

The Politics of Father Rights Activists – Do persistent critics of the Family Court behave in a way which stands up to scrutiny?

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In 1995 when the Australian family law was being amended, Family Court of Australia Chief Justice Nicholson stated *“some people and some politicians with limited knowledge of the issues involved, tend to latch on to such dysfunctional persons for apparent political gain. This has the further unfortunate effect of empowering such persons to feel that their behaviour is not only acceptable but is the subject of sympathy and approval by politicians and government. It is all too often the experience of this court that its most persistent critics have behaved in a way which cannot stand up to public scrutiny, particularly in relation to issues of violence against women and children”*. Justice Nicholson has consistently recognised that many of the Court’s harshest critics were *“discontented litigants, sometimes obviously dysfunctional”*. Further, he recognised that these same people and the groups to which they belong, were being granted access to corridors of powers that resulted in legislation and policy reforms that did not arrest the violence against women and children (that was being heard in some family court proceedings). Justice Nicholson continued *“Such persons, who often espouse the rights of fathers, do very little for their cause. There are legitimate matters that can be advanced on their behalf and it is equally as important that the court and those within it do not adopt stereotyped attitudes towards men as well as women.”* (Nicholson 1995, p1)

In the context of Justice Nicholson’s comments above, this paper scrutinises the behaviour and language of the two major father’s rights activists organisations, the Shared Parenting Council of Australia (SPCA), and the Fatherhood Foundation (FF), particularly in relation to issues of violence against women and children and how these intersect with the emergent contemporary discourse of “fatherlessness” assertion and role models for children. Further this paper will provide evidence that the internet based collectives affiliated to the two key fathers’ rights activists organisations incite virulent hatred of, and harmful action towards targeted women and their perceived supporters. This paper examines why these two key Fathers’ Rights Activist Organisations (FRAO) are gaining such open access and encouragement to/from politicians when much of their agenda expresses high levels of hate and vitriol against women and why this is seemingly ignored in public discourse to the detriment of women’s and children’s safety.

This paper draws on primary materials including: submissions by FRAO and their membership to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs 2003 "Inquiry into Child Custody Arrangements" (from here on referred to as the Inquiry); self-generated literature; father's rights activists email lists and message board postings, and media searches of publishes stories and broadcasts.

This paper focuses on the two major FRAO, the SPCA, and the FF because they have been identified as the two key players in lobbying the Australian government for legislative change in the area of family law.

Forming the Fathers' Rights Agenda the two major Father's Rights Activists Organisations
In 1998, after attending a prayer meeting in Canberra's Federal Parliament, Warwick and Alison Marsh founded the Fatherhood Foundation (FF). It was set up in response to address what they perceived as an escalating social crisis caused by "fatherless families" and a high divorce rate (FF 2002). Contributing to their continued rise, the Fatherhood Foundation had been joined with and influenced by some father's rights groups like Fairness in Child Support/Non-Custodial Party, and the Lone Fathers Association (LFA) (FF 2003, FF 2003i). Alliances within the men's health network, right-wing conservative Christian prayer groups, and other men's rights advocates resulted in the FF now joining the discourse about the need for family law reform more strategically (FF 2003ii). Claiming men's rights to their children was the central platform, they agitated specifically for a rebuttable presumption of shared care because "too many men were suiciding as a result of "femocentric family law" system" (FF 2003iii).

A rebuttable presumption of shared care is a statutory provision that means that if parents separate, there would be an immediate legal presumption that any children of the marriage would live 50 per cent of the time with each parent. If that were not practical or desirable, then it would be up to one or both of the parents in court to rebut or challenge that. In the words of SPCA's Matilda Bawden, "Parents (would) have the right to 50-50 contact and if a parent wants to contest that, they would have to argue in the Family Court that it's not in the child's best interest to have that contact" (Wenhem 2003). The circumstances to rebut such a presumption were never made clear.

Shared care has different possible meanings in the context of the renewed family law debate. In 1996 The Family Law Act was amended to make clear that while a child may reside largely with one parent,

the responsibility for *shared care* of that child's well-being is ideally shared equally between both parents. The Act clearly articulates the principles to which it aspires in Section 60B(2). Those principles mean the Act provides a framework which is already 100 per cent flexible and can cater to any permutation of residency arrangements ensuring the best interests of children and their safety. In the context of the FRAO shared care means that children will divide their time between both parents' residence equally (ie 50/50). A clear understanding of what is meant by 'shared care' is important, as it differs from the term rebuttable presumption of shared care which has the underpinning emphasis on preferencing parental rights by children spending equal amounts of time with each parent. Currently, the amount of time a child spends in each parent's residence is significant in the discourse of family law reform, particularly as child support (cs) and welfare (Centrelink) disbursements are paid and now linked to the time the children spend at each parent's residence, measured in nights and/or the primary residence.

In 2002, a number of the more vocal and active of the FRA groups from each state (other than Tasmania) incorporated to form a national council with a specific father's rights agenda, but using the more ambiguous title of Shared Parenting Council of Australia (SPCA) (SPCA 2002i). Partly this title was developed in order to project a bipartisan approach to family law and to claim female support, usually second wives/partners and paternal grandparents (West 2003).

