

Good one: the Productivity Commission proposes a feminist gain!

Women's Electoral Lobby welcomes the Productivity Commission's Interim Report on paid parental leave as a very good starting point for the recognition of the contributions made by both mothers and fathers in paid work. The proposal is for 18 weeks publicly funded leave, paid at the minimum wage rate, plus two weeks for partners on a take it or lose it basis. Although not 26 weeks, the report points out with recreation leave, it makes six months with the baby much more possible.

It doesn't replace income for the many women who earn more than the minimum wage, and more than replaces it for most of those who earn less. However, a higher proportion of these already have been able to negotiate some paid leave, so will presumably be able to add this on top and maybe for more weeks, at little or not net cost to their employers. Others will have a strong case for negotiating the top up in comparison with their peers.

This model takes nothing from those not in paid work, and a little from some who had both paid maternity and the baby bonus and who can't hang onto the extra leave payment.

The real strength of this proposal is its financial formal recognition of the intersection of the public and private spheres by making caring for babies a workplace issue. This type of change opens up many new areas for discussion of the appropriate levels of time and resources spent in our various roles. Finally, the dominance of workplaces and identities can be challenged and tempered with a more human/social interactions.

The Commission has clearly made the point that there is a clear relationship between paid work and care responsibilities. For an economics driven institution this is a rare recognition that it is OK for paid workers to mix paid work and care. The report states this very clearly: 'Normalcy' of parental leave and maximising retention.

The more that parental leave arrangements mimic those that exist as part of routine employment contracts, the more they will be seen by employers and employees as standard employment arrangements, ... (by) **signalling that looking after children while still being employed is just a normal part of working life.** (my bold)

Until now, Australia has dismally failed to include paid parental leave on its policy agenda. Family payments, often quite generous ones, were likely to be targeted at women with no extra income or discouraged second income earners by the high means tests. This payment, if it survives the consultation and government decision making process, would be the first formal recognition of paid work and nurturing children. It will clearly benefit low paid workers, often part time or regular casuals, who had the most difficulty in bargaining for any paid leave. These include most of the 16% who now return to work within the first three months. Of course, there are gaps but it is a huge first step to get it.

Supporters need to display support, and in unity, to ensure the recommendations stay in the final report and the government will not turn it into another welfare payment like badly designed Howard Baby

Bonus or the earlier Keating version. So far, all the Government says is 'it's time to bit the bullet'.

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