

PRONATALISM UNDER HOWARD

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This article documents the re-emergence of pronatalism in rhetoric and policy under the Howard Government. The author argues that the language of gender equity theory has facilitated this development. However, the Government has not followed through on the policy implications of this perspective.

INTRODUCTION

In 2006, the Howard Government celebrated a decade in power. The news media marked the anniversary with reviews of Howard's achievements and failures, noting major changes in economic and social (including family) policy. Another aspect of change under this Government, largely absent from these reviews, is worthy of comment. This is the way in which the issue of low fertility has been returned to the political agenda in a manner not seen since the advent of feminism and individualism, which saw childbearing decisions placed firmly in the hands of individual women.

The extent of this shift is easily illustrated. In 1994, Australia's most recent population inquiry¹ declared fertility to be beyond the scope of legitimate government intervention. Yet only one decade later, in the lead-up to the 2004 election, the two major parties were engaged in a bidding war over cash payments to be paid at the birth of a baby. Under an ostensibly non-interventionist government, fertility shifted from being 'a personal matter not to be directly and deliberately manipulated by government action'² to the subject of public debate and legitimate political concern. It is worth documenting when and by what means this shift in attitudes and policy occurred. This article tracks the (re)emergence of pronatalism in rhetoric and policy across four terms of Howard Government, and the role of various stakeholders in the fertility debate.

The analysis also considers the way in which the issue of low fertility has been framed. The take-up of the issue has been greatly facilitated by the language of gender equity theory (frequently elaborated in this journal by Peter McDonald). In particular, the framing of the matter in terms of 'work and family balance' has proved broadly acceptable to media and public. The Government has embraced this language, but has failed to implement the policies implied by the gender equity perspective. Instead, policies more palatable to its conservative constituents have been pursued.

TERM 1: RUDDOCK REJECTS A ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT 1996–98

The problem of population ageing was just starting to generate serious concern among political elites when the Howard Government came to power. Reporting in June 1996, only a few months after the election, the National Commission of Audit drew attention to the likely impact of demographic change on Commonwealth finances.³ Initially, indeed, discussion of population ageing focussed almost exclusively on its economic implications, with little attention to its causes.⁴

When the possibility of using policy to influence demographic outcomes was raised during the Government's first term, it was solely in terms of immigration. Soon after the Coalition Government gained power,

Philip Ruddock (then Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs) stated his party's position that 'immigration policy is generally accepted as the only practical tool for influencing the directions of Australia's population'.⁵ On the subject of fertility, Ruddock was adamant that the issue was beyond the scope of government concern. Here the Minister took his lead from the 1991 National Population Council (NPC) Report⁶ that had 'clearly rejected the idea that governments should seek to influence such things as fertility levels',⁷ and went on to state that:

I agree with the NPC's view that 'the role of government in the area of fertility is only that of ensuring that couples are provided with the maximum extent of informed choice in deciding whether or not they have children'. Certainly the Coalition has no intention of trying to influence fertility levels.⁸

TERM 2: FEMINISM, PRONATALISM AND GENDER EQUITY THEORY 1998–2001

An incident early in the Government's second term suggests that politicians were wise to be wary of the fertility issue. In April 1999, Jeff Kennett, then Victorian Premier, caused a furore when he broached the issue in a speech to students at Mac.Robertson Girls' High. Echoing the business lobby's argument that Australia's prosperity depends on population growth,⁹ Kennett was quoted as stating that:

'our women are not producing enough offspring to simply maintain our population levels ... It is important that we keep our population increasing so that there are enough young people meeting the demands of society'.¹⁰

Leaving aside the unrealistic demographic target he espoused (increasing Australia's population by 50 per cent by 2060), reactions to Kennett's statement reveal the sensitivity of the fertility issue at

this point. The responses from feminist groups which appeared in the newspapers the following day were immediate and damning. A Women's Electoral Lobby spokeswoman labelled Kennett's comments 'incredibly sexist'. They would not have been made at a boys' school, added a National Union of Students spokeswoman,¹¹ and were 'completely out of step with changing gender relations in today's society, particularly the acknowledgement that it is a woman's right to choose whether or not she will have a baby'.¹²

Unsurprisingly, politicians from opposing parties also seized the opportunity provided by the media beat-up to pour scorn on Kennett's comments. Democrats senator Lyn Allison reportedly said that Kennett 'was stuck in the 1950s. "It's a pretty sad day when you have a State leader telling girls that their duty to their country is to breed"', while NSW Premier Bob Carr claimed the comments were reminiscent of Nazi Germany breeding camps.¹³

Feminism and pronatalism—an uneasy relationship

The reaction to Kennett's comments reflected a deep societal mistrust of pronatalism, on which his political opponents were able to capitalise. Pronatalism is antithetical to the feminist ideal of self-determination for women, with which the very notion of (mostly male) politicians intervening in matters relating to female reproductive freedoms sits most uncomfortably.

