

Oh dear. When Senator Leyonhjelm is right about childcare? Be afraid ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Politicians are funny creatures. Whereas most educated people make decisions by looking at the evidence and weighing it up, polities seem to be either quite willing to give up their own right to think independently and toe the party line, or alternatively enter parliament with such fixed views on how the world does or should work, that no amount of concrete evidence will sway their view.

NSW Liberal Democrat Senator, David Leyonhjelm is one of the latter types. So anti-regulation is he that it comes as no surprise that he has decided to vote against any funding increase for childcare subsidies and slates excessive regulation of the childcare sector as the only reason why extra funding is needed.

As an early education and care advocate I'm passionate about the rights of Australian children to have access to high quality education and care. I'm also passionate about the need for the sector to be regulated. I'm such a fan of the regulations that govern everything about how our children are looked after in services such as long day care centres, that I've read the whole 178 pages of the regulations probably more than 20 times. (I know, I have a boring life.)

But surprisingly, given this background and my beliefs, I think Senator Leyonhjelm may be spot on this time. Maybe the Government's proposed new Child Care Package with its extra \$3.5 billion for childcare shouldn't be passed by the Senate. Maybe it should be voted down. But not for the reasons Leyonhjelm proposes.

Under the new package children will have their hours of early education and care determined by what their parents do. Whereas children now have access to a minimum of 24 hours of funded early education and care per week, under the new activity test that will be bought in only children whose parents work (or do another allowable activity) two days or more a fortnight, would have access to this amount.

How many children will be excluded from funded early education and care under this measure is not known. The Regulation Impact Statement prepared to support the Government's childcare package does not quantify it. But it points to scenarios where children whose parents fail the activity test will either be only able to go to services for short periods in a day or may be forced to go to services set up especially for children like them. We'll have one type of service for children whose parents work, and another sort for children whose parents don't.

We know that children from disadvantaged families benefit the most from access to high quality education and care. The Government has acknowledged this by exempting families who earn less than \$65,000 per year and children at risk of harm (child abuse) from the proposed activity test. In a two parent family however both partners are subject to the activity test. The more parents work/ study/ train the more funded childcare they can access. (If a mother doesn't engage in any activity other than raising children, it is proposed that the family won't have access to funded care.)

Women are often engaged in casualised work, without regular hours. The complexity of the proposed activity test will mean that such women will not know from week to week how much funded care they can access. If a mother books her child into two days of childcare a week and her employer doesn't allocate her enough work in a fortnight for her to pass the activity test, her childcare fees for that fortnight will rocket as the subsidy is withdrawn.

The very package that is designed to encourage women into the workforce could therefore have the opposite effect. Why would a woman work if her childcare fees increased substantially in the very weeks her income goes down? Women may decide if it too risky to enrol their child in a childcare service at all.

So some women and some children will miss out on the benefits of the childcare package. In my mind this negates the benefits that the package is supposed to bring (\$30 a week cheaper early education and care for families on incomes between \$65,000 and \$170,000).

I fail to see how a rich country can't have a universal education and care system that allows all women to work as much as they are able to

or want to. I fail to see why children should be excluded from access to early education and care on the basis of their families' participation in the workforce when we know the lifelong benefits of access to early education. It amplifies the learning children do at home.

So maybe, even without evidence, and for totally the wrong reasons, Senator Leyonhjelm is right not to support the Government's package. Maybe other Senators should think about doing the same.

-reprinted from Women's Agenda

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