

The new childcare package is the final nail in the community service coffin ^[1]

This subsidy is just one example of changes that have redefined us from citizens to government customers

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EXCERPTS

The government's new package of fee relief for children's services has clearly abandoned the basic principle of funding children's services to meet the needs of children and parents per se.

The new funding criteria, starting on 2 July, clearly establish that the government's interests are limited to the economic benefits of increasing paid work participation by mostly mothers. Their eligibility for hourly based fee relief will be based on activities related to employment or potential employment. This ignores needs of children for time away and their experiences of educational activities, except for 15 hours per week in the year before school enrolment.

Where the current funding package offers all children and their parents the benefit of 24 hours (two days) care per week, regardless of the activities of the parent, now this will be terminated. Only if the parent can be officially categorised as "disadvantaged", or the child as having extra needs, may 12 hours a week be funded. This means parents or children must be labelled, stigmatised or otherwise identified as problematic to gain any access.

I was one of the feminists who fought very hard from the 1970s on for funded childcare services for the increasing numbers of women who had paid jobs, or wanted them. It was tough then because women were expected to put mothering first, and there was opposition because of the possible harm of collective care rather than home based mothering. We argued children benefit from access to professional care and social experiences. We won as quality care was clearly beneficial to all concerned. William McMahon had funded professional childcare workers salaries, Gough Whitlam extended the program, Malcolm Fraser separated childcare from preschools, and Bob Hawke accepted the need for core funding a planned model that allocated services to areas of need, with added fee subsidies for the mainly non-profit services. Communities gained services.

However, by then market models became fashionable so Paul Keating opened funding fee relief for users of commercial services, which expanded massively. So John Howard removed the remaining direct funding to centres, leaving supply, fees and locations to the economic drivers of profits, not community needs. It was an attractive investment, so most centres are now commercial.

Now the final nail in the community service coffin is about to be applied. The socially valuable access to childcare by all will no longer be available and children now in, or needing, two days care will no longer be eligible for subsidies unless they are labelled. Childcare will be no longer contribute to community wellbeing but be funded only as a contributor to GDP, now the only criterion of valuing government spending.

Where Howard clearly supported women's right to not work, he did not exclude children from care. His successors have removed the validity of that option. Yes, we fought for the right of women to paid work, we did not want this to become almost mandatory. Most primary carers () now contribute their time to paid work, but also are still mainly expected to be responsible for providing for children's needs for unpaid care. Men who share these roles might still experience some prejudice at their workplace if they want that time out. Depending on personal circumstances, diverse access to care is needed – as a right, not by a limited bureaucratised safety net. Many parents also use casual and short term contracts to allow for unpredictable needs. The proposed reporting of activities and hours worked will make their access, even if employed, harder. Reporting to determine eligibility are not easy as uncertain casual hours and gig jobs increase.

There are also questions about the increasing market share of big commercial chains that are not addressed in the proposed changes. The distribution of services in the market model is based on profits, not local needs. There are shortages in some areas and oversupply in others. The model also shows the bleeding of substantial profits to big chains. Long-leased childcare centres on capital/costs. Add to that the profits made by the lessee, we can presume that more than 15% profits, plus capital gains on the property, are made from subsidies offered by government plus parental contributions.

Location and fees are assumed to be better determined by the glories of competition, as parents were assumed to be ready to move

children between services on the basis of costs and location. And parents have no input or say, so the communities of users no longer exist. Quality controls are inadequately funded and many local needs not met, so is the proposed system now worth our \$8bn plus spending?

The signs are we need a real redesign of the children's services program. When local services were communal and non-profits, they served communities with informal contacts and inputs. Yes, they drew on local busy people for management committees but these built communities and connected the often isolated. Direct contracts with government meant fair distributions of services and control over fees and mixes of age groups.

Current services are not meeting needs. We have record numbers of children in contact with child protection or out of home care and maybe these needs forms of community care to be re-established as part of what we all own? Given our increased levels of distrust of those in power, could this be fuelled in part by the loss of the sense of partnership between parents and publicly provided services for the benefit of children? Does the absence of engagement with children's services in any way reduce both the connected community of families and the perception that governments do care about children and their needs? Does the government assumptions that the primary parent should do paid work post parental leave further devalue voter level of trust?

The loss of community based care is just one example of the changes that have redefined us from citizens to customers of governments. So many changes to social security and community services have reduced us to using contracted out and commercialised services, one government controlled or delivered.

Customer-consumer roles are explicitly distrust based, as we are told we are responsible for getting "the best deal". Could these changes be part drivers of the increasing devaluing of current political models of democracy as it seems to have lost its social equity function? These are urgent questions we need to address, as well as fix children's services.

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