

Welcome to the Sole Parents' Union newsletter. **17 May 2011 - BUDGET SPECIAL**

This fortnightly newsletter is designed to bring you news and events of interest for sole parents. That is people are, who might be, and who have been sole parents.

Whether you are a sole parent yourself, or you work with sole parents, we hope you will find something of interest here.

## From the Chair



We're sending out this special edition of our newsletter to give you all the information on what the budget brings for sole parents.

We are very supportive of the governments desire to keep young sole parents connected to education and/or work.

However we feel very strongly that threatening to take away

their income when their child turns one is counter productive.

We don't like the 'dog whistle' politics that has to make single parents, particularly young single parents, a target.

Both the government and the opposition seem to put people into two camps. For the government it is "hard working Australian families" -v- "welfare recipients", and for the opposition it's "Australia's forgotten families" -v- "welfare recipients.

Both seem to forget that both groups can be one and the same. Many single parents are both working and in receipt of social security.

The government should be showing leadership on this issue rather than caving in to populist politics and encouraging an us and them mentality in which single parents are 'them', and not as good as everybody else.

We welcome measures which support all parents to combine with or study with caring for their children. However, we don't think it is at all necessary to threaten young mothers with loss of income.

Sole Parents' Union was established in 1998 partly in response to this type of stigmatisation, and it seems things are going right back to where they were.

## The Federal budget

The Federal budget was presented on Tuesday 10 May, with the opposition leader's reply being given on Thursday 12 May.

As is usual there's mixed news.

The main thrust is that the government has targeted ten communities for additional welfare-to-work type programs. These communities are:

- Playford (SA)
- Hume (Vic)
- Shepparton (Vic)
- Burnie (Tas)
- Bankstown (NSW)
- Wyong (NSW)
- Shellharbour (NSW)
- Rockhampton (Qld)
- Logan (Qld)
- Kwinana (WA)

Teenage parents in those areas will be required to attend compulsory Centrelink interviews once their child is aged six months old, and continue until they (the parent) complete year 12 or equivalent.

They will also be required to undertake compulsory activities once their child turns one, or risk losing their income support.

We're not sure yet what those requirements will be. We are seeking meetings with government representatives to discuss this further.

There will also be Service Coordinators and Community Based Facilitators in those locations to coordinate local services across the participatory programs and sectors.

Additionally, five of those areas have been identified for an extension of the income management scheme.

- Playford (SA)
- Shepparton (Vic)
- Bankstown (NSW)
- Rockhampton (Qld)
- Logan (Qld)

Under this scheme 50% of income support payments are provided on a basics card which can only be used to purchase certain items in shops which are part of the program. For those referred to income management because of child protection measures, 70% of their income is provided on the basics card.

Income management will be extended to:

- Parents referred by state or territory child protection authorities
- People assessed by Centrelink social works as being vulnerable to financial crisis
- People who volunteer for income management

### **Helping jobless families prepare for work**

We must admit, we are completely stumped by this one, so will quote it here as it appears in the budget papers:

*“From 1 July 2012, new participation requirements and matching supports will be introduced for jobless families in the ten disadvantaged communities.*

*“Parents who have been on income support for more than two years, or who are under 23 years of age and are not currently working and studying **full time** will be required to meet regularly with Centrelink through interviews and workshops to plan for their return to work.”*

It seems the definition of “jobless” has been changed to include those working part time - but only if you are a single parent on income support.

On the one hand the government is lauding its paid parental leave scheme which encourages mothers to take time out of work when their baby is born, then return part time when they’re ready. On the other hand they are saying that sole parents (who don’t have the support of a partner to pick up child care requirements) have to work or study full time.

It just doesn’t make sense to us.

### **Moving single parents from parenting payment to the dole**

In one of the previous rounds of tightening rules for single parents on social security, the Howard government removed the entitlement to parenting payment once your youngest child turns 7. At that time you are expected to be back in the workforce and you are moved from parenting payment onto the dole.

Those people already on parenting payment were “grandfathered” from this change. This meant they

would keep their entitlement to parenting payment, which is paid at a higher rate. Under this budget, the grandfathering provisions have been removed, meaning that all those that are still on parenting payment with older children will now be moved onto the dole.

We can’t see that this is anything but a budget saving measure for the government.

### **Keeping more of your income when you work**

In some good news, you will be able to keep more of your income when you undertake paid work.