Both the SPCA and FF have a strong cross-membership between both organisations (FF 2003iv, SPCA 2003). While the FF has a distinctive right-wing fundamentalist Christian focus with an emphasis to strengthen father's roles within their families, the SPCA reflects the concerns of non-resident parents (mostly fathers). Both are concerned with family law reform. Many fathers' rights activists belong to multiple organisations to promote shared agendas for men's control of property, child support, mothers and children through marriage promotion and attacks on the social supports available to single parent families.

Examples of joint affiliates, but with stronger right-wing fundamental Christian influence in both organisations are the Festival of Light and Australian Families Associations. Both of these organisations argue for preventative measures to stop marriage dissolution through the need to control the capacity of women to leave, since women are more likely to take the children, and thereby weakening fathers' bonds with their child (Muehlenberg 2004). Another joint affiliate of both FRAO is the secular Lone Fathers' Association (LFA) which represents predominantly non-resident fathers.

Organisations which focus on family law reform for men have linked to the SPCA only. An example of an affiliate of SPCA only is the Family Law Reform Association NSW Inc. This organisation does not construct itself as a FROA, rather it claims equality for both parents, but states that fathers are usually the ones disadvantaged by the current family law system. Other affiliates are Dads Australia Inc, Fathers After Divorce, Men's Confraternity of WA Inc, Men's Right Agency (national), the Fatherhood Foundation, Ozydads and the Separated Fathers Network. With such a focus on fathers'/men's rights the name Shared Parenting Council of Australia is not congruent with their apparent inclusive title that conceals a men's rights agenda.

Access to political power

At least two of SPCA's federal executive committee have political backgrounds, although in different political camps. The SPCA Federal Director (2002-2003), Geoffrey Greene, is a former deputy director of Liberal Party in South Australia who now works for the Liberal Party in Queensland whilst and SPCA Federal Director (2002-2003), and SPCA's founding President, Matilda Bawden, is a former federal Democrat candidate. Both have had associations with the Richard Hillman Foundation Inc (RHF), a South-Australian based FRAO which focuses on the interests of fathers who claim to have been falsely accused of child sexual assault. Greene helped formulate the policy agenda for a rebuttable share care policy through his connections with the RHF. By 2002 he had severed that connection because the RHF had continued to pursue introducing a private member's bill of a presumption of rebuttable shared care through the far right-wing One Nation's Senator Len Harris. Greene saw greater opportunity to use his political connections within the Liberal Party, since they were in power, to lobby key friendly politicians and senators active in forming a backbench committee to influence the Prime Minister (Mottram 2003, Cassidy 2002, SPCA 2002ii). This strategy assisted men's rights advocates in gaining access to sympathetic politicians. As reported by SPCA, they "established a clear pathway through the party room and Cabinet, to have our representations heard and acted on" (SPCA 2002iii). Similarly, the FF had networked through the Parliamentary prayer groups attended by the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Treasurer, a number of Senators finding support and an opportunity to reinforce the case for social reform through legislative change (FF 2002).

Most of the SPCA federal executive committee and state and territory directors additionally have a history of lobbying and activism. Co-founder of Men's Rights Agency, Sue Price, and current Federal director Michael Green facilitated a Parliamentary presentation that asserted the adversarial system of the Family Law Court had failed (men) and that a mediation process should be the first option in cases

of family breakdown (SPCA 2002iii p2, Glancy 2002i, West 2003). (Green runs a mediation service in Sydney for divorcing couples). This presentation won over many parliamentarians, staffers and some media that were present.

Both the FF the SPCA most immediate agenda was to lobby government and representatives to ensure that post separation fathers have equal time with their children, as opposed to the idea of sharing responsibility (SPCA 2002 iv p3). The FF helped propel the SPCA's lobbying by backing calls for an inquiry with their claims about "the facts of fatherlessness". This list of alarming statistics was used to build the case for a rebuttable presumption of joint custody (Flood 2003). Aiding both FRAO agendas is appeal to the many conservative Christian parliamentarians' pro-marriage beliefs and a few who support a masculinist discourse (Lyons Forum 1995, Andrews 1999, Crabb 2003). Both FRAO have succeeded in gaining sympathy for fathers, promoting their agenda using a rhetoric of equal parenting while at the same time stigmatising "fatherless" families, and denigrating and branding single mothers as insufficient care-givers whose families cause many social problems (Jones 2003, The Age 2003, Albrechtsen 2003, Daily Telegraph 7/7/03, Arndt 2002, Arndt 2003).

The branding of single mothers resonated in the conservative Australian Prime Minister, John Howard's announcement of a major inquiry conducted by House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs into the arrangements of families post separation. The announcement mooting the possibility of a "rebuttable presumption of shared care", as well as including inquiring into child support matters (Cordeaux 2003, Jones 2003i). The announcement speech on June 24 2003 is the first recorded mention by an Australian Prime Minister of the concept of a rebuttable presumption of shared care. Howard expressed his "worry" about growing "fatherlessness" and "boys' needing male role models" as one of the impetuses for calling the Inquiry. This same promulgation of "fatherlessness" and boys' needing male role models, specifically their biological father was also the same theme that SPCA and FF used in their various presentations, forums and lobbying to push changes in the area of family law.

