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CATHOLICS IN COALITION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

Catholics in Coalition for Justice and Peace  
2013 Occasional Paper Series

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**Could you live on \$35 a day?**

**Federal Government cuts welfare payments  
to single parents**

**Edited Transcript of Address given by:**

**Samantha Seymour, Single Parent Action Group on  
17<sup>th</sup> March 2013.**

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## About Samantha Seymour



Samantha is a mother of two girls, Sophie and Molly. She is an organiser of The Single Parent Action Group. The Group was formed to advocate for social justice for one of Australia's most disadvantaged groups. This group serves to give a voice to single parents across Australia to ensure that we are not entrenched into an unbreakable cycle of poverty.

The Group's vision is that of equal opportunity and adequate support and services for single parents.

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### Introduction

From January 1, single parents have received between \$60 to \$100-a-week less under entitlement changes. From January 1, people whose youngest child had turned eight were no longer eligible for single parenting payments and moved onto the lower Newstart allowance.

Single Parent Action Group protest organiser Samantha Seymour says 730,000 children are living below the poverty line and the figure is set to rise.

Thank you to Samantha for giving us her time and energy to talk to us.

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### Edited Transcript of Presentation by Samantha Seymour

When my twin girls were six months old, I became a single parent. I've been a single parent since then and they're nearly nine years old, so it's been a hard journey but a very rewarding journey and an on-going one.

In this time, since the girls were probably one year old, I went back to work. However, I was only working part-time because I was never going to leave my girls and do full-time work and put them into care. Then I thought I'd do what I've always wanted to do and I'll go back and study. So that's when I got my psychology degree. It took about five years to do, but it was really worth doing.

What I say to everyone is, there by the Grace of God go I, and what I mean by that - is that at any moment, in anyone's life they can become a single parent. In fact, 12% of all marriages will fail this year. It is a terrible statistic, and 85% of them will involve children.

It's good, in a way, too, because people don't have to stay in really bad relationships. You don't have to have that kind of pressure to have to live in those circumstances. So there's both good and bad being a single parent.

The 2012 budget came along and the Federal Government announced they were going to move 100,000 single parents from a parenting payment, which was tailored for single parents and their children on to a Newstart Allowance. The Newstart Allowance is an unemployment benefit and they decided to do that when children turned eight. Before that, it was when your child turned 16, which was quite fair enough, I thought.

This was a flow-on from the 2005-6 budget when the Liberal Government brought out the Welfare to Work reforms. They started moving single parents when their youngest child turned eight onto Newstart back then, but then the people prior to that were on a 'grandfather' deal. It gets a bit complicated, but they were on a 'grandfathered' parenting payment, which meant they were allowed to stay on that until their children were 16. However, the recent budget announced they were actually going to move 100,000 of us on to Newstart immediately.

The thing I'm trying to tell everyone is that the true focus of doing this was so that the Government could gain a budget surplus. That was it, bottom line. They wanted to gain a surplus. They'd promised and by jove they were going to deliver it.

What the Government told the public was the changes make it fairer for all single parents. So somehow moving everyone on to Newstart is somehow fairer

for everyone. This move will make single parents look for work and in turn increase employment participation, so that's pretty fair enough, isn't it?

But when grilled about the implications of this decision, they said - *We are a Labor Government and therefore first and foremost we're working for the middle and lower income earners, insuring they get a job, that's pretty nice of them.*

Then Julia Gillard said - *We're looking after Australians that need us the most.*

It sends shivers down my spine, just saying that out loud.

What the Government actually failed to mention in all that greatness was that 68% of single parents were already working. So this wasn't about getting jobs because 68% were already working. Then on top of that, 20% of them were studying; there was a combination like me, who were both studying and working, so there was about 88% in total.

That leaves only a very small gap. *That is 88% of all single parents were doing something to get them back into the workforce.* Not a lot of people sitting around watching *Days of Our Lives* as people tell us single parents are doing.

They also failed to tell everyone that 90% of single parents were placed at greater risk of falling into extreme poverty just by the sheer nature of being a single parent. Over 2.2 million Australians were already living in poverty. So bringing those changes in was always going to mean that there is going to be a lot more people that are going to fall below that poverty line.

