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**HOUSE OF
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STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES

Reference: Balancing work and family

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES

Wednesday, 18 October 2006

Members: Mrs Bronwyn Bishop (*Chair*), Mrs Irwin (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Cadman, Ms Kate Ellis, Mrs Elson, Mr Fawcett, Ms George, Mrs Markus, Mr Quick and Mr Ticehurst

Members in attendance: Mrs Bronwyn Bishop, Mr Cadman, Mr Fawcett, Mrs Irwin, Mrs Markus and Mr Quick

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To 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:

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

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Committee met at 10.21 am**WINCHESTER, Professor Hilary Patience Mary, Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Vice President, Organisational Strategy and Change, University of South Australia**

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

CHAIR (Mrs Bronwyn Bishop)—Welcome, Professor Winchester, it is nice to speak with you again. Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in our public hearing this morning. Would you please advise the committee on the capacity in which you appear.

Prof. Winchester—Yes. I am Pro-Vice-Chancellor at the University of South Australia. I am also Chair of the Colloquium of Senior Women Executives in Higher Education, which is a subgroup of the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee.

CHAIR—Although the committee does not require you to take an oath, I should explain that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament and that the giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. Professor Winchester, would you like to make an opening statement?

Prof. Winchester—Yes, thank you. I do not have a formal prepared statement to read, so I am just going to talk. My understanding is that this hearing is about the impediments that family circumstances can bring to working lives, particularly for women.

CHAIR—Yes.

Prof. Winchester—I am going to talk particularly about the university sector, because that is where my experience is. I want to start with some information from the Graduate Destination Survey, which is produced annually by Graduate Careers Australia. Each year they produce information about where graduates find employment and about their starting salaries.

There is some information which breaks that down between men and women. So, for example, the 2005 data, which is the most recent available, shows that men are more likely than women to be available for full-time employment—that is, 69 per cent to 66 per cent—and that men are more likely to not just be available for but actually be in full-time employment. The margins are not very large—that is, 81 per cent to 80 per cent—but there is a continual difference, and there has been a similar pattern for the last few years. The differences are partly because of the sector of employment that men and women go into. Men are much more represented in the private sector and in the government sector, and there are far more women than men, about twice as many, in health and education.

Partly, these disciplinary differences result in variations to graduate starting salaries. In 2005, which is again the most recent data, the mean starting salary for graduate men was \$40,000; for graduate women it was \$39,000. So women's salaries for graduates were therefore at 97.5 per cent of men's on entry to work. That is in fact the highest ratio ever. It has fluctuated between 91 per cent and 96 per cent since 1977. The gap between graduate starting salaries for women and men is highest in some particular areas: in dentistry, architecture, art and design, and medicine. It is interesting that, for a newly qualified graduate dentist, if you are a woman you will earn 92 per

cent of what a newly qualified graduate male dentist earns. Similarly, for doctors, women earn 96 per cent—and this is an average over many years—of the salary of newly qualified male doctors. That gives a general overview that, although the differences are not large, they are consistent and they have been consistent even since 1977, and that women's starting salaries are lower than men's—and I actually do think that the amount of money is important.

That is really where I would like to start, but I would like to go on to talk about men and women who move into university occupations. That is probably what I know more about. We know that approximately 55 per cent of all students are female, but then, when you look at the academic staff in universities, only 38.5 per cent are female. A handful of universities have proportions where there are fewer than 30 per cent of women on their academic staff, but generally it ranges between 30 and 50 per cent. The most interesting feature about this, however, is the way that the numbers of women reduce as you go up the hierarchy. So, if you take associate professor and above—that is, associate professor, professor and people who are in executive positions—you are talking about 21.6 per cent of all those people in senior academic positions being female. At my own university, it is 27 per cent. But in a number of universities, about 10 universities in this country, less than 20 per cent of senior academic staff are women. For professors—so that is taking out the associate professor level—the average across Australian universities is 17.2 per cent female, and, although the pattern of the universities is not precisely the same, generally the newer universities have more senior women and the larger, older, research-intensive universities have fewer. The situation is improving very slowly. Over the last 10 years, you see an increase of about one per cent in the proportion of women at senior levels each year.