Arguably, however, it is not pronatalism *per se* that offends feminist sensibilities, but the manner in which pronatalism is put, reflecting the way in which the problem of low fertility is conceptualised. Feminists have been understandably wary of pronatalism, not because they object to childbearing (although some may), but because, in most forms, pronatalism has sought to restore a gendered division of labour which would restrict women's

opportunities outside the home. As McDonald explains:

To the extent that pronatalism is presented as the need for women to do their duty for the nation, pronatalism is anti-feminist. Pronatalism in this context is portrayed both by proponents and opponents as the bulwark of ‘traditional family values’ by which women will return to the role preordained for them by nature and by god.¹⁴

The reaction to Kennett’s comments may be understood in similar terms. Kennett’s mistake was not that he raised the issue of low fertility but the manner in which he raised it. The scandal was that Kennett made his comments at a girls’ school and was therefore seen to be exhorting young women to choose motherhood over career. (The vilification of journalist Virginia Hausseger in 2002, after she publicly declared that choosing career over motherhood had ultimately left her unfulfilled, further served to illustrate the sensitivity of the feminist lobby on this point.)¹⁵

On both sides of politics, the response to Kennett’s comments was interpreted as a warning that the fertility issue remained off-limits. Then Victorian Labor Opposition Leader, Steve Bracks, and Prime Minister John Howard moved to reassure voters that fertility was not considered a matter for political intervention. Bracks said: ‘Victorians did not want the Premier to advise them on personal and family decisions—“When will the Premier get off telling individuals what to do?”’¹⁶ At the same time, Howard declared that: ‘The question of how many children men and women choose to have is a matter for them, I don’t express a view either way’.¹⁷ Kennett himself said that the fracas illustrated why politicians were ‘fundamentally scared to talk about’ population issues.¹⁸

Gender equity theory

It is in the context of this political sensitivity that the appeal of gender equity theory—which appeared by that name in a number of academic journals in 2000¹⁹—must be understood. The achievement of McDonald and other proponents of this perspective has been to present a pronatalist argument which does not offend the feminist ideal of full participation for women in the public sphere.

Although gender equity theory attributes low fertility to the advances of women in education and work, it does not seek to reverse these trends. In fact, it argues that a policy approach based on traditional homemaker roles for women is ‘likely to produce a negative reaction and a reduction of fertility’.²⁰ The most compelling evidence for gender equity theory is, in fact, that countries with the lowest-low fertility (Italy, Spain, Greece and Japan, for example) are precisely those which espouse socially conservative values and which support a male breadwinner/female homemaker model of the family. Under such systems, the opportunities gained by women in education and market employment are so severely compromised by having children that women are reducing their fertility to ‘precariously low’ levels.²¹

Rather, gender equity theory argues that fertility remains higher where women are supported in their desire to combine both work and family goals. It is therefore acceptable to feminists, not only because it promotes female workforce participation, including that of mothers, but because the ‘blame’ for low fertility lies not at the feet of individual women but with governments and employers who perpetuate the conflict between these goals.

Gender equity theory further appeals to the feminist ideal that women should exercise absolute freedom of choice with regard to reproductive decision-making. One of the central planks of gender equity

theory is that women are not, in fact, entirely free to choose motherhood under existing social conditions—the argument depends on survey evidence that fertility preferences remain above actual behaviour.²² If low fertility reflects a situation in which women are being denied freedom of choice with regard to their childbearing decisions, the problem of low fertility—far from causing offence—becomes a worthy feminist cause. Leslie Cannold, for example, takes up this cause in her recent book, subtitled ‘Why women are losing the freedom to mother, and how they can get it back’ (Curtin University Books, 2005)

