



# FAMILY FIRST



Steve Fielding **Family First** Senator for Victoria

**FAMILY FIRST leader Senator Steve Fielding**

**Speech to the ARA National Retail IR Conference, Melbourne**

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**“THE COALITION AND LABOR:  
BOTH FLAWED WORKPLACE APPROACHES.”**

Ladies and gentlemen.

Almost two years ago, a cyclone was unleashed in Australia; a cyclone created by the Howard Government.

Cyclone *Work Choices* has divided the Australian community and, if the polls are correct, looks set to cost the Howard Government the forthcoming election.

At a time when the Australian economy is so strong, it is remarkable that the Government could be doing so badly.

But the Government has only itself to blame. From day one FAMILY FIRST warned the Government that it was going too far with its workplace changes, yet it arrogantly dismissed the concerns of the Australian community and betrayed its so-called battlers.

Sadly to say, it appears to FAMILY FIRST that the approach being promoted by the Opposition is little different.

I was startled to read yesterday that a Rudd Government would allow any worker to give up conditions such as overtime, penalty rates for working on public holidays, weekends and anti-social hours, along with meal and rest breaks, for more money.

Ladies and Gentlemen, public holidays and rest breaks are about time, not about money. And they were never intended to be traded away for dollars.

It is sad that Labor is doing the same thing as the government - equating time with money. FAMILY FIRST's concern is family values, and family values are about time, not money.

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Having milked family-related issues in workplace relations for all the votes it can get, the Labor Opposition now pulls the rug in the hope voters won't notice, and in the hope they'll win employer support.

So where are the unions? Where is the union campaign against Labor's plan to allow overtime and penalty rates to be traded away? Will they now condemn Labor for being no different to the Coalition?

Ladies and Gentlemen, FAMILY FIRST has been a key player in the workplace debate from the beginning, paying particular interest to those areas that affect families.

That is why I am pleased to be here today, and thank you for inviting me, to speak about important workplace issues at your National Retail IR conference.

In my address today, I would like to do three things.

- Firstly, I would like to speak briefly about FAMILY FIRST and what the party stands for;
- I would then like to focus on FAMILY FIRST's approach to workplace relations policy; and
- I will conclude by making some observations about how Australia's workplace system might look post-election, and where I believe the emphasis should be.

### **1. FAMILY FIRST: what does the party stand for?**

So firstly to FAMILY FIRST – what does the party stand for?

To be frank, there should not be a need for a political party called FAMILY FIRST. But there is a need, because too often decisions made by politicians do not put families first. Instead, it is families second and political ideologies first.

Ladies and Gentlemen, there is only ONE family party in Australia, and it is FAMILY FIRST.

FAMILY FIRST is the only party that stands for family values. Others talk about it; FAMILY FIRST does it. Our passion is families.

I actually think it is pretty simple: to build Australia, surely we need to be paying more attention to the wellbeing of families and making that our top priority.

The fact that children are our future ought to be obvious. But the other parties do not seem to understand, or care enough about this reality, and they do not make the future of families and their wellbeing the foundation upon which all policies are developed.

I believe FAMILY FIRST has great potential, because I believe there is a huge political vacuum in Australian politics as a significant proportion of the community become more and more disillusioned with the major parties.

I believe there is a place in Australia for what I call a “cultural” party – that is, a party that champions a set of values which have widespread community support, but which are not promoted by either of the major parties with enthusiasm.

Those values are important in social issues such as marriage and family, binge drinking and pornography. But they also extend far wider – to issues like tax, help for small business, the amount of money spent on welfare and providing essential services such as water and telecommunications.

Don't get me wrong, FAMILY FIRST does not want to turn back the clock. But I believe Australians are seriously concerned about the direction in which our society is going, about the future for our children and the sort of values being promoted.

Australians remember when things were different; when families stayed intact, ate at the dinner table together and spent time with one another.

Everyday Australians remember when people not only knew their neighbours but actually spoke to them and knew their names. And when children treated older Australians with respect. Family was the place where children were taught about roles, about personal responsibility and community obligations, about manners, decency, discipline and self-restraint and, most of all, about respect.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I believe the Australian electorate wants a party which will be the fearless champion of ordinary Australians holding mainstream values, and that party is proudly FAMILY FIRST.

You see, families and small business get a lot of lip service in Canberra, but sadly, what are sold as family friendly policies are often really market friendly policies.

