

BACKGROUND 17: WHO PAYS IF YOU DON'T?

Backgrounder No 17, March 2000

Child Poverty Action Group takes strong exception to the recent attempts by the IRD at social marketing. We are particularly concerned that factual accuracy has been ignored, and children have been used inappropriately. This backgrounder is a follow up to the complaints made by CPAG in 1998, which were never resolved satisfactorily.

In September, October and November 1998, the IRD ran a controversial TV advertisement depicting a boy who apparently missed out on soccer because of the non-payment by his father of child support. Half page pictures of this 'suffering child' were also run in major daily newspapers during this period. Despite the grave concerns expressed by various child advocacy and sporting groups, the ads were repeated in May and June 1999. As there are indications that this expensive campaign will run for at least five years more, it is time that the IRD answered the criticisms.

The ads purport to encourage defaulting parents to pay their child support. The technique is to infer that the child misses out because the father does not meet his obligations. The force of social opprobrium and the pricking of the conscience of the parent concerned are supposed to increase compliance. The voiceover and the printed message say: "who pays if you don't" Pitied by the other kids and shamed by the coach, the child slinks away, excluded from participation in sport by his father's non-contribution.

This advertisement was played at prime time, when the more-fortunate soccer-playing and traditional-family children watch TV. The message was pointed and stigmatising for any child unfortunate enough to be in the position of the boy depicted in the ad. CPAG was also alarmed at the portrayal of insensitivity by the coach, and/or the school. In light of the problems of bullying and ostracism that comes from a them/us attitude, the ad represents social engineering at its worst. It is common for CPAG hear from people who have been affected by the reality of such alienation

The IRD have correctly surmised that the medium of social marketing can powerfully mould public attitudes. It is especially important therefore to mould them in ways that foster social inclusion rather than division. The IRD who have no training in these matters might have sought wide consultation. Perhaps real tax evaders would be more appropriate target for their experiments?

The ad misinforms. **If the caregiver parent is on the DPB, as is implied, any child support payment from the father is collected by the Inland Revenue Department, and goes to offset the costs of the caregiver's DPB.** These payments are *not* available for soccer lessons, or for anything extra for the child at all. The IRD are under no illusions that this is the case as background material claims the decreasing liability for the DPB as is the pay-off for taxpayer.

The CPAG believes that there are genuine problems with the Child Support Act. None of the recommendations of the 1994 Trapski report has been actioned and the report has disappeared into the too hard basket. CPAG does not condone the avoidance of parental responsibility. However, CPAG believes changes to the Act are needed so that some of the child support paid *always* makes the child better off instead of being entirely swallowed up in the state's coffers.

The lack of public accountability for the money spent on the child support campaign is another deeply concerning issue. CPAG has asked repeatedly to see evaluations of this campaign. No documents have been forthcoming despite assurances that they would be supplied by June 1999. After attempts to get information under the OFA failed, intervention by the Ombudsman resulted in the IRD releasing a draft discussion paper this month.

From this discussion paper it is clear that the costs of the ad campaign were excessive. \$850,000 was spent in up front costs, with between \$300,000-600,000 each year projected for the next five years. After the 1998 phase, a small gain in compliance netted an extra \$18,600 with a further \$22,500 expected to be paid. If the aim of the exercise is to save money then it must be judged to be a pitiful failure. A small direct mail out to affected parents at much less cost appears to have been more effective in debt recovery. It is also offensive to include data on the success of the anti- violence 'Break the Cycle' campaigns in this draft report. There is a significant difference between violence against children and non-payment of parental contribution.

Ominously the IRD signal that for behavioural change to be maintained, social marketing needs to be sustained and deliver a consistent message. They claim to expect no substantial return on their social marketing investment for at least five years.

The surveys commissioned by the IRD themselves have highlighted a wide array of administrative and other factors in non-compliance, such as IRD's inaccurate records, inappropriate accounting for access visit costs, no account taken of an ex-partner's financial situation, and concerns about whether the child actually benefits. This suggests many design and compliance faults with the current legislation, but apparently these are to be ignored. Despite having it pointed out, there is no appreciation in the discussion document of the dishonesty of pretending that child support payments where the DPB is involved would improve the lot of children.

Thus we can expect up to \$3m to be squandered for little return. At \$60 a pop for soccer boots, the cost of this campaign to date would give 16,000 children a new pair each. If the madness of this campaign is to go on for the next five years as the discussion document indicates, those 16,000 children could have around \$200 each. If this could happen instead, children would be real beneficiaries of tangible support and not pawns in a manipulative game played by adults.

Reference: Inland Revenue Child Support draft discussion paper: *Who pays if you don't? A social marketing programme to obtain results over time.*