

Work and Family

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN WORK AND FAMILY

The Australian Democrats recognise the growing pressure felt by Australians who have family responsibilities, whether it's raising children or caring for someone with a disability, frailty or mental illness. Research and anecdotal evidence suggests that workplaces do not help make balancing work and family life easier. Instead, many people feel that it is getting harder.

The Democrats recognise the need to implement flexible work places that are friendlier to families; improve the security and conditions of part-time and casual work; and to assist working families on the birth of children and the ongoing care of children and the elderly.

Our Action Plan

“A growing body of international research recognises that policies that give workers more say over their working time arrangements to accommodate their care responsibilities, improve the wellbeing of workers and their households. They can also increase retention rates and lower absenteeism”

**Benchmarks for
Work and Family Policies
in Election 2007**

Australia trails most other OECD countries when it comes to providing key supports for working families. Whether men and women are working, whether they are parents or carers, the Democrats are committed to help ensure families are provided with appropriate support mechanisms. We will:

- Push for the creation of a Work and Family Act and a Commissioner to monitor and promote through the Act the importance of work and family practices in the workplace; and
- Aim to widen the debate and reflect on the need for protective strategies to address the pressures on families of longer hours, exacerbated by WorkChoices and spiralling costs and debt levels; and
- 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
- Support the right for women to have access to flexible working hours; and the right to return to work part time; and
- Call for more affordable and accessible childcare – especially under twos; and
- Establish policies that restrict long or very unsocial hours of work. This could be achieved either through the employer or at industry level; and
- Continue to highlight the inadequacies of the current supports available to families in Australia.



Other ACTION PLANS are available online at
www.democrats.org.au

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Finding a balance

A recent Relationships Forum Australia study, *An unexpected tragedy*, highlighted that Australia has now become the only high-income country in the world that combines very long average working hours with large amounts of work at unsocial times – weeknights and weekends.

For those who combine work and family life, the first step in overcoming the disadvantage and inequity women face in the workplace, is to introduce government-funded paid maternity leave (PML), to acknowledge the physical imperative for women to take a break from the workforce.

Despite pledging to make the workforce "the most women-friendly in the world", Mr Costello handed down a budget this year that does nothing to address the shortage of long day care places, or provide extra funding to care for under-two's, effectively keeping at home around 162,000 women (according to ABS Statistics) who would like to be in the workforce.

The Government continues to refuse to acknowledge the real issue – that we need a suite of reforms to make a real difference to the lives of working parents.

The case for PML

The fact that more than 50 countries have a national paid maternity leave scheme, yet Australia does not, is proof that this Government is not serious about providing Australian families with a better work and family life balance.

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. (See issue sheet 'Paid Maternity Leave').

Research conducted by the *Australian Institute of Family Studies* last year found 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.

It's time for the major parties to recognise the importance of providing supports for Australian families, and legislate on this vital issue that would go some way in finding a real balance between work and family life.

Footnotes

1. The Australian Democrats put the paid maternity leave debate on the political agenda in 2001 and remain the only party with legislation in the parliament to establish government-funded paid maternity leave.



CONTACT US

(03) 9416 1880

Lv 1, 62 Wellington Parade, East Melbourne VIC 3002

inquiries@democrats.org.au

Authorised by Jack Evans, 5 Poinciana Place, Wanneroo WA 6065
Printed by Senator Lyn Allison, Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600