

The best Mother's Day gift? Paid parental leave ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

This Sunday is my 15th Mother's Day. To mark my first in 2001, I wrote an opinion piece for the Sydney Morning Herald suggesting that the best Mother's Day gift would be paid parental leave, affordable childcare, ramps and lifts in public spaces. No bunches of white chrysanthemums or fluffy pink slippers for me!

Since then, the daily challenge many mothers face in managing paid employment and care giving has morphed from John Howard's 'BBQ stopper' conversation into a hot political issue that has shaped federal elections, budgets and political debate.

You would think all this attention might have led to some improvement in the day-to-day experience of Australian mothers.

But not really, and in many cases we have gone backwards. Over the past 15 years, paid parental leave policy-making has become a political sport, childcare services have become more expensive, and prams still need to be carried down steep steps at my local train station.

Being pregnant in the workplace remains fraught

There have been some modest improvements in workplace flexibility, with the right to request flexible arrangements for workers with caring responsibilities now embedded in the National Employment Standards. However, this right is not legally enforceable and remains weak in its application.

Many employers have their own flexible workplace policies, and in the past three years, some of Australia's largest corporations have moved to mainstream flexible work practices across their workforce.

This has been good for all workers, not just mothers. Business also likes it.

But being pregnant in the workplace, and moving in and out of the workforce on account of children, remains fraught.

Discrimination against women who are pregnant and have care responsibilities has long been illegal in Australia.

Nevertheless, a national review undertaken by the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2014 found one in two Australian mothers experienced discrimination in the workplace on account of being pregnant, seeking parental leave or on return to work following parental leave.

Childcare needs overhauling, not tinkering with

Childcare remains a key issue for women's participation in paid work. Australian women with young children have much lower rates of workforce participation than women in comparable OECD economies.

Over the past 15 years, childcare has been a difficult area of policy for successive governments. Efforts to reduce the out-of-pocket cost of childcare for parents by increasing public subsidies has only led to a constant escalation in the price of childcare making it unaffordable for many mothers.

Australia's childcare system is in need of major renovation, not tinkering.

The Abbott government referred the problem to the Productivity Commission, and in the 2015 federal budget, announced a new Jobs for Families Childcare Package that includes more than \$3 billion of new investment over four years. But there is a catch.

The new funding for childcare is contingent on cuts to family payments — Australia's mothers are expected to trade more money in one policy area for less in another.

As it turned out, the Senate crossbench did not pass the deal and we head into the federal election with the childcare reform package pushed out to 2018.

Australian mothers will just have to wait. We always seem to be waiting.

Remember last Mother's Day?

The biggest debacle has been paid parental leave. When I first became a mother, Australia was one of only two developed economies that did not have a national paid parental leave scheme (the other was, and still is, the USA).

In 2011, Australia introduced a national scheme providing 18 weeks of leave paid at the national minimum wage.

Early evaluation found the scheme to be efficient and effective, with significant benefits to low-income women and those working in small business. It was a good start, with plenty of room for improvement.

In 2013, the then leader of the opposition, Tony Abbott, made paid parental leave his signature policy, advocating a totally new system that would deliver 26 weeks of paid leave to new mothers at full wage replacement levels on incomes up to \$150,000 (later reduced to \$100,000).

This was to be funded by a levy on the 300 wealthiest companies. The policy split the parliamentary Liberal Party, got business off-side (many of whom already funded their own paid parental leave schemes) and divided the women's movement. Paid parental leave became the prime minister's millstone.

Then, on Mother's Day last year, Mr Abbott double-crossed Australian mothers, dumping his signature paid parental leave policy and slashing eligibility for the existing scheme.

Then-treasurer Joe Hockey, social services minister Scott Morrison and the prime minister spent Mother's Day accusing women who used the government scheme of fraud, rorting and 'double dipping'.

The Senate crossbenches refused to pass the cuts, but the Government's intention to slash the current paid parental leave scheme remains embedded in the 2016-17 budget.

We're still waiting, fighting for it

Australian women deserve more respect and recognition than they currently receive.

Building a predictable, sustainable care infrastructure that meets the needs of women and their families has become an urgent task that requires serious resourcing. Great Australian feminist leaders and regular women alike have been arguing the case for more than 150 years — these things are not new!

But for all the policy debate, Productivity Commission inquiries, books, news stories and discussion we have not made much headway over the past 15 years.

Perhaps worse than that, successive governments have used up so much political capital on issues such as paid parental leave that it will be a very brave government that chooses to poke the hornet's nest that policy support for Australian mothers has unwittingly become.

So my wish list for Mother's Day 2016 remains much the same as in 2001: a strong national system of paid parental leave; high quality, affordable childcare and a ramp at my local train station.

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