

Work and Family beyond 'WorkChoices':

Establishing the Partnership

Presentation to the Roundtable: 'Work, Family and Industrial Relations: Making It Work', Wednesday May 17th, 2006, Level 46, 55 Collins Street, Melbourne.

by

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The implementation of WorkChoices raises important challenges for both employers and workers in Australian workplaces. Newspaper reports about employer responses to the newly amended law suggest a range of responses - from those who feel it will make little difference to the way they work or manage, to those who believe they will work very differently. Amongst the latter are responses that include a greater willingness to dismiss staff, to reduce conditions and to adopt a harsher approach to employees. Whilst it is too early to attempt any general evaluation, existing reports suggest that employers and employees face a changing labour market that is very variable by industry, occupation and region. It is also evident that many employers and employees are confused about the changed industrial laws and their actual rights and obligations. It seems that this confusion has fostered a shift in the industrial climate in some locations, with employees feeling that their rights are now very constrained, while some employers believe theirs are significantly enlarged.

This paper explores three issues:

1. What the work/family challenges facing Australia are, and why we can expect them to intensify rather than moderate into the future;
2. Why WorkChoices and a strategy of individualised bargaining, in the context of reduced minimal labour standards, cannot meet the challenges around work and family that are affecting Australian workers, workplaces and employers;
3. What strategies and partnerships, in the current environment, employers, employees, governments and other service providers can adopt.

The Australian Work/Family Challenges

A growing body of literature and research in Australia and internationally points to growth in the proportion of workers with family responsibilities (OECD 2002, 2004, 2005; HREOC

2005; Charlesworth et al 2002; Pocock 2003). This has made work and family balance a critical workplace issue, and a question of pressing importance to employees, employers and governments alike.

Household work patterns have changed around the world over the past 30 years, so that more and more households are sole-earner/parent households and more and more are dual earner. The 'male breadwinner/female homemaker' household is in international decline. Growth in women's employment is critical to lower poverty in many households, especially where children are present. The OECD report that:

child poverty rates are more than three times as high for jobless single parent households than for employed single parent households. Children in two-parent families where only one parent has paid work are almost three times more likely to be poor than those in families where both parents are employed (OECD 2005, p 2).

Work matters to poverty rates for both adults and children, as well as to social connection and self-esteem for many workers. In many countries, sole parent/carers face intense pressures in combining work and care. At the same time, many adults are having fewer children than they wish because of difficulties in combining work and family. Across the OECD the gap between desired and actual fertility outcomes is around 0.5 children per woman on average (OECD 2005, p 2). This amounts to a high level of disappointed expectations. The economic consequences of this fertility under-shoot are high for economic growth, tax collection, and labour supply.

As in most OECD countries, Australians are increasingly starting their families later and having smaller families. International experience around these issues, however, shows that local action and policy settings significantly shape these patterns. For example, in Switzerland where combining work and family is difficult, 40 per cent of university educated women are still without children when they are 40 (OECD 2005, p 1): many have had to choose between using their skills and having a family. In many OECD countries economies and pension systems are weaker as a consequence of the withdrawal of women from the labour market and lower fertility.

Australia's fertility has been declining in recent decades although it experienced a slight rise in 2004. Australia's total fertility rate (TFR) in 2004 was 1.77 babies per woman, slightly higher than in 2003 (1.75). However, since 1997 the TFR has been fairly stable, ranging between 1.73 and 1.78 (ABS, 3301.0, 2005). Australian governments are increasingly concerned about the long term effects of lower population growth and increasing rates of dependency.

International evidence suggests that higher rates of labour market participation are not inconsistent with higher rates of fertility. Over recent years the OECD has been undertaking surveys of work and family arrangements in a range of countries and they concluded on release of their latest survey that:

Countries with policies that facilitate regular female employment, for example by offering public support for childcare for 0 to 3 years olds, flexible working hours and individual tax systems, are also those countries with the highest fertility rates (OECD 2005, p 2).

