

## FAMILY ISSUES

Wednesday, 30 May 2007

**The Hon. D.G.E. HOOD:** Each year 15 May is the United Nations International Day of Families, and I use this opportunity to call on members not to lose sight of family issues during our deliberations in this place. I believe that people increasingly realise that a country can be wealthy, with a strong economy, and yet still have deep social problems. I also believe that Australians deserve politicians who realise that there are some things that are more important than an economic balance sheet on some occasions. I sometimes wonder whether a sole political focus on economics is the reason why, since the 1960s, the marriage rate has reduced by a third in Australia, divorce has doubled, the birth rate has halved, single parent families have trebled and abortion rates, drug dependence, gambling addiction and suicide have all skyrocketed.

I believe that this age of materialism has not truly prospered our nation where it counts. While we live in bigger houses than our parents and have more gadgets, the evidence does not suggest that we are any happier or really any better off, in a broader sense. Indeed, in 2005, there were some 52 399 divorces in Australia, more than one in five Australian families had only one parent and 41.6 per cent of employed males worked over 40 hours a week, which is an alarming increase since 1985. In the past 10 years, the number of people imprisoned has increased by some 45 per cent.

In 2001-02, some 137 938 children were reported abused or neglected in Australia, an increase of 19.5 per cent over the previous year. Of the hundreds of children murdered in Australia over the past 10 years, 65 per cent were the victims of child abuse, neglected and killed in their own homes by their own parents. More than 100 000 Australian women are the victim of domestic violence every single year. Each year, about 2 500 Australians will take their own life, which is an increase of 24 per cent since 1988. Australia and New Zealand have the highest suicide rate in the western world, with suicide the fourth ranked cause of death in Australia. Some 68.9 per cent of Australians believe that the fundamental values of our society are under serious threat, according to a recent survey.

Successive governments—I am not pointing the finger at either government, I wish to make that clear—in general, have failed to put families before economics and that has contributed to these very serious and highly alarming statistics. The 2006 data from the Australian Institute found that 77 per cent of surveyed Australians agreed with the statement that the government's prime objective should be to achieve the greatest happiness of people, not the greatest wealth.

In his maiden address to the Australian Senate, Family First senator Steve Fielding noted that:

There seems to be a growing concern that many Australians are there to serve the market, rather than the market being a tool to serve them, especially families and small business.

He went on to say:

Australians are not economic units, households are not harbours of consumption and children are not commodities.

The focus on wealth can be bad for family life, if it is the primary focus. A recent report from the Relationships Forum Australia in March this year showed conclusively that long and unpredictable working hours are destroying family life and relationships in Australia. With this in mind Family First has worked to find a middle ground on this issue, particularly on the issue of industrial relations; not to throw out the legislation, as some would, but via amendments to balance job creation with the need for workers to have a family life and a decent rewarding job and decent income.

Family First does not necessarily agree with our Prime Minister that businesses ought to be able to operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, neither do we agree that working at 1 a.m. is necessarily the same as working at 1 p.m. or that working on a Saturday is the same as working on a Wednesday. We do not agree either that working on Christmas Day, New Years Day or Anzac Day is the same as working on any other single day. We believe in the idea of a day in which there is eight hours work, eight hours rest and eight hours for family and community, for which our grandparents and their parents struggled, and it is indeed a great idea.

Family First believes we need to find ways to promote family life, not to undermine it. That is why we should examine how effective overtime and shift allowances are now in achieving their original purposes. Their original purpose was to deter employers from employing people during socially undesirable hours and for excessive hours. We should develop alternatives if penalty rates no longer achieve these objectives. We should do this at a time that allows Australian industry to grow and to continue to employ and enjoy the prosperous times that we are experiencing at the moment. I will leave it there, Mr President, I am not going to be able to finish.