The appropriate policy direction implied by gender equity theory is reform of ‘the institutional arrangements that entrench the male breadwinner model of the family’.²³ This has been the oft-quoted approach of welfare states such as Sweden, which has provided parents with low-cost child care and taxation transfers.²⁴ In addition to remedying the lack of affordable child care, and the removal of any bias towards single income families inherent in the tax system, this perspective argues the need for ‘family-friendly’ policies that avert conflict between family and career goals for women: for example, more generous parental leave entitlements, greater provision of part-time jobs, and flexible working hours.²⁵

The issue gains momentum

Using the framework provided by gender equity perspective, a number of politicians subsequent to Kennett were able to raise the issue of low fertility without provoking such outrage. In fact, only eight months later, Ruddock made another statement of population policy which hinted at retreat from his earlier position that fertility was off-limits to government. This time, the issue of low fertility commanded a little more space, albeit at the end of a discussion which remained otherwise focussed on immigration. Ruddock acknowledged the suggestion that

‘family-friendly policies’ could be used as a means of ‘encouraging higher fertility’, but considered this to be a futile goal.

The government of course has a strong commitment to family-friendly policies and will continue to enhance these ... I must caution, however, on any speculation that family-friendly policies will have a dramatic effect on fertility rates. The research seems to suggest a marginal and short-term impact is the best we can expect.²⁶

Unlike Kennett earlier that same year, Ruddock received no criticism for expressing concern over low fertility. In fact, the only criticism to be found in newspapers was an Opposition piece arguing for greater attention to the issue.²⁷

Indeed, in late 1999 and in 2000, the issue was taken up by several members of the Federal Opposition. Martin Ferguson,²⁸ Wayne Swan,²⁹ Kim Beazley³⁰ and Jenny Macklin³¹ all expressed concern over low fertility. While some employed the language of gender equity theory more explicitly than others, it became standard to frame the issue in terms of ‘work and family balance’, to be achieved through ‘family-friendly policy’. Consider, for example, the following statement from Macklin:

Progressive work and family policies that permit greater room for children are good for the economy and good for the country. Failure to adopt a new approach and stabilise the nation’s declining fertility rate puts Australia in serious danger of becoming a child-free society.³²

What Ruddock and the Opposition players seem to have learnt was that to frame the issue in this manner was to suggest structural factors working alongside personal decisions regarding family size. Thus the language of gender equity theory provided a degree of abstraction from the no-go area of individual women’s childbearing decisions.

By the end of 2000—perhaps pressured

by this competition from the Opposition for ownership of the issue—Ruddock was prepared to expand on his earlier statements regarding low fertility. The matter was central, rather than peripheral, in his address to the Australian Centre for Population Research in October,³³ and Ruddock had clearly subscribed to the views that low fertility (a) constitutes a ‘risk’ and a ‘danger’ to society, and (b) is to be understood in terms of women’s life choices regarding education and employment:

... it is apparent that the decline in fertility rates over the past few decades has been associated with significant increases in educational and labour force opportunities for women. ... The challenge now is to protect and enhance these gains while at the same time guarding against the risk that fertility rates may fall to dangerously low levels.

Ruddock spoke of the need to arrest fertility decline and by now was prepared to offer a target (of around 1.65 babies per woman) in order to stabilise the size of Australia’s population. Again (at least when filtered through the news media), the solution was reduced to ‘family-friendly policy’.³⁴

Following Ruddock’s comments in late 2000, *The Age* and *The Australian* published editorials in support of Government attention to low fertility. This was noteworthy in itself given the treatment Kennett had suffered at the hands of these same papers the previous year. Moreover, both did so with an unquestioning acceptance that the nature of both problem and solution lay with women combining childbearing and work. The following excerpts from *The Sunday Age*³⁵ read like a precis of the gender equity argument, illustrating the success with which this particular academic perspective had penetrated public discourse:

Surveys here and overseas show that most young people want to have an

average of a little more than two children. ... Unfortunately, once the realities of juggling work and a child hit home, many people decide not to have a second child. And women, in particular, learn that having children disadvantages their careers.

It is also known that countries, such as France and the Nordic countries, that have more family-friendly workplaces and more liberal family structures, have higher fertility rates than countries such as Spain and Italy, which have more traditional family structures. Australian governments and industry must find ways of providing incentives, rather than disincentives, for parenthood.

The Australian agreed that the birth rate was ‘the more important element’ contributing to population ageing.³⁶ Again, it is worth quoting from the paper in order to show how the gender equity perspective on the issue was adopted wholesale:

The Government should look at adjusting to the reality of new families, where women have more to offer society as workers than as stay-at-home mums. Policies that accept childcare as essential are crucial to encouraging parents to have more children. So are flexibility on income replacement, maternity leave and working hours.

