

I wish to comment on Australia's Tax-Transfer System as it relates to families, focusing particularly on the transfer measure: Parenting Payment.

Extensive transfer reforms were implemented during the term of the previous government, including mutual obligation requirements. These mutual obligation requirements were, on the face of it, designed to support the purpose of the transfers to which they were attached. For example, Newstart's requirements included job search and work for the dole. If the purpose of Parenting Payment is to support parenting, it seemed unaccountable to have been delivered of a mutual obligation requirement that frustrates this purpose. Parenting Payment's mutual obligation requirement of 15 hours of Labour Force Participation per week, while styled for the popular ear, as a requirement for the idle to work, is in fact a work-shifting requirement—a movement of children from the active care of principal carer parents to the care-in-bulk of commercial childcare. The extent of the Labour Force Participation requirement fails to recognize the continuing validity of the stay-at-home model of parenting, and fails to respect the enduring right of families to determine their internal organization. I ask the committee to recommend modifying the Labour Force Participation requirements to address the above concerns.

In its reform of Parenting Payment, the previous Government improperly assumed a parental role, and gave insufficient regard to the unique needs of children, to the form that meeting these needs must take in terms of service delivery, to the special relationship between parents and children, to the work of the Principal Care Parent and to the type of care that the Principal Carer Parent undertakes.

In light of the guidelines of the inquiry, the terms of the Labour Force Participation requirement attached to Parenting Payment fail the test of equity understood as a negotiated mutual obligation, directs a particular outcome rather than promoting opportunity, places a burden on Principal Carer Parents not commensurate with either the tax-transfer savings or capacity constraint alleviation a Labour Force Participation requirement seeks to achieve, and ignores a fundamental human right, being 'the free exercise of family responsibilities'.

THE RELEVANT SECTIONS OF PARENTING PAYMENT

Welfare To Work is the title of the Government Policy introducing Labour Force Participation requirements to Parenting Payment.

The Commonwealth Government, through the Department Of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DWER), administers Parenting Payment.

Parenting Payment is delivered to the Principal Carer Parent of children less than seventeen years of age. Parenting Payment is a Means-Tested transfer.

Principal Carer Parent is a term used in Social Security Law, a body of law administered by DWER. However, on application forms for Parenting Payment, DWER uses the term 'Principal Carer(s)'. The entity referred to is presumably the same. I have not been able to find definitions of either Principal Carer Parent, Principal Carer or the type of Care that is being given, anywhere on DWER's website. Bureaucratic language has difficulty in capturing the relationship between Parent and

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Child. My interpretation is as follows: Children typically have a Principal, or main Carer, who provides a type of Care that could reasonably be described as Primary i.e. supervision, shelter and sustenance - as opposed to, for example, Educational or Medical. My interpretation is that in DWER's usage on Parenting Payment Application Forms, Principal Carer is the person responsible for the provision and maintenance of such Primary Care.

Parenting Payments' Labour Force Participation Requirement directs partnered Principal Carer Parents, whose youngest child has turned six, to place their dependent children with available Government Approved Childcare Providers if suitable Labour Force Employment is offered to the Principal Carer Parent. This condition placed on eligibility for receipt of Parenting Payment is variously described by DWER as a Mutual Obligation provision, or a Participation Requirement. Unsuitable Work is defined in the Social Security Law Guide 3.2.8.30. (SSLG). Exemptions to the above MO/PR are set out in SSLG. Recipients of Parenting Payment single face this requirement when their youngest child turns eight. For both groups the requirement is to actively seek, or engage in, 15 hours of Labour Force participation per week.

The above requirement is in force for 52 weeks of the year, and thus extends across school holidays, pupil free days and sick days.

The committee should note that principled rejection of any aspect of Welfare to Work, as it applies to Parenting Payment, results in the complete withdrawal of Parenting Payment, not a reduction in the amount.

