



FAMILY FIRST



Steve Fielding Family First Senator for Victoria

**Senator Steve Fielding
Family First Leader**

Adjournment Speech

Family First

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Two-and-a-half years ago I stood here as Family First's inaugural senator to explain why there was a need for a political party in Australia called Family First.

We all know that big business has a voice in parliament, we all know that the unions have a voice in parliament and we all know that the environment has a voice in parliament, but ordinary Australians, their families and small businesses do not have a strong voice in parliament.

We also know that the two major parties say they put ordinary Australian families as their top priority, but all too often they do not. That is why today the need for a political party called Family First is even greater. Family First is the only party fair dinkum about making life easier for ordinary Australians.

In my first speech to parliament I spoke about workers struggling to balance their paid work and their family life. I spoke about the loss of the model of the eight-hour day—eight hours of work, eight hours of rest and eight hours of family and community time. I spoke about the tragedy of relationship and marriage breakdown. I warned that often what are sold to the community as family-friendly policies by the two major parties are really market-friendly policies and that the market values of choice, competition and consumerism are in conflict with family and community.

Over the last 2½ years Family First has been working hard for Australian families. I am now almost halfway through my term and I wanted to reflect on that struggle for cultural change from a market-driven focus to a family-driven focus.

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Australia's future depends on ordinary Australian mums and dads raising the next generation of Australians. Parents are responsible for shaping and nurturing a nation. It is from within the context of family that our children learn right from wrong, how to get along with others, what a good work ethic is and how to navigate their way through life.

The fact is that the strength and resilience of any nation is determined by the strength and resilience of its families, yet I think we forget too easily, in the bustle of daily life, just how fragile families can be. We can forget how much time parents need to be successful at raising the next generation for Australia.

It is important, wherever possible, to have at least one parent in every family working. That is why Family First supported the previous government's Welfare to Work legislation. Sometimes children from low-income households suffer both materially and in their future chances of earning a decent income for themselves and their kids as a result of not having a parent in employment.

Jobless families report more hardships than families with an income. However, Family First still wants changes to the payment for single parents to ensure they are no worse off under these changes and it also wants to see the harshness of the penalties for breaches addressed.

As a country we should be using economic policy to help ordinary Australian families get what they need, not working families harder to serve the economy. Family First has long been concerned that there are not adequate safeguards in place to help protect family time from the time demands of work.

Overtime and penalty rates were introduced to help achieve the eight-hour day. They were intended to discourage employers from employing workers for more than eight hours a day. They were not introduced to reward workers for working longer or antisocial hours. Working long hours is good for the market, working on weekends is good for the market and having temporary work also suits the market, but none of this suits the family, which is why family life is under threat.

Family First was in fact one of the first to expose the holes in the Howard government's Work Choices laws, because we understood the effect that Work Choices would have on ordinary Australian and their families. Family First voted against Work Choices and went a step further and introduced legislation to give back to workers and their families the penalty rates and other basic working conditions that the Howard government had taken away.

Right now, Family First is concerned that penalty rates are not part of the Rudd government's proposed 10 minimum National Employment Standards. This means that conditions such as overtime, penalty rates for working weekends and

antifamily hours, along with meal breaks and rest breaks, can be traded away for more money. Penalty rates are about family time, not about money. They were never intended to be traded away for dollars. Once again, Family First is standing in the gap for ordinary Australian workers and their families who have lost their voice to the politics of the major parties.

But beside the pressures of time and work, families are facing increasing financial pressures. Things like soaring petrol prices, inflation and interest rates, and rocketing grocery prices are squeezing families and making it very difficult to make ends meet. That is why Family First has been focused on these sorts of issues from day 1.