The differences are even more marked if you look not just at senior academic positions but at senior research positions. Work has been done by Sharon Bell, who is now at the University of Canberra, where she has examined the research positions and the research applications. Just to take a couple of examples: when she did her work, which was last year—there may have been a little bit of change, but it will not have changed much—88 per cent of the people who were running research in universities, the deputy vice-chancellors of research, were male. Of the applicants for Federation Fellowships, which are the most prestigious fellowships run by the ARC, 92 per cent were male. Of applicants for NHMRC grants, 87 per cent were male. If you look at the learned academies, you see that in science it is 94 per cent male; in social sciences it is not so bad—it is 78 per cent male. In the ARC College of Experts at that time, there were no female chairs for the College of Experts. So in those senior research positions there are very few women, even fewer than there are generally in academia.

In my own research conducted last year for the AVCC, I looked to see whether there were barriers to women in the promotion process, but we found that women apply in reasonable proportion to their representation in the level below and in most cases are slightly more successful. So the barriers to promotion were not the promotion processes operating in universities. Those policies are quite fair and equitable. The criteria are transparent. The processes are good. But what is happening is that there just are not enough women there.

It seems from evidence that comes from other work that has been done in the sector that the impediment is not the structures within the universities; it is actually the family responsibilities and the gendered division of labour in the household. Here, I refer to work conducted by Belinda Probert, who is now at the University of Melbourne. I can give the exact reference a little later.

She found in two studies, one which was national and one which was of a very large, research-intensive university, that there were very significant differences not only in the representation of women at senior levels but in their family circumstances. So, for example, very many more men than women lived with a partner. For women to be successful, they were still less able to maintain a partnered relationship than men. Statistics for the University of New South Wales showed that 80 per cent of the men had partners but only 63½ per cent of the women. So marriage was suffering. Also, there was an enormous difference in the proportion of women and men who were primary caregivers: 67 per cent of women were primary caregivers but only eight per cent of the men.

Going back to the situation with the partners: of the women who had partners, over 90 per cent of those partners were in full-time employment. But of the men who had partners, only 57 per cent of those partners were in full-time employment. So the women had much more of the responsibility for looking after children whether they had partners or not. There was also a significant difference in the proportion of women and men caring for elderly parents. Approximately 22 per cent of women had caring responsibilities for elderly relations and 13 per cent of men.

This is an increasing problem as women have babies later and people are living longer. Many women who are in their 40s and 50s have a double bind of teenage children and elderly parents. There is a lot of quite detailed research that shows that those caring responsibilities affect career plans. In her study, Professor Probert went on to have focus groups with these people, and 88 per cent of women said that caring responsibilities had affected their career but only 50 per cent of men said that. Interestingly, the women said that what they needed to progress their careers, particularly their research, was time. What the men said they needed was money. The evidence from Professor Probert's study was not just about babies but about teenagers and family breakdown, and it is very much to do with the gendered division of labour in the household and these expectations of how women will behave.

There have been some responses from universities to these studies. The Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee committed itself to an action plan for women from 2006 to 2010. It focuses on those critical points of senior academic women and, perhaps to a lesser extent, senior women in the general staff positions. It is monitoring the data and giving financial support for some further research on these issues. There are individual workplaces too which are working to alleviate some of these difficulties. My own university, the University of South Australia, won the inaugural BCA award for work-life balance. I think the way to do that is not just to have policies in place but actually to model that behaviour from the very top, which has been the case for my vice-chancellor.

We have a number of family-friendly initiatives such as extensive maternity leave, flexible working hours and so on. But those will work only if the cultural expectations change. I think they operate more at the margins and do not affect that very basic conception of the male breadwinner and the female doing a little bit of part-time work, which is seen as not really being of great significance. I would say that, in the university sector, where you have women who have undertaken first degrees and higher degrees, there is a lot of wasted intellectual and human capital, because we have not yet sorted out that balance between work and life. I will stop there.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. I think that was an excellent presentation to us. When you said that the higher up the hierarchy you go the fewer women there are in senior ranks, do you have any evidence as to what proportion of those women are unmarried and have no children?