Julia Gillard famously made her speech about branding Abbott a sexist and a misogynist. I don't know about you but in that speech I stood up and went, "*Yes, yes, this is great, this speech is fantastic*". It gave a lot of kudos to her and I really started appreciating her.

Yet while she was doing that, behind our backs, she pushed forward – and this was the exact day – she pushed forward her plan to move us all on to Newstart. So while she was saying this wonderful thing about *he's a sexist*, etc., she's doing it. Of course, the problem is that 85% of those people were women, so it defies belief that she could do that.

I've put in a little bit here about sexism - *Attitudes, conditions or behaviours that promote stereotyping of social roles based on gender.* Although that does

not fit totally into what she was saying, it is pretty close. There are some parallels there, which I think need to be said.

The Government has now had three parliamentary enquiries, which have come out, and said that this is a really bad idea, do not do it. That's three of them! One of those enquiries was actually the Human Rights, their own Human Rights Ethics Committee. They ignored it!

They stood up and said, please don't do this, this is going to be a terrible, terrible thing to do. Australia's peak welfare agencies came out and said, no, no, this is going to cause homelessness, suicide. People such as Anglicare, St Vincent de Paul, came out and said this. Other organisations like ACOSS and National Council for Single Mums and their Children, which is a big organisation, said no, no, no.

Very importantly, the United Nations condemned them and said no. They said in 2012 that there were serious concerns that the changes to this parenting payments, they're talking about nothing else, would impede the enjoyment of human rights of these sole parents dependent on social security payments.

All these things the Government ignored. They kept saying this is about getting jobs; this is a really good thing we're doing here.

So our precious children – what are the effects of this legislation on children? This isn't just about single parents – this is about children, first and foremost about children.

I had to put this in. What happened to this? I was only young then but I remember this and I remember thinking, this is fantastic, finally, a concerted effort to do this. So yes, I'll say it:

*“By 1990 no Australian child will live in poverty.”*

I don't think any Australian doesn't know that. Bob Hawke's now come out and said that was the worst thing he's ever said. He regrets saying that more than anything else in his political career.

In 1987, the official ABS statistics was that 575,000 children were living in poverty. Just bear in mind we were in a rural recession at that time, so those are huge figures. What has changed?

In 2012, 20% or 730,000 children lived well below the poverty line. One in five children – it's disgraceful.

And projections on numerous reports have come out to say that this level will increase to one in four, and because of these changes that increase is going to happen really, really soon. They've come out and said on the international scale, Australia's been condemned for these figures. These figures are higher than any other industrial nation. That's just appalling. And you think we live in this free country.

*So what are the effects of poverty?* Obesity, depression, developmental delays, poor schooling outcomes, lower sense of efficacy so children don't even think they're worth anything. They're more likely to be jailed, live in transgenerational poverty, which is back to the aboriginal rights here, and they're likely to die younger than anyone else in Australia.

The McClelland Report, which came out post 'no child poverty in Australia', said that children are vulnerable and dependent, and the effects and impacts of poverty jeopardised their future lives, by robbing them of their opportunities to develop to their potential.

So we're saying that 20% - say, one in five of our children – will never, ever reach their potential. That makes me want to cry. That's just staggering figures.

*The reality of these changes – can you live on \$35 a day?*

We have a couple of opinions here. Jennie Macklin says, yes, you can. We emailed her and rang her office and there were thousands of responses. She was being flooded. She had to go on holiday because she didn't know what to say. I'll say also she's now come out - and I appreciate this – and said, *Of course I couldn't, I wish I hadn't said that, I couldn't live on \$35 a day.*

Adam Bandt of the Greens, said, *You know what, I'm going to do it. I'm going to come out and I'm going to live on \$35 a day.* So he's done his week and single parents started to say, it's only been a week, etc. I said, No, this is great, because at least someone's doing it, at least someone's saying I can stand up and do this. So he had his money, He took out his rent, so he got the cheapest rent he could find that was \$280 a week, He took his utilities out and he thought - *What am I going to do now? I haven't got enough money. I'm going to*



*have to eat Vegemite sandwiches, but that's fine, I'll do that, I'll do that for a week.* And of course it's not healthy, and you're not going to feed your children on that either.

