

I am strongly opposed to the Social Security (Benefit Categories and Work Focus) Amendment Bill

There are two major areas of the Bill that concern me.

First, the Work Focus aspect of the Act, aimed primarily at the employment of sole parents, particularly single mothers, despite any ambitions the parent might have of focusing on her family rather than employment.

Second, the Social Obligations which will require beneficiary parents to send their preschool children to a registered Early Childhood Education (ECE) provider, to ensure their children do not play truant from school, to register their children with a health care provider, and to attend the core Well Child checks.

I am also concerned about the Ministry for Social Development's policy on home educating beneficiaries. According to a letter received by Samuel Blight on October 18 (enclosed), the MSD intends to prevent the Ministry of Education from issuing exemptions to home educate to beneficiaries unless it would be "unreasonable" for the children to attend school. A home educating family that goes on a benefit will only be allowed to home educate until the end of the school year in which they go on the benefit. After that the exemptions will be revoked and the children forced to attend school.

Background

I am a widow with three children still at home who are 14, 11 and 7. I am not on the widow's benefit. My 5 older children are supporting me and my children. Historically the Church looked after widows and the fatherless.

But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. 1 Timothy 5v4

If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows. 1 Timothy 5v16

The problem we have today is that the Government requires such high taxes that it makes it hard for families and the Church to look after widows and the fatherless. I have had people telling me that I am crazy not to take the widow's benefit because I have paid my taxes and I am entitled to it. This attitude is now ingrained in the community and also in many Churches.

The Government took on this role from the Churches and the benefit has been abused by some people. Now the Government has to be careful how they pull out of supporting widows and the fatherless (who so very often are not fatherless but have irresponsible fathers). There are many families on benefits for various reasons who want to be responsible and cannot find a way to get off the benefit because the Churches are not helping in this area at this time. These families also see that it is their responsibility to be home educating their own children. The Bible calls parents to educate, protect, train up, and prepare their children for adulthood. These parents are not abusing the Government system – they are working at train-

ing up responsible adults. They want to get off the benefit as soon as they can but also want to be the best parents they can for their children by home educating them.

Work Focus

It is false economy to put children in day care and expect the parent to work at the same time – it is cheaper to have the mother at home with the child or children and use the day care allotment for someone who wants to use it. It costs about \$6—9000 to have a child in school and I assume about the same amount to have a child in ECE. So for me if I was on the widow's benefit I would be saving the Government about \$21-22,000 a year by home educating my children and I would be receiving less than that amount from the Government—only around \$15,000 per year.

Being a mother is a full time job. Home educating children and being a home maker is a full time job. If mothers are forced out to work the mother will be tired with trying to do everything well that she will NOT be able to give her best to a job as well. If the MSD forces mothers out to work for 15 or 30 hours a week they will be forcing mothers to be burning the candle at both ends. Something will have to give and unfortunately it will be the cleanliness of the home, the mother's relationship with her children, her health or she will not be performing at work as she should be.

In addition there are many women who want nothing more than to be a mother. They want to be with their children because they believe it is the best thing for them. They want to contribute to society in their own way—by raising confident, secure children. And the figures show that this is a financially viable option for the government.

There are plenty of childless couples and young men who are on benefits — Why is the MSD not going after them —many of these young men and not so young men are the fathers of the children who will be affected in a bad way if this Bill is passed in its present form.

Home education

A lot of home educating parents, some of them on a benefit, have contacted me over the last few weeks really concerned about this new policy. They want to continue home educating their children. This is a full time job. These parents take this job very seriously. It is a concern that they are being required to work for 15 or 30 hours a week when they already have a full time job educating their children. You might say that this is a lifestyle choice but we do not understand it as such. We believe that it is the parents' responsibility to be educating their children not the Government. It is wonderful that the Government provides schools and ECEs for those parents who would like to send their children away to them. But the Government should not take this responsibility away from parents who desire to educate their own children.

The Education Review Office and Ministry of Education say Home Education has been found to be low risk. The fatal flaw in this bill is that it is designed to prevent any children being kept at home, even those being home educated by loving parents. The preschool 'social obligation' will force children aged 3-5/6 to attend preschools. And the MSD's policy on home education will force school-aged children to attend schools even where their parents wish to home educate them.