Across both articles, the talk of opportunity costs for women, the international comparisons with ‘more liberal’ states, and the calls for ‘family-friendly’ policies all find their origin in the gender equity argument.

By March 2001, given this degree of public interest in the matter, Ruddock was no longer uncertain that there was a role for public policy with regard to low fertility. Rather, he reiterated the need to ‘find out more about why the fertility rate is falling and, where possible, formulate policies which address this issue’.³⁷

At this point, despite the rhetoric, formal Coalition policy was yet to incorporate pronatalist elements. This first occurred in the lead-up to the 2001 Federal election. The campaign also marked the point at which the issue had gained enough momentum (independent of other population issues) that it outgrew Ruddock's Immigration portfolio and was adopted by the Prime Minister and Treasurer.

TERM 3: HOWARD, HREOC AND HAKIM 2001–04

2001 federal election campaign

Talk of 'work and family balance' began to appear in prime ministerial statements in the lead-up to the 2001 federal election. In his pre-election speeches to the National Press Club in August and November 2001, Howard identified three key policy challenges for his government's third term. First among these was 'the ageing of our population', followed by 'balance between work and family' (the third was 'sustainability'). The issue of low fertility *per se* was never mentioned, but it is notable that by this stage the demographic and social issues surrounding low fertility were linked—and indeed prioritised—in the Prime Minister's public statements.³⁸

Howard announced the First Child Tax Refund, or 'Baby Bonus', at the Federal Liberal Party Campaign Launch in October, 2001. The refundable tax offset allowed women to claim back up to \$2500 per year of the taxes they paid in the previous year, for up to five years after the birth of a first child, provided they stayed at home.³⁹ The scheme was designed to give back to new mothers a sum proportional to their prior earnings.

The Refund was considered the 'biggest surprise'⁴⁰ and the 'policy highlight'⁴¹ of the campaign launch, and commentators struggled to explain the policy in electoral terms.⁴² Howard himself explained the initiative using the 'work and

family balance' rhetoric:

I have outlined during the year some of the government's priorities in a broad sense for its third term. One of these is the ongoing challenge of the balance in our lives between work and family. I guess of all the many discussions around the community and neighbourhood barbeques, that particular balancing act for so many families with young children probably comes up more frequently than [sic] any.⁴³

Amid a long spiel about helping families through the financial challenges posed by the birth of a child, there was only one small hint that the Refund might have other aims: '... in addition, of course, assistance with family formation is very much in Australia's long term interests'.

Yet public responses to the announcement immediately recognized the pronatalist intent behind in the policy. 'So it is [in Australia's interests]', editorialised *The Australian*, 'given Australia's fertility levels are below the population replacement rate and still falling and how frightening are the projections of an ageing population and shrinking labour force'.⁴⁴ In fact, just as surprising as the Government's decision to introduce the policy was the public reaction, or lack thereof, to its inherent pronatalism. There was no protest at government interference in family affairs. In fact, some criticized the Refund on the grounds that it did not address the issue of low fertility directly enough.⁴⁵

Rather, commentators noted that 'the critique was all about the delivery, rather than the philosophy behind the policy'.⁴⁶ The Refund was swiftly deemed discriminatory because it favoured stay-at-home mothers, unfair because high-income earners received most, and inadequate because it failed to compensate for a mother's lost earnings.⁴⁷ Take-up of the benefit was low, and the policy was discarded at the following election. Nevertheless, the Refund marked a

significant shift, both in terms of its inherent pronatalism and in terms of the broad acceptance with which this pronatalism was received.

The Intergenerational Report

The key to understanding the pronatalist shift behind the Baby Bonus may lie with the Intergenerational Report, released on the occasion of the Budget 2002–03 in May 2002. The Report was ‘the first by any Australian government to assess the long-term sustainability of government finances in detail’ and aimed to provide ‘a basis for considering the Commonwealth’s fiscal outlook over the long term, and identifying emerging issues associated with an ageing population’.⁴⁸

The Intergenerational Report was certainly the first official document to spell out the dramatic implications of low and declining fertility for the ageing of the population and, in turn, for the economy. The Report assumed further decline in the fertility rate (to a TFR of 1.6 babies per woman by 2042), which was presented as the primary influence over the size and growth rate of the labour force in future decades. While it contained no mention of efforts to boost fertility, it seems likely that Howard’s stated third term priorities of addressing ‘the ageing of our population’, followed by ‘balance between work and family’ were shaped by the Report, which would have been in the works during the 2001 election campaign.