Prof. Winchester—The Probert study has some information, which I can probably find for you. The figure that I quoted to you from the University of New South Wales study was that 63 per cent of women were unpartnered, which is a much higher proportion than average, but some of them would have had children. In the national study done by the Northern Territory Education Union, about 72 per cent of women did not have partners, but I do not know how many did not have children. I do not think it was part of that study.

CHAIR—They were without partners at the time that this study was put together?

Prof. Winchester—Yes.

CHAIR—Was the breakdown that 63 per cent of women were unpartnered or were partnered and that 87 per cent of men were partnered? Would you clarify that figure for me.

Prof. Winchester—The question was: ‘Do respondents live with a partner?’ The figure for women who did live with a partner was 63.5 per cent for UNSW and for men it was 80 per cent. In the national study done by the NTEU, the figures are that 72 per cent of women lived with a partner and 83.8 per cent of men. The number of women with a partner declines above the age of about 44 or 45. Apparently, in the discussion groups, a number of women commented that they had broken up with their partners while they were doing their PhD—I know that from my experience—for example, one woman said, ‘I wonder how much of a price I did have to pay to do my PhD. My marriage ended four or five months after—the price I paid for working so hard.’

I have just found a table here that says, ‘Presence of children by sex.’ For the University of New South Wales study, the figures are that 70 per cent of the women had children and 83 per cent of the men. So obviously there were more women who did not have children: about 30 per cent of those women did not have children and 17 per cent of the men.

CHAIR—It also indicates that, by the time this snapshot was taken, there had been a decline of at least 10 or 11 per cent in the number of people who were partnered. They were on their own.

Prof. Winchester—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you have any statistics on how women in university life fare when they do have children and come back? Does that impede their progress?

Prof. Winchester—I have not got statistics on that. I would only have anecdotal evidence. Women have the capacity to come back; there are usually excellent policies for maternity leave and the retention statistics are good. I think that part of the problem of moving ahead is combining the caring for children, which women do disproportionately, with the requirements of a demanding academic position, particularly the requirements to do research.

CHAIR—Obviously, child care that is available for these people will be institutional child care—a childcare establishment where they drop the kids off, pick them up and all of that. Have you asked them how they would feel if they could have in-home care—that is, a nanny, for want of a better term, in their own home instead of having to drop off, pick up and so on?

Prof. Winchester—I have not asked that question. A study was done by Dr Colleen Chesterman and others about women and cultures of management, and there was a comparison between women in academia and women in banking, which think was the main comparison. The difficulty for women in academia is that they often feel they cannot afford that in-home care. It is more expensive to have a nanny than it is to use institutional child care. I think it would be beyond the means of most people who are at, say, the senior lecturer level.

CHAIR—There is no tax relief for that; if people got some tax relief, such as a tax deduction, do you think they would be more able to afford it?

Prof. Winchester—They would. The other mechanism to look at would be salary sacrifice.

CHAIR—We had some figures in today from the University of Western Sydney, where they offer salary sacrifice, and they have 29 employees who take that up. Sydney West Area Health Service has 23. The CSIRO has given evidence of having 123 taking up salary sacrifice. The main inhibitor seems to be the availability of premises that meet that Australian Taxation Office definition of business premises. It does seem that the CSIRO would be a good indicator of how people would take it up. Can I ask you again: you gave us two figures, which were the difference between the starting salaries of men and women.

Prof. Winchester—Yes. That was an overall statistic.

CHAIR—As they remain in the workforce, does that gap remain the same? Or does it get bigger or smaller?

Prof. Winchester—My understanding is that it would get bigger. It certainly would be the case in the academic sector, because you have fewer women moving into the higher ranks, which have higher salaries. I do notice also that in academia more women are employed at the lowest level, which is associate lecturer, and start their employment at associate lecturer level, whereas men are more likely start their academic career at the lecturer level, which is the next pay step up. The differences tend to be exacerbated as you go on.