Currently you lose 50-60 cents for every dollar you earn. This will change to 40 cents for every dollar you earn. In effect, this means that single parents working part time could be paying an effective marginal tax rate of up to 80%, leaving them with very little to show for their work.

### **Family tax benefit**

If you have teenagers the maximum rate of Family Tax Benefit (FTB) Part A will increase by \$4,208 for 16 & 17 year olds in secondary school, and by \$3,741 for 18 & 19 year olds in school.

The maximum age for FTB will also be lowered to 21. The government says that this is to recognise that young people aged 22 and over are independent of their parents. If only youth allowance would recognise the same thing!

If you wish to claim the end-of year FTB(A) supplement (just over \$600), your child will need to get a health check before starting school. This requirement is only for those on income support.

### **Youth allowance**

Young people aged 22 and over may be able to obtain youth allowance independent of their parents’ income, but only if they are in full time study.

### **Paid parental leave**

As part of the paid parental leave scheme, the government introduced a scheme specifically to encourage fathers to take time off following the birth of a child. This paid paternity leave scheme was due to commence on 1 July 2012, but has now been put back to 1 January 2013.

### **Indigenous youth**

From the beginning of 2012 school year, the Indigenous Youth Career Pathways Program will be extended to 6,400 students.

In addition, the Indigenous Ranger Cadetships initiative will be implemented in six regional schools, followed by a further six schools at the beginning of 2013.

There will more outreach services for Centrelink and Medicare to reach those who are geographically or socially isolated. This will include providing a mobile office to respond quickly to natural disasters, and more services for those who are, or at risk of becoming, homeless.

Centrelink will also have a new 24 hour self service and on-line option at [www.humanservices.gov.au](http://www.humanservices.gov.au), or phone 13 24 68.

## Northern Territory Mother of the Year

With all the talk of targeting young single parents as being in need of additional 'encouragement' to be good parents, we welcome the announcement of the NT Mother of the Year.

25 year old Rebecca Healy, from Tennant Creek, is a single mum who says her teenage years were a big blur. She left home at 12 and lived with friends or in refuges for 7 years before turning her life around.

A worker in the refuge she was living in convinced her she was not a hopeless case, and helped her to clean up her act.

Because of that refuge worker she has now become an advocate for youth, an indigenous economic development officer, and an active volunteer in her local community.

That's in addition to being a single mum to Blake, three and Chase, four.

Congratulations Rebecca.

## Mediation services

Unfortunately, the budget also saw a cut in family relationship services.

Sole Parents' Union has already heard of waits of 3 months or more to get into Family Relationships Centres. These cuts will only make this worse.

If the government is serious about supporting separating couples, and helping them to focus on their children, then these services are essential.

**Sole Parents' Union works with government to try to improve outcomes for sole parent families. We recognise that people move in and out of different family types, but that many of the issues of sole parenting, such as child support, family law, and parenting across households, remain even when people repartner.**

In 2010, Senator Hanson-Young of the Greens introduced a Bill to establish a Commonwealth Commissioner for Children and Young People to advocate for the rights and needs of children and young people.

The Bill was subsequently referred to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee for enquiry. Their report was presented to Parliament last week, with their first two recommendations being:

1. The committee acknowledges the strong arguments put forward supporting the establishment of a Commonwealth Commissioner for Children and Young People (Commonwealth Commissioner). However, the evidence received by the Committee pointed to a range of concerns with the provisions of the Commonwealth Commissioner for Children and Young People Bill 2010 (the Bill). The committee also notes that the Australian Government is currently considering the role of a National Children's Commissioner under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children.
2. The committee is of the view that, given the concerns raised in relation to the Bill, the establishment of a Commonwealth Commissioner should be further considered. *The committee therefore considers that the Bill should not be passed.* However, the committee believes that the matters raised during the inquiry should be given full consideration in the Government's deliberations on the role of a National Children's Commissioner.

## Law week

If you're near Marrickville in Sydney, there are a number of Law Week activities that might be of interest:

Thursday 19th - Nadine Behand will give a talk about her book "How to Run Your Own Court Case", at Marrickville Library

Friday 20th - Talk on Apprehended violence orders/ domestic violence at Marrickville Town Hall, presented by the Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Centre

For more information on what's happening for Law Week see [www.lawweek.com.au](http://www.lawweek.com.au)