When Howard called this Inquiry he reverted to using the outdated term of "custody" which was replaced by residency in 1996 family law reforms to emphasise both parties have parental responsibility post-divorce/separation ie: shared care (Parkinson 2003). This reform was to make clear that while a child may reside largely with one parent, the responsibility or "custody" of that child's well-being is ideally shared equally between both parents. The term custody is still used extensively by FRAO.

Disinformation and stigmatisation

Since 1995 conservative politicians and men's rights activists have advocated consistently for a need for reassertion of Christian values, and promoted the traditional family as the basis for a stable society (Lyons Forum 1995, Andrews 1999, Millet 2002). The same covert language of mother-blaming, specifically single mother families, and an increasing pressure to promote marriage was part of the language and agenda by the FF on February 10, 2003 at their Fathering Forum held at Parliament House (Muehlenberg 2002, FF 2003ii). This was done specifically in the context of pressing the need for family law reform. The fatherlessness issue was further formalised on 26 June 2003, with the launch of a policy document, "The 12 Point Plan", at *the National Strategic Conference on Fatherhood*, at Parliament House Canberra, well attended by politicians, their staffers, and media -just one month prior to the announcement by Howard.

The significance of the National Fathering Forum was the disinformation about "fatherlessness" disseminated as "fact" which was further repeated by those politicians who attended, and by media, gaining a largely uncritical foothold. This political and media take-up strengthened political support for fathers' rights groups and in particular helped persuade Howard to hold the Inquiry into family law (Albrechtsen 2003, Cadman 2003, Barnett 2003, Jones 2003, Arndt 2003i, Mottram 2003, Wroe 2003). These public statements and materials prepared by Muehlenberg and other FRAO are characterised by the confusion of correlation and causation, the reduction of multiple social variables to bivariate associations, the highly selective use of research evidence, neglect of contradictory or competing evidence, and treatment of small differences as if they were gross and absolute (Coltrane 1997, p8 in Flood 2003). The fatherless claims are bogus statistics, with no factual basis yet became a powerful weapon in asserting their fathers' rights political agendas (Flood 2003).

To give one example, Michael Flood researched the claim that '*Boys from a fatherless home are 14 times more likely to commit rape*' that was a widely reported part of the '12 Point Plan' released by the National Fatherhood Forum in June 2003. Flood found it is one of the claims commonly made by those who argue the destructive effects of father absence on families and society. Yet this statistic is an invention. Although it has no basis in fact, it is regularly repeated even affecting social policy formulation (Flood 2003, The Age 2003, Labi 2003, Cadman 2003, SA Hansard (Evans) 2003, Burke 2004).

Fatherlessness – a social crisis?

Some politicians were so convinced about a fatherless “social crisis” as to repeat the disinformation of these FROA on their own websites, and in speeches in Parliament (Cadman 2003, Barnett 2003, Senate Hansard 2003). This information was the stimulus for other politicians actively lobbying on the need for family-friendly (father) policies, and other inquiries into the status of fatherhood (FF Issue No. 57- 29th September, 2003, Cadman 2003, SA Hansard Evan AL 23/9/03, Burke 2004). Accordingly, some politicians continue to use the fatherless assertions as part of their wider conservative reassertion of boys’ and men’s rights that covers such issues as boys’ under-achievement at schools, boys (not children’s) role models, along with increased violence, men’s suicide and other arguments that FROA support, (Bouchard et al 2003, Nelson 2002, Oakes 2004, Stepfamily Zone 2003).

The political strategy of building an alarmist discourse about the problem “fatherlessness” aims to stem the perceived permissiveness of marriage breakdown by stigmatising single mother families as “fatherless” while at the same time promoting marriage by comparing social outcomes between the traditional families and single mother families (Mead 1999). A key contributor to the FF’s The 12 Point Plan, Meuhlenbeg claims that “85 per cent of sole parent families are fatherless families” (Fatherhood Foundation 2003, Appendix), when in fact 83% of sole parent families in Australia are headed by a woman (ABS 2003). Fatherless homes/families as defined by the National Library of Australia refers to single mother families (NLA 2000). Muehlenberg’s insults discount single mother capabilities, ignores fathers who have regular residency but not primary residency, ignores those fathers who have no contact orders due to a past history of violence, and overlooks those fathers who abrogated contact with their children, or those widowed. Consistent with the remainder of The 12 Point Plan, Meuhlenberg argues in the context of the absent parent, that a “growing body of evidence... to ensure the healthy development of children is the setting of the biological two-parent family. By a number of indicators, children from intact, stable two-parent will do much better than children from broken homes of single-parent families” (Muehlenberg 2002).

Blaming single mother families for poor social outcomes of children, in part based on data from other countries is again simplistic and but avoids intersecting issues like poverty, violence, health, housing, lower economic status of women, and resilience (Flood 2003). This political strategy of creating a social panic about fatherlessness reinforced by similar statements of “worry” made by the Prime Minister, which was echoed by politicians and media and that coalesce to undermine the image of single mother family capabilities, negatively influencing the socially mediated attitudes that may be personally internalised (Perry and Whiteside 2002).