Here are just a few of the key policies that Family First has been pursuing to make life easier for ordinary Australians and their families: stopping the banks from charging outrageous bank penalty fees; cutting petrol prices through a national fuel-watch scheme; working towards a cleaner environment by introducing a national recycling scheme that refunds 5c or 10c on drink containers, like in South Australia; tackling the pokies plague by getting pokies out of local pubs and clubs and allowing them only in dedicated gambling venues like race tracks and casinos; addressing the alcohol toll by having information labels on alcohol products and restricting TV advertising; lowering grocery prices by outlawing predatory pricing and strengthening competition laws; and putting downward pressure on interest rates and inflation by cutting petrol tax by 10c a litre.

Family First is constantly calling for action on practical policies that will make a real and meaningful difference in the lives of ordinary Australians and their families.

Let me now discuss some of these key policies in more detail. I will start with lower petrol prices. For more than two years Family First has been calling on successive federal governments to cut the petrol tax by 10c a litre.

It is crazy to think that the government is happy to rip more than 50c a litre in petrol tax from families while at the same time saying there is nothing it can do about higher petrol prices. Families are being squeezed. Interest rate rises and high petrol prices hit families who can least afford them. And with Easter just around the corner, petrol prices are tipped to climb towards \$1.50 a litre.

Cutting petrol tax does two things. Firstly, it puts downward pressure on inflation, because higher petrol prices feed through the entire economy and put direct upward pressure on inflation.

Secondly, cutting petrol tax helps families to make ends meet. Petrol prices and inflation-driven interest rates are two of the biggest impacts on family budgets.

Family First has also been calling on the government for additional powers to be given to Australian Competition and Consumer Commission head Graeme Samuel in order to stop once and for all possible petrol price gouging.

Family First also wants to save families a massive \$300 million a year at the bowser by adopting a national fuel watch scheme. An Australian Competition and Consumer Commission analysis published in its *Petrol prices and Australian consumers* report in December last year found that motorists in Western Australia have saved 2c a litre from the Western Australian FuelWatch scheme.

Under FuelWatch, petrol retailers have to notify consumers of their pump prices a day in advance and keep prices constant for a 24-hour period. They are also required to publicise the price of petrol on a website and in the media. Any reduction in petrol prices will make it easier for ordinary Australian families struggling to make ends meet.

Family First has also taken on the fight for Australian families with the banks. Family First introduced legislation to the Senate in February to stop outrageous bank penalty fees being charged for things like dishonour fees and ensuring penalty fees are for cost recovery only.

It is appalling that banks can charge penalty fees that one study found were up to 16 times the cost of processing dishonoured cheques and 92 times the cost of processing dishonoured direct debit transactions. Banks refund many of these fees when challenged by customers, so they know they are in the wrong.

Family First's bank penalty fee bill has incorporated expert advice from the Law Council, Choice and the Consumer Action Law Centre.

The new Rudd Government has a chance to get tough with Australia's banks by supporting Family First's proposed laws that would stop banks ripping off ordinary Australians. Family First has called for and gained a Senate inquiry into this legislation.

The Alcohol Toll. Family First has been calling for urgent action to tackle Australia's \$15.3 billion alcohol toll. The alcohol toll is a huge issue that Family First identified over a year ago. As a nation we have tackled our road toll, our drug toll and our tobacco toll with success. Family First believes it is now time to get tough on binge drinking.

The Australian National Council on Drugs report found that one in 10, or more than 30,000, 15 year olds binge drink every week and one in five teenagers, 16 and 17 years old, binge drink every week. And almost half a million children live in a home where one adult binge drinks.

As far back as September last year, after several discussions with both the then Prime Minister Howard and opposition leader Kevin Rudd urging them to take action, Family First took the initiative and introduced legislation into the Senate to tackle the binge drinking culture which is damaging generations of Australians.

Family First's *Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007* would require health information labels on all alcohol products. It would ensure all alcohol advertising is pre-approved by a government body, that television alcohol advertising runs after 9pm and that ads should not link drinking to personal, business, social, sporting, sexual or other success.