The Minister for Social Development told me in a letter dated 25 October (enclosed) that

parents of vulnerable children are unlikely to be “engaging with appropriate services”. Combined with the one-size-fits-all approach in the Act, this suggests that refusing to “engage” in “appropriate services” is taken by the Minister as an indicator of vulnerability, as though wanting to care for your children at home makes you a bad parent.

However the Ministry of Education thinks differently. In July 2009 the Ministry ceased carrying out routine reviews of home educators, saying “This programme is considered to be low risk to the education priorities of the Government. “ A senior member of the Education Review Office wrote in personal correspondence, “The reality is home schooling has been found to be low risk.” He went on to note that home educators make use of support networks, that home education is seen as a viable option, and that the ERO has received “mostly positive” feedback on home education. <http://hef.org.nz/2009/no-more-ero-reviews/> If home education has been received so positively by the ERO and the MoE, why does the Ministry of Social Development leave no options in the bill for parents who want to follow this path?

The MSD is just making it harder for people to choose responsibly. Paula Bennett said to me in her letter dated 25 October *One of my key goals as Minister is to reduce long term benefit dependency and to improve outcome for children in vulnerable families.* I think you will find that home educating families are not the families that are long term on the benefit. They are on the benefit until their children are old enough to work then they will be doing everything they can to get their children and themselves into the workforce. The MSD knows who the vulnerable children are—they are the children at risk of assault and neglect. But in its one size fits all approach this bill makes it hard for home educators and does nothing about assault or neglect.

Paula Bennett also said *I know that most beneficiary parents are acting in the best interests of their child and engaging in appropriate services.* So why is she making ECE compulsory? There is no need when they already know who the “at risk” children are - which are not home educators, who are the people who will be most affected by making ECE compulsory. Paula Bennett then went onto to say that *Children from lower socio-economic groups, particularly benefit-supported homes, have a higher risk of negative social outcomes or missing development milestones.*

This is a gross generalization. Poor children come from families on a benefit or a very low wage, who are often setting up a business. These children’s parents don’t have a lot of money to spend on the children but they are loved, clean, well fed, and often educated at home—these children are not vulnerable! Their parents sacrifice for them and the government’s White Paper on Vulnerable Children describes them just the same way as the vast majority of children:

“The vast majority of children enjoy loving and supportive homes and families. ...Most parents put their children first, second, and third in their order of priorities. ...Most of all, they want their children to be happy and fulfilled.”

Again the ERO and MoE have found that home educators are very low risk, which is true even of poor home educators. It’s true that people who neglect or abuse their children tend to be poor, but this Bill treats all poor people like bad, neglectful parents. This discriminates against the thousands of poor people who are good parents.

Paula Bennett also said in her letter to me *These welfare reforms aim to help to fundamen-*

tally shift the benefit system to one that encourages independence and personal responsibility, primarily through paid employment. All home educating parents want to be independent and to be personally responsible but it is irresponsible to leave one's own children to others to train and nurture and go out and find a job. How ridiculous for one mother to be caring for a bunch of children while another mother is caring for her children. These children will be totally disconnected from their own family and socially disadvantaged.

Therefore it is with great concern that home educating parents on the benefit are being asked to work (or study) for 15 or 30 hours a week when they are already very busy home educating their children responsibly and saving the Government the cost of having their children in schools.

Early Childhood Education

I have even greater concern about the move to have 3, 4, and 5 year olds being required to be in ECE for 15 hours a week. Over the years there has been a lot of research that children do much better at home than in Early Childhood centres. Here are a couple of links <http://hef.org.nz/2012/home-v-ece/> and <http://hef.org.nz/2008/value-of-parents-praised/>

There was a study done in California to find out who did better a child in poverty or a child in an Early Childhood Education Centre. They compared a Mexican immigrant girl (as the most disadvantaged child they could find) with a child in an ECE Centre. They concluded that the Mexican girl did far better than the child in the ECE because of the interaction she had with her mother who she trusted and was emotionally connected with.

