

I am indebted to the Commissioners who have made it welcoming for people such as myself to present their ideas on maternity leave, and for in my case consideration for maternity leave to be extended in some circumstances that need special provision.

For the past few weeks I have agonised how to present my submission for consideration, and I have thought of all ways, from a paper full of statistics, one full of well thought out logic, and in the end I have decided to let it rip with all kinds of ideas that our current Federal Government is constantly calling for.

I am a wife (happily married) a mother and a grandmother. My life has been full and busy, and above all I have had a half a century involved in the area of intellectual disability. Our eldest child suffered brain injury during a difficult birth.

Firstly, my thoughts on maternity leave. Let us look well beyond that most horrible of words 'funding', and another word to avoid is politics, but of course, they go hand in hand.

Let us look at the half full glass. We are a wonderfully rich country, a young country with a shining future, we gift to the world all kinds of inventions, commodities, and the intelligence of our young people.

With incredible sums of money sloshing around, is it too much to expect a better level of support for families who decide to have babies? Maternity leave for such a short period of their working lives? The benefits of having a stable stress free period after the birth of a baby are incalculable, as today so many young people have to work owing to factors outside their realm, high housing and living costs.

Six months is an ideal time, it allows the family to settle and cope with a new member. Great benefit would be gained if both parents wanted to share this time.

I can hear the remarks like 'pie in the sky', who will pay for it? all the usual doubts arising. Large companies would have no trouble covering this cost, and the smaller employer would pay for it with an

increased pay roll tax,¹ to be matched by the Government. For a small business, temporarily replacing² a staff member is expensive through an employment agency, and this is where maybe the union movement can act as an agency for the various job specifications, using older people as staff replacement, as many of them may only want to work for six months of the year.

This pool of talent may be very beneficial to an employer, as the temporary employee would have many years experience which could be invaluable in any business.

Anyhow if the whole thing can't be thought out by those who do these things, can we put it to the Schools of Business at the Universities and let those clever young brains do the work?

The news today is that we are to welcome up to 300,000 overseas workers. As a modern country we have to catch up with other countries and encourage our young people to have babies, it is very very important we increase our birth rate. The six months salary allowance for maternity leave is such a small thing when taken into the whole of life working time of a family. It goes without saying, time to establish a new baby without financial stress should be something that we should be able to just take for granted.

Six months of maternity leave is an imperative.

Which leads me to the point of discussion which is really "pie in the sky, but why?" I am endeavouring to bring forth information about a group of people who are living a life that most Australian people could not comprehend. That is the lives lived by parents of a baby who has a disability. Sometimes in the letters to the editors of the newspapers there will be a heartfelt plea for help and services, but these are few and far between. Anyone who viewed the ABC's Four Corners program 'Carers' shown about May 5th 2008 would have difficulty sleeping well after seeing those mothers and the life they lead, and the life they will continue to lead until the day they die. They will not die in peace, as the continual, torturous thought is continually with them, "what will happen to my child when I die?" In the 80s there was a dark saying doing the rounds (and it probably is there today) "Blessed are those parents whose children with a

¹ Mechanisms for funding. 3 months as existing and possibly three months tax matching
² Considerations of employment regulations, original employment conditions and unfair dismissal laws.

disability die before they do". What a dreadful indictment on our society, and worst of all there has been no improvement in provision of services since then.

Young parents who are faced with the devastating news there is something wrong with their baby are on a learning curve like no other. They will become experts on the condition of their baby, and will end up knowing more than most medicos. Using this knowledge they will be able to nurse their child through all kinds of illnesses and conditions, saving thousands of dollars of the health budget.

They will learn some of the most painful and heartbreaking of lessons about people around them, and family members are not able to cope with the knowledge of a handicapped baby who will grow into a child and adult. Brothers and sisters and sometime parents will slip away, and old friends will find you not very interesting as you have very little time to share with them, no quick trips to the pub, taking the family to McDonalds, no nights out, all the wonderful spontaneous outings now require such planning that it is easier to stay at home. And they are tired anyhow. So old friends also slip off the radar, and gradually these parents face a kind of isolation, and this will last for the rest of their lives as they are tied to never ending care of a child with a disability.

The whole thought behind this submission is the hope that somehow in this wonderful country of mateship, friendship and help for those that need it, the maternity payment can be extended for another five years to the family of a baby with a disability.³ This young couple have so much to face the least society can do is make sure they are not tortured with financial distress as well as everything else.

Somehow, Australia has to show compassion to people who, out of a clear blue sky have the whole of their lives changed forever, and with the way conditions and services are at present, they will lead a life which while there are many joys associated with progress of their child, they could face a life of broken sleep, no holidays, financial disadvantage trying to live, possibly raising other children, on what will always remain a one-income family.

³ Considerations must be made for special provision for more than one baby with a disability in a family, eg twins or multiple births, or a genetic component. Extra time will be needed.

Some of the problems facing parents are obvious. The tiredness, which is overwhelming, and the full time routine prevents parents from being able to attend meetings and trying to get the attention of politicians. Services for disabled children are scarce and many are not of long duration. There are costs involved in respite and day care services (if they are lucky enough to find one and get in) special equipment, toys and foods, transport costs when you can locate a service probably some distance away, especially in rural areas, and costs involved in fund raising if you do find some service.

There are significant personal costs. Marriages are put under enormous strain, compounded by trying to manage on one income. Career opportunities are in jeopardy, as the employers would be reluctant to offer a job to a parent of a disabled child in another State, and a father may not be performing a he had done in the past, because of financial concerns, worry about his wife and children and maybe lack of sleep are taking their toll.

They are finding that the world around them is totally ignorant of disabilities, and many people really don't want to know. Of great concern is the effect of time and energy available to spend with their other children, and trying to give them as much time and love as possible, and this never seems enough.

The future for such a family is bleak. They will probably have to cope with their own parents becoming frail and needing attention. Finding permanent residential accommodation as this child becomes of age is for most, a dream. Government funded child care for the disabled child is non existent.

In closing, it is my dream that a six month's paid maternity leave is established, and if a new baby is disabled, parents have an extension of this benefit until that child reaches the age of five. This will enable these parents to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and learning some of the lessons they will simply have to learn, at least without the searing and constant worry of finances. Taking away that concern it will make them stronger and more able to cope. It will enable them to have some leeway, maybe getting someone to clean the house, or to come and baby sit for a precious night out. It will enable the parent at home to maybe get work from home, and keep up their skills for the time when their child will hopefully enter some kind of day care or schooling. It will help them pay for the

special equipment and possibly special vehicle⁴ to the family, and it will help with the upbringing of their other children.

Australian society must start somewhere to implement life long care for this child and his or her parents, and this payment is a good start.

⁴ Considerations of exemptions of vehicle tax and GST on specialised equipment.