

Mothers want a lot more than Howard's baby bonus [AU]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Prime Minister John Howard chose six women during the last election campaign to highlight his commitment to maternity issues. Now, 19 months on, some of them say Australia has let down its new mothers.

Maria Serner, a nurse, comes from Sweden, which has one of the most benevolent maternity policies in the world. During the media stunt with the six new mothers and their babies, Mr Howard put a paternal hand on Mrs Serner's shoulder and urged her to, please, sit down. "We've got to look after you," he said.

But if her daughter, Olivia, was born in Sweden, Mrs Serner knows she would be entitled to 96 weeks' leave including one year on 80 per cent of her wage. Australia is less generous. Many women don't get paid maternity leave at all. If they do it is usually only up to 12 weeks.

"I'm spoiled," Mrs Serner, 37, said this week. "I would never be happy with 12 weeks. But the Swedish way would never happen here as long as it is the employers who pay. In Sweden it is the taxpayers. It's like Medicare - it is a social insurance."

Mrs Serner resigned from her job after having Olivia because of difficulties finding suitable child care. She stayed home until last week, when she started a new job part-time. Her husband Gary, a business manager, worked throughout.

It is a familiar scenario - juggling the family/work divide. Of the new mothers who posed with Mr and Mrs Howard in November 2001, most say they would need more maternity pay to avoid rushing back into the workforce. And those were the ones who got any maternity pay at all.

Mr Howard and his wife Janette visited the St Vincent's Hospital maternity ward to announce the baby bonus, a tax refund to non-working mothers, of up to \$2500 a year. It was pitched as a financial incentive for women to stay home until their child reached school age. It was also a major platform of Mr Howard's campaign to be re-elected.

"Strong, stable, united loving families are still the most prized asset that this nation has," Mr Howard said at the time. It was just a week before the election. "Without them we have no real soul."

Now, however, the baby bonus may be scrapped to make way for a "universal maternity allowance", worth about \$5000 over 12 weeks.

The photograph of the new mothers became a defining image of the election campaign.

Mr Howard didn't just kiss these babies. He cuddled and cooed at them. And he fussed over the women, even suggesting names for a baby which, at that point, was unnamed.

But where are his election mothers now? How have they coped, and what do they want from him?

Anne Russell, 36, had twin girls, Claire and Genevieve. In the 2001 photo it was left to Janette Howard to carry the extra baby. Mrs Russell has just gone back to work, in the public service, part-time. She took 12weeks' paid maternity leave, then accrued long-service leave and annual leave at part pay, which her award allows. She returned to work for financial reasons. Her husband Jack, 36, works full-time.

"I got the baby bonus," she says. "That amounted to about \$250 last year in my tax, which was a drop in the ocean." She says it is "disgusting" that Australian women don't get more maternity pay. "The rest of the Western world can manage it. Of everyone I know, the mum has to work. It's almost as if you're disadvantaged for having a child."

Betty Yates, who had a daughter, Ellini, has opted to be a stay-at-home mother. Mrs Yates, 37, is a state primary school teacher and entitled to seven years' unpaid maternity leave. She is planning another child so she'll probably use it all. Her husband Cameron, 34, is a full-time student on an Austudy allowance of \$340 a fortnight. Mrs Yates gets a family allowance and parent allowance, meaning they live on about \$450 a week. They have already paid off their house.

"It would be useful to get the \$5000. I'd use it to do the extra things, like music classes for Ellini," she said.

Vikkie Chrisoulis is expecting her second child next month. As a casual employee on a contract, she was not entitled to maternity pay after having Kathryn, and she will not be entitled this time. She went back to work full-time at first, to help her husband's new business get off

the ground, then went part-time and now doesn't work at all.

"I wouldn't mind a \$5000 bonus," she said. "I wouldn't mind some paid time after my next child. But I won't be getting that."

Paola Mifsud is a mother and an osteopath with her own clinic. When she had Isabella she took three months off - unpaid - but then felt she had to go back to work so her business didn't suffer.

"As an employer maternity pay is difficult," she said. "It can dissuade people from employing women of a child-bearing age. But as a mother I think maternity pay would encourage family values. One wage is not enough these days."

Mr Howard recently told the Liberal Party's Women's Conference that new maternity provisions were still "very much on the table". But according to Peter McDonald, a professor of demographics at the Australian National University, Mr Howard is losing enthusiasm for a radical overhaul of maternity policy, preferring to build on the existing system.

"He has created a strong expectation that something will happen but now he is very low key. I think there is a loss of commitment," Professor McDonald said.

-Reprinted from The Age

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