

Productivity Commission Inquiry into Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave
Submission from MARGARET KER

General Comments

Personal background I am 60 years old, married and have 4 children (daughters aged 27, 25 and 22 and a son aged 19). My daughters are all university graduates and my son is currently in the second year of university studies.

I also have 2 grandchildren aged 5 and 2 and a third expected in July.

Professional background I have a BA (Hons) in Modern History (University of Durham 1968) and a Ph.D in Medieval History (Monash University 1982). I worked in the public service prior to coming to Australia in 1971 and from 1972 until early 1980 as a university teacher. I have not worked full time since 1979 and after the birth of my eldest child in late 1980 my only paid employment has been two periods as a heritage historian over the past 5 years.

Work in a voluntary capacity Apart from work done as a member of school, church and local communities I have been very involved during the past decade in women's organisations, particularly in the area of social concerns. Currently I represent the Council of Churches of WA on the Women's Advisory Network of WA.

Whilst I make this submission purely as a private individual I believe that my personal and professional background has had a formative influence on my views.

I also believe that my recent and current involvement in women's organisations has given me some insights into a wider range of issues affecting maternal, infant and family wellbeing and their implications for the wider community.

I was fortunate to be able to attend the public hearing in Perth on Thursday 29 May, and have also tried to follow the progress of submissions online. My major concern at this stage is to say that as a concerned citizen and a mother and grandmother I believe an incontrovertible case for a federal government paid maternity leave scheme has been established both on economic and social grounds.

Why?

- ❖ The time is long overdue for us to follow the lead of almost every other OECD country. I find it embarrassing as an Australian that we are so far behind in this area and are still maintaining our reservation in relation to CEDAW. However this does now enable Australia to learn from the experience of other countries in developing the best possible model to support Australian families in both the short and long term.
- ❖ Whilst my own experience gives me some empathy with the views of those who see childbearing as a personal choice for which the whole (taxpaying) community should not be held financially responsible I regard this view as far too narrow. As recently

as 2002 the decline in national fertility was regarded as a matter of urgent national concern. Even if this concern appears to have lessened it can hardly be discounted. Of at least equal importance even from a narrow economic perspective the past decade has seen a wide range of solid research on the importance of early childhood for long term physical and mental well being. An investment in these years in the form of a national scheme of paid parental leave makes sound economic sense .If taxpayers do not pay at this point then they must expect to pay at least as much if not more later. I hope that in the course of the present inquiry this point can be strongly made.

Specific Areas of Concern

How should a parental leave scheme be funded?

I believe that (in recognition that this is a matter of importance for the whole community) it should primarily be funded by the federal government.

Who should be eligible?

I believe that all women (whether currently in the paid work force or not) should be eligible. Though my own experience is of voluntarily leaving the paid workforce and for a variety of reasons not returning this was commented on as being unusual even at the time and apparently perceived as a waste of skills/training. Almost 3 decades later it is not an expectation I would ever entertain for any of my own daughters. In the 21st century women need to be able to find their own balance between childbearing/rearing and a contribution to society through involvement in the paid workforce. Men too need to be supported in finding a balance between workforce and family involvement.

Should fathers also be eligible for paid parental leave? Yes! Again this is a major and readily observable (in every primary school and playground) change in the past three decades. The importance of a child (male or female for different but equally vital reasons) bonding deeply with his/her father is absolutely critical for emotional wellbeing. The problem of 'absent fathers' has affected men of my own generation very deeply, as evidenced in phenomena such as male spirituality in various forms (not necessarily formally religious) as well as changes in parenting practice. Internationally bodies such as UNFPA recognise the vital role played by fathers. I am somewhat concerned that this does not seem to have been given much emphasis in the submissions I have read (including those included in transcripts of hearings).

Should there be some eligibility for other primary caregivers? Again-yes! Certainly cases where for any reason there are difficulties in the take up of parental leave I believe that grandparents or other family members should be eligible. I also believe that parental leave should apply in relation to adoption and same sex parenting. One-to-one care of infants (under 12 months) at home is very important for a wide variety of reasons.

Should a scheme of paid parental/primary caregiver leave be provided at the expense of either/or the current baby bonus or childcare subsidy schemes?