CHAIR—Do you think that there is almost an in-built affirmative action program in favour of men—in other words, almost built into the psyche is the situation: ‘He’s a male, we’d better give him more’?

Prof. Winchester—There is evidence, certainly from Canada, that people have what Professor Valerian called ‘gender schemas’ in their minds. She shows that a very small difference, for example, in successful applications for research grants means that the gap becomes wider and wider. So, even if it is only one per cent a year, the track record of the man builds and the track record of the woman declines in proportion, and men are therefore more likely to be successful in getting research grants and, conversely, women are less likely to be successful. So it does tend to be either a positive cycle or a negative spiral. There is also

evidence that putting male or female names, for example, on grant applications means that they are viewed differently.

CHAIR—Really?

Prof. Winchester—That is international research. I am not saying there is any deliberate intent, but there is still an image built into people's minds of what a successful researcher looks like—a male image, probably in a white coat.

Mrs IRWIN—Professor Winchester, in your opening statement regarding executive positions you stated, if I am correct, that less than 20 per cent of senior staff are women. Is the reason for this that women are finding it very hard to balance work and family, that they are not being offered these positions or are not going for these positions?

Prof. Winchester—That is certainly part of the reason. You need to have a pipeline of women who have the relevant experience to be able to get those positions. As I have said, the proportions drop off as you go from associate lecturer to lecturer, senior lecturer and above. Partly they are more reluctant to put themselves forward for those positions. The comments you get from women—which are again reflected in the research of people like Probert and Chesterman—say things like, 'I just couldn't fit it all in,' or 'These jobs are unmanageable,' because there are expectations that you work long hours, that you are very visible, that you do things in the evenings, that you do not have a right to be absent, if you like. There are obviously a complicated set of reasons why this is the case.

Mrs IRWIN—Do you find women who have gone for executive positions are putting off having children because of the constraints?

Prof. Winchester—I certainly did. There is a general trend for educated women to have their babies later, so I would think that is a reasonable assumption to make but I do not have hard evidence on that.

Mrs MARKUS—Professor Winchester, with the results that you have is there any indication about the impact of the choices or attitudes of male partners towards their women or expectations about what the women are doing or not doing in supporting them moving forward or progressing? A lot of your comments related to what women are having difficulties with and it is not that those difficulties are not important, but is there any assessment of the impact on the men they are in partnership with, both attitudinally towards them and time—how much men and women contribute to child care and looking after practical things in the home? Was there any information about the attitudinal aspect?

Prof. Winchester—No, I am sorry, there was not. There was only that rather bald information about who said they had primary responsibilities and some individual evidence from focus groups where people reflected on the difficulties of teenage children or coping with summer holidays or illness. Certainly the statistics that I quoted seemed to say that 88 per cent of women said that their caring responsibilities affected their career and for men the figure was 51 per cent. They are talking about having to cut their hours back to do those caring responsibilities. But it does not really go into detail about the attitudes that men have about sharing domestic work or to

their partners undertaking demanding positions. I am afraid I do not have exactly what you are looking for there.

Mrs MARKUS—That is fine, thank you.

CHAIR—Professor Winchester, thank you very much. Your evidence this morning has been very valuable. Often when we are talking about policies that will make it easier for women, there seems to be a tendency, particularly by males, to discount women who earn higher salaries as somehow not being worthy of tax relief, that they probably should be doing only part-time work and assisting their partners. What you have said to us this morning is very valuable indeed. Thank you very much.

Prof. Winchester—Thank you. Would you like the exact references of the information I have been talking about?

CHAIR—That would be very helpful. I will get the secretariat to give you a call. Thank you.

Prof. Winchester—Thank you. I hope the inquiry goes well

[10.58 am]

ROMER, Ms Jodie, Private capacity

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

ACTING CHAIR (Mrs Irwin)—Welcome. Do you have time now to speak to us?

