledge that the minister is trying to reform this system, but it is still discredited. Until it is fixed and working effectively and fairly for other income groups, it should not be imposed on one of our more vulnerable and most stressed groups—sole parent families. For these reasons, the Democrats urge the committee to delete this schedule from the bill. We will deal with the rest of it on its merits.