Countries like Finland, Norway and Sweden enjoy relatively high TFRs and high rates of female participation. They offer extended periods of paid leave and low cost, quality childcare. For example, in Sweden parents pay around 11 per cent of childcare costs themselves (and much lower if they are poor) while in the US parents pay around 76 per cent of childcare costs and even low income families contribute around a quarter of household income to childcare

and sometimes much more (OECD 2005, p 4). Four key issues have proved especially significant in supporting work and family combination: paid parenting leave, childcare, tax and benefit systems and flexibility at work. We consider these in turn very briefly.

Paid Caring Leave

Paid parental leave constitutes a vital support for parents combining work and family. As the ILO labour standards have long recognised, this leave is especially significant for mothers around birth where the physical elements of pregnancy, birth and breast-feeding affect mothers. However, a shared period of paid parental leave, available to both mothers and fathers, is also seen as important to work and family combination. While mothers tend to take such leave in all countries (indeed men's hours of work tend to increase around the arrival of a baby), making some paid parental leave available to both parents is an important encouragement to fathers involvement in parenting.

International evidence about the optimal periods of parental care for a new baby is equivocal: the OECD concludes that 'a range of six months to two years' is appropriate from a child development perspective. However, many parents need support (including leave) for other periods in a child's life, as well as leave to deal with other caring responsibilities including for ageing family members. Given the ageing of the population throughout OECD countries, including Australia, there are strong arguments for greater attention to the work/family issues that arise around care for the infirm and aged, as well as newborns and children.

From the perspective of labour market participation, the OECD argues that a period of paid parental leave of about six months 'may be about right' (OECD 2005, p 5). However, this period is significantly shorter than that prevailing in many countries (like the Nordic group) that have high levels of labour market attachment. It is also much shorter than many mothers would prefer.

There is concern that longer periods of leave may weaken women's attachment to work. For example, in countries like Austria, Finland, France and Germany paid leave is available for parents for up to three years or more. However, such long periods of withdrawal from paid work are sometimes associated with long term employment disadvantage, such as low pay, low reward for qualifications and insecure employment. In Finland parents can receive significant cash payments where they care for their own children and do not use public childcare, and thus often spend long periods out of paid work when they have a baby. However, up to 40 per cent of Finnish women of childbearing age are employed on short term and insecure employment contracts, partly reflecting employers' expectations about women's weak labour market attachment. In this way, policies to support working carers can have unintended but significant labour market effects – effects that can reach to all women, regardless of their fertility intentions.

Childcare

Countries with poor public provision of affordable, quality, accessible childcare impose high costs on working parents and potentially their children. Households where parents cannot work for lack of non-parental care are associated with higher child poverty. In many cases, inferior care is accepted as the price of earning a wage. Low income households are especially vulnerable to inferior childcare, given their high need to work.

Poor quality childcare is now widely understood to create serious, long term, costly disadvantages for societies as well as the individuals and households it affects. In contrast,

good quality care is often associated with improved cognitive, social and behavioural outcomes for children, especially those from poorer household environments (Esping Anderson 2004). However, long periods in poor quality care, and childcare for young babies are seen as less desirable (Waldfogel 2004).

Childcare is now a lively debate in Australia, because of serious problems of under-supply, significant concerns about variable quality especially in the corporatised sector (Rush 2006; Rush and Downie 2006), and high costs for many parents. Recent federal budget measures (that remove caps on out of school hours and family day care) do little to alleviate what is now regularly described as a crisis in childcare provision in Australia. Many thousands of Australian mothers who would like to work are now prevented from doing so by childcare supply bottlenecks. These are associated with long day care in particular and are partly driven by poor pay, high labour turnover and inadequate skilled labour supply in the industry. High capital and land costs in city locations are especially problematic in an industry that has been largely given over to the private market and where serious market failures exist.

Tax and benefit systems

Particular tax and benefit arrangements can facilitate or impede the labour market participation and working hours of carers. In particular tax regimes that tax family units rather than individuals can impose high marginal tax rates on second earners. Recent tax and benefit changes of the Howard Government have increased cash payments to Australian families. In combination with our tax system (which is formally an individualised rather than family-based tax system), Australia's tax and benefit system imposes high marginal tax rates on second earners. The OECD note that Australia's system of payments to single mothers and their high effective marginal tax rate partly explains their low rate of labour market participation.

