

Council of Single Mothers and their Children

Federal Election Policy Positions - Single Mothers and their Children

Nearly 500,000 single parent families now make up one in five Australian families with children under the age of 15¹. 87% of these families are headed by a woman². The 2007 Federal Election confirmed the significant influence the voting patterns of single mothers had on the outcome of this election. In the forthcoming Federal Election we will once again ensure that our vote and voice are heard.

On behalf of the Council of Single Mothers and their Children, Inc, Victoria (CSMC Vic) and the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children, Inc (NCSMC), we invite you to provide information about your policies relating to single mothers and their families.

CSMC (Vic) and NCSMC have worked for over 40 years to improve the circumstances of single mothers and their children in Australia. We have advocated for equality of opportunity, financial security and access to legal and human rights for all single mother families. At the same time we have provided telephone support and counselling, referral, advice and emergency relief to single mothers. CSMC Vic alone has nearly 2,200 members. As organisations run by and for single mothers, our expertise is grounded in the lived experiences of women seeking our assistance, and is called upon by organisations working with single mothers, including Centrelink and the Child Support Agency.

The spring edition of the CSMC Vic newsletter *Scarlet Letter* will be published in August and will feature a summary of the major parties' policies that are particularly relevant to single parent families.

We invite you to contribute to the edition by providing us with responses to the questions overleaf. These questions focus on the most pressing policy issues facing single mothers and their children in 2010.

The information provided by you will be distributed to single mothers, supporters and networks to assist them in making informed decisions when casting their vote. In addition to the print publication, your responses will be posted on the websites of CSMC Vic and NCSMC, and distributed via our extensive email bulletins.

¹ ABS 2007 Australian Social Trends Article: One Parent Families, Catalogue Number 4102.0

² *ibid*

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In order to publish your responses, please keep responses to no more than **150 words per question**.

Please return your responses to scarletletter@csmc.org.au or via mail to 'Scarlet Letter', CSMC, 54 Victoria St, Carlton South, Vic 3053 by **20 July 2010**.

If you have any questions regarding this request or the work of CSMC, please do not hesitate to contact Kerry Davies, CSMC Project Worker, on **03 9654 0327** or projects@csmc.org.au.

Yours faithfully,



Jane Stanley
Coordinator
CSMC



Terese Edwards
CEO
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National Council of Single Mothers and their Children, Inc

Federal Election Policy Positions - Single Mothers and their Children

The experience of women contacting our services and other non-government agencies is consistent with contemporary research. Single mother parents are at an increased risk of disadvantage in terms of employment, safety, housing, inadequate income and social participation. The current child poverty rate in Australia is 11% and we know that a child in a sole parent family is three times more likely to live in poverty.

However, poor outcomes are not a forgone conclusion if policy and support responses are well targeted.

1. Poverty

Single parent families are the poorest family type in Australia³. Despite this single parents receiving income support are moved from Parenting Payment Single to the substantially lower paid Newstart Allowance when their youngest child turns eight. These payments were excluded from the Harmer review and consequently single parents were denied the increase to income support payments granted to other recipients in 2009.

In combination with increasing costs of living, particularly dramatic increases in housing costs, low income single mothers (those living on low wages, income support payments or a combination) are struggling to make ends meet. The increasing number of calls to CSMC Vic from single mothers seeking emergency financial assistance attests to this.

- a. What plans does your party have to increase income support payments (Newstart Allowance and Parenting Payment Single) to the same amount as other pensions and when will these plans be implemented?
- b. Single mothers already have a high level of participation in the labour market, but to ensure the care of their children need secure, part-time, family friendly jobs during school hours. What strategies will your party implement to ensure the increase in supply of these jobs?

2. Child Support

Despite changes introduced under the previous government to the Child Support system, only 50% of child support is paid in full and on time⁴. The combined effects of child support and 'Welfare to Work' changes have also led to significant reductions in income for affected families⁵. Timely receipt of assessed amounts of child support payments is critical for children's wellbeing.

³ ibid

⁴ Senator Joe Ludwig Speech to the Child Support National Stakeholder Engagement Group, 9 October 2008. Accessed at <http://www.humanservices.gov.au/dhs/resources/media/archives/ludwig/speeches/2008/081009-speech-child-support-scheme.pdf> on 25/06/2010

⁵ Summerfield et al "Child support and Welfare to Work reforms: The economic consequences for single-parent families" Family Matters Number 84, 2010, Australian Institute of Family Studies

- a. How will your party ensure that Child support payments are collected on time and in full?
- b. Child Support payments are often reduced as a result of the minimisation of taxable income. What policies will your party implement (and when) to ensure that Child Support payments are based on the true financial position of payer parents, and an accurate assessment of the level of care provided?

3. Family Law

Research into the impact of the new Family Law system has confirmed that it has failed in its duty to protect women and children, and has exposed them to increased risk of harm. The two potentially conflicting purposes to the legislation too often place a parental sense of entitlement above the safety and rights of the child.

- a. Despite legislative provisions, serious concern remains regarding the ability of the system to ensure the safety of women throughout family law proceedings. What measures will your party take to guarantee women's safety?
- b. What changes will your party be making to the Family Law legislation to guarantee a child's best interests, ensuring their right to safety and stability are paramount to all cases? How will you ensure that the work of all family law practitioners and professionals prioritises the safety and stability of children?

4. Affordable Housing

Single mothers are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain stable housing due to the housing shortage and rapidly increasing rents. Affordable, secure housing in areas accessible to education, transport, employment and family networks is fundamental for the wellbeing of single mothers and their children.

- a. How does your party plan to increase the availability of affordable, secure housing for single mother families?

5. Social Inclusion

Despite the increasing number, and acceptance, of single mother headed families in recent years, many single mothers feel marginalised and treated like second class citizens. Income Management, compulsory participation requirements, and lack of funding for single mother services combine with poverty to create this sense of exclusion.

- a. What does your party intend to do to ensure that the one in five families headed by a single parent feel like valued, respected members of Australian society?
- b. What plans does your party have to remove compulsory Income Management?