



Pat Harper reports on the

National Council for the Single Mother and her child

National Conference

Friday 6th-Monday 9th August,
1976 Burton Garran Hall —
Australian National University
CANBERRA

**Pat Harper
is the President of
N.C.S.M.C.**

Report

Over the weekend on Friday 6th August and Monday 9th August, the National Council for the Single Mother and Her Child held its second National Conference at Australian National University, Canberra.

Delegates to N.C.S.M.C. were present from Victoria, N.S.W., Queensland and A.C.T., while observers from Parents Without Partners and other community organisations also attended. Speakers included Marie Coleman, Director of Child Care Office, and Ian Yates, Director

General of A.C.O.S.S.

Agenda items included adoption, status and rights of ex-nuptial children, income security (including the taxation of pensioners and Medibank levy), family support services (including housing, child care, emergency help, etc.), and the administration of the present welfare system (including the role and funding of voluntary organisation and the operation and administration of Department of Social Security).

Resolutions from the Conference covered most of the above issues and are listed below:-

CONFERENCE RESOLUTIONS:

- 1 That in all matters of adoption, custody, guardianship and access, the rights, interests and welfare of the child shall be paramount.
- 2 That while it is the inalienable right of every child to have a family, it is not the automatic right of every couple to be provided with a child. The single mother and her child must be recognised by the community as a viable and valid family unit, and not be seen as a source of supply of babies for adoption.
- 3 That NCSMC endorses and reaffirms the resolution of the 1st National Conference on Adoption that it is the basic right of the child to have access to information about his/her birth records. We further affirm that it is the right of the natural parent to have access to information about the child's progress. In addition we recommend that the natural parent should be able to approach the adoption agency to register his/her wish to meet the child so that if the child later wishes to meet the parent the agency can put them in contact.
- 4 NCSMC urges the community to understand that adoption does not cut the natural bonds between a mother and her child. Single mothers who have given children for adoption favour
 - 1) having access to information about the progress of the child (through the appropriate agency) and
 - 2) personal contact with the child at a time of the child's choosing.
- 5 In addition to redefining adoption law and practice a new form of legal guardianship should be established, whereby the reciprocal legal rights between natural parents and their children are not negated, but where the child's security of custody with the custodial parents is ensured. This form of guardianship could benefit
 - 1) the ex-nuptial child whose mother marries a man other than the child's biological father. In this case the step father could obtain the status of legal guardian, while the relationship between the child of the natural father whose paternity has been established could be maintained.

2) the child whose parents divorce and remarry

3) children at present in long term institutional or foster care

4) the child whose natural parents are unable to care for her/him but wish to retain contact.

6 NCSMC expresses its deep concern for children in long-term care and is strongly critical of long-term institutional and foster care as currently practised. We urge that family support services should be provided in the local community to prevent family breakdown. Where a child is separated from its family every effort must be made to re-establish that family as quickly as possible. Only if these efforts fail should alternatives such as legal guardianship or adoption be implemented. We further recommend that regular and mandatory reviews should be conducted for all children in foster care and institutions; that this review be carried out by an independent body which has representation from community groups; that agencies be accountable to this body which in effect acts as an advocate for the child; and that these reviews be made three monthly.

7 That NCSMC directs all delegates and state member organisations and urges those with similar aims and objectives to lobby state delegates to the Constitutional Convention in October and state members of parliament to implement the resolution of the 1975 Conference that each and every state cede to the commonwealth government jurisdiction over ex-nuptial children to bring them within the ambit of the Family Law Act 1975.

8 Income Security

NCSMC renews its call for a single Lone Parents Pension to be paid to any lone parent supporting a child. We are concerned at reports that the government proposes to introduce a separate benefit for

supporting fathers. It would be irrational to add a further layer of benefits to the existing wasteful, cumbersome and discriminatory triple system of Widow's Pension, Supporting Mother's Benefit and State Family Assistance. All lone parent groups have called for the introduction of a single pension for supporting parents based on the equal needs of children, whether their parents are widows, single mothers, separated wives, or separated fathers. Benefits and pensions for different categories of supporting parents have been introduced piecemeal as the needs of different groups have been recognised and accepted by the community. Lone fathers are the last to be included. It is now time to rationalise this hotchpotch system and introduce one new pension for all lone supporting parents.