Ms Romer—I do. I must apologise: I am not fully prepared. I came in early this morning but have been busy all day. So I have not done as much preparation as I would like.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you. Although the committee does not require you to speak under oath, you should understand that these hearings are formal proceedings of the Commonwealth parliament. Giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. Do you wish to make a brief introductory statement before we proceed to questions?

Ms Romer—I guess so. I feel really unprepared, as though I am back at university doing an essay the night before it is due.

ACTING CHAIR—We would like to hear your story. Prior to you coming on the line, our chair, Mrs Bishop, was saying that you have had difficulties with your own business, balancing work and family, and so forth.

Ms Romer—Definitely.

ACTING CHAIR—We would love to hear about that.

Ms Romer—I will give a brief outline and then in answering questions I could probably be more articulate. Basically I always wanted to work and have a family so when I started my business it was with the premise of opening a retail store and getting it established with a manager so that I could work and have a family. Even though I did not need to work, I always wanted to run my own business. Obviously, theory and reality are two different things. Instead of having the store for two years and then having a family, I fell pregnant six weeks after opening and I ended up having my son in the store for the first year, which was a challenge but at that time I was married and did not want to put my son into day care as a newborn, nor did I want to give up the store I had just started. It worked quite well and then I ended up having my mum look after my son three days a week, but because she needed an income, I paid her to look after him. Then I was home two days a week with my son and my husband had him one day a week.

Over the next three years, I had another child and trying to have a baby in the store and a toddler, running the store and being at home was proving very difficult. My husband at the time said to give up the store, that we did not need the money. I was not doing everything very well and I did not want to give it up. Basically, the marriage folded when my daughter was four months old—he just walked out. That was a very challenging time and I struggled to look after a

newborn baby and a son who was crying every night for his daddy, and I did not really know why the marriage was over.

Obviously I was a mess, never having fully run a business or a household by myself. I was smart enough to seek counselling and the counsellor suggested that I get some sort of live-in help because my mum was looking after my father, who was quite sick. I had no support and my husband was not communicating at all with me. So I got a live-in au pair, which was fantastic. Basically, an au pair lives in a spare room and they are able to do anything for those 20 hours, whether it be child care, cleaning or whatever—it cost about \$250 a week. That was fantastic. Over the next 18 months I had three au pairs who lived at home and cared for the children and I worked four days a week and had two part-time staff. Trying to juggle that financially was very difficult and I ended up not being able to have au pairs anymore. So my children were in day care full time. Trying to run the business and pay the mortgage was getting very difficult. I had had a settlement with my husband and just could not cope looking after the family home. So I sold the family home and got a townhouse, downsizing. I think Bronwyn came in when I had the closing down sale. Like a lot of working women, whether they are married or single mums, I want to work, I need to work. From dropping the children off at kindy, running to work, working all day, running home, making dinner, with tired children, I feel on a daily basis as though the balls are dropping around me.

There is always something, every week. Obviously I am divorced and there are lots of issues with my ex-husband but on a day-to-day basis trying to cope with the bills and managing a small business is why I have decided to close the business. Then I have other things to work out: how am I going to work part time, pay the mortgage and start a new business? It is very difficult but I personally would like to continue to work. I probably could go on a pension and not work but for me that is not an option at all—I prefer to work. That is basically my story. I could answer lots of questions.

I know the committee is interested in incentives to have a family and return to work and then the impacts of taxation on choices in balancing work and family. I certainly have ideas on that. I do not know how they would work logistically, having a private enterprise. I am aware of different budgeting requirements. I am interested in answering any questions you might have.

CHAIR—Jodie, thank you very much. I came by on Sunday and saw that you still have the signs up and that you are still working hard. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to us today. If you were able to go back to the situation of having an au pair and having it tax deductible, would that make your life more bearable?

Ms Romer—Definitely. I have spoken to Mrs Bishop about that because—

CHAIR—That is me!

