

Short-term politics won't leave sustainable childcare legacy ^[1]

Five years ago, Labor promised to subsidise childcare wages and was howled down. Now, it hardly moves the dial.

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Excerpt

Arguably, one legacy of Kim Beazley never becoming prime minister is that Australia has a crippling expensive and increasingly unsustainable childcare sector.

In May 2006, just seven months before Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard joined forces to seize the leadership of the Labor opposition, Beazley promised that, if elected in 2007, he would “end the double drop-off”.

Childcare was a relatively new but rapidly burgeoning sector, fuelled by the rise of, and need for, the two-income family.

Then-prime minister John Howard was of a different generation, one in which the woman stayed home and raised the kids and, if she had a career, returned to work after the kids were at school. Maybe.

Thus, he never really got the need for childcare and, like countless other policy areas, thought it best be dealt with by the private sector.

But Beazley, aided by his then-shadow minister Tanya Plibersek, who was among a small group of pioneering female MPs to become mothers after entering parliament, was much more hip to the beat.

With parents dealing for the first time with the burden of having to drop kids off to both school and childcare, he pledged to build care centres at 260 schools.

Rudd adopted the plan but never implemented it, in part due to the collapse soon after he was elected of ABC Learning, which had a virtual monopoly on childcare. Gillard, then the minister responsible for childcare, had to fix up that mess, and then the financial crisis came along.

Had Beazley's policy been implemented and expanded, childcare, or early learning, would have been integrated into the public school system and parents would have had a guaranteed, affordable option.

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