"Enjoying a Conference Feed"

9 NCSMC protest at the introduction of a separate levy to pay for medibank on two grounds:

1) that the opt-out system with a levy ceiling will result in a two class health insurance system to the disadvantage of low income families who will be insured through medibank.

2) that the same levy for single parent families is the same as that paid by two parents families.

We call on the government to introduce a third rate of medibank levy set between the

present single and family rates in recognition of the fact that single parent families have half as many adults and on an average fewer children than two parent families.

That the levies should be imposed on total taxable family income, without a ceiling or opt-out provision. This should permit the amount of the levy to be lowered.

10 NCSMC deplores the government's decision to tax pensions. Means-tested pensions have never before been taxed in Australia. The government is using one department to take away what another department has given, thus increasing the complexity of bureaucratic procedures.

Those hardest hit by the government's mini budget proposals are supporting mothers with one child who work part-time to supplement their government benefits. Despite the increase in child endowment and the sole parent tax rebate, supporting mothers with one child earning between approximately \$50 and \$95 per week are worse off than before the mini budget proposals by up to \$3 per week. They are already losing a substantial part of their pension through the application of the means test. Now the tax and medibank levy are taking another slice of their income. The Minister for Social Security, Senator Guilfoyle, has said she wishes to encourage single mothers to return to the work force. These measures can only discourage and penalise those who do so.

To ensure that it is the needy who benefit from government pensions and allowances, governments must either tax pensions or impose a means test — but not both. NCSMC calls on the government to

1) exempt pensions from taxation and health insurance levies

2) provide a tax rebate to cover the cost of child minding expenses for the children of working parents.

11 NCSMC deplores the action of the federal government in

- 1) abolishing the subsidised pharmaceutical benefit scheme
- 2) increasing the costs of prescribed items under the NHS from \$1.50 to \$2.00.

These actions have had a very serious effect on many one parent families especially on women receiving Supporting Mothers Benefit, who are not eligible for Pensioner Medical Service.

Instead of paying 75 cents for each prescribed item a Supporting mother now has to pay \$2.00 — an increase of 166.66%. Illness of either mother or child may result in crippling expense for women whose income is only marginally above the poverty line. The end result is very frequently that the mother is unable to pay for food, rent, gas and electricity, etc.

We therefore call on the federal government to relieve this hardship and to abolish discrimination between

Widows Pension and Supporting Mothers Benefit by giving equal pharmaceutical benefit by giving equal pharmaceutical benefits to both.

12 NCSMC is appalled at the failure of the government and specifically at the Department of Social Security

- 1) to inform recipients of its pensions and benefits, prior to 1/7/76, that these payments are now liable to be taxed

- 2) to inform recipients prior to 1/7/76 that the onus is on the recipient to ask the Department to deduct regular income tax installments from the benefit or pension.

We therefore require that the Minister for Social Security take immediate action to give this information in writing (multi-lingually) to all recipients.

We stress that the tax scales should be made available to all recipients so that they can understand their liability according to their rate of weekly earnings.

Further, we urge the government to recognise that simple justice demands that no recipient should be required to pay any such tax during the period in which the government failed to inform her of her liability.

13 NCSMC demands that the Minister for Social Security take immediate action to ensure that all recipients of pensions and benefits are informed of their legal rights in the situation where they are visited in their homes by field officers of the Department.

Recipients must be informed in writing (multi-lingually) that

- 1) a field officer has no right to demand entry to a home
- 2) if the recipient invites the field officer into the home the officer has no right to search the home.

Further we demand that the Minister instruct officers within her department to cease forthwith the use of the intimidatory practices that have been employed all too frequently over recent months.

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