By day three Adam Bandt was at the welfare agency asking for food. He said - *I can't do this. I can't eat, I've got no food*, and it was great because he put up his blogs so you could read. It was funny, because you think, of course that was going to happen. But he came out and really, thank God for Adam Bandt. He really put this into the spotlight.

*Audience Question: Was there good media coverage of this?*

Yes, great media coverage, and the media have turned around now and put a positive focus on this. I've done a lot of interviews now with *Today Tonight* and *A Current Affair* and where their angle before was of making us look silly and stereotyping us, they've actually put a positive slant on this, doing it as an intelligent interview, which apparently has not been seen before.

I just want quickly to let you know the differences between parenting payment and Newstart.

Before, parenting payment single – you'd be given \$663.70 a fortnight. Newstart is \$533 so immediately there's \$130 difference.

Now the income test – this is the biggest change that affects me. Before I was able to earn \$176.60, plus I was given an allowance for each child I had. If I earned above that then my payments were reducing 40 cents in the dollar.

On Newstart, income over \$62 a fortnight is taken, and then reduces 40 cents in the dollar, and there is no allowance for any children you have. So you could have one child or you could have 12, and that's it.

And the threshold – I was able to earn \$1,800 a fortnight, plus allowance for each child, before I was cut off, so that's quite good earnings and I was all right with that. Now I'm only allowed \$1,400 a fortnight and no allowance again for children. Then after that, if I stay on that threshold for a couple of weeks I have to re-apply and it takes me 12 weeks to get a reply.

Another awful thing that happened was the federal government axed the pensioner education supplement. This supplement was about \$70 a fortnight

and paid to single parents who were studying. In talking to many people this money was important because it paid them to get to their courses by bus and it paid for their pens and pencils. The horrible part is that so many people have to pull out of study now. It's just another awful ramification of these changes.

Before I would be able to earn, would get \$464 for my parenting payment, earn my \$700 and my total was \$1,164. Now you can see the difference. The difference is straight off. I'm losing about \$190 a fortnight. That's a lot of money. Moreover, the more I earn, the more I lose, and the last time I was working, I was actually working a lot more than that. So I was working about 25 hours a week and it was just dropping and dropping, so it was not good.

I think the last time I did my budget I was about \$350 in the red a fortnight. Lucky I've got a good family.

The problems with Newstart were single parents were not given adequate notice. I was called up – luckily, I had two weeks' notice because I had a big meltdown. My meltdown lasted three days before I was able to regroup. OK, come on; think positive as you always do. It's going to be all right. I had my three days and then the lady rang me on about 5<sup>th</sup> December and told me, on 1<sup>st</sup> January this was going to happen. Christmas – it was supposed to be a really happy time. No, that wasn't really great for me.

A friend of mine got a week's notice. Can you imagine that? That's awful.

The compulsory participation requirements were already there, so when your child turns six you were eased into the workforce. By the time your youngest child is seven you should be working 15 hours a week. I think that's great. I think that part of the thing, asking people to work, I think that is really positive. But again that was already in existence and that's why we were all working.

Newstart doesn't take into consideration the number of children. Those people working are the most disadvantaged in this, so them saying, *It's about jobs, it's about getting you back in the workforce*, we're actually the ones that are most disadvantaged.

This is a really important point: there's no evidence that the people who were moved on to Newstart in 2006 were able to be employed any better than they were before. There's no evidence. There's no empirical evidence.





CSI has major problems. \$2.8 million is owed in child support to mothers. I don't like to say mothers – I think parents are parents, but this is predominantly mothers, so there's huge problems there. People aren't getting the support from their ex-partners.

A more horrible one, is where women are forced to stay in abusive relationships. I know three people who've said they had to go back. I've said, please – I'd rather live in the car, please don't go back to an abusive relationship, but if you can't put a roof over your head you've got to do something. So people are going back.

Housing stress – you've got huge rents; \$300 is about the median in Adelaide. I could imagine Sydney is bigger, huge. I couldn't even imagine \$300 a week – that's \$600 gone in a fortnight - that's more than your Newstart.

JET child care – don't even get me started. I don't like JET child care because I wasn't allowed to have it and I think a single parent with twins who's working and studying probably should have got it but didn't. This increased 1,000%.