FAMILIES AND THE TAX-TRANSFER SYSTEM

Australia's tax system first approaches taxpayers as individuals before an annual righting that recognizes the individual's family situation. Whether it should do this is open to question, but it is certainly not a model for the transfer system. Families do not relate internally as bureaucracies, or as individuals to bureaucracies; the principal carer parent and child do not have the kind of relationship that can be separately managed by Government and then a reckoning occur between the pair come the 1st of July. In directing the transfer system, Government must deal with the family as a group, indeed, as the fundamental group unit of society. Except during periods of national emergency or in instances of failed

family, Government should not be permitted to determine the internal organization of families. Still less should it be permitted to view family as a labour pool from which to select the useful and the useless, the young, the old, the working age-in short, act as though families have no other reality than as individual citizens who happen to live under the same roof.

Australia's tax/transfer system should, and in large part does, recognize that:

(1) Children have the status of vulnerable dependants.

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(2) All measures directed at children, tax-transfer based or not, require activation by adult personnel.

(3) Citizens are created within families; there is no nation without citizens and no coherent nation without healthy, well educated and well cared for citizens. The formation of such citizens begins in childhood. Parents are not only best placed to guide the formation of their children, but have a natural right to do so. While the formation of children is not immediate wealth creation, the wealth created by principal carer parents is the vivifying wealth of nations.

(4) Australia's tax/transfer system does not reflect the actual cost of parenting. Parenting is a work of profound value adding. From the point of view of the Government and the nation, transfer measures directed at families offer a tremendous 'return on investment'.

(5) Uniquely, children live 'in the moment'. The crying baby and the teenager stressed over the H.S.C. are on a continuum, as are childhood illnesses, the legitimate need for school holiday recreation and the school's timetable of pupil-free days. Good parenting is child-centred and responds to the reality of children's lives.

(6) The bonds that naturally exist within families are the fundamental human bonds and thus stronger than the bonds that individual family members may have with Government or with any other Australian citizen. They form the basis of stable societies.

THE ZIETGIST-MARKET DOMINANCE AND ITS EFFECT ON CHILDREN

Wayne Swan recently described 'working mothers' as 'the unsung heroes of the economy', but alas, had no words for the children in long-day childcare (Fully 30% of 4 year olds are in long-day childcare- care defined by the childcare industry as 8-11 hours a day.). Peter Costello openly mocked those who thought his Parenting Payment reforms were cruel but to his credit he didn't pretend these reforms were good for anyone but the market. For its part, the Market pretends disinterest, happy to deal with children as consumers, but not as children.

Early in the 1990's, think tanks and the economists, politicians and senior public servants linked to them, complain (out of earshot of their own mothers) that ' the country can't support all these women doing nothing', while failing to acknowledge that the non-existent work of parenting has to be done by someone. (The commentator, John Stone, writing in Quadrant Magazine, recently described Parenting Payment as 'sit-down money', neatly managing to skewer both Aborigines and the poor.)

Media, overwhelmingly committed emotionally and financially to a childcare model of parenting, pass lightly over Parenting Payment's extraordinary reforms, and concentrate on Welfare to Work's breeching regimen.

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Working principal carer parents, while accepting a wage, are feted as martyrs to the economy, as special servants of the state-as heroes, while stay at home parenting becomes seen as-if not a flat out work avoidance ploy-then an occupation suitable only for dullards. (Parenting itself is in danger of being seen as merely a lifestyle choice; no longer a core, society-building relationship, but a user pays indulgence. The conservatives who targeted poor parents through Welfare To Work may be undermining their own families.)

