Family life and the working poor

I have glimpsed John Howard’s vision for working life in Australia and this is what i’ve seen of its effect on families.

The main breadwinner working routine 10 to 12 hour days on any of the seven days during a week; without overtime or penalty rates, indeed these are an anathema in the retail industry in which she works. Her partner holds three casual jobs to try and make ends meet and frequently has to look for new work. There’s plenty of it but it is low paid and his grip on it, tenuous. Their paths rarely seem to intersect due to the demands of irregular work schedules. In the few hours a week they’re able to spend together the couple shares this time with two children.

Household chores are sometimes neglected and the convenience of take-away food provides an inferior substitute for a family meal. This lack of opportunity to enjoy life together has resulted in the children seeking the comfort, and solitude, of computer games and cable television far too frequently. Exercise, outside of the restricted amount experienced at school, is limited. The children are only remotely aware of the warmth of mateship as we know it. They have no developed sense of team work or bonding with a group. Perhaps they will discover this later when they are approached to join one of the neighbourhood gangs.

Poor health and weight problems are an unfortunate legacy of this life style, not easily treated when the high cost of medical consultation and pharmaceuticals are considered. Health insurance premiums are an exorbitant luxury, well beyond the meagre resources of this family. Time off work to care for sick children, or attend to one’s own illness, almost certainly spell the end of yet another job. In fact, minor injuries at work often go unreported to employers who suspect that disproportionate retribution will be the consequence for them in a litigious society. On the other hand, the worker fears the impact that another round of unemployment, no matter how short-term, will have on their family.

This society is not as caring as Australia currently is for those who are less well off. At least this family isn’t reduced to seeking handouts from motorists at traffic lights as so many that share the streets of the same city are; although they often feel only a small step away from this fate. Rents are high and good housing, in a comfortable part of the city, let alone the distant dream of home ownership, is a remote prospect. Savings are difficult to come by. The family needs two cars to commute to work, neither vehicle is insured, reliable, or in good repair. Public transport is not always available to suit the extended operating hours both partners are required to service in their jobs.

The gulf between the wealthy and the poor has grown into a chasm which has steadily eroded the strata of the middle class as you and I might know it. A few are able to elevate their fortunes to join the ‘haves’, but far more slide into the despair of the working poor. I guess that they’re the lucky ones; at least they still have their family. This is the reality of working and family life for many in the United States of America. While this family is fictitious, the circumstances confronting the working poor are not.
Australian Workplace Agreements (AWA) are the blunt instruments by which unscrupulous employers can attack the working poor and their families. The conditions which enable workers to rise above poverty and maintain healthy family relationships are being pared back. In relatively prosperous times, with ready availability of jobs, society will not feel as keenly the full impact on families as when the economic cycle takes a downturn, interest rates rise, and prosperity and work, dry up almost as certainly as the drought has sapped our water supplies.

The twenty-four hour a day convenience of a supermarket that never shuts comes at the expense of the low paid who make it possible; from children who barely know their own parents and siblings because of working round-the-clock rosters, when they should have the chance to play sport with their friends on week-ends; to the elderly who simply cannot afford to retire. It’s just not possible to organise a meaningful family life under these stressful and difficult circumstances.

This is the future for families I saw while working in the US from February to June 2006. For my family’s sake, (and yours!), I hope I’m wrong!