Apps' recent analysis (pre-budget 2006/07) shows that in Australia recent changes have effectively shifted Australia to a system of joint household taxation, replacing the traditional progressive individual system (2006, p 14). Apps concludes:

Australian families are now subject to a tax system that closely approximates one of joint taxation, and ... they face an effective MTR schedule that tends to exhibit an inverted U-shaped profile. As a consequence, second earners in low and average wage families face the highest *average* tax rates in the economy. A tax system of this kind, together with a poorly developed childcare sector, offers an explanation for the very low average market hours of work by married mothers, and the resulting large gap between female and male hours that persists over the life cycle despite the decline in fertility in recent decades (2006, p. 29, her emphasis).

The changes in tax and benefits in the 2006/07 budget (which include a higher phase out income point for Family Tax Benefit A) appear to do little to remedy these effects, given the higher benefits that continue to flow to sole-income households over dual earners.

Flexibility at work

Many Australian employers understand that practical measures in the workplace are critical to supporting workers with family responsibilities. Part-time work is widely available in many industries and occupations, especially to women, and in recent years increasing attention has been paid to the quality of that part-time work including through the Quality Part-time Work Project conducted in Victoria by Industrial Relations Victoria in cooperation with industry partners.

Paid parental leave, flexible working hours, work hours that match school hours, leave-banking, leave to care for sick children or other dependents, paternity leave, childcare support are typical measures in firms with exemplary work and family policies (see DEWR 2005 for examples). As the OECD note, these policies are most common in larger workplaces, in the public sector and are more available to highly skilled women (OECD 2005, p 4). Parents on less skilled occupations have much less access, with important effects on inequality and for dependents in poorer households. While some businesses are aware of the business case in favour of family-friendly employment practices, many employers do not undertake a careful cost/benefit assessment of work and family innovations. They are very commonly instead driven by a local champion who sees such innovation as ‘the right thing to do’. In other cases, managers and supervisors have had personal experiences that drive policy change. The literature also suggests that policy is far from enough in driving change: practices – beyond policy – are what count, especially the cultures and behaviours of direct supervisors and managers (Wajcman 1998).

It is interesting to note the OECD observation:

Family friendly working practices can reduce absenteeism and increase employee commitment, with positive effects on productivity and work performance. In this context, the business case for part-time work is clear, and is accepted by many firms in most countries. *However, while individual employers who have introduced family-friendly arrangements suggest the net benefits are positive, there is little general evidence that the business case for other family-friendly arrangements is strong enough to lead to widespread change in work practices.* (OECD, 2005 p 5, our emphasis).

This analysis strikes us as very true of the Australian case. If so, it creates a strong argument for leadership by exemplary employers, the public sector, unions and governments to create and stimulate change in family friendly provisions, especially if these benefits are to be available to workers on lower incomes and in less advantaged households, and to the dependents of such households.

How does Australia rate in work and family support?

Australia’s female participation rate lags behind that in many other industrialised countries, our population is ageing and our fertility rate is low (though not as low as many other countries like Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Slovak Republic and Spain where TFRs are around 1.2 to 1.3).

Compared to OECD averages, Australia is under-investing in early childhood supports. While overall investments in spending on families in 2001 placed Australia above the OECD average of 1.8 per cent of GDP at around 2.8 per cent, more than 80 per cent of this expenditure was on cash payments and the small residual on services. This distribution has become even more pronounced since 2001 with significant increases in cash family payments, including cash maternity payments rather than implementation of a national paid maternity leave scheme (OECD 2005, p 5). Working parents need more than money: they especially need time with children and other dependents, as well as alternative forms of quality non-parental care. Australia lags in its provision of both of these, especially time through paid leave (and even paid holidays, given the growth in casual employment) and quality childcare.

Australian parents need predictable working time, flexibility at work to accommodate household needs, the opportunity to work part-time or to take leave, and accessible, affordable childcare. Many Australian households now have multiple earners (including one or

two parents, young people and school children), all of whom need some employee-influenced flexibility in their work rosters to find some common household time, or to fit study and care with their work and household relationships.