It should be acknowledged that in the last election cycle, while reforms to Parenting Payment were a non-issue, Australian parents who practise the childcare model of parenting were the subjects of a bidding war in the area of childcare fee rebates. Unquestionably, Australia has seen a society wide embrace of the institutional care of children. Nevertheless only North Korean officials actually believe that children are better off separated from the care of their parents. (Totalitarian regimes are particularly hostile to family, and while we are not hostile to family, we are certainly not asking children whether they prefer the stay at home model or the childcare model.) Yet even though the majority of Australian parents practise the childcare model of parenting, I believe we are leaving an era when childcare is viewed as an unambiguous good. (It is finally being recognized as not positive for the child in the early weeks, hence the maternity leave debate.)

Perhaps the least critical observation that can be made about the society wide adoption of institutional care of children is that it is a profound social experiment. (It becomes social engineering when it is forced upon a segment of the population.) Yet experiment might be too generous a description since significant elements of the experiment are prone to go missing. I refer of course to constant staff turnover, to blowouts in staff/child ratios and to the profit imperative that squeezes the child's world to that of astroturf, brightly painted concrete and elaborate fortifications. However, as the labour force participation requirements for Parenting Payment apply, at this stage, only to principal carer parents whose youngest child has turned 6, I confine myself to the observation that childcare's oft repeated claims to 'education' and 'socialization' are entirely redundant. For school-aged children, childcare is nothing more than warehousing.

What is it about children? Why are they all of a sudden seen as boring to be with, an impediment to earning, a cost burden, rather than a joy? In terms of transfers, I note that recipients of Carers Allowance are not required to place their subjects of care into institutions for 15 hours each week as a condition of their Carers Allowance and any other transfer that may rest upon it. The obvious inconsistency is resolved with the realization that the aged and disabled cannot be cheaply cared for in bulk. In fact, the Government does all it can to keep the aged and disabled out of institutions as long as possible, attempting all the while to slot children in as early as possible. Clearly, it irritates some politicians and economists that children cannot be warehoused until of working age, and that childhood extends to all of 16 years of age. Politicians and economists want parents to have children, recognizing childbearing as vital to society, but (some) politicians and economists do not want the costs involved in 'one on one' parenting, minimal though these costs are. The same politicians and economists

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would be loathe to completely release parents from their responsibility of care-not because they believe in family-but because it would not be cost effective for the Government to 'incubate' children. Under the different form of pressure that 'capacity constraints' generates, family becomes a 'safety-net' for Government in its failure to pursue policies that guarantee labour supply. Apart from immigration policy, is it bad form to note that both sides of Government support a 'right' that directly curtails the birth rate?

Government is experimenting with how far the bonds of family can be stretched. (Note that in the care of aged and disabled, particular families are encouraged to rediscover their bonds.) Children, viewed as adaptable, are the principle focus of these attenuating bonds. The norms of 'economies of scale' are applied to care of children; the norms of 'cottage industry' or 'piece work' are used for the aged and disabled.

Pre reform, Parenting Payment extended uninterrupted until the youngest child turned 16. This was not an accident. It was an approach that reflected the fact that the intense 'working period' of the family occurs in the period up until the youngest child turns 16. Historically, an increased sensitivity to the needs of children has tended to extend the period of care rather than reduce it. Increased attention to the nurturing and guidance of children not only benefits advanced societies, it underpins them. Responsiveness to the needs of children could be described as a hallmark of the modern west. The putative desire for an education revolution - a smart nation - should be something other than children spending more time in institutional learning environments (before and after school care, and commercial childcare, sell themselves - or offer the sop-of being educational). It is a mistake to short-change children

in their emotional and spiritual development, and in their legitimate need for recreation. It is remarkable that generations that rebelled against 'the institutions' in their teens and early twenties so lean on the institutions during their parenting years.

FREE EXERCISE OF FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY

Just as there is a proportion of the Australian population who elect to home school their children, and in so electing, exercise either parental judgement or informed conscience, a proportion of Australian parents quite properly wish to provide the personnel component of the primary care of their children. Under Welfare To Work, home schooling principal carer parents are not required to absent themselves from their children's home schooling to meet Labour Force Participation Requirements, yet parents who hitherto provided the personnel component of the primary care of their children are so required. Unlike electing to take on the role of academic teacher of one's children, the provision of primary care (supervision, shelter, sustenance) is at the heart of parenting. To demand that this be outsourced is to breach the natural boundaries of the family. Formerly, it has taken parents' involvement in serious crime, drug or sexual abuse, cult membership or the lack of the required skill set, for Government to assume the right to make such a demand.