Let me explain.

The major parties struggle to reconcile their professed family values with their free-market mantra. They struggle because the two cannot be reconciled.

The free-market mantra of choice, competition and consumerism is in conflict with family and community. Often it seems we live in a world where few values matter except those of the market.

There is huge pressure on almost every activity to be financially viable - to compete, to pay its own way and to show a healthy bottom line. But Australians are not economic units, Australian households are not harbours of consumption and Australian children are not commodities.

FAMILY FIRST believes that productivity should be geared as much to helping workers become better parents and family members as to boosting profits and returns to shareholders.

How many Australians have asked, like I have, and more than once: ‘Does my paid work dictate my life and, if so, is my family suffering because of it?’

I wonder if you have ever thought the same?

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I believe that Australians want a party that supports mainstream family values and avoids extremism of any kind. They want a party that is fiercely independent, votes on issues on their merit and negotiates to get the best outcome for families and small business.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

FAMILY FIRST voted against the Howard Government's unfair workplace changes;

FAMILY FIRST voted against the Government's privatisation of Telstra because telecommunications is an essential service and the focus should not be the bottom line;

And FAMILY FIRST voted against the Government's unjust changes to processing asylum seekers.

However,

FAMILY FIRST voted for the Howard Government's anti-terrorism laws because national safety and security is a major issue;

FAMILY FIRST voted for the Government's welfare changes because we believe people who can work, should work;

And FAMILY FIRST voted for new laws to protect small business, because we are passionate about helping small business.

Unlike other parties, FAMILY FIRST looks at every issue on its merit and assesses their impact on our constituents; families and small business.

Today, Australian families are struggling to make ends meet.

That is why FAMILY FIRST has been campaigning for action on issues like:

- Soaring petrol prices;
- Skyrocketing grocery costs;
- Exorbitant bank penalty fees;
- Australia's binge drinking toll and;
- Protecting our kids from Internet Pornography.

### **Balance of power**

FAMILY FIRST is the party of balance between the two major political parties. FAMILY FIRST is firmly in the middle.

While the forthcoming election will be a showdown between John Howard and Kevin Rudd, there is another battle looming – the battle to determine who will hold the balance of power in the Senate and effectively control everything that happens in Australia. Most experts predict it will either be the Greens or FAMILY FIRST.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the thought of the anti-family and anti-small business Greens dictating what happens in Australia is horrifying.

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On workplace relations, the Greens want to turn back the clock by introducing bargaining fees, abolishing secret ballots before strikes and having shorter working weeks with no loss of pay.

If FAMILY FIRST gains the balance of power, we will negotiate sensibly with whichever party is in government, to get the best outcome for families and small businesses. Our record proves it. Australians deserve a sensible balance of power party like FAMILY FIRST that votes on issues on their merit and advocates commonsense solutions.

## **2. FAMILY FIRST's approach to workplace relations policy.**

May I now turn to FAMILY FIRST's approach to workplace relations policy, which is the focus of your conference today.

As we all know, at the last election, the Howard Government won control of both Houses of Parliament.

For that reason, the Prime Minister decided to embark on radical workplace changes, which went further than most of his own Coalition MPs ever believed.

From day one FAMILY FIRST believed the workplace overhaul was too drastic, and we warned the Government it risked alienating its supporters.

We also warned that the changes (I don't call them reforms because "reform" means "to improve") would not benefit families or small businesses in the long term.

But the Government stubbornly refused to budge.

The way FAMILY FIRST sees it, the fundamental error with *Work Choices* and the Government's approach, was that the values, or motivations, which underpinned the changes were flawed.

They were flawed from the beginning, and it seems that Labor's approach is little better.

Whether it is the Government's interest in looking after big business, or Labor's desire to appease the unions, both are flawed foundations on which to overhaul a workplace relations system.

FAMILY FIRST strongly believes that the values which underpin Australia's economic policies and workplace relations system, must be consistent with the cultural and social policies we promote.

FAMILY FIRST believes it is values such as:

- promoting family formation;
- strengthening marriages and families;
- helping workers to become better parents, and
- helping workers to have more precious family time,

that must underpin Australia's economic policies and workplace relations system.

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It is important to stress that FAMILY FIRST agreed that changes were needed to the workplace relations system.

FAMILY FIRST was not opposed to further deregulation and increased flexibility for employers and employees.