In addition, of course there are child care issues. There always has been. Childcare Places - you can't get them. One lady who did go to South Australia has got a six month waiting list on her child care, so she can't go back to work, what's she going to do, leave her kids alone? You can't. And of course, that's illegal.

*So single parents are fighting back! What's happening? Single Parents Action Group.*

We started in November 2012. The way I came across it was after my mini-meltdown. I thought, what can I do? There's got to be other people out there, there's got to be other people who are in the same boat as me. Let's find them. I did Facebook. Thank goodness for Facebook, That's a really good medium to get you started, and I came across them, probably about 20 members then. We're over a thousand now and it just keeps growing. And it's only been going about four months.

We're affiliated with many organisations, as I've talked about before. They're all on board and really we're advocating together and it's a really powerful thing. We had rallies in February. The rally I attended, even though I was in

Adelaide, was in Canberra and we marched from Old Parliament House to New Parliament House, together with the Greens, together with ACOSS, together with the National Council for Single Mothers. It was just great.

The best thing that happened was I was able, before that, to get 45 meetings organised with ministers and senators in that day. It was a huge day. I was so exhausted by the end, but we sat in there and we spoke about our stories, and it was very draining to have to justify your existence over and over again. But ministers said - *Oh, I didn't realise*, and that was really good.

Nearly all of them were really willing to speak to us and if they didn't they wanted to make a time when we could come and see them.

As I said, they're our partnerships. All these people aren't just passive. We're all working together as a group and the National Council for Single Mothers, Terese Edwards and I, were the ones who went in to Parliament House and sat and spoke to these ministers. I sat with Bill Shorten's office and it was a really enlightening conversation we had with him. It was nice to see Bill Shorten himself after a Q&A episode.

The letters to the United Nations have come out and part of the letter states that a number of the provisions within this Act would have the effect of threatening the enjoyment of human rights and some of the most marginalised and impoverished members of Australian society. There could also be violations of the Conventions on the Rights of the Child and of the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

All these groups and people, ACOSS, etc., are coming in, emailing, talking to ministers, and when the United Nations talks you've really got to listen. But the Government has still ignored them. People are now saying, *Come on, you can't ignore them, you just can't!* But they've done it before and they seem to be going to do that now.

I've put in a little thing about what you can do to help our cause. I suppose the biggest thing is to advocate for change. We've got petitions going. I've set this up and we've had people in America who have said please do this because we're going to get it in to the United States. So that's going around the world at the moment and we hope to get more and more people to do that.

Write to members of parliament – I think one of the best ways is just saying, as an organisation we're not standing for this. We're coming on board and this is not right. I've done it as the Council of Welfare Reform now and just said I work with the single parents, obviously, so it's all about applying more and more pressure, pressurising the Government to come out and talk about it.

Julia Gillard keeps ignoring it.

The website is Single Parent Action Group -

<http://singleparentsactiongroup.org/> - If you want to email me or speak to me, I will get you anything.

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### Selected Audience Questions

*Audience Question: I'm interested in terms of the Government decision to cut payments to single parents on the basis of keeping the budget in surplus, which seems to be a typical knee-jerk reaction or panic more than anything else. I am also curious about the fact that the amount of savings that the Government project from this decision is going to be completely undermined by the money that will have to go to NGOs, in order, to support single parents who can't pay their rent; can't buy food; can't pay their electricity bills; and all the other things which the allowance allowed them to do.*

**Samantha:** The projected savings from doing this were only \$728 million over four years, so it was a real little bit. Even speaking to ministers – they say, *Is that all?* Now the problem is when a lot of people were talking to Centrelink and saying, *How are we going to do it? How are we going to pay our rent? How are we going to do this?* Centrelink are saying, go to the welfare agencies.

John Falzon who is the CEO of St Vincent de Paul is working closely with us. He's gone out to the Government to say, the Government has actually cut funding to the welfare agencies, and they're now telling single parents to go and speak to them about all of this issue. Of course because it's so new their figures haven't come out, but they know they're going to be inundated with people and for the Government to be advocating for them to go to these welfare agencies, that's why they're fighting against it. They're saying, this is just terrible.