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I ask the Committee to consider the following premises:

- Children and Families have special status within Australian society.

- The special status of children and families is recognized by U.N. declarations to which Australia is a signatory.

- The Australian Government extends support measures to Australian children through the Tax-Transfer System.

- The Australian Government must justify the exclusion of individual Australian children from support measures delivered through the Tax-Transfer System.

- The Australian Government extends support measures to Australian children in areas including Health, Education, Primary Care, Defence, Justice, Policing and Health and Safety.

- Primary Care is the support measure encompassing the child's need for supervision, shelter and sustenance.

- Primary Care underpins all support measures directed at Australian children.

- Given the foundational nature of Primary Care, Government may not withdraw Primary Care support measures from children.

- All support measures directed at children have a personnel and material component.

- Disabling the personnel component of support measures directed at children amounts to the withdrawal of the support measure.

- Parenting Payment funds the personnel component of the child's Primary Care support measure.

- The Principal Carer Parent has the natural right to provide the personnel component of the child's Primary Care support measure.

- The child has the natural right to receive the personnel component of its Primary Care support measure from the Principal Carer Parent.

- Family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society.

- Family is an internally integrated group before it is integrated into society.

- Parents are the responsible persons within family.

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- The family model of earner parent plus carer parent plus children is to be counted a natural family model.

- Family has rights and responsibilities.

- Family's chief responsibility is parenting.

- Responsible parenting may include the outsourcing of parental responsibilities.

- Responsible parenting does not require the outsourcing of parental responsibilities.

- Government is free to set qualitative parenting benchmarks in regard to Primary Care, Education, and Health etc within families.

- Family is free to structure its internal organization without interference from Government, except for purposes of qualitative parenting benchmarks.

- Government Approved Childcare Providers are principally providers of Primary Care.

- Government Approved Childcare Providers are a type of institutional care.

- Government may not take children into institutional care without just cause.

- Government may not direct the use of proxies to replace the natural relationships within family without just cause.

- Family is the natural home of children.
- Children have the right to live under the care and direction of their parents.
- Parents have the right to the free exercise of their family responsibilities.
- Parenting is both a natural right and a natural expression of family.
- Parenting is vital to the well being of children.
- The provision of Primary Care is fundamental to parenting.
- While the provision of Primary Care by the Principal Carer Parent involves work, it is more properly described as a vocational, conscience-driven, duty based response to children.

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- Government Approved Childcare Providers cannot replicate the natural dynamic of family.
- Government Approved Proxies cannot replicate natural relationships within families.
- Conscientious objection to the use of Government Approved Childcare is a valid position.
- Mutual obligation provisions attached to Government services may not breach the rights of citizens or families.

- Children should not be the targets of mutual obligation provisions, either directly or through their Principal Carer Parent.

- The obligation to periodically enter Government Approved Childcare is a mutual obligation provision targeting Children.

- The Mutual obligation requirement to place children with Government Approved Childcare Providers is a requirement for the Principal Care Parent to surrender their work to a commercial party.

- Principal Carer Parents should not be required to surrender work that is both extant and theirs to do by natural right.

- Labour Force Participation requirements must be structured around the Principal Carer Parent's free exercise of family responsibility and rights.

- Every Child/Principal Carer Parent relationship is unique.

- A child's suitability for Government Approved Childcare is properly an assessment made by the Principal Carer Parent.

- It is beyond the power of a Minister of the Crown to rule that all children from a particular demographic (low income) are ripe for Government Approved Childcare.

