

25 May 2008

Inquiry into Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra City ACT 2601

Members of the Productivity Commission,

The subject of Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave is important for the role it plays in helping to form young children with the best emotional and psychological foundations they can have, which is the key issue, as distinct from hurrying mothers back to work as soon as possible. However, steps to make easier the ability of mothers to work from home is an important goal, while not undermining their need to be available for their child. Fathers too, require more consideration during the time of the birth of their children. Paternity Leave has been of significant importance in my own experience.

In answer to the Section “Personal Responses”, I worked in a NSW Local Government Council during the time of the birth of our two children. Shortly before the birth of our first child in January 2005, new changes came to leave arrangements whereby a father could take a week of parental leave, which would come from the staff member’s accrued Sick Leave. This proved highly opportune as it reduced the need to draw upon Annual Leave, accrued RDOs or Leave Without Pay. We were not in a position to afford the latter. This new leave, though welcome, is not nearly enough for fathers. Three to four weeks is preferable, on full pay, to assist spouses before, during and immediately after birth. This leave type should be independent of other leave types, in the sense that it does not draw upon leave from any other source, but is available for fathers when their spouses are giving birth and afterwards. Time is necessary to settle at home and develop a routine. A week is too short and I had to draw upon other leave to ensure I was with my wife for as long as she needed me there, and for a greater opportunity to bond with the new baby. More paid leave time available for first-time fathers is welcome, as the newness of the experience and our inexperience requires us to take a little more time to settle down – perhaps four to five weeks.

A major theme through the Issues Paper is the need to ensure both parents return to work as soon as practicable after the birth of their child, while promptly sending the child to a childcare facility. I found the following paragraph of interest, from page 9:

One of the main impacts of parental leave is on the time a mother takes away from work to recover from birth, bond with her baby, breastfeed and monitor the baby’s welfare — all of

which can contribute to better infant and parental outcomes. (Some countries mandate a period of absence for this reason.) The World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization have recommended an absence from work of around 4 months.

Four months is totally inadequate and the thought of not having parents with their children at this age is abhorrent. No pressure should force a mother to abandon being with her baby in favour of work at this age, irrespective of what the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization have to say about the subject. Something is very wrong about this view. It implies that children are subordinate to a working life, that they do not come first when it comes to the onus on returning to work and that not taking this position means a mother is doing the wrong thing by her self and the economy. No mother with a newborn child should feel any pressure to return to work and feel that they cannot remain with their child. We are dealing here with a natural bond and a natural right. Some women have heavy financial burdens, as part of a family or struggling on their own. Some childcare is inevitable here, but extra support and some creative work solutions needs to minimise the necessity of this also.

A paragraph on page 5 treats the issue of fertility, in the context of having greater fertility levels to offset the effects of an ageing population, and offers a discouraging assessment of “the capacity for family policies to cost-effectively make a significant further difference to fertility levels”. The key issue is, however, the need to make provision for the raising of children at home, to school years, and creating incentives for this to happen. A recent article in *The Australian* paraphrases Anne Summers as saying: “Mr Rudd had recognised the reality of life that the vast majority of women do work or want to work”.¹ Her statement may be more about what Anne Summers wishes the article’s readers to think than perhaps what Mr. Rudd does. The problem is it sweeps away both the importance and legitimacy of women who want to raise their children, full-time, at home until preschool years and beyond. With adequate support, this will encourage more women to feel at ease in having larger families. From an economic perspective, it means a greater investment in Australia’s future; more children to offset an ageing population, more people available for work and more Australians with the benefit of greater quality parental care in the crucial earlier years and all the positive effects that flow into society from this, as well as the health and wellbeing of the child. The Issues Paper itself refers to these on page 9:

A growing literature has identified several ways in which paid parental leave can influence infant health and cognitive/social development (for example, Ruhm 2000; Winegarden and Bracy 1995; and Tanaka 2005, Waldfogel 2006). For instance, a recent study of the effects of the availability of maternity leave on infant mortality across 18 OECD countries found that in countries with longer periods of paid maternity leave, infant mortality rates were significantly lower (Tanaka 2005).

One option is to pay the mother the amount of the current child care rebate to help stay at home with her child, which would help forgo the expense of sending the child to childcare agencies. The challenge is to enable women to return to the workforce, if they

¹ Stephen Lunn, ‘Divide between mothers a fallacy’, *The Australian*, May 16, 2008, page 4 and <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,23706546-5017014,00.html> (accessed 20 May 2008)

want to, after seeing all their children off to school and beyond. We should not view the family, however, as resources for maximisation. Rather, economic policy should support it and value it in and of itself.

Another approach, to encourage women to remain at home with young children while also earning an income and keeping in touch with work itself, is to encourage businesses to make provision for work to be done at home, utilising current technology for this purpose, and also increasing support for home-based businesses. This support could be in the areas of tax benefits and further financial incentives to have offices at homes.

Effective home linking-up to the work office is an area that software and systems designers could invest more resources into. Again, the hours should not be too long during the day. In this way, women who wish to work can continue to remain in touch with the workplace, earn an income and stay near their child. One hears too little about this. Organisational strategic planning should include exploration of programs to assist mothers working from home, to keep in touch with work, but not compromise their time and accessibility for their child. Having said that, if parents were to set this up, then have no time for their children and send them to childcare anyway, the project will be a failure.

Above all, we need to recognise that mothers who remain at home to raise their children are highly valued in our society, and that the positive role of fathers is also valued. Stay at home mothers, as an option, needs greater encouragement and support. The long term values to society far outweigh any initial costs involved. I note the Issues Paper referred to a “breadwinner’ ethic” on page 14 in a derisive tone, which is unhelpful. The roles and virtues of fatherhood need both acknowledgement and support and here again, recognised to be of significant value. Lastly, nothing and no one can take the place of a mother and father of a child in raising and caring for them.

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