No. In the last resort parents must be left free to decide on what is best in their own family situation. My own grandchildren spent some time in quality daycare as infants and have certainly not been adversely affected! The baby bonus serves a different purpose and though it has been said that it was introduced to discourage further debate on paid maternity leave and certainly merits monitoring and possible adjustment it should not simply be scrapped. Nor should its use be too rigidly controlled. If nothing else it is an important acknowledgment of the value the community places on parenthood. This should not be underestimated in considering maternal wellbeing. My own preference (should paid maternity leave become the norm) would be a lump sum payment but of a lesser amount than at present.

Should publicly-funded parental leave be topped up by employers?

Yes, on a voluntary basis. I believe this is on balance the best option, leaving with employers the option of offering such a scheme as an incentive.

Should a scheme of paid parental leave be seen as justified primarily in terms of workplace or workforce attachment?

In Western Australia, in the current situation of both skills and labour shortage, I believe that both are equally important. Although any top up scheme should adequately protect the interests of employers it has to be recognised that a prospective or new mother needs to retain some flexibility in terms of her return to the workforce. Reflecting on the experience of my own daughter, who at 25 is expecting her 3rd child. I note that she completed her studies shortly after the birth of her first child, gave up paid employment prior to the birth of her second child, and is currently studying for a postgraduate qualification with a view to finding flexible employment when her third child is old enough for day care. The kind of flexibility of career path this involves is I believe critical to family wellbeing in the 21st century and should be encouraged.

For what period should any parental leave scheme be provided?

Ideally I believe it should be possible for a child to remain at home with a parent or primary caregiver for at least 52 weeks. The minimum standard of 14 weeks is simply not enough, providing only the bare minimum for maternal recovery, breastfeeding and maternal bonding. If 52 weeks is considered unattainable economically in the first instance then 26 weeks with the alternative of 52 at half pay should be adopted. All fathers should receive two weeks quarantined parental leave (to be taken at any time during the first year) and should be able to access the overall allowance of 26/52 weeks. I look forward to such a provision being in place for my son to access-at 19, he is an exceptionally able and sensitive carer for his niece and nephew!

I also believe that a period as long as possible is important for the short and long term emotional well being of both the parents and the whole family unit (however this is defined). The pressure on a mother knowing that she has 'only' three months or so to make the physical, mental and emotional adjustment to motherhood before returning to the workforce is far too great for many. It will I believe often result in short and long term negative consequences for both her and her family. If the community is prepared

to invest in a universal scheme of paid parental leave then it is important that this investment is made wisely and effectively.

The short and long term benefits (including both physical and mental health) of extended breastfeeding are well documented. In cases where breastfeeding is not possible (and I believe these will be minimised by an adequate system of paid parental leave) the case for strong maternal bonding at a more general level is actually strengthened.

I am also thinking here of older siblings, who may experience some stress at having their needs apparently receiving less attention than those of a new baby. Though I have not seen any research on this it certainly accords with my own family experience. Once a baby reaches the age of 3 months he/she becomes more responsive and a little less demanding (in some respects at least!) and the mother hopefully more able to plan activities which involve the whole family. I believe this is likely to have very significant benefits for older siblings and make the mother's eventual return to the workplace far easier.

CONCLUSION I am particularly concerned that the present Inquiry should be encouraged to give considerable weight to the research done on short and long term benefits of strong parental bonding with infants. In addition to the excellent references provided in the Issues Paper (a resource which I found extremely valuable in itself) I commend to the Inquiry the following research:

J Porter, Christin L. Hsu, Hui-Chin "First-Time Mothers' Perceptions of Efficacy During the Transition to Motherhood: Links to Infant Temperament' in **Journal of Family Psychology**, Vol.17(1), March 2003, pp 54-64 and references cited therein as indicative of a body of recent research on the importance of maternal bonding on maternal efficacy and wider issues of family wellbeing

and

W.Oddy et al 'Breastfeeding and Mental Health Morbidity: A Prospective Birth Cohort Study to Ten Years', **Proceedings of 3rd Conference of Epidemiological Studies in Europe 2004** which provides much food for thought in relation to growing community concern about the mental health of young people.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to comment on issues which are I believe of vital interest to my children (both my daughters and my son) and my grandchildren and to the whole Australian community. I look forward to reading the Productivity Commission's Draft Report and being further involved in public discussion later this year.

Margaret Ker

2 June 2008