- It is for parents to judge their child's suitability for Government Approved Childcare. It is not for Government to advance contracts involving periodic use of Government Approved Childcare under duress of complete withdrawal of care.

- If the personnel component of Primary Care support measures is to be funded through Government Approved Childcare Providers for 15 hours per week, families should be free to opt out of this period of funding without further prejudicial treatment.

- Government objectives, be they political, social, economic or religious, may not divert families from the free expression of their rights and responsibilities, except in the case of emergencies.

- Australia does not currently face a 'crisis' or 'emergency' such that Australian families may be diverted from the free expression of their family responsibilities.

- Government policy responses to issues such as 'capacity constraints' or budgetary limitations may not breach the rights of citizens or families.

- A means-testing regimen does not give Government licence to abuse individual or family Rights.

- Families means-tested to receive Parenting Payment have not surrendered their right of free exercise of family responsibility.

- Means-testing, being widespread throughout Australian society, cannot be deemed a sufficient point of difference to justify punitive or discriminatory behaviour by Government.

- It is discriminatory to impose a fundamental change in family structure, involving the use of Government approved proxies, on one demographic alone (low income).

- Childhood extends to 16 years of age.

- Government does not want families to withdraw the care appropriate to children before 16 years of age.

- To classify the means-tested benefit of Parenting Payment as welfare dependency is to hold against children their youth, their dependant status, the naturalness of the family dynamic and the necessity that any support measures directed towards them requiring activation by adult personnel.

- Except for the political purpose of accusing Principal Carer Parents of welfare dependency, Government does not want children to be viewed as other than dependants until 16 years of age.

An Australian parent means-tested to receive Parenting Payment might quite reasonably complain:

(1) The Australian Government is trespassing on the free exercise of our family rights by mandating that our children enter non-parental care. Government is only free to mandate non-parental care in case of national emergency or catastrophic failure of parental responsibility. There is no national emergency sufficient to warrant directing

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our children into non-parental care, nor has there been a catastrophic failure of parental responsibility on our part.

(2) Government is acting in a discriminatory fashion by targeting the children of one demographic for non-parental care, and by doing so, restricting a natural, legal and historically valid family model. Government selectively denies the natural right of parents to be the providers of the personnel component of their children's primary care. Government selectively prevents children from accessing their natural right to receive the personnel component of their primary care from their principal carer parent.

(3) By selecting our children for non-parental care, Government is acting in a Parental, not Governmental Role.

(4) Government is proposing the withdrawal of our children's primary care support measure when there are no circumstances when Government (or family) may deny children primary care support measures. Government is never justified in directly threatening the well being of children for the purpose of influencing adult behaviour.

(5) Our unwillingness to relinquish our children to non-parental care is conscience based as much as it is rights based. Government is not justified in leveraging our consciences by advancing contracts involving the periodic use of Government Approved Childcare under duress of the complete withdrawal of care. Government is not justified in employing extreme and selective financial pressure to force the relinquishment of Australian children.

It is not a trivial thing to ask Australian Taxpayers to support principal carer parents at home with children. However, they are not supporting individuals whom they may like or dislike, approve of or disapprove of (always the tabloid presentation); they are supporting the principle that: "The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society..." By refraining from manipulating the natural and fundamental group unit they are recognizing that desire to parent one's child is a legitimate expression of the energies of

families, and as such, recognizing that family is an internally integrated group before it is integrated into society. This surely, is the meaning of 'natural and fundamental group unit'.