Maternity leave debate

In this environment, the fertility debate began to seem not only acceptable but useful to feminists. It became a ‘bargaining chip’ for some, who implied that ‘the birth strike’ would continue until policy-makers effected changes to facilitate mothers’ workforce participation. This is perhaps most evident in the campaign for a national scheme of paid maternity leave, spearheaded by the

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward’s Interim Paper on ‘Options for paid maternity leave’⁴⁹ was released in April 2002 and invited comments on a number of alternative models. The final ‘Proposal for a national maternity leave scheme’, released in December 2002, recommended a federally-funded scheme of 14 weeks paid maternity leave for all women in paid work.⁵⁰

Low fertility figured strongly among the many imperatives canvassed by the HREOC investigation. In fact, the Proposal notes that the release of the Interim Paper generated an ‘extraordinary’ volume of interest,⁵¹ a major focus of which concerned the ability of paid maternity leave to affect fertility rates.⁵² The investigation received submissions from ‘unions, employers and individuals’ concerned about low fertility as a cause of population ageing and a shrinking labour force.

While cautioning that ‘no single policy measure will increase Australia’s fertility rate to replacement level’, the Proposal asserts that ‘paid maternity leave can be expected to make a contribution to Australia’s fertility by making it easier for families who have decided to have a child to do so’.⁵³ Adopting the language of gender equity theory, the Proposal further advised that:

paid maternity leave would need to be part of a suite of family-friendly workplace policies if it is to assist families to combine work and family and remove some of the barriers to the decision to have a child.⁵⁴

Conservative opposition

HREOC’s push for a national system of paid maternity leave was opposed by many conservative lobby groups. Conservatives themselves endorse ‘family-friendly policy’, but understand

this very differently to mean supporting mothers to stay at home, rather than to work. Conservatives oppose paid maternity leave on the grounds that it favours working mothers: ‘paid maternity leave goes only to those women who return to work, and discriminates against full-time homemakers’.⁵⁵ It is also viewed as encouraging the use of formal child care, which many conservatives oppose in principle.

National Civic Council (NCC) president Peter Westmore argued that ‘the weakness of the current debate about paid maternity leave is that the voice of full-time mothers is not being heard’.⁵⁶ In fact, submissions to the HREOC inquiry into paid maternity leave suggest that this voice made itself loudly and effectively heard. A close examination of the report reveals that conservative lobby groups (religious and women’s groups in particular) were heavily represented among those who argued that the proposal would discriminate against stay-at-home mothers.⁵⁷ Despite such submissions, HREOC maintained the position that paid maternity leave should be a workforce entitlement that relates specifically to the need of employed women for income replacement and/or a period out of the workforce after childbirth.⁵⁸

Unfortunately for the Sex Discrimination Commissioner and her supporters, the use of the low fertility issue as fodder for the maternity leave campaign backfired badly. Moral conservative and then Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations Tony Abbott famously claimed that a compulsory system would be adopted ‘over this government’s dead body’.⁵⁹ Sure enough, the Coalition Government seized upon the absence of evidence that paid maternity leave could boost fertility and used this argument to reject the

proposal altogether. Howard asserted:

We do have a declining birth rate, but you shouldn’t be so naïve as to imagine that introducing a paid maternity leave support of a period of 12 or 14 weeks is going to on its own suddenly reverse the declining fertility rate in this country, that is simplistic and naïve in the extreme.⁶⁰

The Government’s resistance to a national system of paid maternity leave—provocatively described by Westmore as ‘a test of the Government’s policy towards the family’⁶¹—suggests that pressure from conservatives, whether within or without the Coalition Government, had some effect in moderating the influence of the gender equity perspective on the policy response to low fertility.

Preference theory

Here, the take-up of Catherine Hakim’s preference theory by conservative groups, and by the Prime Minister himself, is important. Underpinning preference theory is the idea that women in modern societies are faced with an unprecedented degree of freedom regarding their work and family choices.⁶² These choices, when exercised in a social environment that prioritises individual autonomy, reveal female heterogeneity to its full extent. In particular, Hakim identifies three ‘ideal types’ of women distinguished by heterogeneous preferences and priorities regarding the conflict between family and employment: home-centred, work-centred, and adaptive. According to Hakim, economic and structural conditions may only alter the relative sizes of the three groups, primarily through influencing the choices of adaptive women.

