



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

**SOCIAL SECURITY AMENDMENT
(FLEXIBLE PARTICIPATION
REQUIREMENTS FOR
PRINCIPAL CARERS) BILL 2010**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 12 May 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Wednesday, 12 May 2010 Page 3446 Questioner Speaker Rishworth, Amanda, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof No Responder Question No.</p>
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Ms RISHWORTH (Kingston) (7.18 pm)—I also rise to support the Social Security Amendment (Flexible Participation Requirements for Principal Carers) Bill 2010. This bill is a very important bill and it comes off the back of a Participation Taskforce Review that was commissioned by the previous Minister for Employment Participation and taken up by the now Minister for Employment Participation for the actual changes to legislation. What these changes really do, while recognising that there is an imperative for principal carers of young children to be able to maintain continuity in the workforce, is actually ask, are we doing this in the best way possible? Are we actually making sure that our principal carers are involved in work and are a part of work?

Really, I think that we can do better. Workforce participation rates were published in the Participation Taskforce Review and it found the participation rates for mothers of school-age children lower compared with other OECD countries. Australian labour force participant rates particularly for single mothers as well as those in the 55-64 year-old group are actually lower than other OECD countries.

That shows that there are things that can be done to help, encourage and improve involvement in this area. Part of what we are looking at in this bill is ways to increase flexibility and ensure that parents can transition to work on different paths. The flexibility to allow parents to transition by improving their skills and upskilling is really important, and I will talk about that little bit more. We have heard a lot about increasing the flexibility for sole parents to meet their participation requirements, but we cannot forget that this is about whole families. In fact, what is at the heart of the exemptions and other parts of the participation requirements is ensuring that parents can give the best possible care to their children, especially in situations where children need some specific care.

Looking at specific exemptions, we will extend the existing 12-month automatic exemption for families with four or more children or families that are providing distance education for children from 16 up to 19 years if they are currently completing secondary school. This recognises that parents do have a responsibility and are involved in helping children, especially in large families, to get through those schooling years. We have said many times in this place and I have certainly said that finishing a year 12 education is a passport for children for the rest of their lives. So I see this exemption as one where we are really focusing on parents with large families getting an exemption so that they can make sure their children get the best pathway for the future.

In addition we are recognising the difficult role of respite and emergency foster carers through a new exemption that remains in place for the period of time the child is in that person's care. Again this recognises that these children need more assistance and that having a carer who is absent is perhaps not in the best interests of a child who has been through often traumatic and difficult circumstances. As the previous speaker said, the role of kinship carers is recognised through a new exemption for those who have the care of a child in a state or territory case plan. I know this will be particularly welcomed by the grandparents I have spoken to who often take on the role of caring for their grandchildren, although they do not take on a full formal foster care role. Certainly a lot of people would argue that if a grandparent is able to take on that role that is in the best interests of the child, but there are a lot of complex issues that come with that. Providing that exemption is really important for these families to get back on their feet. But we should not get completely focused on exemptions. While exemption is for the parent, this is indeed also in the best interests of children—and that is really important.

A second area of recommendation by the Participation Review Taskforce which is a component of these changes is allowing more flexibility to help people upskill. The government wants to ensure that people get the best opportunity for and the best access to training. As part of our education revolution we want people to upskill, and I will give an example from my own electorate. By way of background, the bill will allow carers to satisfy their requirements for 15 hours participation, both contact or non-contact hours, in combination with paid work. I want to let people know what this meant for someone in my electorate.

Catherine Jordan of Morphett Vale, a single mother of one, said to me that she was studying aged care at TAFE and working casually. She wanted to work in the aged sector for which she had a real passion—an area where we really need qualified people. Like many Australians, she wanted to improve her skill set and eventually return

to full-time work. As part of the previous requirements for participation she had to quit this study and focus on getting casual work. In the end, it defeated the purpose of skilling up someone who wanted to contribute to this very important area—especially as we have an ageing population. The changes in this bill will mean that Catherine can return to study, knowing that between casual study and her work she will fulfil her participation requirements. This is really important.

As previous speakers have mentioned, primary carers should be encouraged to pursue the development of their own private businesses if they so desire. I hear many stories of mothers and fathers, single parents, coming up with some very inventive and exciting businesses which they start at home. Under the changes in this bill, carers will be afforded the same opportunity and support as the rest of the population, allowing them to enter into the scheme on a part-time basis, giving carers the skills to go into business for themselves. This is really important.

I want to touch on one other very sensible change, which has certainly affected a lot of people in my electorate, which ensures that carers have more flexibility over the Christmas and New Year holidays—a very stressful time for families. It should be a time of joy but it is a time when non-government organisations, church organisations and charity organisations find the demand on their services really goes up. So having more flexible guidelines over Christmas and New Year holidays is really important.

Another important change is the flexible provisions for employees who temporarily do not work over school holiday periods—people who work in an administrative role or maybe as a classroom support officer. They may have a very good arrangement with the school where they work during term time, with guaranteed ongoing hours, but they are not needed in school holidays, although they do not necessarily want to work then because they want to spend time with their children. They do not want to leave their children at home alone because they have to go out to work. When talking about school holidays for two weeks, it seems nonsensical to many of the people in my electorate to have to fulfil participation requirements knowing that in two weeks they will be back at their job, yet they have to go through the process which, in fairness, does not improve their long-term sustainable role in the workforce. This is a very important and sensible change which makes sure that people who have good arrangements with their employer and ongoing meaningful employment can continue, rather than chopping and changing jobs just because they go on school holidays. Obviously we have specified that the carer must have the expectation of ongoing employment, but for people assisting in schools it is evident that having a break for two weeks is just about schools closing for school holidays.

In conclusion, these are important, sensible changes. They do not detract from the fact that we still want to encourage people into the workforce. We want to ensure, if they are receiving welfare money from Centrelink, that there is an obligation, but do it in a way that keeps in mind the children they are looking after and some sensible arrangements so as to ensure that by upskilling and educating themselves they can go even further and have a long-term, meaningful connection to the workforce. I commend the bill to the House.

Debate (on motion by **Ms Hall**) adjourned.