To put it bluntly, we are familiar with a 'poverty line'; we now have a 'compulsory childcare line'. If Government is successful in mandating a separation of 15 hours a week between the principal carer parent and the dependant child, the Committee should ask itself when, not if, future rulings will extend the childcare/labour force participation requirement to 20 hours, 25 hours, 40 hours per week

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NEGOTIATED MUTUAL OBLIGATION/OPPORTUNITY RATHER THAN SPECIFIED OUTCOMES

It is simply not open to Democratic Governments to behave towards families in the ways described in the above sections. Negotiated mutual obligation is the proper engagement. As noted, principal carer parents make a vital contribution to our nation's future. Those principal carer parents means-tested to receive Parenting Payment, and parenting school-aged children, are quite willing to widen their contribution, they simply wish to do so without absenting themselves from the primary care of their children. Government needs to understand, value and negotiate with these Australians rather than adopting an approach in which they are brutalized and their children threatened.

I will make a number of suggestions for negotiated mutual obligation requirements followed by a suggestion for a universal option-based transfer model. Both areas will recognize the centrality of primary care in the life of the child and that primary care has both personnel and material components. I assure the committee that I do understand what the Government is trying to achieve through adding year round labour force participation requirements to Parenting Payment. Put simply, the principal carer parent earns, and thus Government contributes less to families. The principal carer parent pays the commercial childcare centre, which employs more childcare workers. The principal carer parent and the childcare worker spend their new earnings. Personal and company taxes are paid. The economy grows. This indeed is mushrooming wealth. Unfortunately, it is a model in which children are the hummus.

SUGGESTIONS FOR NEGOTIATED MUTUAL OBLIGATION

(1) A balance between the present national need (capacity constraints and budgetary limitations) and the integrity of the family, might include a labour force participation requirement for the principle carer parent during school hours, but suspended during school holidays, sick days and pupil free days. (If the market is sufficiently hungry for workers, it will adjust.)

(2) Parenting benchmarks could be formalized; mirroring the educational outcomes Government fondly imagines are achieved in childcare.

(3) Principal carer parents could be required to acquire or update labour force skills.

(4) Participation in voluntary work (which is flexible) could be mandated, especially given the value of this work to society and the beneficial effects to the principal carer parent of continued social engagement. (I do, however, bridle at suggestions that the practice of stay-at-home parenting necessarily results in a ruinous loss of self-confidence. Are we failing to question the extent of self-identity we currently gain through labour force participation? It would be fair and prudent to ask principal carer parents to prepare themselves for post-parenting life, but patronizing to view all

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principal carer parents practicing stay-at-home parenting as necessarily deskilled, emotionally shattered individuals.)

(5) Principal carer parents could be given the option of a reduced rate of Parenting Payment-justified in the following way: Governments control the funding frameworks that regulate transfer measures. The recent change in conditionality attendant on Parenting Payment may mark the Government's intention (for a small segment of the population), to fund the personnel component of primary care transfers through Government Approved Childcare Providers for 15 hours of each week. I note that the Australian Government only funds educational transfer measures through registered schools, not home-schooling programmes (unlike the New Zealand Government), and only funds medical transfer measures through registered health care providers. However, citizens who have the temerity to visit an 'alternative practitioner' do not forfeit the entirety of their Medicare entitlement, nor do children who are partial users of the school system lose their right to educational transfer measures. The Victorian State Government encourages the concurrent use, by home-schoolers, of funded educational transfer measures. If the above is an accurate description of a new funding framework for primary care transfer measures, I believe justice requires that principal carer parents who choose to opt out of this 15 hour period—where the care of their children is handed over to someone else—only forfeit this 15 hours of funding, rather than the current situation where the entirety of Parenting Payment is withdrawn. The total withdrawal of Parenting

Payment is punitive and not merely a consequence of our freedom as citizens to choose to opt in or out of the various funding frameworks established by Government.

As I have argued above, parenting payment funds the personnel component of the child's primary care transfer measure. It is intended to cover 7 days a week, matching the principal carer parent's legal obligations to the child. To disable a child's primary care transfer measure is to render useless every other transfer measure directed at the child.