NCC writers in particular have enthusiastically endorsed preference theory.⁶³ Australian Family Association

national secretary Bill Muehlenberg, for example, praises Hakim's work and makes a direct leap from her research to his own ideological agenda:

One of the major conclusions of [Hakim's] research is that women clearly do not have one view on the issue of work and home, but many. ... Thus, if some women want to stay at home, and eschew the paid workplace, then government policies should recognise and accept those preferences. ...

The importance of Hakim's thesis cannot be underestimated. The 'one-size-fits-all' approach of most governments to questions of women and work are simply unworkable, restrictive and coercive ... And given that the one size pushed is usually an uncompromising feminist version, the sooner we jettison such an approach, the better.⁶⁴

Preference theory has also proved popular with women of the intellectual right such as Bettina Arndt⁶⁵ and Anne Manne,⁶⁶ both of whom delight in challenging feminist orthodoxy. Most importantly, preference theory is reported to have had a profound influence on Howard and his Government's policies.⁶⁷

In reality, Hakim claims neutrality in the 'war' between conservatives and feminists, and is scathing about attempts on both sides to impose 'ideologically driven notions of the ideal family'.⁶⁸ What is it, then, about preference theory that so appeals to conservatives?

First, preference theory fits nicely with rhetoric about valuing motherhood and women's choices (which became so prominent in the oratory at the time of the 2004–05 Budget). Again and again, Howard has repeated the mantra that 'our key policy goal in this area is to facilitate choice for families, not to mandate behaviour'.⁶⁹ This line was specifically endorsed by Hakim.⁷⁰

The second and related advantage of preference theory is that it offers a way out

of the more controversial and extreme (to the conservative mind) policy options that accompany gender equity theory, paid maternity leave being the prime example. The escape route comes via the argument that such policies favour only one type—the 'work-centred' type—of the three types of women identified by Hakim⁷¹, neglecting the interests of 'home-centred' and 'adaptive' women who would prefer to care for their children at home.

The link between preference theory and the Government's maternity policy is evident in Howard's address at the Aston electorate dinner in Melbourne in July 2002. In an unusually explicit endorsement of academic theory, Howard cited Hakim's ideas to defend his imminent rejection of a paid maternity leave scheme:

It's important that we don't make the mistake of thinking that there's a one size fits all approach. The proposition that we should have some kind of maternity leave is a proposition that ought to be examined ... as part of an overall policy package. I've been very impressed with some research I've read recently by an English researcher by the name of Catherine Hakim ... I think it's important in this whole area that we don't make the mistake of saying to the community well this is a particular prescription for a particular section of the community and we're going to mandate it for all sections of the community.⁷²

Despite rejecting a national system of paid maternity leave—one of the most important policy implications of gender equity theory—Howard continued to employ the 'work and family' rhetoric which originated with this same perspective. Indeed, at the Aston dinner, amid all the self-congratulation on the Liberals' 2001 election win, the only substantive issue to be raised was that of 'work and family balance'. Howard declared that: 'nothing is more important than the debate that goes

on in the community, I call it a barbecue stopper, about the balance between work and family'.⁷³

TERM 4: THE RHETORIC CONTINUES 2004—

The lead-up to the 2004 Federal election intensified the competition in this policy area. This time, the Labor Opposition was first to announce its own ‘baby care payment’, setting the scene for a bidding war between the two major parties. As part of the 2004–05 Budget produced before the 2004 election, Treasurer Peter Costello announced ‘the largest package of measures ever to assist families who are juggling work and child-rearing’. The Budget boosted Family Tax Benefit (FTB) Part A by \$600 per child, and raised the FTB Part B income limit for secondary earners in families with children under five years.⁷⁴

The failed Baby Bonus was replaced with a tax-free, lump sum payment of \$3000 to all mothers, irrespective of their employment status. The shift in the attitudes of both the Treasurer and the Prime Minister was evident, as journalist Emma-Kate Symons noted:

After years of scoffing at suggestions governments can induce couples to have children, the Treasurer this week assumed the fertility mantle like a man who had always been in the business of pestering voters to procreate and profit.⁷⁵

Once again, the 2004–05 ‘breeder’s budget’,⁷⁶ despite its nickname, attracted little serious criticism on the grounds of its pronatalism.