We enclose a 2008 paper by Dr Sarah-Eve Farquhar, "Assessing the evidence on early childhood education/childcare" which addresses the New Zealand situation. According to Dr Farquhar,

"The best evidence points to parents/family having a far greater impact than the childcare/ECE experience on children's developmental outcomes. This suggests that effort put towards supporting families to provide great home learning environments for children and allowing parents to make child-rearing arrangements that are best for their child and for family well-being would pay off. Such efforts would more likely make a greater difference to children's immediate and long-term developmental outcomes than simply encouraging parents to make more use of nonparental childcare as present ECE policy does."

Dr Farquhar goes on to say, "Public policy that emphasises telling parents about the benefits of formal ECE and not about risks and other childcare options may increase the risks for children further."

Everything about me as a mother screams that it is the mother's role to love, nurture, protect little children. Children need to connect with adults and their parents are clearly the best people to love them and care for them.

My motto as a mother is that I want my children to walk away from me when they're ready, rather than watch me walk away from them. This produces happy, secure children. In fact 4 of my older children are all overseas at the moment, 2 in the USA and 2 in Australia. If my motto produced clingy children they would still be around their home town. My children are confident and they are contributing fully to society. I believe that they are like this because of the firm foundations of their lives when they were preschoolers and secure in their rela-

tionships in our family. They never needed to be insecure about being left alone with strangers because it never happened to them. I am absolutely baffled why this Government wants to break up families like this. It is cruel to the children for them to be forced away from the security of their parents.

I am very well aware of this as we have adopted 3 children and we have one under guardianship. I have studied the emotional needs of children and have spoken on this at conferences many times.

Babies in the womb attach to their mothers. Once born they attach to the rest of the family. When children are forced away from their family bonds they detach from their mother and family and reattach to other adults in their lives. This becomes a problem in ECE centres when the adults keep changing around. So these children keep attaching and detaching throughout their early childhood. They are also learning to be dependent on their peers. The result of this is peer dependency and also multiple relationships. Multiple relationships also lead to divorce. This attaching and detaching scars children and adults alike. We then learn to guard our hearts from being hurt. Then we struggle for the rest of our lives to have meaningful relationships.

I want to keep my 3—5 year old children home from ECE and my 6–16 year old children home from school.

Children don't need other children to learn how to be children but they do need to be around adults to learn how to be adults.

So the VERY BEST place for educating children under the age of 5 is in the home. So why does the government want to give children second best. Why do “*children need to be enrolled in a licensed or certificated service*” as Paula Bennett says? As we have seen under False Economy above in this submission, it pays the Government to leave children in their homes. It is cheaper for the Government to pay a benefit to a parent than to pay for several children to attend an ECE and school.

So leave the mothers in the home please.

The MSD Policy on Home Education

If a family goes onto a benefit it is unacceptable that they can only home educate until the end of that year. This family wants to continue home educating while the father continues to look for work. He will be wanting to get off the benefit as soon as he can. It doesn't make sense to disrupt a family's life merely because the MSD believes schools are best.

Sanctions

The sanctions in the bill are totally unreasonable for home educators. They start with 3 stages of “support contact”, then a 50% benefit sanction, and after that “intensified case management support” which according to the MSD's Welfare Reform Paper E means CYFS involvement and fraud investigation. This is crazy! No amount of “support contact” to “encourage” home educators to fulfill their “social obligations” will make them want to send their children to preschool. Home educators want to home educate their children and NOT send them to preschool. So the 3 stages of contact over a period of 6 to 8 weeks envisioned in the bill is nonsense to home educators. And parents who take a stand as you already know from the ERO and MoE will not be *symptomatic of far deeper problems within the family*. They are just wanting to do what the Care of Children Act (2004) section 16 and the Univer-

sal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) Article 26 (3) says they can do: “Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.”

Conclusion

My concerns are:

1. That home educators be able to continue to home educate their children while on a benefit without having to work or study.
2. That home educators and other concerned families be able to keep their preschoolers at home and not send them to ECE. (Greatest concern)

Please remove the social obligations from the Bill, insert exceptions to work testing for home educating mothers, and insist on the MSD dropping its ridiculous policy against home educators.

Enclosures

Letter to Barbara Smith 20 September 2012 from Paula Bennett

Letter to Samuel Blight 18 October 2012 from Paula Bennett

Letter to Barbara Smith 25 October 2012 from Paula Bennett

Dr Sarah-Eve Farquhar (2008), “Assessing the evidence on early childhood education/ childcare”

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