Ms Romer—Sorry. Without a doubt, a live-in au pair or any sort of nanny would work out just as financially viable as kindy and you do not have all the running around. Kindy is still a good social interaction but when your time is limited, a live-in au pair makes life easier and makes the family flow better. When I got home from work with an au pair, dinner was starting to be prepared or they could go shopping during the day with the baby, or have the washing on the line. The daily things that a stay-at-home mum would do the au pair does for you. I did not feel

as stressed, I guess you could say, when I had an au pair. I was stressed financially, but I was not as stressed physically and emotionally.

Mrs MARKUS—Thanks, Jodie, for being available to speak to us today, particularly sharing such a personal story. Would it have made a difference if you had had that tax deduction and an au pair when you were still married? Would that have helped?

Ms Romer—I think it would have but I do not think my husband would have—people are so funny. I think partners think that if you have a cleaner, then that is like an Alice Brady. I keep saying that a cleaner is different from a housekeeper. My husband thought it was a luxury and I think a lot of men do not want someone else living in the household. That is really hard to know because I did not know that he was so unhappy and I did not know that I was so unhappy—we were so busy chasing our tails, we did not realise. Having options is what it is all about, options to make better decisions. It is much easier when you have three or four different things in front of you. Even with the gardener and the cleaner, I would prefer to work, outsource things and do what I do best, but then you cannot have all those things without the income to justify those expenses.

Mrs MARKUS—Jodie, are you aware that there is an option available for you if you are self-employed to salary sacrifice and would you choose that as an option if it were to minimise expenses, to take that out of your own wage for child-care fees prior to tax?

Ms Romer—Definitely. I was not aware of that. When the school holidays come you are paying \$100 for your children to be in care or you can take the day off, but then you are paying \$140 in wages—it is a struggle, definitely, to try to weigh up all those things.

Mrs MARKUS—Is there anything particular that you can think of, that we may not think of, that would have helped you to maintain your business and still care for your children and possibly have maintained your marriage? Would there have been something that was not available?

Ms Romer—That is a million-dollar question. Some women are happy to stay at home. It is probably easy for them to stay at home. In a way, I wish I could have been one them—my life would have been different. I wanted to work. I do not know whether we are expecting too much. When you go to university and you travel and you want to have a career and a family, something has to give. Having household help and live-in help would definitely make people's lives easier. I have lots of friends who are in corporate jobs and they all have au pairs. Otherwise they would not have time with their partner or whatever as well.

Mrs MARKUS—So would some sort of deduction for in-home care—where they did not necessarily live with you but they came and looked after your children—when you were married have helped you to maintain and have everything?

Ms Romer—I think so, definitely, because I think a lot of people juggle with their parents, 'Can the grandparents look after them?' or whatever. I did not want to burden my mum with that because she has already raised a family. I know a lot of people rely on grandparents, and if the grandparents are not available then day care can sometimes be more expensive than what you are earning. Everyone has that struggle. Definitely, if you could have live-in care or outsourced

care—without a doubt. I think you are getting a better environment for your children, their being at home, and then you are not burdening the grandparents with raising your children. I think that can be quite unfair. I have many customers who have three children and six grandchildren and they are looking after them four or five days a week. It is a burden for them, and I did not want to do that.

Mrs MARKUS—Do you mind me asking, Jodie, about the age of your parents, roughly? You do not have to give it exactly.

Ms Romer—My dad is 75 and my mum is 69.

Mrs MARKUS—One of the challenges for women who are balancing work and family now is also often their parents. While there are some who rely on their parents to care for their children, there are ageing parents, and they have particular needs.

Ms Romer—Definitely.

Mrs MARKUS—Of course, now your mother has had to care for your father.

Ms Romer—Yes, definitely.

Mrs MARKUS—That means that the availability of that support is not always present.

CHAIR—Sometimes they work.

Ms Romer—Definitely. And it is also a matter that I do not think should be forced upon them. I know my sister pretty much had a child and it was expected that mum would look after the child, or she would not have been able to return to work because she could not have afforded child care. I thought that that was a little bit selfish, but everybody is very different, and I would not want to do that. So, when my mum looked after my son, she was paid to do that, because I took her out of part-time work.