Why Work Choices does not help meet Australia's work/family challenges

Persistent challenges remain on the work and family front in Australia as in many other countries. Work Choices does little to relieve these. Indeed, it seems likely to exacerbate them in some fields as various reports have argued (see, for example, Edgar 2005 and Pocock 2005).

In the current environment, many Australian employers and managers need little convincing that new work/family employment arrangements are necessary. They understand that many other countries are improving their work and family arrangements through legislation – for example, the UK now offers employees 26 weeks paid maternity leave and two weeks paid paternity leave, New Zealand ensures that all workers have a paid holiday whether permanent or casual, and Germany and The Netherlands provide employee rights to request part-time work.

However, Work Choices swims in the opposite direction – away from general rights, and removing the capacity for new general standards for Australian working carers.

This creates a pressing challenge for Australian employers to take action at the workplace level. Those that do will retain and attract skilled workers, reduce recruitment and training costs, increase the well-being of their workforce, and contribute to a better work/family balance nationally.

On the other hand, employers who encourage employees to 'sell' annual leave or set aside award conditions like public holidays, rest breaks, annual leave loadings, allowances and penalty, shift and overtime loadings, allowing unsocial or long hours of work to increase – as Work Choices allows - will disadvantage workers with family responsibilities.

While many employers will be reluctant to cut employee conditions, especially those that disadvantage families, some will be forced to match lower industry standards especially in industries facing tight margins and strong local competition, like contract cleaning or in hospitality. This environment is likely to see widening dispersion in outcomes in different industries and occupations and amongst men and women and different classes of workers. Such inequality has significant negative effects on social well-being and is simply unsustainable in the long term.

In the absence of 'test' cases to establish new general standards on work and family (and the Australian Industrial Relations Commission's capacity to create them) – also removed under Work Choices - it is likely that advances in the next few years will arise from local initiatives and innovative partnerships between governments, employers, unions and employees. Such advances are essential to sustainable Australian workplaces and to the well being of Australian men, women and children.

The Case for and Content of New Partnerships

In this context, there is a strong case for individual employer action, in partnership with others including governments, to improve local arrangements around work and family.

One element of this challenge might be characterised as defensive: that is, action that avoids negative change. For example, a challenge exists for employers to ensure that individual agreements – traditionally more family-unfriendly and especially amongst women – where they are adopted, are family friendly. This requires ensuring that annual leave, long service leave and sick leave provisions are not inferior to past standards. Further, that employment contracts protect loadings for overtime and unsocial hours. Given that two-thirds of Australians already work sometimes or often at unsocial times, and that such working patterns are associated with negative effects on marital stability, and on workers' and children's well being, avoiding such harmful outcomes is important.

A second element of this challenge is positive action by employers to assist employees to find a better balance between work and the rest of their lives, including their caring responsibilities. The way in which work has been traditionally organised around a full-time male breadwinner neither reflects the reality of the Victorian labour force nor the challenges we face in increased business demands for productivity, skill and flexibility, the ageing population and a declining labour pool. Better work and family balance is central to meeting the demands of economic, social and family relationships and demands a new and broad ranging approach to flexible working time and work/family balance (Fagan et al 2006). Such an approach includes making alternative working-time and leave arrangements more widely available within workplaces and encouraging their uptake, particularly by managers and men. These reforms include efforts to ensure that part-time work, widely used by Australian women in pursuit of work and family balance, is of good quality and results in no loss of workplace conditions and status.

A partnership approach between government, employers, employer associations, unions and local communities is crucial. While responsibility for industrial relations, social security and taxation lies with the federal government, state governments have a major role to play in brokering and supporting a partnership approach to work and family balance. They can also provide information to employers and unions about options for more family-friendly working, encourage innovation through pilot projects or contract compliance through the procurement process for government services, and 'smooth' costs for businesses that provide benefits such as paid maternity leave. Unions, employers and employer associations also have a proactive role to play in ensuring working time is a central issue in workplace bargaining and negotiations and that employees have a say in the quantum and scheduling of their hours.