But the Government avoided the hard issues and instead adopted a 'scorched earth' policy by removing vital guarantees for basic conditions such as public holidays, meal breaks, overtime and penalty rates.

That was the prime focus of FAMILY FIRST's concern.

Initially, responding to FAMILY FIRST's concern, the Prime Minister insisted that these guarantees – for public holidays, meal breaks, overtime and penalty rates – would remain.

But he conned the Australian community, he failed the so-called 'battlers' who put their faith in him, and workers are now forced to bargain for basic conditions.

It is absolute nonsense to think a checkout operator – perhaps a young person or a migrant – can sit down with the boss of Coles or Safeway and negotiate their terms and conditions. A level playing field? What a joke!

And consider the Prime Minister's statement that workers will have the choice (that's such a buzzword isn't it, choice) between an individual agreement, collective agreement or an award.

Under *Work Choices* employers can force new employees to sign individual contracts.

It is all very well for the Prime Minister and others to say that people do not have to take a job.

But for most workers, particularly the unskilled, people over 50 or those whose skills are not in demand, life is not that simple. Most Australians do not have the luxury of picking and choosing.

I believe one of the important issues the Government failed to tackle was penalty rates.

FAMILY FIRST tried to establish an investigation into whether or not penalty rates were achieving their original purpose – to enable workers to balance work, family and community obligations.

The reason FAMILY FIRST wanted the inquiry is because penalty rates no longer discourage employers from employing people for long hours, or anti-social hours.

Today penalty rates are just another overhead. Those employers who can afford to pay, do. But those employers, such as family businesses, who cannot afford to pay either work longer hours themselves or do not operate when they would like to.

Another important issue I believe the Government avoided was the problem of breadwinners having to work excessive hours to make ends meet.

And the growing pressure on increasing numbers of families to have both parents in the paid workforce just to pay the bills and get by. That is a huge issue and puts enormous stress on relationships, marriages and families.

FAMILY FIRST's strong stand against the Government's *Work Choices* laws surprised many people, particularly the political commentators. They saw me as an "unlikely opponent", because I represent a socially conservative party.

But they shouldn't have been surprised at all, because my passion is the family and these laws undermined the family. The new laws were market friendly, not family friendly.

FAMILY FIRST does not know anyone who thinks working at 2am is the same as working at 2pm. Do you?

Nor have I met any families who think working on a Sunday is the same as working on a weekday, or that working seven days a week with no day off is fair or reasonable.

No politician wants to work these hours, so why is it okay for everyone else?

It might suit the market, but it certainly does not suit Australian families.

The Prime Minister might be right when he says the world has changed from a five-day-a-week society. But we work to live. We do not live to work.

And it is family life which will suffer from Mr Howard's new world of businesses operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, without paying penalty rates or compensating those who work on public holidays like Christmas Day or Anzac Day.

What FAMILY FIRST's stance on *Work Choices* revealed was a deep rift in politics, between support for free-market liberalism and support for family values, which I spoke about earlier.

As I have said, I believe there are fundamental tensions between the imperatives of family life and the free market. The embrace of pro-market policies by both the major parties has eroded family values and left people feeling alienated and concerned about the direction we are going.

Parents feel the demands of work conflicting with their desire to raise their children, and small businesses are grappling with tougher competition from cheap imports and globalisation.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I do not apologise for FAMILY FIRST's hardline stand against *Work Choices*.

We approached the legislation with a number of principles in mind:

- That families should have genuine choice about how they structure their paid work and family life;
- That Australians should be parents first and workers second;
- That workers should feel secure in their jobs and should not have to bargain for basic wages and conditions; and

- That any changes should be aimed at reducing the crippling number of marriage and relationship breakdowns which wreak such a devastating toll on families and children in particular.

The *Work Choices* legislation put many workers in a more vulnerable situation, and FAMILY FIRST is particularly concerned about those who are least able to negotiate for themselves, including young Australians, the low-skilled and migrant workers.

Like other parents, my wife Sue and I worry about our three children and what sort of workforce they are going into.

I do want to stress that FAMILY FIRST did a lot more than simply oppose the Government's Bill. We met with the Prime Minister and senior Ministers and lobbied hard for changes to improve the legislation.

FAMILY FIRST also introduced its own legislation, in March, to give back to Australian workers conditions that were previously guaranteed.