In all this “fatherless assertion” there is little acknowledgment by FRAO or politicians that some ‘male role models’ (or some female) may not be useful for boys and girls, particularly in those highly dysfunctional families where entrenched conflict, domestic violence, serious mental illness or child abuse occurs. In their pursuit of father-centric and pro-marriage agenda FRAO have ignored that it is important for children to have effective, safe and healthy parenting, which most women are quite capable of, particularly if they have adequate support and resourcing (Flood 2003). Where there are negative outcomes among children who grow up without their biological fathers, these are explained in part by selection effects – by systematic differences between the people who divorce or never marry and those who marry once and stay married. Again these differences show up as high parental conflict, substance abuse, violence, mental illness and other forms of anti-social behaviour which are associated with divorce *and* with poor outcomes in children, not because the parent is a single mother (Rodgers et al 2003 p6, Flood 2003).

The FF, the SPCA and many FRAO involved in lobbying for family law reform have consistently sought to link suicide rates of separated men to blocked contact with their children and/or family “disintergration” (FF2003vi). The charge that either it is the mother who blocks contact or moves too far away or to the court who decide residency (and no-contact) arrangements (King 2003, Daily Telegraph 2003, Rhoades 2002). Dads In Distress (DiD) claims “up to 5 men suicide each week”, while the SPCA claims up to “3 fathers suicide every day” as a result of family separation” (and being unable to father daily) (SPCA 2003i p17, Miller 2003). Miller who convenes DiD arrives at his weekly figure by assuming all 1817 male suicides in Australia in 2002 are due to separation distress, a totally bogus invention. This casual link and statistical issue was investigated by the Inquiry, and the Committee’s report stated “there are no reliable statistics on why men commit suicide. The committee has made considerable effort to obtain this information but it is not available.” (HRSCFCS Parliamentary Inquiry Report 2003). The FRAO suicide assertion puts the argument that these children of separated parents grow up fatherless but if a rebuttable presumption of shared care is not implemented there will be an epidemic of suicides (Miller 2004, SPCA 2003 submission p 17). This suicide assertion seeks to make children a cure and hold women responsible for deeply depressed mentally unstable men. Such an assertion does not advocate for better mental health accessibility and affordability for men, some of whom do experience distress in the separation process (Robinson and Rodgers 2004). Further, it presents an unacceptable risk of women and children’s safety as evidenced by the distressing cases where fathers have murdered their children, occasionally the ex-wife (or other family members), and then suicided – most often in the context of their ex-wife

complying with contact arrangements. Post-fatality the connection is made that many of these men had past histories of domestic violence (Passmore 2004, Jackman 2003, Flood 2003, Rathus, Rendell and Lynch 2001, Astor 1994).

Therefore, the implications of fatherlessness claims and father suicide assertions in the context of arguing for the rebuttable presumption of shared care has its largest impact on those most vulnerable families, women and children who experience violence and abuse is at the hands of their partner/father.

Spreading the word

Much of the propaganda of the SPCA's and the FF and their supporters in the media and in parliament is published and broadcast, often without a counterbalancing voices from women's organisations or groups, or even the views of those with family law or with social policy expertise (King 2003).

FRAO longed for an unfettered forum to air their views and sought a ways to gain greater public support. This resulted in the development in 2001 of "Dads On the Air" (DOA), a weekly broadcast community radio 2GL (outer Sydney, NSW,). Although, more significantly, for those outside the broadcast area, DOA provides web-casts and internet-based message boards aimed specifically at fathers who have separated, assuming that they are unhappy with how they, as men and fathers, are treated by the courts, and/or child support agency and/or other family law infrastructure. The SPCA's website states that "the Shared Parenting Council of Australia is pleased to support the Dads on the Air (DOA) program on 2GLF every Monday. To hear this program as an Audio Webcast click the link below. [Dads on the Air Webcast](#)" (SPCA 2003ii). The reason behind such an endorsement of DOA is that often SPCA leadership are regularly guests of the program. FF's President Warwick Marsh has also been a guest of DOA programs.

Additionally, since their formation both the FF and SPCA have sought to fund "an extensive publicity and advertising campaign designed to inform and educate the Australian public" (SPCA 2002iv p3, FF 2002). Both these groups have media strategies aimed at gaining greater public support for their respective and collective agendas (FF 2003i, SPCA 2002i). To this end, they are also aided by media commentators like Bettina Arndt who have actively lobbied on behalf of, and aided FRAO by giving them access to decision makers and giving them a forum to air their views and to influence public opinion (FF 2003v FF 2003 vii). Ms Arndt's influence extends beyond her media commentator role, with her public speaking and her appointments to many consultative roles by the Coalition government

in advisory groups such as the Family Pathways Advisory Group, Ministers' Advisory group on child care and child development (Attorney-Generals Department 2000, *The Age* 2003).