I think the Government allow a \$30 gift voucher for food every year; that's their contribution. I think you're allowed two vouchers a year, two \$30 vouchers a year, and I know that Anglicare who provide some of those vouchers are saying, *We really want people to continue to take them from us because then our funding is going to get cut if you don't.*

So there's all those kinds of things as well, but St Vincent de Paul has come out and said, No, this is just terrible, you can't do this. He was really passionate when he spoke to me about it and just said, no, we'll be fighting this to the end.

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*Audience Question: If this just happened with a Labor Government, if there's a change of Government later in the year can you see this only getting worse ?*

**Samantha:** Yes. The reason I can see it getting worse is because Tony Abbott has not on one occasion come out and said anything about it. If he was going to advocate for any kind of change, he would have come out and said, I don't support this.

I spoke to his advisor, which was really good because they allowed me a meeting. So the meeting was with his advisor and she kept saying - *This is about childcare, isn't it?* And I was saying, *no.* I was trying to tell her that for me I've actually got two degrees, I still can't get the job of my dreams because I've got two children to support, and then she turned around and said - *So you're talking about child care? No, we're not talking about child care.* I was pretty floored by the lack of knowledge she had, but on not one occasion has Tony Abbott come out and said anything.

So I think it will get a lot worse. The only thing he has said was, *I always wanted people to get back into the workforce,* so he has jumped on to that bandwagon as well.

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*Audience Question: If I can recall properly, one of the Q&A meetings, Bill Shorten was on and a woman from the audience spoke about this and asked him a question, and he was very empathetic to her and said, speak to me after*

*the meeting, I'll see if we can get around that for you. So I think he's a bit distressed about what has happened.*

**Samantha:** To be really honest with you, I was very, very angry at the end of that. Why was I angry? Because he indicated or he put out there that she was somehow special and that she was a strong – he quoted, '*As a strong woman like you I can't believe this is happening to you*' and I thought – strong?!

You know, some people haven't got education. We're not people who have decided this is a great career choice being a single parent, I'll hang around all day and paint my nails. It doesn't happen. I straight away got into contact with his office and said, *I actually can't believe and I'm really upset that you didn't understand the implications of this, because where was the research?, Did you not do the research when you were going to vote it in. How can you say one person is a strong woman. Oh, I can't believe this is happening to you; and you want to talk to her after to sort her situation out?!*

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*Audience Question: We have been strongly supporting you because we know that you must be worse off.*

**Samantha:** It is hard. If you don't understand where people are coming from, then you don't support because you don't know, and you're stuck in your own world of trying to struggle.

People have come out and said - *Why didn't you support people who were moved on in 2006. You seem to be only after yourself.* I'm sorry, I was really ignorant, I didn't know these changes would happen, and I was quite happy doing my study and getting on with my life but I'm sorry, I didn't understand this was happening back in 2006.

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*Audience Question: Thanks, Samantha, it was wonderful to have that presentation and it was very good to have those stats. I'm interested to know if there's any research being done about the social impact of this on families and children, children at school and learning, and the distress this is causing. I'm not too sure if that's being addressed as well.*

**Samantha:** Not that I know of. I'd love to do it. This is going to be my thing. I actually got an email the other day from the women's office saying if I'm interested in doing a scholarship on this kind of thing. I'd love to do that.

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*Audience Question: I do some work with the local centre at Campbelltown, and I said to them last month, it will be interesting to see the impact of this new legislation on the youth coming in to the centre, and they told me last Thursday they'd had 77 new people coming in from the beginning of March to 14<sup>th</sup> March. I don't have the breakdown of that; how many single parents. But I think it's an area we need to look at; to have a look at that data, because we also need that to go to our local members.*

**Samantha:** Exactly, and another group that did do it was the RSPCA. They've already done a bit on how many animals have now been surrendered because people can't afford them. Who's going to be able to feed their family dog? So that's another area. There are organisations doing their own research.

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*Audience Question: Pensioners are struggling but their position is far better than people on Newstart and that's because they have more political power and/or social sympathy than the unemployed.*

**Samantha:** Pensioners have social sympathy. I found it really hard to deal with the stereotypes and the abuse we get. I've had it personally from people on my Facebook, friends of mine, saying, *it's about time people got off their fat arses and got a job*. Delete you as a friend! The comments are pretty horrendous.

The majority support us but there is that fraction that says, *it's about time you stopped bludging*.

