

IF MEN COULD HAVE BABIES . . .

LEAVE TO BE ABSENT FROM WORKPLACE: In the 21st century, after a minimum of twelve months of employment with an employer, women should be entitled to paid maternity leave for six months, funded by the federal government at the rate of the minimum wage, supplemented where appropriate by top-up payments from employers. This should be put into practice immediately. In 2012 the six months paid maternity leave entitlement should be raised to nine months, and in 2014 to twelve months.

In addition, the non-birth parent should have access to two weeks paid parenting leave to stay home with mother and baby after the birth. At some point after the first four months of the mother's paid maternity leave, the birth parent could have the option to return to work and delegate the non-birth parent to take some paid parenting leave in her stead.

In a newspaper article published on 21 May 2008, the (female) writer says:

"hello to a new non-means-tested maternity leave payment" that will "utterly undermine the Government's tightening of spending on cash handouts to wealthy families" (*The Australian* 21 May 2008).

There it is in a nutshell! The false assumption that paid maternity leave is a "cash handout." Paid maternity leave is employment leave, just as paid sick leave or compassionate leave or paid long service leave are employment leave. It is not welfare. Nor is it a baby bonus, and the two should not be confused, as they are separate issues.

There is still plenty of sexism in the Australian employment scene. Although some countries do universal retirement income differently and without discrimination, men in Australia regularly receive much larger superannuation contributions (and fringe benefits) during their working life than women, due to the existing system and the fact that women earn only 85% of men's earnings and tend to be concentrated in lower paid jobs. Meanwhile, the need for legitimate paid maternity leave in Australia has been questioned over a long period and categorised as an unnecessary handout to women.

The cost to the federal government of paid maternity leave for six months or twelve months will not be great compared to other costs. For example, the Australian automotive industry receives billions of dollars in "assistance" and has recently requested more because the competitive environment has changed. Perhaps we should more loudly call this type of assistance "industry welfare."

Women nowadays do not have a baby frequently, and not all women have even one baby in a lifetime. But it is predictable that some women each year will have babies. Motherhood has been treated like an embarrassing disability. Rather, maternity is a fact of life and a human survival mechanism, not some cause for special pleading, though it needs appropriate arrangements.

The changes in the economy of the family, in women's working patterns, and in the economy itself mean that guaranteed paid maternity leave now is an employment necessity.

If men could have babies, entitlement to one year of paid maternity leave would have been in operation in Australia for a decade or more, and there would be high quality affordable community child care centres sufficient to cope with demand!

Paid maternity leave is a matter for political will. Government needs to enter the 21st century and stand up to the nay sayers, and to stand up for women. Women are disgusted at the delays and the ingrained sexist thinking behind them, and women are expecting that the new government will not think it governs in the 1950s like the previous government. As a grandmother who retired from fulltime paid employment at 65 years of age after a variety of occupations, I am anxious that my five granddaughters should have a better deal in employment than previous generations of women.

(I will refrain from telling the hair-raising stories!!)