

# Paid Maternity Leave

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AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN  
PAID MATERNITY LEAVE  
WORK AND FAMILY

*The Australian Democrats have led the parliamentary campaign for paid maternity leave. After developing a fulling costed proposal in 2001, in 2002 the Democrats introduced Australia's first (and only) paid maternity leave legislation which would give all working women access to 14 weeks Government-funded leave at the minimum wage on the birth of a child.*

*Australian workers need greater access to paid leave, especially in the form of paid maternity leave. Currently, most Australian working mothers are forced to 'pay' for their maternity leave through unpaid means, or through the use of their personal holidays, long service and sick leave. It is well past time for a government to legislate on this important issue, and prevent any further pregnancy discrimination.*

## Our Action Plan

*"Australians now want paid maternity leave to be given reasonable, bipartisan political consideration."*

**Marie Colman**  
NFAW

At a time when families are struggling to find a healthy work and life balance, the Democrats are committed to providing appropriate access to paid maternity leave (PML), flexible working hours, and the right to return to work part time. We will:

- Re-introduce legislation calling for a national 14-week government-funded paid maternity leave scheme, to take into account changes to Australia's industrial relations law; and
- Call for a Senate Inquiry into the issue, to address the pressures on families of longer hours, exacerbated by WorkChoices and spiralling costs and debt levels; and
- Support the right for women to have access to flexible working hours; and the right to return to work part time;
- Lobby both major parties to back up their 'family-friendly' rhetoric with some meaningful policies for reform; and
- Continue to highlight the inadequacies of the current supports available to families in Australia.

## Why do we need PML?

On a day to day basis, working families are finding it harder to balance their work and family life, which has become increasingly difficult following the changes to Australia's IR laws.



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The introduction of a PML scheme would help address the systematic discrimination and disadvantage women in the workforce are faced with on a daily basis, and help protect working women from economic hardship due to pregnancy.

Yet the government's "answer" to PML, the Baby Bonus, does nothing to prevent women being forced back to work days or weeks after giving birth. Nor does it encourage workplace attachment or allow superannuation payments to continue throughout the leave period.

The Baby Bonus has already cost Australian Tax-payers more than \$1 billion last financial year alone, so claims by the major parties that a PML scheme is too expensive, proves just how out of touch they are with the strains of modern working family life.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, only 34% of women have access to PML across Australia, highlighting just how backward Australia is when it comes to providing equality in the workforce, compared with the rest of the world.

Research conducted by the *Australian Institute of Family Studies* last year highlights the necessity of introducing a PML scheme in Australia. Statistics showed that more than 45 per cent of mothers surveyed who took leave and had returned to work would have taken more time out of the workforce if they had better access to paid maternity leave.

While some women have the support of their employers, the majority are forced to get by without any assistance from employers or taxpayers alike.

Research conducted by the *Work and Family Roundtable* in July, confirms that Australia is behind other OECD nations. Countries such as New Zealand and the UK are steaming ahead, with a PML system where taxpayers, through government payments, provide a basic period of paid leave that allows for employer top-ups.

Provisions for paid maternity leave should be seen as a financial edge for businesses— not a burden, with those currently offering it experiencing a 19% higher return rate from maternity leave than those businesses that do not offer it.<sup>1</sup>

PML maintains an effective right to work, and would go some way in addressing gender pay inequity, over a woman's lifetime.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Leading the way: EOWA Employers of Choice for Women' Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency 23 May 2007