With greater access to technology many individuals are able to link with each other, small vocal groups, or with larger national organisations like the SPCA utilising the internet and airwaves. Also, they are able to link nationally and internationally so there is an extensive internet-based network of e-list discussion groups and websites on which to further strategise in response to their grievances about family law issues and have an internet presence. Some members are on multiple lists, creating repetition with cross-postings with information appearing on several sites and lists (some 28 identified national lists associated with SPCA alone, many more international e-list affiliations). All FRAO sites and e-lists are anti-feminist.

Webcasts and websites like Dads on the Air (DOAw), e-lists like Ozydads and the shared parenting yahoo list that hosts message boards and forums plays a considerable role in supplying space and information, sometimes launching vitriolic attacks that quickly escalate into hate speech and/or incite hatred on/about individual and collective women, feminists, judiciary, government agencies and organisations that intersect with family law and/or their political agenda. For example after a DOA broadcasts, it is common to find anonymous individuals posting their grievances on message boards, including some overseas FRA posts. Easy access to email facilitates a quick and effective way of contacting opponents, fellow supporters, media and politicians and is part of an essential FRAO tool kit.

Some public sites keep the language respectful, but closed lists, and/or anonymous boards display language and rhetoric that are disturbing. Some posts involve the expression of hate, violence, threats and/or unrestrained discourse against anyone who the FRAO feels opposes their views or questions their rights. This phenomenon is not isolated to the Australian context as a Canadian study by Bouchard, Boily and Proulx found. In the context of family law where domestic violence and child abuse cases feature more prominently, particularly in the contested cases, the hate speech and the incitement of more "militant" action is an extension of the familial intimidation and violence into the public and political sectors.

As part of their hate rhetoric FRAO continue to incite one another to keep their ex-partner in litigation. For example, after the initial report of the Inquiry, many postings on various FRAO-networks incited one another to "drag their ex-partners back into the legal system to "clog it up" and "show the bitch

and the [politicians/judiciary] bastards we want their child for equal time" [Ozydads e-list, posted 29/12/03]. It is impossible to assess whether these men then carry through with their threats.

Further the vitriolic language of FRAO members single out representatives of specific organisations who either represent family law system or who comment on issues associated with family law. For example Chief Justice Nicholson, HREOC Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward, even academics like men's interest researcher Michael Flood are described as "the enemy", "maggots", labelled misandrists and often slandered using derogatory terms, sometimes with homophobic labels. Occasionally post describe inflicting murderous desires on these individuals, particularly the Chief Justice and his colleagues ("If I could ask for my "Family Law Court Judge" (FLCJ) to be hanged"). An example of the more extreme of emails was posted on a list moderated by a former State director of the SPCA that stated:

Posted 19/03/2004 Ozydads network

">What about Magistrates like Lawrence of Rockingham WA who not only
>accepted false DVO's but re-established them for THREE MORE YEARS!!1
>I want to kill that cunt and god help him if I find his address"

Sometimes the FRAO e-lists and sites accuse the Courts of being like feminists who they see as dictators ("feminazis" or "feminazi puppeteers") and who are accused of great crimes ("crimes against humanity", "legal child abductors"). Other hate rhetoric is aimed at professionals generally, especially lawyers, social workers and even police ("Lawyer-solicitor-barrister-judge scum mafia are riding on feminazi brainwashing ordinary taxpayers into believing they are neither well-paid thieves nor child abusers").

More hate speech and intimidation is reserved for single-mother and sole parents' spokeswomen who are vilified, slandered, defamed and hated with ferocity ("face of feminazi evil", "fucking fat slag blood-sucking liar"). When the media allow these women to have a counter voice the hate-speech is sometimes escalated into threats and/or outright intimidation as posts on DOA escalated until FRAO, Fathers 4 Justice's Australian Coordinator, Trevor Arthurson (who appeared in the same 60 Minutes program) sought to incite harm against Sole Parents' Union President, Kathleen Swinbourne with a false allegation that stated "WE SHOULD REPORT HER TO THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY SERVICES [CHILD PROTECTION AGENCY] FOR THE WAY SHE TREATED HER SON" (DOA 30/5/04).

FRAO even target hate mail towards politicians, some whom have worked hard to support and understand their agenda. After the handing down of the report of the inquiry titled, "Every Picture Tells a Story" politicians reported receiving "hate mail threats of violence and significant abuse" (Hull 2004). Mrs Hull, as woman-chair of the Inquiry, was targeted and labelled "treacherous" and politicians generally were described as "F****G politicians are LYING SCUM" for not recommending 50/50 care. Fuelling such disgruntlement following the report's release, DOA message boards had more than 460 posts (175 pages) of posts on one message board on DOA site alone, with some posts inciting a more "militant" approach in lobbying and demonstrating their opposition to what they see as a "feminised law system created by feminists". Fathers 4 Justice (F4J) in Australia was started in April 2004 as anger-fuelled men seeking to copy the more successful militant and intimidatory actions of their UK brethren. Other FRAO messages boards contained similar postings. Since April F4J have attempted to hold several intimidating demonstrations outside Family Courts where "decontamination suits" were worn. The rationale behind F4J suits and super-hero costumes is "looks good in media and protesters can remain anonymous" (Ozydads 2004).