SUGGESTION FOR A UNIVERSAL OPTION-BASED TRANSFER MODEL

I propose a universal transfer measure designed to contribute to children's primary care, recognizing that children's primary care always has a personnel and material component. Parents are given the option to spend this transfer on the personnel and material components of home-based primary care, commercial childcare, community based not-for-profit centres or the informal care of grandparents etc. If means testing is employed, parents who choose home-based primary care could choose any or all of the above negotiated mutual obligation requirements, none of which compromise their primary care obligations.

Through the above approach, Government can absent itself from decisions that are properly the decisions of families, safe in the knowledge that the institution of family has long preceded Democratic Government- indeed any Government, and that in the normal course of events family does not require management by Government.

13.

CONSCIENCE: THE COST TO PARENTS OF FORCED USE OF CHILDCARE

The workings of individual conscience may be of only peripheral interest to the Committee but I believe it is significant issue. The Committee should be aware that current Parenting Payment policy results in two extremely negative social outcomes.

(1) Given the cost of childcare and the pressure of employers, there are a significant number of children in the pre-teen and early teenage groups who are left unsupervised at home or on the streets – the return of 'latch key' children for those old enough to remember.

(2) Secondly, a number of families who have accepted the lower standard of living that having only one wage earner normally entails, will accept a devastating reduction in financial resources rather than place their children in non-parental care. They do this for reasons of conscience. They ask themselves 'what is the best I can do for my children in the area of primary care' and the answer is not 'ABC Learning'. They are not asking themselves 'what is the least I can get away with?' 'what is everyone else doing?' they are not seeking stories of children who have prospered despite appalling childhoods and seeing these stories as an excuse to aim down. They are personally committed to their children ahead of their career, ahead of their self-realization, ahead of their consumer profile. While emphasising that a principal carer parent's availability to their child is not a negotiation the Government should enter, I would have thought a principal carer parent's prolonged absence would be open to question rather than a principal carer parent's dedicated presence in the life of their child. While this could be described as a secular conscience position, the demands of religious conscience are even more pressing. Parenting is understood in the Catholic (my) tradition as nothing less than a vocation. The primary care giving parent (usually the mother) is the 'sign of God' in the child's life. She mirrors both God's constant availability and God's constant engagement in our lives. Neither the Market nor the State has a prior claim to the child's primary care giver. Neither the Market nor the State may be permitted to reach into family in such a way. To use the language of the Popes, Mother and child are not 'economic units', one to be directed to the labour market and the other to a situation of 'commercial care in bulk', as Government sees fit. The God we know is personal and the mother's engagement is personal. Australian society (and the churches) already suffers greatly from disengagement with the personal. How many Australians already favour the workplace or a broadly speaking a 'spectator' culture ahead of their relationship with neighbours and community? The churches are particularly vulnerable, somewhat as bellwethers, to any degrading of personal relationships. A fundamental reordering of parental obligations, formalized through Parenting Payment and enforced and legitimised by State power, will further erode participation in social life and the life of the Church. It degrades family and destabilises children.

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The Committee will be aware that any number of social, economic or environmental problems could be swiftly and 'rationally' resolved through the disregarding of human rights. One thinks immediately of China's 'One Child Policy'. Principal carer parents, means-tested to receive Parenting Payment, but seeing themselves (not unreasonably) as the appropriate person to provide the personnel component of their children's primary care, are not unwilling to broaden their contribute to Australian society - they simply desire to do so while maintaining the 'free exercise of family responsibilities'. The Committee will make recommendations to politicians. Typically, politicians emphasise the positive in justifying their decisions, repeating formulas such as: 'I support women's access to employment, I support children having opportunities for educational from birth, I support working families.' One need not disagree with any of these sentiments, however, the changes to Parenting Payment skate over the fact that the integrity of the principal carer parent/child relationship is forcefully breached by Government; that poor children, since they cannot work, are now deemed to owe the Australian people periods of institutional care. Whatever problems the country may face, they will surely be surmountable if Governments and families regard each other with mutual respect, seeking truly negotiated mutual obligations.

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