

Speech

Family First Leader, Senator Steve Fielding

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Paid Parental Leave Bill 2010

I believe we should be increasing the assistance that we give to families with children, because having children is expensive and families need help.

But the Rudd Government's paid parental scheme goes about doing this the wrong way.

The scheme is a long, long way from perfect.

Instead of having a policy which benefits all families, such as the Baby Bonus, the Government has come up with a scheme which discriminates against parents depending on how they choose to raise their children.

It is a scheme which places higher value on mothers who leave their children in childcare to quickly return to the workforce within a few months after having a baby, AND de-values those mothers that want to spend more time at home looking after their children.

It is a policy which gives money to prisoners and prostitutes but ignores stay at home mums and the important unpaid work that they do.

Mums who stay at home and look after their kids will be about \$2000 worse off because of this decision than those mums who rush back into the workforce.

Clearly put in this context, this policy hardly seems like a fair policy at all.

Under the Rudd Government's paid parental scheme, mothers will be required to have worked 10 of the last 13 months before giving birth in order to be eligible for the payments.

Because of this work test, thousands of stay at home mothers will miss out on these payments.

This work test is unlikely to affect too many mothers having children for the first time, but what about those mothers who are having their second or third child – or even 16 like my mum?

The Productivity Commission has noted that only 51% of all mothers are engaged in paid work some 18 months after giving birth.

Many parents like to have their children close together, often 2 or 3 years apart.

The Government's strict eligibility criteria will now force many parents to delay or dump having more kids.

How can anyone consider this to be a sensible policy.

Under the proposed bill, mothers will now be faced with the following scenario after the birth of their first child

1. Rush back to work after only a few months so they can get 10 months of work time under their belts and still qualify for paid parental leave for the next child

OR

2. Stay at home and look after their newborn and then miss out on thousands of dollars in assistance as a consequence of this.

How is this a fair choice?

The Government's policy is designed to discourage women from staying at home and looking after their children during their important formative years, and intent on getting women into the paid workforce so they can help stimulate the economy and increase the tax revenues available for the government.

I have no problem with businesses offering a paid parental scheme because it makes economic sense for them to offer attractive incentives to their staff to encourage them to return to work and ultimately business is about increasing your bottom line.

However, profit making should never be the one and only consideration of a government.

If that were the case, no government would ever pay pensions to the elderly or disabled and rural communities would be even more under-funded than they already are.

A government's responsibility is to govern in the best interests of all Australians, not just a select few.

A government must also always consider the social costs of every policy, not just the economic costs.

Numerous studies show that there are enormous benefits to children who are cared for by their parents and given personal attention rather than put in the care of strangers with 50 other children in long

day care centres and it would seem that the Rudd Government has failed to properly consider this.

I'm not suggesting for a moment that woman shouldn't want to have careers.

I also understand that there are many women who would like to spend more time at home looking after their children but their financial situation makes this next to impossible.

Similarly, I am in no way advocating for cutting the amount of money that we give to families.

Rather, quite the opposite, I believe we should be increasing the assistance that we give to families with children, because having children is expensive and families need help.

However, this help should be across the board, not just to those families with mothers in the workforce.

Instead we have the Government's scheme which enshrines into law a policy which ignores the value of the work performed by mothers who stay at home and look after their children.

It makes a judgment call on what is real work, and what isn't.

I don't think any parent that has ever spent a day at home looking after a one year old would claim that it was a relaxing day off.

The Government's scheme treats unpaid childcare work as the lowest form of work.

In fact, it doesn't even classify it as work at all.

Most incredibly, even prisoners and prostitutes are valued more highly than stay-at-home parents under the Labor Party's policy.

That's right, under the proposed scheme, a criminal who does paid work in prison or a woman who works as a prostitute can each meet the work test requirement to qualify for government payments, but an exhausted mother looking after three small children at home cannot.

What kind of values is this sending to the community?

The truth is, the government's scheme has more holes in it than Swiss cheese.

Also, unlike the baby bonus, which stay-at-home mothers can apply for and which is means tested based on whether the total family income exceeds \$150,000, the paid parental leave payments look only at how much money the mother earns.

Again, this is further discrimination against stay-at-home mothers, by having one set of rules for them, and another set of more generous rules for women in the workforce.

The Government's scheme also imposes a huge financial cost on businesses and forces small businesses to wade through even more red tape.

It makes employers the paymaster instead of the Family Assistance Office, costing businesses \$197 million dollars in the first year alone.

It makes no sense to set up the Family Assistance Office to be able to administer these payments and then still force businesses to take responsibility for some of these payments and add a huge cost to their bottom line.

Family First believe that all payments should come through the Family Assistance Office, leaving businesses without the headache of more red tape and able to get on with running their business.

Another huge flaw in the bill is the fact that people who have late term abortions would still be eligible to receive paid parental leave payments.

That's right. Under this Bill, drug addicts and welfare cheats can rort the system and get paid parental leave money for nothing.

Drug addicts and welfare cheats can go out and get themselves pregnant and then after 20 weeks have an abortion and still pocket the government's cash.

It's absolutely ridiculous and it makes you wonder whether the Government is making policy on the run again.

This was a loophole which was discovered in the Baby Bonus legislation and I can't possibly understand why the Government has been so careless to make this mistake again and then is too stubborn to fix it up.

A recent Galaxy Poll showed that 68% of people thought there should be equal funding to all mothers, irrespective of whether they engage in paid work in the workforce or do unpaid work as a stay-at-home mother.

What's more, hundreds of people signed up to my petition calling for equal help for all mums after just a couple of hours of being put up on my website.

These figures are compelling and prove that the Rudd Government's scheme as it currently stands is out of touch with the views of the general population.