

# PM, the money's still there, if you'd care to use it [AU]<sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Sydney Morning Herald

**Source:** Sydney Morning Herald

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 10 Nov 2003

## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

Australia's working mothers will have to hope the Prime Minister's surprising intervention last week in support of increasing child-care places this time delivers the goods. After all, his similar utterances in favour of paid maternity leave have conspicuously failed to.

John Howard has developed a propensity to "talk up" work and family support and then to not deliver. Two federal budgets have been brought down since paid maternity leave was put on the table by the Sex Discrimination commissioner, Pru Goward.

Both failed to provide for paid leave - or any other support for working mothers - despite the fact that Howard had proclaimed several times that he agreed with the concept and that work-family issues were a priority of his third term. Is it going to be the same with child-care places?

Last Thursday Howard leapt to his feet in Parliament to answer a question on child-care that had been directed to Larry Anthony, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The week before, Anthony had floated the idea of reducing the government cap that determines the number of family day care (FDC) and after-school hours care (ASHC) places for which the child-care benefit (CCB) is paid. This in effect regulates the number of places available since most families need some help with the astronomical fees.

The next day, the Treasurer, Peter Costello, shot down the idea in no uncertain terms: "There are ministers that always have wonderful new ideas," he said when asked about the child-care cap plan. "They are brimming full of wonderful new ideas but unfortunately in a budget, when you're dealing with people's taxes, you can't fund everybody's great ideas."

That seemed to be the end of it until Howard told Parliament last Thursday: "I want to make it clear that the issue of the capping of child-care places is a matter which I have invited the minister to bring forward for consideration."

That night, all the news programs reported Howard's support for an increase in child-care places. Working mums, with half an eye on the TV while they fed and bathed their kids, must have greeted this with relief.

After all, the huge shortages in child care have been recently described as a crisis by The Daily Telegraph (could this be why Howard decided to get involved?) and even the responsible minister acknowledges there's a problem.

According to Anthony's office, there is a nationwide shortfall of 28,000 ASHC and 2600 FDC places. These figures are provided by the department's Child-care Planning Advisory Committees in each state. They sound low to me - the actual shortfall is likely to be much higher - but at least this would be a start. Creating more places would provide some respite for working parents who are desperate for places. (The cost to parents of child care is another story.)

Howard told The Sun-Herald on December 15 last year that he was "not opposed in any way to the principle" of paid maternity leave. On March 1, he told The Australian "the concept of some paid maternity leave or equivalent is still on the table". On April 8, he told a businesswomen's afternoon tea in Brisbane: "I think [paid] maternity leave is part of the mix." On June 6 - after the May budget for the second year had failed to provide for paid maternity leave - he told the Liberal Party national conference in Adelaide: "Any idea that we are opposed in principle to paid maternity leave is wrong."

Anthony's office declines to say how much removing the child-care cap would cost, but Labor puts it at \$130 million over four years. Peanuts really, when you think of the benefit it would deliver to harried working parents desperate to find care for their kids for that time between school finishing and the end of the working day.

Paid maternity leave was scuppered by Howard's Cabinet colleagues. "Over the Government's dead body," said Tony Abbott; "middle class welfare", shrieked Nick Minchin; "child care is more important", intoned Amanda Vanstone. Costello then took out his scalpel. If he is proposing to do the same to the child-care cap, perhaps he should consider this.

Last week the annual report of the Department of Family and Community Services reported a spending shortfall of \$900 million - yes, almost \$1 billion - on its family and child-care support budget for 2002-03. (This was apparently due to rising wages, meaning fewer families were eligible to claim all or part of these savagely income-tested benefits.)

The CCB alone was under spent by \$115.8 million. That's enough to fund three years worth of increased child-care places. If you throw in the rest of the unspent funds, taxpayers can easily afford paid maternity leave as well.

No new allocations required, Peter Costello, so that's no excuse for not doing it. Just redirect last year's money. Easy.

John Howard, will you this time put your money where your mouth is?

- reprinted from the Sydney Morning Herald

**Region:** Australia and New Zealand <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** demand <sup>[3]</sup>

availability <sup>[4]</sup>

---

**Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022):** <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/03/11/pm-moneys-still-there-if-you-d-care-use-it-au>  
**Links**

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/03/11/pm-moneys-still-there-if-you-d-care-use-it-au> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/australia-and-new-zealand> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/demand> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/availability>