

Paid parental leave policy ditched: Did the women of Australia just get duded?^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Excuse us, we have been a little bit distracted this week. It's been hard to see through the haze of déjà vu which has descended over Canberra, while simultaneously trying to work out why Dennis Jensen is suddenly on the TV.

But while we groped around in the fog of internecine party war and tried to peer into the mind of Malcolm Turnbull, did the women of Australia just get quietly and massively duded?

What happened was this: Abbott used Monday's speech to formally snatch away the one piece of women-directed policy his government had offered. He gave nothing in return.

There was so much focus on the significance of Prime Minister Tony Abbott's National Press Club speech on Monday, and whether or not it would revive his fortunes, and its resemblance or otherwise to the Gettysburg Address (courtesy of a dry review given on Q&A by Agriculture Minister Barnaby Joyce), and how strong Abbott seemed during it, that we failed to really "process", as the Americans say, what just happened.

What happened was this: Abbott used Monday's speech to formally snatch away the one piece of women-directed policy his government had offered. He gave nothing in return.

Let's leave aside for a moment whether or not Abbott's "signature" Paid Parental Leave policy was a good one, whether the funds allocated for it were well-directed, and the fairness or otherwise of the levy to be imposed on big companies to pay for it.

The policy, which offered replacement wages to working women while they took time off to have a baby, was radical. It was a message to employers that they bore a financial responsibility towards their female workers during the time when they are most vulnerable to losing their jobs or experiencing an in absentia demotion. It told women their work as mothers was valued. It would have delivered to working women a better financial comfort during a time when they would prefer not to be worrying about money.

It was also expensive and loathed by Coalition and Labor MPs alike. The electorate thought it an indulgence, and many bought the Labor opposition's argument that it was a scheme which benefited rich women at the expense of taxpayers.

This opinion was best summarised by a questioner at the Rooty Hill people's forum in 2013, in what was probably my favourite contribution to the election campaign.

Political communicators take note: this bloke had what you people call "cut-through".

"I just think that the forklift driver in Mount Druitt shouldn't be paying his taxes so a pretty little lady lawyer on the North Shore earning 180 grand a year can have a kid. Just to be fair," he told Abbott, in a tone that was friendly yet insistent.

The pretty little lady lawyer was set to benefit from the policy, no doubt. But so was the nurse and the teacher and the waitress and indeed, any woman who currently earns more than the minimum wage, which is what the current government scheme is set at.

Now no woman, rich, poor or average, will benefit from it, because it doesn't exist. No replacement policy has been offered. All we have in return is the vague promise of a "better and more effective childcare system", zero detail of which was released on Monday. We have vague assurances that something will be done about the cost and availability of childcare. We have no firm information and zero specific pledges. Even if we did, how could we believe them? Abbott always said PPL was a "signature" policy of his. But it turns out it was a forgery.

The Productivity Commission report into childcare was handed to the government last year but its findings haven't been made public. It has to be tabled in parliament next month. Abbott has said he wants to consult widely but consultation is difficult when there is such a huge asymmetry of information.

It is unclear how any childcare/families policy will be funded, given Abbott has been evasive on the topic of whether or not the 1.5 per cent levy on big business, which was to fund his PPL scheme, will remain. And if it does remain, we don't know whether some, all or none of

those funds will be re-directed into childcare costs.

On Tuesday the Prime Minister did a doorstep at a childcare centre, where he said that "money that might under different circumstances have been invested in a bigger, better paid parental leave scheme will be invested in childcare". But before he could be pinned down on the detail, he was assailed with questions about a leadership spill.

Nestled on page two of the Australian Financial Review the same day was an unrelated story about bonus time in the big banks.

Specifically, that the CEOs of the big banks always know it's bonus season when the lobbying from their male employees begins.

Mike Smith, Ian Narev and Simon Rothery, the respective bosses of ANZ, the CBA and Goldman Sachs Australia, all said that women tend to be "much more modest and less aggressive" around pay issues, and tentative in seeking greater workplace flexibility. Their advice to women? Just take it. Take it like it's your right.

I wonder if something similar happens more collectively when it comes to female-oriented policy-making.

We are so grateful for any scraps thrown our way - in the form of an unworkable, unpopular and eminently ditchable Paid Parental Leave scheme, for example - that we daren't ask for any more. The result? We end up poorer than men, who, by the way, if they're working in the finance industry, get paid bonuses worth a whopping 36 per cent more than the ones their female counterparts do.

The time for asking prettily for policy is over. Let's make demands.

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

Tags: maternity and parental leave ^[4]

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