Many of these men do not see their language and actions as intimidating and violent in nature in and of itself. For example a women "Kym" challenged the fathers' rights supporters about the hate speech on DOA message board posted on 04/01/2004 and the replies attacked her personally and one rejected her claims while suggesting such hate-speech was accurately targeted against "feminazi's are evil bitches", that "poofter pollies..might be voted out".

Besides targeting individuals, organisations, opponents and professions, FROA hate discourse is almost exclusively focused on the same issues that the representative organisations push politically and in the media, (ie: child support, being denied contact with children, false allegations of child abuse and/or domestic violence, PAS, that women are equally violent, biased family court).

Some dedicated groups (for example: www.StopPAS.info www.MaleVictim.net , www.SelfRep.net , www.FamilyRules.net) have emerged on particular issues such as Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS), which has been rejected by reputable medical and legal experts an invented condition. Yet postings quickly accuse the ex-partner of parental alienation syndrome (PAS) labelling them "PAS-child alienators". This dedicated internet-based group assists fathers and their children who other FRA diagnose as being PAS victims, with peer-support and advice in how to incorporate such "evidence" into their court proceedings. PAS is growing in popularity amongst members of the father's rights movement. Initially, this syndrome was used by men who have allegations or have been

charged with child abuse and/or domestic violence but now it is used by men who resent what they see as their ex-partner's "gate-keeping" the child. Mostly it's fathers and/or their second wife who claim that the mother of their child is trying to alienate the father-child relationship as a means of denying contact and/or getting an upper hand in court. In all their rhetoric there is no recognition in any of the discussion of resolving entrenched conflict, or of the reality of incest and domestic violence.

Other vocal internet-based groups with issues are "Self-Represented Litigants", "male victims of domestic violence", "child abduction", "disenfranchised", and "fathers against child support". For example FRAO combine their disgruntlement about child support and hatred rhetoric about the Child Support Agency (CSA). They believe that this agency and its staff are directly responsible for their misery claiming impoverishment resulting from a harsh formula (Stapleton 2000). FROA strategise and lobby to make child support payments "fairer" for payers (mostly fathers), on how to achieve a 50/50 shared care partly to abolish any child support assessment (Flanagan 2003). The FRAO logic is that if each parent shares the care including financial responsibility equally there will be no need for a child support agency intervention. Sometimes posts contain accusations that the Child Support Agency (CSA) is "hounding them to death", or how to exploit loop-holes or win a change of assessment to reduce child support obligations. Sometime though, FRA incite one another to email the child support agency, or participate in campaigns design to show their contempt for this agency. This ties in with their unsubstantiated opinion that all men are suffering in the family law system, and that this is causing 'an epidemic of male suicides, especially after the issuing of child support obligation/debt notices' (Stapleton, 2003, SPCA 2003).

At other times their misogynist views encourage disparaging posts of their ex-partner, sometimes revealing highly sensitive identifying reference numbers and/or personal information about themselves and their ex-partner on publicly accessible e-lists, clearly breaching privacy laws. For example a letter to the Child Support Agency in Melbourne was posted to a DOA forum containing the case reference number, and the full names of all parties and information about his case and obligations. The father blames the mothers for his serial fatherhood and consequent child support obligations.

Commonly postings about the CSA are referring to it as the C\$A or the "Collection and Suicide Agency". For example – this email is an excerpt of a campaign's instructions to send old dirty shirts to the Prime Minister, and failing acceptance of the shirts by the PM's office to ensure the return address is each father's CSA case manager, posted to world lists on 13/1/04:

“ Put the name and address of your C\$A case manager as the sender on the post pack (– THIS IS IMPORTANT, IF THE PM REFUSES DELIVERY YOU DON'T WANT YOUR SHIRT RETURNED TO YOU, THIS WILL GET YOUR SHIRT SENT TO YOUR CASE MANAGER) I am a non-custodial parent. I know that the government and Child Support Agency won't be happy until they have the shirt off my back. Well here it is! I hope you're satisfied!”

Further, fathers' rights activists set up websites or post their stories about being “driven to welfare dependency”, or “fleeing overseas” “in exile” because of child support obligations (Desbois 2004). Conversely these same individuals while claiming to love and care about their child/ren do not appear to be willing to concede that child support keep will their child out of poverty, and that their lack of contact with their child/ren is self-imposed. This is one among many inconsistent opinions and beliefs which characterises the FRA agenda. For example this posting to Ozydads network demonstrates:

“re: Phone calls, conferencing and pity

Mark wrote:

>"Its all bullshit.FUCK the legal system, go out and DO what you must.....whatever the cost.enough is enough.The REAL men are in jail \snip\

..well, Mark, i am a 'real' man and i chose to be out of jail by hiding overseas. to make a difference i joined F4J to fight. Lionel is a member of f4j-international. please join him and others in WA to decontaminate your FCs.