Despite the fact that these measures were introduced as ‘family-friendly policy’, they do not reflect the gender equity perspective with which this language originates, since they are not designed to facilitate mothers’ workforce participation (though McDonald has endorsed the maternity payment⁷⁷ and seems to have broadened his position, with

decreasing emphasis on policies aimed at working mothers and increasing emphasis on the principle of horizontal equity).⁷⁸ The payment is perhaps more in keeping with the rhetoric of preference theory, in that it is strictly neutral with regard to the working preferences of mothers, and has also been endorsed by Hakim.⁷⁹ Certainly, it is difficult for proponents of any theoretical perspective on the issue to argue against the provision of a bonus to support families with newborns. Yet it is unclear by what means the maternity payment is supposed to boost fertility. Ultimately, a cash payment paid at the birth of every baby would seem to imply that low fertility is an issue of affordability. But is there any theoretical and/or empirical basis for believing that a one-off payment can induce couples to consider an extra child or children?

According to the Government, the facts speak for themselves. Figures released in March 2005 showed a small rise in births,⁸⁰ and some maternity hospitals also reported increased numbers.⁸¹ The data referred to births occurring in the September quarter 2004 and was not, therefore, indicative of any response to the maternity payment, established in July 2004. Nevertheless, the Howard Government lost no time in claiming credit for the ‘boom’,⁸² reportedly stating that ‘the bonus had been instrumental in lifting the nation’s fertility rate’.⁸³ *The Australian* featured a photo of a beaming Peter Costello surrounded by newborn babies at Melbourne’s Royal Women’s Hospital. The Treasurer told *The Herald Sun*: ‘I feel proud to have brought the maternity payment to birth ... it was my little bit of labour’.⁸⁴ Such reports have continued to appear as subsequent figures confirm a rise in births.⁸⁵ And yet, when faced with the argument that the payment might encourage teenage pregnancy, even Costello claims that ‘nobody would get pregnant for a \$4,000 payment’.⁸⁶

Meanwhile, other Coalition policy directions directly contradict the gender equity argument. Arguably the Government's recent industrial relations reforms fail the 'family-friendly' test. For example, Goward claims that the spread of individually-negotiated Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) will further reduce access to paid maternity leave, which, where available at all, is usually provided by employers as part of collectively-negotiated enterprise agreements.⁸⁷ She also claims AWAs offer reduced protection from excess or unpredictable working hours, and could therefore make parenting more difficult for both women and men.

CONCLUSION

This article has traced the development of the Howard Government's handling of the fertility issue, from outright rejection in its first term to explicit pronatalism in its fourth. In 2006, politicians continue to express concern over low fertility—Costello's Census launch speech in July was devoted to the subject.⁸⁸ Further, they continue to do so using 'work and family' rhetoric. An inquiry into Balancing Work and Family is underway, conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services. While the Terms of Reference state that 'The Committee shall inquire into and report on how the Australian Government can better help families balance their work and family responsibilities',⁸⁹ the official media release nominates low fertility as the explicit justification for the Inquiry.⁹⁰ The release goes on to advocate 'family-friendly' solutions in terms which arguably pre-empt the findings of the Inquiry.

Meanwhile, immigration—far from being the 'only practical tool' available to the Government—is decidedly out of fashion as a means of influencing Australian population outcomes. Again, Costello's Census launch speech made it clear that using births to prevent population decline is now, in the Government's view, far preferable to using increased immigration, which carries with it risks of social 'division', 'disruption' and 'dislocation'.⁹¹

Political interest in the issue of low fertility clearly stems from a growing understanding of the demographic causes and economic implications of population ageing. However, I have suggested that the framing of the issue is the key to understanding its re-emergence. Pronatalism is more readily swallowed if couched in terms of 'work and family balance', the effect of which is to turn an economic imperative into a social one. This language has its origins in gender equity theory. In fact, the gender equity perspective seems to have provided the necessary rhetorical framework enabling low fertility to become the subject of legitimate public debate and political concern in Australia.

However, gender equity theory has been used as a Trojan horse of sorts. Having breached feminist and individualist defences against pronatalism, it has, ironically, enabled other pronatalist perspectives—some with very different policy implications—to achieve legitimacy. The policies pursued have been more in keeping with Hakim's preference theory, and/or with the view that low fertility is an issue of affordability, rather than gender equity. With such selective use of academic theory, it seems 'family friendly' can mean anything the Government wants it to mean.

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