

Maternity and Childcare Provisions:

Planning for the Future

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INTRODUCTION For some time now we have been aware of the issue of the declining birth rate and the associated social and economic impacts. In the past few years various measures have been introduced to attempt to address this problem, and there have been significant improvements in support provided to families. However, there are a number of problems associated with the way services are currently provided, and there is still room for improvement. This paper outlines some of the problems identified in the services provided, particularly to women with families; and identifies some strategies which may help overcome the difficulties faced by women returning to the paid workforce following childbirth. If these issues were to be addressed in a systematic way, they would set an international benchmark in maternity provisions, enhance family life, and perhaps even deliver tangible socio-economic benefits.

This paper is based on personal experiences gained over the past few years, a limited amount of research conducted on the internet, and discussions with parents about these issues. It is intended as a starting point for discussion about policy change in this area.

ISSUES

1. Access to Maternity Leave Access to paid maternity leave is not universal and it is sometimes associated with conditions which may be difficult to meet. Although a woman may have been working for many years, she may have to change jobs before she meets a qualifying period and find herself no longer entitled to paid maternity leave. Under certain circumstances women may be required to pay back maternity leave.

Solution There needs to be universal provisions for access to paid maternity leave. One means of bringing this about would be to establish a Maternity Benefit Fund. This could be voluntary. Both men and women could contribute to this fund during their early working life. Contributions could be matched in some way by the Federal Government. A contributor could decide how they would utilise the money in their fund. For example, they could take payment on a full time or part time basis, specify the time period, or how they would utilise the funds. This might include funding maternity leave for themselves, to pay for formal childcare, or engage a nanny at home. The length of time and amount of contributions would be a determining factor in how much a woman receives, with those contributing more receiving greater government assistance. There could be incentives for women to complete their high school education. The relative

merits and details of such a scheme, or an alternative one, could be worked out at a National Summit to develop a strategy in this area.

2. Loss of Entitlements After Twelve Months Leave Another issue that women face if employed by either a State, Territorial, or Federal Government department is the loss of Long Service Leave (LSL) benefits. If a woman has been unable to return to work after twelve months of maternity leave, she then loses the benefits of long service leave. Women in the private sector may face a similar problem. The loss of additional leave provided by LSL each year, just when more leave may be needed to cover childhood illness and school holidays, places further strain on family life and returning to work.

Solution The amount of time a woman can have off work, from either the government or private sector, needs to be increased where maternity leave is concerned. A time frame of up to four to five years is suggested. This amount of time would allow women to focus on child rearing, should they choose to, until a child is of school age. Accrual of LSL would recommence following return to work. Retention of LSL entitlements, over an extended period of LSL, would reduce the strain on families attempting to deal with the issues of childhood illnesses and school holidays upon return to the workforce.

3. Piecemeal Responses to Issues in this Area One of the issues I have been aware of in the last few years is the piecemeal response to needs in this area. For example, to address the issue of the declining birth rate and the financial costs associated with raising a family, a baby bonus was introduced. This amount, made available through the Family Assistance Office, has since increased. Around the same time another scheme was introduced whereby women can also claim a rebate through the taxation system. In the early weeks, months, and even years after giving birth, dealing with multiple government departments contributes to stress in adjusting to family life.

Solution There needs to be systematic plan to address the needs of women and families. A National Summit is needed to set an agenda for the delivery of services, say for the next 10-20 years. Any financial support needs to be more automated, or coordinated through one agency.

4. Poor Consumer Knowledge of Maternity and Child Care Provisions One of the problems identified in the previous section is that of how readily available information is concerning current provisions and entitlements. What is provided at the moment is comparable, in some areas, to what is provided in other countries. Other areas could be improved. There needs to be greater promotion of what is currently provided, both to improve access to financial support and services, and to reduce the associated stress.

Solution Multiple forms of media need to be utilized to promote what has been introduced to date and how to access provisions. Newspaper, television, and

pamphlets could be used to assist with promoting services and support in this area.

5. Loss of Income Associated with Childrearing Although the previous government increased the level of financial support to women and families raising children, this support is no-where near the previous earnings of many women, particularly if a women takes several years out of paid work. Further consideration needs to be given to increasing the level of financial support to women. Perhaps the issue of the level of financial support would be addressed through the proposed Maternity Benefit Fund. Although the tax relief promised at the 2007 election may be of assistance to those in the paid workforce, it will be of little direct assistance to women who are not in the paid workforce.

Solution Financial assistance to child bearing women who are either not working or engaged in part-time work needs to be reviewed. The nature of payment and amount provided could again be examined at the proposed National Summit. Again, the proposed Maternity Benefit Fund may be a solution. Australia should look at setting an international bench mark in this area.

6. Access to Appropriate Childcare There are still difficulties accessing suitable child care. For example, those living in regional areas have fewer options than their urban counterparts. Children's care needs change as they get older, for example from long day care earlier on, to before and after school care later. There needs to be greater incentives for employers, of a certain size, to provide childcare facilities. There needs to be greater flexibility in the workplace for parents with children, including provisions for part-time work and job sharing, particularly in the early years of child rearing. There also needs to be more recognition and importance placed on working in the area of childcare.

With respect to the range of childcare services, children have different needs. Some are suited to formal childcare, while others appear to cope better in smaller groups, in a more home-like environment. The current Child Care Benefit (CCB) needs to be extended to cover in-home care, such as by a nanny.

Solution

The issues of employer provided childcare facilities and family friendly workplace conditions need to be reviewed and updated. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on the value of 'motherhood', and of paid and unpaid work in the area of childcare. A proposed National Summit on maternity and childcare issues could be tasked with developing proposals in these areas.

The current CCB needs to be made more flexible to cover the full range of childcare arrangements, including in-home care services. Further research is needed into flexible working conditions, for parents, particularly women, who need to adjust their working lives to accommodate children.

CONCLUSION This paper has identified a number of problems in the way services are currently provided to women and families with children. The problems identified in this paper are likely to represent the 'tip of the iceberg'. For example, issues from a 'father's' perspective have not been addressed. A National Summit would help to further identify the issues faced by parents in their working lives, and aim at generating solutions to these problems.

While many problems exist, there are likely to be some innovative ways of addressing these problems. Again, a forum to identify these solutions would go a long way in simplifying and enhancing the services currently provided.

More support to families with children may encourage a further reversal in the declining birth rate, enhance family life, and deliver tangible socio-economic benefits. Rather than a piecemeal approach, and merely keeping up with what is done in other countries, Australia should look at developing a long term strategy and setting an international benchmark in this area.

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