Roger

<http://www.pafe.human-rights.org/index.htm>

In all the FRAO hate commentary that targets opponents, organisations, and issues most of their propaganda affects women generally. The SPCA's woman president, Matilda Bawden, expressed it like this: “The Family Court is biased against men; self-serving feminists dominate the family law policy agenda in Australia and the Family Court itself; women habitually “lie and cheat in court” (Wenham 2003). This again feeds into a collective ideology that mothers (women) lie and cheat and are likely to make false allegations. This ideology is transparent in SPCA views and rhetoric on violence against women and child abuse, almost exclusively framed in the context of false allegations.

Adding to the assertion that women lie and cheat the SPCA seeks to negate women's experiences of violence by arguing gender symmetry (ie: that men and women are equally aggressive towards each other and therefore domestic violence is a gender-neutral issue) (SPCA, 2003, Men's Rights Agency, 2003). In their submission to the Inquiry the SPCA offers no discussion on how to engage perpetrators to end their violence, or how to protect victims other than through mandatory mediation and counselling. Given that separation is a high risk period for women and their children's safety, enforced mediation has been shown to expose women to being re-abused (Astor 1994, Rathus et al

2000). Further FRAO have organised to attack campaigns that seek to end violence against women including writing to politicians, and the Advertising Standards Board to complain about the “Australia says No to violence” domestic violence campaign (Ozydads 15/6/04, 20/6/04).

Similarly FROA child protection discourse is generally in the context of biological fathers are the best protectors of their children, that most allegations are false. Although the SPCA wrote in support for speedy expedited investigations where child abuse is “established” allowing the Family Court to rule on parenting plans [presumably no contact] (SPCA, 2003). Yet FRAO are so vehement in their assertion that women and children falsely accuse child abuse that even child protection campaigners come under attack. SPCA Director Edward Dabrowski, on 29/6/04 emailed Senate candidate and child protection campaigner Hetty Johnson, “I have read your mission statement for an automatic presumption of no contact for fathers who are victims of false abuse accusations and mother's shallow objections. Even worse is that you would deny natural justice on the basis of unproven allegations. Do you really think that people will vote for a despot to enter Parliament and remove their natural rights and relationship with their children? You have been found out, uncovered, exposed”. Again the assumption is that women lie and coach children to falsely accuse fathers, as Ms Johnson's campaign mirrors the New Zealand Bristol Inquiry recommendation of no contact while allegations are thoroughly investigated. A small disruption that preferences child safety over parental rights.

Where FRAO do recognise child abuse they are more likely to selectively cite Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) child abuse data that records the family structure the child is living in, not the relationship of the perpetrator to the child (ie the single mother family). This selectivity fits with FROA misogyny that blames the mother to reinforce their opinion that biological fathers are the best protectors and single mothers are bad for children, especially if they have re-partnered. Their rhetoric discounts the urgent need for better child protection systems and safe parenting, instead seeking to promote fathers over mothers.

FROA also try to promote fathers to the detriment and denigration of mothers by posting global news items of child abuse perpetrated by mothers, or mother's new partner to their e-lists or boards as a way of validating this belief (Ozydads 2002-2004, Shared Parenting Forum 2003-2004). News-reports are problematic as they approach complex social issues with simplistic conclusions, and often not all the full facts are presented at the time the story goes to print/air. Additionally, news agencies are selective in the reporting of news. So while FRAO are vocal about the need for biological father's child protection, they are not pushing for more child-friendly investigation processes and prosecutions. Nor

do their policies take account that some child abuse victims are pre-verbal, or lack language skills to articulate the crime. Unless a forensic approach is taken to collecting evidence, and/or there is greater cooperation between Federal and State agencies, substantiation of abuse enough for conviction child protection in the family law system continues to be problematic (Brown et al 2001).

The FROA discourse on domestic violence and child abuse depends on denying and negating victims' experiences. FROA present flawed, ill-conceived and invalid rationalisation as social policy solutions particularly when it comes to protecting victims of abuse and violence in familial circumstance. So entrenched is FROA assertion of false allegation combined with selectivity about data that many FROA ignore cases of child fatalities, and those women murdered by violent ex-partners even though these mothers do comply with contact-orders even when their safety is at risk [(for example: Bartley case 2002 (mother shot dead at handover), Kongon-Poulson case 2003 (2 infants and their grandfather killed, Dalton case 2004 (2 infants smothered by suicide father prior to handover))]. Several studies and pilot programs like Magellan have shown FROA assertions to have no substance and that without proper Federal-State cooperative funding and investigations women and children's safety will continue to be at risk (Brown et al 1998, 2001).

Hate propaganda, bogus and statistical inventions overlooked.

Given there is much evidence of hate propaganda, bogus statistics and dodgy research underpinning FROA policy, it is alarming that these groups are continuing to influence much of the debate and public discourse about family law reforms and be so accepted by politicians.

The hate literature and extremism is generally being ignored on both sides of politics. Support for FROA has come from both houses of Parliament; Government Ministers and from a number of ALP, Independent and minor parties members (FF 2003v). This can be explained in part by constituency case load where fathers are more likely to complain. Further explanation may be found among the substantial divorce rate of politicians (majority male) so father discontentment with the family law system and on-going child support resonates with some of the personal life experiences of those politicians who are non-resident payers, or second-wives.