In Victoria, the State government's *Action Agenda for Work and Family Balance* has allowed it to respond strategically both in terms of whole-of-government policy development and in taking specific action, such as the *Better Work and Family Balance Grants* program. To date, this program has provided funding to small businesses and non government organisations to investigate employee work and family needs, implement policies and programs to assist employee work and family balance while improving business performance, and the development of model clauses and agreements. The challenges thrown up by the new industrial relations regime however demand a fresh approach to encouraging innovation through the partnership model that we set out below.

The partnership model

Partnerships between government, employers, employer associations, unions and local communities to support better work/family balance could operate at a number of levels, from the state level, an industry level, the local community level and in individual workplaces.

Such partnerships would be guided by three key policy principles (see Charlesworth et al 2002, pp64-65):

- *Improving the quality of work, family and community life* Having a say about working hours is fundamental to balancing work and family. Individual workers need to be able to make choices to suit their changing circumstances over the life course, for example by moving in and out of part-time and full-time work and undertaking a phased reduction of working time into retirement.
- *Advancing gender equality* Action around work and family balance needs to recognise that gender equality in both the workplace and the home is fundamental to enhancing work/family balance. The key to achieving greater gender equality in both spheres is the recognition that men and women need support in both their family and paid work roles.
- *Enhancing labour market efficiency* This is more than a short-term ‘business case’. It includes the medium and long term interests of individual employers and their employees as well as the efficient functioning of the industries in which they are located over time. It is about linking action around work and family balance to addressing skill shortages, shrinking labour markets and contributing to a sustainable economy.

The Victorian government clearly has a major role to play in facilitating work/family partnerships and in providing a point of coordination and information dissemination. However sustainable effective action needs a partnership approach. It is therefore vital that all the relevant parties, including employers, unions and communities, be involved in initiating and jointly setting the agenda for particular action.

Partnership options

In this section we outline several possible options for work and family partnerships at a number of levels. This list is not exhaustive but intended to point the way to the variety of innovative approaches that could be taken to better support work and family balance in the current industrial relations climate. International experience suggests that social partnerships such as these can lead to joint problem-solving and joint solutions between government, employers, employer associations, unions and local communities (Fagan et al 2005, p15).

A Right to Request Process

Having a say about the quantum and scheduling of working time is fundamental to the successful balancing of work and family obligations. In 2006, the AIRC Family Provisions test case decision provided for, among other things, the right for employees returning from parental leave to request a shift to part-time work, with an obligation on employers to seriously consider such requests. Such a ‘right’ is a procedural one rather than a substantive one and allows employers to consider whether the request can be reasonably accommodated within the constraints of a particular workplace. This ‘right to request’ has not been included in the Fair Pay and Conditions Standard established under WorkChoices, despite the AIRC decision and international precedent. While some individual employers provide a *de facto* right to request process for considering employee requests to adjust their working time, others reject such requests out of hand or deal with them in an ad hoc way, often leaving the granting or rejecting of requests up to individual supervisors. In some cases the failure to seriously consider such requests will breach anti-discrimination legislation. In most cases it

leads to poor employee job satisfaction and organisational commitment, both critical factors in enhancing productivity.

What is needed is the development of a model of a formal workplace process for initiating and considering short or long term adjustments to working time. This would provide a clear and transparent process for employees to request changes to working time and a process for managers/employers to seriously consider these requests. International experience particularly in the UK suggests that a formal right to request process leads to positive outcomes for both employees and employers.

The development of a right to request model of working time could be facilitated in the first instance by the Victorian government in partnership with VECCI and the VTHC. It would then need to be further developed at the industry level in partnership with the relevant employer associations and unions with appropriate adjustments made to reflect industry characteristics, such as around rostering and shift work. The right to request model could then be trialled in individual workplaces in partnership with the employer, managers, employees and the relevant union if there is union membership. The Victorian government, and relevant peak and industry employer associations and unions would then evaluate the outcomes of these workplace trials to improve and encourage the uptake of a formal right to request process.

Industry Codes of Practice

In individual industries there are a set of specific conditions and demands that impact on workplaces and shape employer calculations and choices including around working time arrangements. In some industries intense price competitiveness may place pressure on employers to cut work conditions. Where this occurs it will almost certainly disadvantage workers with family responsibilities. However lowering working conditions also limits the options both individual employers and others in that industry have to attract and retain labour in the medium to long term. The development of industry codes of practice are one mechanism that can both assist employers in a particular industry meet the skill and productivity demands in their particular enterprise *and* support workers with family responsibilities.