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*Audience Question: Alan Jones and Chris Smith .have they helped?..*

**Samantha:** They do. I got a phone call from a talkback radio station saying could you do an interview and of course I go, oh no, I don't want to do talkback.

I'm so scared. But they were so great. Single parents – why are they doing this to you? I thought, that's great, but I was really worried about doing it.

That was in Canberra. It was WIN drive time. I got so many calls I just lost track of who I was doing these interviews with. That was drive time and they've actually spoken to me twice but they were pretty good. No one in Adelaide, of course.

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*Audience Question: Is there any particular media or anyone in the media that you think we could be working with to get this story out there? Anyone particularly sympathetic in the best meaning of that word?*

**Samantha:** Yes, very sympathetic was *The Project*, very supportive, and it was great, because I've been on there a couple of times and they're really for us and have been really helping. Even *Today Tonight*, of all the interviews I've done and how scared I was, especially the last one because they asked me about the child support agency and I was really worried about that, but it came out pretty sympathetic.

Even getting on Q&A – I'd love a bit more ABC, a little bit more away from the tabloid type of thing. But certainly 7pm *Project* is a really good one.

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*Audience Question: There are two things I want to ask you about. At the beginning of this year, and I believe accidentally, 80,000 people were told they were not longer eligible for the concessions associated with any form of the support. Has that been fixed up?*

**Samantha:** The story behind that was you got a little letter in the post and of course every time you get a Centrelink letter you get a little bit sweaty. I opened this one and it said - From 1<sup>st</sup> January, you are no longer entitled to a concession on your pension concession card. You need to immediately tear it up. And then it had a little clause under it: And if you proceed to use it, we will know because we are electronically connected to the pharmacies. It was a threatening letter. I thought, No, they can't do it!



As you know, as pensioners, what you gain from that. You go to the doctor, your children go to the doctor for nothing, you get your pharmacy stuff, really everything, discounts on travel, and your gas and electricity, and this was a horrible letter. I thought, no way am I going to do that. Let them put me in jail, I don't care. I am not listening to that.

I got a call from *The Age*, I think, asking me *can you comment on this, because now they've come out and said it was a computer error. I said, yes, how funny it was a computer error,– it typed it up itself, did it?*

Then he asked them, *are you going to contact everyone?* They replied -*Yes, individually, we'll contact everyone.* Of course they didn't. I didn't get any contact.

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*Audience Question: The other thing I wanted to ask is one of the conditions of all this is to apply for jobs if you're not already working. May I ask how in the hell do you apply for jobs when you have less money coming in for shoes ... and where are the jobs and what are the conditions?*

**Samantha:** The CEO of Centrelink on a couple of occasions said it's simple. *You have to get a job within school hours, that's all we're asking.* And a lot of people that I knew said, *yes, what's the problem?*

I did research, I got seek.com, I got all of the job places, I got Centrelink website, and I did a search on all the jobs. Not one job in all of them was in school hours. At the Centrelink website I think it ended up 12 jobs that were part time, because you can't take full time when you've got children, it's impossible. There were only 12 and half of them were to become self-employed. 90% of them were that. Two of them were proper jobs and they were fitness instructors. On seek.com not one of them was school hours, because there are none. People don't employ school hours. It doesn't happen anymore.

You ended up with maybe 10 jobs you could go for and they were ridiculous.

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*Audience Question: I think this is just another example of the undervaluing of women's work in the community. They know that they will pull out all stops to look after their children and I think it's a big example of the undervaluing of the education of our children and I think in the long run the Government will lose.*

**Samantha:** In an interview, I asked the interviewer 'Are we going back to the 1920s when you're saying that raising a child isn't work? – He said 'Oh, no, of course I'm not'. But again, we haven't changed very much in that time, when you're talking about paid work. But raising children who have the efficacy to go out and feel worthy, that's a huge job. As single parents, we didn't force this on ourselves; we're here and it's been forced on us. This is a position that we didn't come into and say *yay, I'm a single parent!* We all wanted to be married and have a lovely life, but for a lot of us that didn't happen, so what do you do? You should not be penalised because you've decided that you're going to raise your children.

CCJP wishes to thank Samantha Seymour for a very passionate, realistic and informative presentation and discussion.

Please see our website [www.ccjpoz.org](http://www.ccjpoz.org) for other Sunday Seminar summaries and reports.

