

# Families Commission – An Outsider’s View

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Let’s be honest. The Families Commission was set up by the previous Labour government as a sop to the United Future party with its then eight MP’s. United Future had run on a strong pro-family platform. Ironically, this kept in power a government who then rammed through a number of anti-family pieces of legislation including the decriminalisation of prostitution, the anti-smacking law, the ‘white elephant’ Civil Unions and Relationships legislation, opposed notifying parents when their teenagers wanted an abortion, and opposed raising the drinking age.

But back to the Families Commission. Some still hoped that it would listen and advocate for the views of families.

Unfortunately they failed their biggest test when they blindly followed the government’s lead and supported the anti-smacking law without consulting the very people they were appointed to represent. Dr Pryor suggests that the anti-smacking law will help prevent family violence. The problem is that a smack on the bottom is not violent, an assault or child abuse.

The ban on smacking can be compared to attempting to deal with boy racers by taking vehicles off senior citizens because we all know that boy-racing starts with driving a car!

The Families Commission should have spent time to find out from parents who are vehemently opposed to child abuse why they did not accept the anti-smacking law as a viable solution. The Commission would have been told that parents want the real causes of child abuse tackled – drug and alcohol abuse, family breakdown and

dysfunction, poverty, and mental illness.

That’s why prominent lawyers referred to by Dr Pryor say the law has done nothing to deal with rates of child abuse. That’s why Sue Bradford admitted that her law was never intended to solve the problem of child abuse. New Zealanders want laws that target parents who need support and resources and in the case of rotten parents, even intervention, but they oppose unwarranted interference with good parents raising law-abiding and responsible citizens.

The Families Commission research has been mixed – but a boon to the local printer. On a regular basis, large coloured booklets are released highlighting research done by the Commission.

These include a 97-page report on family breakup involving the interviewing of just 39 parents; a report on parenting programmes targeted to Maori which surveyed nine parents which dropped to five, but still warranted a 30-page glossy booklet report; and a 45-page report on the experiences of migrant and refugee families in New Zealand adapting to NZ culture which admits that they have used a non-representative sample, small numbers, and did not study important generational issues.

Ironically this report did say that migrant families found the anti-smacking law difficult to understand and to follow, and smacking was still seen as a viable method of correction by some parents.

In fairness there has been some excellent research from the Families Commission including a report on elder abuse and an analysis of 60 years of statistics relating to the structure of the

NZ family (*Kiwi Nest*). They also run an online poll “The Couch” but it is limited in its findings because of the size of the sample and being available online only. The appointment of Dr Pryor with a background in research suggests that the research component should improve.

The furore surrounding the appointment of two new commissioners Bruce Pilbrow and Christine Rankin speaks for itself.

How dare they disagree with the current stance of the Families Commission and seek to represent the views of the overwhelming majority of parents who oppose the anti-smacking law – despite the Act which established the Commission requiring that they ‘facilitate informed debate’ about families.

Sue Bradford claimed that the appointments were political because they disagree with her. Yet her silence was deafening when the previous head of the Commission Dr Rajen Prasad was appointed to the ‘cream’ position of number 12 on the Labour party list at the last election – higher than Ruth

Dyson, Trevor Mallard, Lianne Dalziel, Shane Jones and Darren Hughes.

It’s time the Commission spoke up on issues surrounding the impact of long-term childcare on children, the benefits of marriage for children and families, the recognition of full-time parents, the importance of shared custody, and the urgent need for an independent CYF Complaints Authority.

The appointment of Christine Rankin and Bruce Pilbrow as commissioners suggests that the National government is willing to have a diversity of opinion on its Board. This can only strengthen the important debates to be had around family issues.

But at the end of the day, it’s time to have a Minister of Families at the Cabinet table.

We currently have Cabinet Ministers for disabled, senior citizens, youth, Maori, veterans, women’s affairs – even the rugby world cup.

It’s time we stopped paying lip service to our most important asset – strong families.

*(798 words)*