In 2005, the Victorian government developed industry-endorsed guidelines around improving the quality of part-time work in five industries; law, nursing, hospitality, retail and local government. These industry-specific guidelines were developed in partnership with the relevant employer associations and unions and individual workplaces in each industry. The development of the quality part-time work industry guidelines provides a useful partnership model for the development of industry codes of practice, based as it was on extensive consultation with and cooperation between the key employer associations and unions within each industry.

Apart from quality part-time work, two other areas where industry codes of practice could be usefully developed include family-friendly or employee-choice rostering (ECR) and limiting excessive working hours. ECR allows employees to choose their own working time arrangements within the operational constraints of the business. It has benefits beyond allowing employees to better match the time demands of work and family. Experience both in Australia and internationally suggests that ECR is used by a number of businesses to better match staffing to service or production needs. On the other hand, excessive working hours are a critical inhibitor of work and family balance. There is little evidence to suggest that working long hours - typically found in but not limited to male-dominated occupations and

workplaces - are productive over the medium to long term. Indeed there is increasing evidence that points to the negative impact of long working hours on personal, social, family and economic relationships, as well as health and well being (Fagan et al 2006, p 8). Developing and promoting a code of practice that focuses on achieving reasonable and predictable working hours could assist employers and employees to focus on more effective and efficient work organisation, reduce employee stress and enhance the capacity of employers respond to the changing demands of the market.

The development of industry codes of practice such as on ECR and limiting excessive working hours could be jointly initiated by the Victorian government in partnership with VECCI and the VTHC. Relevant industries would be identified and partnerships facilitated between the relevant employer associations and unions to address an industry-specific working time issue. Clubs Victoria and the Liquor Hospitality & Miscellaneous Workers Union have recently launched a set of ECR guidelines designed to encourage good practice within licensed clubs, which could be used as starting point for the development of similar codes of practice in other industries.

Managing Flexible Working

While many, mainly larger, Australian organisations have introduced work/family or work/life policies, there remains a significant gap between policy and practice. This means even where flexible work options are available employees may have limited practical access to them. In many cases while the senior leadership within the organisation may indeed be committed to implementing a particular working time policy, the line managers or supervisors who are supposed to put this into practice are not. Their reluctance may be due to a number of reasons: a lack of information about the intention and scope of the policy; lack of awareness about the organisational benefits of flexible working; mixed messages from senior management about competing short term business priorities; a belief that employees' family responsibilities are their own and should not influence the organisation of work; or an assumption that the current way of organising work is the only way work can be undertaken. If family-friendly workplace policies are to become more practically accessible to employees, line managers and supervisors need to be trained and supported in better managing flexible working time.

One option for a partnership approach would be for the Victorian government and individual industry unions and employer associations to jointly develop training material for line managers and supervisors. Such material would provide information and support to more effectively manage a range of different working time arrangements through adjustments in work organisation and work flow to meet the needs of both employees and the business. This initiative could be developed and trialled in a number of similar workplaces within designated industries and would provide the basis for the development of similar training material in other industries.

Piloting Innovation

At the workplace level it is often difficult for employers, managers and employees to see or have the time to reflect on the possibilities for other ways of organising work and working time that may meet the needs of both the business and workers with family responsibilities. While there is a lot of media and public discussion about issues such as the ageing workforce and the looming labour shortage in some industries and occupations, day to day work demands can leave little room for innovative responses to respond to such challenges. Researching and piloting creative ways to provide family-friendly working conditions and

meet service and production demands can provide an important impetus to longer term change. Partnership working is fundamental to the success and longevity of such projects within a particular workplace and also more broadly.