Further explanation of FROA rhetoric may be found in the personal interpretation of the suicide of Greg Wilton (Federal ALP member for Isaacs). There were many politicians on both sides of the House who were affected deeply by the events and his death. Liberal South Australian Senator Jeannie Ferris, who has helped SPCA along with NSW Backbencher Ken Ticehurst and Alan Cadman

who also assisted FF, have spoken of being deeply affected by Mr Wilton's suicide, which came two weeks after his attempted murder-suicide that was thwarted by police. Media reports simplistically blamed his death on marriage dissolution, child support and/or lack of contact but neglected to acknowledge his depression (mental illness) may have contributed to the separation/marriage dissolution in the first place (Rodgers 2004). Many politicians also fail to recognise men's lack of access and poor funding of mental health support has meant that many men's problems compounded to breaking point and mental illness is highly featured in divorce cases. There is an urgent need to de-stigmatise mental illness, and encourage those suffering depression and other mental disorders to seek out and access help. The safety needs of children are not best met by being cared for by a suicidal parent.

In reviewing some hundred plus media stories, many media commentators were found to have acted as customary spokespersons for the masculinist discourse (Bouchard et al 2003, Arndt 1999, Arndt 2002, Arndt 2003, Stapleton 2003, Jackman 2003, King 2003). While there are some attempts to canvass alternative opinions, largely the debate of a rebuttable presumption of shared care was reported from the "fathers losing out" perspective, often with an impassioned sense of grief (Overton 2004, Daly 2004, Horin 2003) and often sidelining domestic violence issues with incest/child abuse taboo. In taking a sensationalist approach encouraging "gender wars" the media gains improved ratings and sales but neglects social obligations. Further with the media reluctant to engage constructively on social relationships, they influence and prejudice the socially mediated attitudes and make invisible constructive discourse on building safe familial victims of violence.

It seems politicians and media have ignored men continue to be the dominant social group. The FRAO portrayal of fathers as an underclass who suffers discrimination denies the gendered social inequalities between men and women. It masks the gendered social, political and economic divisions of power where women still run second to men (Bouchard et al 2003).

Of further concern that such the false claims, hate language and violence supportive behaviour by FRAO is being overlooked by many politicians, bureaucrats and administrators in the context of the family law, policy making and this is also resulting in judicial pressure. While inflammatory criticism about alleged "collusion and corruption in the family law" continue unabated and while the leaders of FRAO do not engage their members to desist from posting such hate mail Justice Nicholson's words caution all to scrutinise family law lobbying of FRAO. Such is the discourse of hatred and false claims of gender symmetry when it comes to sexual abuse and violence against women by FRAO that

politicians have interfered in education campaigns that seek to lower or end violence in intimate relationships (Wallace 16/12/03, Harvey 17/12/03). This political intervention, together with the denial of hatred and threats against women generally, and FRAO opponents signals the presence of a backlash. This backlash constitutes an impediment to engaging men to recognise and take responsibility for their behaviour and language to ensure safety from violence for all.

So the question remains for politicians to answer why are FRAO gaining such influence and open access, when there is clear evidence of hatred and targeting of women and those involved in family law? There is a real need for politicians and media to assert women's rights to expression and political power and to live without threats fear and hatred. The political acceptance and promotion of the claims of fatherlessness insults those non-resident fathers who have positive influence and positive relationship with their child/ren. Also it undermines adoptive, step and blended families and continues to further stigmatise single mother households. None of this judgement and stigmatisation of selected families is in children's best interests.

Recommendations:

In the context of the continued and growing use of the internet by FRAO to develop misogynist sites inciting hatred, and the number of growing discussion groups used to promote anti-mother propaganda, it is suggested that **closer monitoring of these groups be undertaken** by either a hate watch organisation, Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) or by HREOC to focus on gender social relations (Bouchard et al 2003). Such monitoring should be used to provide warnings to government agencies such as the Child Support Agency and the Family Court, also politicians, and non government organisations which are the target of hate actions. Authors of hate mail and incitements to violence should be investigated and prosecuted for promoting violence. Persistent offenders should be identified on a national security register.

The data from men's hate speech could be collated and used to inform social policy development and women's status. Further that a **family law media awareness network** should be established for those who intercept with the family law system to provide accurate information and to counter misinformation and provided informed information about family law and gender social relations. For example FRAO claims that fathers are subject to bias in family law is a provably false claim that is wrongly used to recruit men to the FRAO agenda and to discourage them from reaching positive workable post-separation parenting arrangements solely in order to support the FRAO case. Users of the family law

system should not have to interpret it from a fathers' rights framework but one from the perspective of child safety and best interests.

Also it is proposed that the "Window on Women" site be the **central information, reference and factual data site** for journalists and academics and others to access on the status of women in various areas such as family law. Further that publication of **gendered data** must always be supported by analyses that provided the **context**, since without it the data only fuels the masculinist discourses. This site and social responsibility should be broadly publicised. Also the establishment of a strategy to develop and support the dissemination by women's groups of positive egalitarian messages to balance masculinist discourse and FRA propaganda.

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