Mrs MARKUS—So what you are talking about is really your choice and also the choice of other members of the family?

Ms Romer—Definitely. Someone should not be expected to do something just because your choice is to work and have a child. That is also why I had an au pair. I had to refinance three times my mortgage to allow that, and everyone kept saying, ‘Why are you doing that?’ But I had two children and, if someone was sick and could not work, I could just turn to the au pair and say, ‘Casper, you need to work today.’ It was a given, so I did not have to ring around and do that. It made my daily life a lot easier. Whereas now, if someone were sick and I could not get Julia into kindy, I could not ring up my ex-husband, because he would not do anything, so I would end up having my daughter here sick. So, definitely, having someone regularly to be a carer for your child, because it is paid work, means that it is a lot easier—asking someone that you are employing to work rather than trying to get your parents, friends or whatever to rearrange their life.

CHAIR—Jodie, we have had a quorum called, but we can continue. Keep going.

Ms Romer—I think I have finished what I was saying. I am waffling!

Mrs IRWIN—Jodie, do you receive family assistance from the government in the form of family tax benefit part A, the childcare benefit, or childcare tax rebate?

Ms Romer—I was. It is quite a funny story. I think I was getting \$400 a month—\$200 a fortnight—and in January this year my ex-husband rang up and said that he was sharing parenting, which he was. He said, ‘From April last year, I’ve had the children four days a fortnight,’ so I basically have to pay back a debt, so I am not receiving anything. I have not received anything for the last year and a half because I am paying back that debt, because apparently I was overpaid. I found it very frustrating that he could ring up in January just because his partner had stopped work—

Mrs IRWIN—Before you go on, Jodie, I just want to remind you that what you are saying is on the public record.

Ms Romer—That is fine.

Mrs IRWIN—Do you feel comfortable making mention of your marriage and your partner?

Ms Romer—Totally comfortable, because he knows the system and he is working the system to his advantage. That \$400 a month was food for half the month, and that has put a greater financial burden on me.

CHAIR—So you are saying it was vindictive?

Ms Romer—I personally think so. Why couldn’t he have said something in April, or why does the system allow him to backdate seven months? He was taking out \$100 a month for the children’s medical needs for the last three years, but that cannot be backdated. That is \$3,600 that he should not have taken out of my maintenance.

Mr QUICK—What were your options in getting your children into the local childcare centres, considering you needed some flexibility? How hard was that?

Ms Romer—I was quite lucky with that. I got my days without any problems at all, but I am always behind with my childcare fees. ABC has taken over the business—and obviously a business is a business—and I would have had to pay \$1,000 up-front before my children could go to care during the school holidays, so I had my children in the shop for four days because I could not afford the \$1,000 for them to attend.

Mr QUICK—\$1,000 up-front?

Ms Romer—Because I was behind with my fees, they said that if I did not get that balanced the children could not go. I said: ‘I don’t have \$1,000, but my ex-husband does have money so just take it out over four months.’ But he said no, and my in-laws ended up paying so that they could go there. It is holistic, isn’t it: you want to work for your independence and you also want your children cared for but balancing it all financially is extremely hard.

Mr QUICK—When you decided to have the au pair, how did you go about deciding which company to go to?

Ms Romer—I was quite lucky. My best friend's husband had left her three months before and because she works in corporate she heard of a company called People for People—I think they have a website. They interview people and bring them out and then match them up. She had an au pair for six months and that au pair had a friend, and so I interviewed Chrissie and she came to work for us. I was lucky because I had a friend in a similar situation. But Chrissie had to go back to Germany after six months because they are only allowed to have a visa for 11 months, I think. She said, 'You need another au pair,' and we went to a national website called Aupair.com and put up our profile. We had about 4,000 people respond; it was quite amazing. She culled them and I chose someone from Denmark. I actually had a male au pair for a year.

CHAIR—Jodie, I am sorry but we have to go to a division in the House. Thank you very much for your evidence today.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Quick**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 11.18 am