The ageing workforce is a significant challenge faced in many workplaces both in the short and long term. On the one hand, the challenge is to maintain the skills and organisational knowledge of older workers within the organisation; on the other hand, the challenge is to ensure that the organisation can continue to attract and retain workers in a tight labour market. Innovative approaches to both challenges could be developed through a number of workplace pilot projects through a partnership between the Victorian government, VECCI, the VTHC and individual workplaces. Pilot projects could focus for example on developing a variety of approaches to retain older workers such as through phased retirement and providing better supports through appropriate working time practices and job redesign. They could also focus on encouraging innovative approaches to work organisation by developing new work processes that allow an organisation to adapt to market changes more quickly and attract and retain both older and other workers.

The Victorian government has undertaken a number of initiatives to pilot innovative workplace approaches to work/family balance under its *Better Work and Family Balance Grants* program. Such initiatives create the time and space within organisations for employers and employees to work in partnership on specific work and family issues relevant to the workplace and often to the industry. To use these pilot projects as a springboard for broader family-friendly change, peak and industry employer associations and unions need to collaborate to ensure the lessons from such projects are disseminated more broadly within industry workplaces.

'Times in the City' Projects

The local community context in which businesses operate and employees work is a major influence on work/family balance. In recognition of the importance of the local context a number of community-based initiatives in Italy and more recently in the UK, known as 'times in the city' projects, have focused on the reorganisation of working hours together with changes in the operating hours of services such as kindergartens, public transport and local government. Central to all these projects has been a partnership approach between local government, local employer associations and trade unions, local employers, and local health and community service providers.

Building on the 'times in the city' approach, community level partnerships in several designated rural and regional areas could be established to tackle the better integration of child care services and responsiveness to the working time arrangements used by employees in local workplaces. Poor co-ordination between the array of children's and family services at the local level is a critical issue for many Victorian parents who are juggling work and family or who are trying to return to paid employment. Research evidence suggests that early childhood services which are linked together at the local level, properly supported and resourced, foster child development, break down the isolation of families and contribute to community building (Wannan 2002). Access to quality childcare services is also critical for supporting the transitions from the home into work and further education. More responsive opening times and integration of children's services and facilities - including family day care, long day care, occasional care, vacation care and before and after school care - could be integrated with the services offered by maternal and child health services, as well as other local government services.

These childcare service focused partnerships would be initially facilitated by the State government. However it would be the relevant local government that would take a central coordinating role in establishing the ongoing partnership between the child care services, other relevant local health and community service providers, the local employer associations and trade unions and local employers. These partnerships could also draw on the lessons from the recent establishment of ten Early Childhood Development Centres (ECDC) in South Australia. Similar facilities exist in Victoria. Each of the South Australian ECDC sites was selected on the basis of local unmet demand for child care and a demonstrated commitment to an integrated approach to service delivery. While the service mix varies across each ECDC in accordance with community needs and priorities, all provide a range of integrated care, education, and health and family services for children from conception to eight years of age (SA Department of Health 2006).

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed some of the international evidence about work and family arrangements that can assist families. WorkChoices is very distant from these. Many long term challenges remain. They include access to paid carers leave, the provision of quality, accessible, affordable childcare, a fair tax and benefit system that does not penalize second earners, and workplace flexibility that supports real choice for working carers. Australia has a long way to go on in responding to each of these challenges.

This paper has suggested some modest steps that might be considered at the state level in Victoria. Most of these rely on effective partnership between different organisations including government, employers, local authorities and unions. Such partnerships can have important demonstration effects that for low cost encourage significant changes at the workplace and industry level.

In addition, the Victorian Government is a significant purchaser of goods and services that provide it with leverage to encourage better efforts to meet the workplace needs of working families. It is also funds many community services and is a very large employer. The Commonwealth Government has not hesitated to use its leverage arising from these functions to directly shape employment outcomes and contracts in the building, TAFE, university and other sectors, including amongst its own employees. The same capacity exists for state governments.

Of course the kinds of partnerships we suggest, along with state government encouragement to its suppliers and services, as well as good practice in relation to its own employees which their Victorian Government has already committed to, are no substitute for general minimum industrial standards that protect the wages, job security, living standards, penalty rates, meal breaks, holidays and other basic working conditions of all Australians. Without such standards there is every chance that the greater dispersion in wages and family-friendly conditions of Australian workers will continue to widen, with lower paid workers and women especially disadvantaged.

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