

Childcare is not a "women's issue"^[1]

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EXCERPTS

At last, the penny has dropped. In his National Press Club address on Monday, Prime Minister Tony Abbott finally seemed to understand what people have been shouting from the rooftops for years: childcare needs reform.

Abbott used the address to formally announce that his paid parental leave policy was "off the table" and would be replaced with a new families package with childcare at its centre. This is a good thing. The proposed PPL was a dog of a policy - economically problematic but, even worse, fundamentally unfair.

So what now? If Abbott, or whoever is PM after next Tuesday, really wants a "signature" policy, childcare reform is it. Finding appropriate, affordable childcare is one of the biggest headaches facing new parents - I count my blessings every day for the wonderful centre my daughter goes to and loves. But other parents are not as lucky, spending a frustratingly long time on clogged waiting lists, being unable to find the hours or days they need, and then having to patch together a range of other options such as nannies, which can be very expensive, or that wonderful and underappreciated volunteer workforce made up of grandparents.

This is the government's golden opportunity but, to get it right and reap the huge economic and social benefits that will follow, it needs first to establish a better framework for the discussion than we've had in the past.

Childcare is not a "women's issue", it is everyone's issue. It needs to include people beyond those directly affected by it and, to do that, the broader benefits of the option of quality childcare need to be stressed: it's better for our economy, better for families, better for society.

To really reform childcare and make it work effectively, we need to look at it not simply as a productivity issue or as a social one, but as both. For example, how can childcare best complement the modern workplace, given the ways in which technological change has in turn made many people's working hours more flexible, and how can it support those who do not work traditional office hours? How can it help make best use of the talents of our collective workforce, including the parents of young children? They're all difficult questions to answer but it is essential that they be asked.

Some of these issues have been addressed in the Productivity Commission's examination of childcare, the final report of which is yet to be released and could serve as an excellent starting point for the debate. Some of the commission's draft recommendations around means-tested funding, access, and quality of care, for example, are promising.

As a community, we spend much time and effort wondering how to educate our children, from the curriculum to whether institutions should be public or private. This is how it should be - education is fundamentally important and the key to our future success and growth. It is puzzling, then, that we have not treated early childhood education, including childcare, with the same seriousness.

Childcare workers are not just babysitters or ersatz parents (or more particularly, mothers), but trained professionals charged with helping to raise the next generation of Australians, a job that in my experience they take very seriously. Just as we so often do with school education, we need to look at how we attract high-quality candidates to these positions and how they are trained for their jobs.

While cost is undoubtedly one of the biggest problems parents face with childcare, there is also a question of quality. Goodness knows parents in general and mothers in particular are faced with enough subtle - and sometimes not so subtle - judgment and guilt around how they raise their children, so it would be of great relief to be assured that they were leaving their little ones in the best possible care.

All of this, of course, is going to cost money and the government will have to be prepared to spend. Business big and small will also need to be involved, because the provision of quality childcare is very much in their interests.

So if the government is serious about childcare reform, it has to do it properly. Let's not waste more years on daft and unfair policies that will eventually be dumped, but look at how we really make childcare work to the best of our ability.

To do that we need to ask fundamental questions about how we work and live, how we raise children and why it matters that we do it well, rather than subtly, unconstructively, framing it as a way to help mothers with their kids.

Region: Australia and New Zealand^[3]

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