

## **Time for more work?**

*Social Issues briefing #037, 10/3/2005.*

The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation. ... Do you charge us with wanting to stop the exploitation of children by their parents? To this crime we plead guilty. [Karl Marx, *Communist Manifesto*]

How do we encourage people to remain in the workforce and still commit to creating a family? [Chairwoman of the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, Mrs Bronwyn Bishop]

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. [Exodus 20:9-10]

### **Households and economic growth.**

It is no news that modern life can be tough.

- Time with spouse and kids competes with time at work to earn more money to support said spouse and kids.
- Choices between living closer to the office in order to spend less time commuting must be weighed up against pouring more money into more expensive accommodation closer to the centre of city activity.
- Our efforts to transcend the mundane nature of life has, oddly, left us paying a price of an increasing number of ‘things’ that mess up household life. What was invented to make life easier by giving more efficiency and more leisure often simply makes more demands upon us, robbing us of opportunities to engage with spouse, children, neighbours and friends
- More students are entering university, and as the length of time spent in formal education stretches out, the beginning of a working career is pushed further back, the consolidation of it takes longer, and the possibility of committed marriage and childbearing recedes into the distance.

As a community, we are committed to the kind of ‘economic growth’ that will, we believe, improve our quality of life. But this commitment has these complications; and one clear effect has been a worryingly low birthrate in Australia. Economic growth has become an end in itself, which rather than serving the needs of relationships, families and future children, makes these more difficult.

The chairwoman of the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, Bronwyn Bishop, recently announced a parliamentary inquiry to provide recommendations on how to stop the declining birth rate and overcome the stumbling blocks parents face when they rejoin the workforce. Recent studies suggest that most young Australian adults want to have children and most parents with one child want to have another one. But, says Mrs Bishop, “It has been estimated that around one quarter of Australian women in their reproductive years will never have children and we need to look at why that is.”

The inquiry is no doubt a good thing. We encourage you to read its terms of reference at the end of this briefing, and to think about making a submission.

However, we must also sadly note a serious limitation in its terms of reference. When

Mrs Bishop asks “How do we encourage people to remain in the workforce and still commit to creating a family?” it seems that there is little interest in asking a deeper question – whether as a community, we could sacrifice some economic growth for our social good.

Times have changed since Marx attacked the effect of capitalism upon families. Nonetheless, the difficulties of modern life remain, at least in part, the result of trying to conduct household life in a growing free-market economy. Yet questioning this economy is not part of the inquiry’s terms of reference: commitment to growth is the given, the rock in the centre of the field, and work/family balance must be investigated and solved around its edges. (The left-wing French government’s 1998 attempt to solve such France’s low birthrate—the 35 hour week [or more accurately, the 1600 hr year]—has been dismissed by Mrs Bishop as a “terrible disaster”.) Perhaps there are strategies to enable “people to remain in the workforce and still commit to creating a family”; but it is also possible that the modern free-market workplace is the enemy of the family, such that it has to be reigned in for the sake of the family. That latter possibility should at least be examined.

### **Weekends.**

The inquiry comes at a time when, according to journalist Ross Gittins, the Federal Government’s industrial relations reforms will inevitably mean the extension of a work week to include Saturdays and Sundays. He does not mean that people will be working seven days (although conceivably, some may). Rather, abolition of weekend penalty rates would mean the loss of shared time.

The current commonality of weekends means that most people have an opportunity to engage in social activities together. Families, communities and churches can spend time together. Yet we also like to work the weekend to bring in extra money, and we like to spend it on the weekend. So a growing army of people must work weekends—often low-paid casual workers of whom round-the-clock availability is expected, and who compete for weekend shifts against a large pool of others.

Hence according to employer groups, to accommodate our demand for weekend work and shopping, the current laws need to change. It is our own complicity with the benefits of Sunday trading that enables employer groups to argue for the abolition of weekend penalty rates.

### **Sabbath-thinking?**

It is interesting to see the very counter-intuitive way that God inserts the Sabbath law into the community life of his people Israel. Undoubtedly, it was hard for Israelite farmers to down tools and watch the crops grow (or be eaten by bugs). It is all the more surprising that not even sons and daughters, servants or animals—the traditional ‘muscle’ of economic endeavour—may take up the slack during this special day.

Christians are divided as the extent to which this law is binding upon believers and upon the wider community. Also, attempts to make Sabbath-based policy often tend to descend into legalism. Nonetheless, there remains a salutary lesson in this ancient command: we don’t always know what is best for ourselves, and the lure of ‘economic growth’ sometimes needs to be deliberately sacrificed for our own good.

Any law is an attempt, in a way, at ‘social engineering’, to work towards what is best. We probably cannot return to the absence of Sunday working – shops will always need to open and medical, emergency and public utility services will always need to operate.

But we do not need factories, building sites and every business open for weekends. Our laws need to reflect that we are not willing to pay this very high price for yet more economic growth. It is simply not worth it.

One final thought. When Marx complained about the effects of capitalism upon the family, one of his main concerns was revulsion at the way capitalism had opened the way for child labour. This concern, thankfully, is not ours. Yet at the same time, most people probably agree that children should continue to have school-free weekends and should benefit from the same routines that we grew up with. If so, then talk of harder work and extended working hours and the abolition of weekend penalty rates should be resisted. (Even workplace childcare, which is often a good thing, risks turning into a weekend baby-sitting service for working parents.) For Marx—and also, it seems, the One Who commands the Sabbath - are both clear about who suffers first in an unrestrained economy: our children.

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### Sources

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Ross Gittins, "Mondayitis cure: drop the weekend," *SMH* Feb 23 2005. Online:

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### Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/fhs/workandfamily/index.htm>

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services has reviewed the 2003-2004 Annual Report of the Department of Family and Community Services and on 9 February 2005 resolved to conduct an inquiry.

The Committee invites interested persons and organisations to make submissions addressing the terms of reference by **8 April 2005**. In order to facilitate electronic publishing of submissions, the Committee would prefer them to be emailed to [fhs.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:fhs.reps@aph.gov.au) or sent on disk to the [Secretariat](#), if possible.

#### Terms of reference

The Committee shall inquire into and report on how the Australian Government can better help families balance their work and family responsibilities. The Committee is particularly interested in:

- the financial, career and social disincentives to starting families;
- making it easier for parents who so wish to return to the paid workforce; and
- the impact of taxation and other matters on families in the choices they make in balancing work and family life.

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