I am also proud that FAMILY FIRST was successful in having an amendment passed to *Work Choices*, with the support of all parties, doubling the protection period for workers' redundancy pay to two years.

FAMILY FIRST's successful amendment to protect redundancy pay for two years will be a bigger deterrent to employers trying to avoid their obligations. May I point out that FAMILY FIRST wanted a five-year protection period but the Government would not agree.

FAMILY FIRST's legislation – entitled *Workplace Relations (Restoring Family Work Balance) Amendment Bill 2007* – struck the right balance between protecting workers and their families on the one hand and supporting business, particularly small business, on the other. Both groups deserve a fair go.

Under FAMILY FIRST's Bill:

- Workers would be guaranteed an unpaid meal break of at least 30 minutes after five hours work. Existing law says all workers are not guaranteed meal breaks;
- Workers would be guaranteed compensation for working public holidays at a minimum rate of time and a half, plus a day off in lieu. Existing law says all workers are not guaranteed compensation for working public holidays;
- Workers would be guaranteed overtime at a minimum rate of time and a half for working more than 38 hours a week. Penalty rates would apply for anti-family hours. Existing law says all workers are not guaranteed overtime or penalty rates, so working at 2am is the same as working at 2pm;
- And finally, under FAMILY FIRST's Bill, workers would be guaranteed their redundancy entitlements. This would ensure there is no repeat of the ludicrous situation with Tristar workers being kept on by their employer, even though there is no work for them to do, until they can be sacked on lower entitlements when their agreement runs out.

FAMILY FIRST is pleased the Government finally acknowledged it needed to fix its flawed legislation and introduced a fairness test for workers earning up to \$75,000 a year.

But there is still nothing to stop an employer paying someone the same rate for working at 2am or 2pm.

There is still nothing to stop employers requiring workers on agreements or contracts to work seven days a week with no overtime or meal breaks.

And there is still nothing to stop employers from not compensating workers who work on public holidays like Anzac Day and Christmas Day.

Let me stress that I do believe the overwhelming number of employers, and employees, do the right thing. But we must have strong protections because of those who seek to abuse the system.

### **3. The future for Australia's workplace relations system.**

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, may I briefly look to the future.

Who knows what our workplace relations system will look like after the forthcoming election, particularly if, as predicted, Labor wins.

As you know, the Opposition has released its plan for change, and FAMILY FIRST could have a key role in deciding its fate.

Consistent with our approach over the last two years, FAMILY FIRST will wait to see the detail of legislation before making a decision about those changes, but we will take a number of factors into account.

Firstly, FAMILY FIRST is not opposed to Australian Workplace Agreements (AWA's) so long as guaranteed basic conditions are met.

Removing that option for employers and workers does not make sense.

Secondly, FAMILY FIRST believes that job security is important to workers and their families and the Government's changes on unfair dismissals have gone too far.

It is vital that any further changes be balanced against the needs of small business.

Finally, FAMILY FIRST supports unions and their right to represent employees on a voluntary basis.

FAMILY FIRST also supports collective bargaining rights, but not where union involvement is compulsory.

And FAMILY FIRST supports enterprise bargaining, but not pattern bargaining that forces different employers into the one negotiation with unions.

## *Conclusion*

Ladies and Gentlemen, workplace relations is a work and family issue.

And the vexed issue of balancing work and family life is not about getting more people into the paid workforce, earning more dollars or working longer hours.

It is about finding a way for parents to do the best for their kids and make ends meet, without having to sacrifice so much precious family time.

Most parents in the paid workforce – me included - want to spend more time with their children. Family life is vital and disappears so quickly.

Parents work hard to support their family but increasingly feel the strain of long hours away from home.

We have to find better ways to support families. We all have to work to make ends meet, but no one wants unreasonable work hours stealing time from their family life and friendships.

Yes work is important, and so too is the economy. But we work to live. We do not live to work.

As a nation, we should be doing everything we can to strengthen our families, to encourage family formation and to support parents who have the most important job of all, raising kids.

Parents in the paid workforce should be parents first and workers second.

FAMILY FIRST strongly believes that the values which underpin Australia's economic policies and workplace relations system, must be consistent with the cultural and social policies we promote.

It is the values I have outlined this afternoon which FAMILY FIRST believes must underpin any further changes to Australia's workplace.

Thankyou.