

Why I wasn't gobsmacked by David Leyonhjelm's contribution to the childcare debate in Australia ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

I was going to say that I was gobsmacked by Senator David Leyonhjelm's summation of caring for children last week on Channel 10's The Project as "wiping noses and stopping the kids from killing each other".

But I wasn't actually gobsmacked. I wasn't at all surprised.

I would hazard a guess that many, many other men - and no doubt some women too - also view caring for children in a similarly green way and I know why.

I suspect they come at it from the vantage point of having never stepped foot into a preschool or childcare centre for longer than a photo opportunity, if ever. I suspect they have escaped ever being directly responsible for a child under the age of five, let alone fifteen of them.

Anyone who has spent more than five minutes inside a preschool or childcare centre will appreciate why Chloe Chant's open letter to Leyonhjelm on Facebook quickly gathered 25,000 likes.

"Wiping noses" is the absolute least of the work they are woefully underpaid to undertake.

Which is why Leyonhjelm's comments were shockingly ill-informed and offensive. But his comments were also useful in revealing, quite clearly, the distinct divide in the childcare debate.

On one side there are those who have no exposure to the work of early childhood educators. They have no idea what a day in a busy childcare centre actually entails. They genuinely believe it's child play: a matter of turning up and letting the kids do what they want. They haven't read the research about the importance - and benefits - of investing in early education. They are ignorant of the economic and social benefits - now and in the future - of ensuring children under five have access to a quality education and care program.

On the other side of the debate, there are the people who comprise the sector and those who use it. The educators themselves, the directors of centres, the advocates. There are the parents who access care and the parents who can't. Those in this camp understand implicitly the value this sector delivers - not just in facilitating parents working but in the stimulation and education of their children. They know - all too well - how the system is flailing. They know how and why it needs to be fixed.

Unfortunately, too many of the decision makers fall in the former camp. Which might explain why the state of childcare in Australia in 2017 is such a mess. Why the cost of childcare assistance incurred by the government is spiralling. Why the wages of educators are stagnant but the fees parents pay are growing. Why the demand for positions and supply fail to match up. Why early childhood education is so undervalued.

Leyonhjelm's comments were depressing and dispiriting, particularly delivered at the time of year when childcare is such a hot topic for so many families and children who are starting new arrangements. But his comments serve as a reminder that the sector is misunderstood and has revealed Chloe Chant as a powerful champion who can help address this. Here's to seeing and hearing a lot more from women like Chant this year.

-reprinted from Women's Agenda

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