Family First's *Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007* has now been referred to a Senate Inquiry, which will for the first time enable ordinary Australians to have their say on the country's alcohol problem.

In addition to introducing this legislation, Family First was the first party to call for a commitment by the Government in this years budget to an additional \$25 million over the next five years on new high impact shock ads similar to the grim reaper ads, to form part of a TV alcohol education campaign to counter binge drinking and help develop a new responsible drinking culture.

At the time of last year's federal budget, Family First was calling for more money to be spent to tackle the alcohol toll. Family First will continue to tackle the alcohol toll on behalf of ordinary Australians.

Poker Machines. Another huge concern for ordinary Australians is the pokies plague and the enormous damage it causes many Australians.

The statistics on poker machines show the extent of the problem:

- About 293,000 people have a significant gambling problem in Australia and about 85% of problem gamblers use poker machines;
- About 52% of problem gamblers said they had borrowed money and not paid it back, 36% said they had sold property to raise money to bet and 43% said they sometimes went without food to pay for their addiction. One in four suffered divorce or separation and one in 10 had seriously contemplated suicide;
- On average around seven other people are affected by a severe problem gambler's behaviour. That is around two million Australians.

- More than 50% of regular poker machine users are problem gamblers or at risk of becoming problem gamblers.

Despite both the Prime Minister and the opposition leader's public statements of concern over the impact of poker machines on families, neither party has taken decisive action.

Without federal intervention policy paralysis at the state level will continue. That's why Family First introduced the *Poker Machine Harm Reduction Tax (Administration) Bill 2008*.

Family First is not afraid to tackle the poker machine gaming giants and the gambling addicted state governments who are incapable of weaning themselves off poker machine taxes.

Family First's bill will introduce a new federal tax on poker machines in pubs and clubs to push pokies out of these community venues and restrict them to casinos and racetracks, which are dedicated gambling venues. The tax will be phased in over a number of years to allow businesses to wean themselves off pokie profits. A trust fund will use the tax revenue to help community and sports groups in this transition.

Family First's bill has been sent to a Senate Committee for an inquiry. This is a major victory for ordinary Australians who can now comment on these proposed laws and document the impact of poker machine addiction.

Drink Container Recycling Scheme. Last week, Family First tackled a major environmental issue by introducing laws for a national 'cash for trash' recycling scheme in response to state governments poor record on recycling.

The *Drink Container Recycling Bill 2008* is similar to the container deposit scheme operating in South Australia where there is currently a 5c container deposit redeemed when the container is returned for recycling. The South Australian government have just announced that this will increase to a 10c refund.

South Australia is leading the way with container recycling at up to 85 per cent, while the other states are at an appalling recycling rate of 35 per cent. A national container deposit scheme makes sense—it's a win for the environment and a big win for the community.

It is a win for the environment because we end up with 25 percent less litter on our streets and in our waterways and half a million less tonnes of waste every year as we will see the container recycling rates lifted.

It is also a win for the community with a cleaner looking environment and local community groups and kids can earn some extra cash while keeping Australia beautiful. Last year in South Australia the Scouts earned \$7 million from container recycling.

A national container deposit scheme would recycle an extra half a million tonnes of waste every year and save the average family \$30 every year on kerbside recycling as well as creating 2,000 new jobs.

Changing Australia's binge drinking culture to a healthy drinking culture, moving poker machines out of the suburbs and restricting them to casinos and racetracks, introducing a national container deposit scheme to cut down on litter in our parks and waterways and making sure banks cannot charge outrageous bank penalty fees are all examples of how Family First is making it easier for ordinary Australians.

Family First's practical policies are about changing our political culture to be more in tune with the needs of ordinary Australian families and small businesses, rather than being in tune with the more dominant discussions about the needs of the economy. These are the sorts of policies Family First will continue to pursue in the lead up to the next election.

And this is why there is still a great need for a party called Family First in Australia, to make life easier for ordinary Australians and to give them a strong voice in parliament.