

Senator Zed Seselja
Senator Australian Capital Territory
Committee Chair
Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Sent via email - community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au

RE: Fairer Paid Parental Leave Amendment Bill 2015

Dear Senator,

The Parenthood was invited to give evidence at the Senate Committee public hearing held 1 September 2015 in addition to our written submission (Submission 27).

You received testimony from two of our members Rachel Green and Sandra Croft but we had also myself and two additional Parenthood members Natalie and Ben Williams scheduled to give evidence. Unfortunately due to weather conditions at Canberra airport on the morning of the hearing, Natalie and Ben's plane was unable to land and they were not able to give their testimony to the Committee.

Flight difficulties also resulted in my delayed arrival into Canberra and therefore a missed opportunity for me to deliver my statement.

The Parenthood is pleased to offer a written copy of the statements Natalie and Ben had hoped to share with you to assist you and your fellow committee members with your deliberations.

Please also find following the statement I had prepared.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you or any of the members of the Committee have any additional questions.

Kind regards,

Jo Briskey
Executive Director
The Parenthood.

NATALIE'S TESTIMONY

Firstly, thank you for giving us the opportunity to share our stories. I hope we can give some insight into the human picture of this policy space.

My husband Ben and I are just recently married. I am about to turn 37 and I married somewhat later in life than most of my peers. I originally planned to marry younger, and have kids younger, but life didn't follow my perfect planning. How anyone thinks they've got an ounce of control over this I'll never know. I feel fortunate to have met him, and as the saying goes, "it is far far easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than it is to find a decent, single man in Sydney". Luckily for me I did, and in hindsight I am now glad I met Ben later in life. For us, it was perfect timing.

Ben already has two kids, both 5 and 6 years old, who are now my step-children, and I help Ben care for them under a shared-care arrangement with their mother. I am very fortunate to be married to Ben. He is an impressive and expert father. He is playful with the kids, he is gentle and tender with their little hearts, and he knows how to give them safe and firm boundaries. The results of his amazing parenting are two beautiful angels, and I consider myself the luckiest step-mother alive!

When we were dating, we talked a lot about having our own child. Children are a blessing and we both want to give our child a healthy and stable full-time home after the challenges and sadness of a relationship breakup. Emotionally, we know we are both ready for our own child. And then there is my age - I keep hearing that at 36, I am "no spring chicken" and "don't have any time to waste". So it seems that the time for us to start trying for a baby is now.

To prepare for impending motherhood, I deliberately moved out of a career I loved in the poorly paid community sector to move into the public service. I changed careers for a number of reasons, but the central decision was practical – as a public servant I would have access to better parental leave pay and conditions than where I was.

I was also aware that experts recommend that infants are breastfed for the first six months of life and this was my plan. I was planning to take both my employer maternity leave and have that topped up with the government paid leave scheme so that - after having a baby - I could take a full 6 months off with some income, so I could breastfeed and bond with my little one.

If this legislation passes, my only real option is to go back to work after just three months, making it unlikely I could breastfeed past then. We live in Sydney, we can't move to a cheaper city because Ben's children are here. Don't get me wrong, I know how lucky I am and what a great job I have, and I know that compared to many others, I am well paid. But we need to find housing in Sydney that is close enough to the kids which, as we are all too aware, isn't affordable any more. Neither of us earned much money in our 20s working in the health and community sectors, and then with Ben's relationship break-up and child support payments, has meant we are not able to afford to buy a house. And to even attempt to generate the income for renting our current place and keep up with bills, I will need to stay in full-time work. Being able to top up my workplace maternity leave payments with the government's scheme was something I was counting on.

If the proposed changes went through, I would have to stop breastfeeding my baby when it is just three months old. I would also have to give my newborn to my ageing mother to care for her during the day. She turns 70 this year and has some serious health concerns, so that is a less than ideal scenario. But I just couldn't give such a small baby to complete strangers at a childcare centre, not

to mention the cost. Anyway, it is very hard to get childcare places in my area, and I would imagine that changing the government scheme will make it even more competitive to get a spot at a local daycare.

The thought of this now scares me. This policy direction has now made me seriously rethink whether we try for a baby. As a step-parent, I already have some insight into the truly exhausting process of juggling work and kids with all the extra responsibilities they bring. If I brought a baby into this, being forced to go back to work before I was ready... well, I know how much stress this would put us under, and how distressing it would be for me to just try and make it through the week, sleep deprived and exhausted. And what if I got sick with mastitis or post-natal depression? I just don't know how we would manage.

I keep hearing that having children is a "lifestyle choice". I guess this means that if women choose to have a child they just have to face the consequences. If it means ruining your career and ending up much poorer than men in the long term, then that's the sacrifice, we are told, we have to make. Well, in a certain sense that is true, it *is* a "choice" I can choose to make or not to make. And on the cusp of making this decision, this so-called "lifestyle choice" to have a child, the possibility of not having access to the government scheme has left me thinking *my* choice might now be - not to.

It just seems like it may be too hard to manage and I am genuinely tempted to not go down that path. And if we decide not to have a child because it just *is* too hard, what then? Well, it will mean that my two beautiful step-children will go without a step-sibling that they tell us they dearly want. My husband will not have the opportunity to be a magnificent full-time father to a very wanted child. And we will all miss out on a wonderful human being who would have been raised to contribute to society in a meaningful way.

I keep hearing that we are in the middle a dramatic change to age demographics in this country. In just 15 years time, around 20 per cent of the population will be aged over 65. I can't believe my government is not interested in encouraging stable, well-adjusted, loving couples to have children who can increase the tax base to support the services we will need to support this rapidly ageing population. What if we ended up with population growth below replacement levels, what then? To me having access to a government paid parental leave scheme seems like a *smart* investment in the future of our society. So it is not only mothers and babies who will suffer if this legislation is passed, but our society too, who will be paying the price of this false economy.

I was personally insulted when the government told me I would be a "double dipper" - a cheater, getting something that all taxpayers can't also use. Since *when* did all of our taxes only go towards things that *we* use? I could also say why should my taxes go towards people with disabilities? I don't have a disability! Why should my taxes go towards roads in Northern NSW - I don't use them! We need to look at the bigger picture.

This is not a rort - I'm not asking to be a taxpayer-funded stay at home mother for an indefinite period of time! Just for those first critical months of life when I'm trying to feed and protect my baby.

I purposefully moved into a job that offered me parental leave pay, so that when I did have my first child, I could spend the maximum amount of time possible with my baby before returning to work. It might seem unfair to some people because I would get a better deal than them. But I think that my better deal makes it easier for others when they are bargaining with their employers for better conditions. We need to improve the situation for ALL parents, not be removing entitlements for some and justifying it by pitting us against each other. And what employer will keep paying parental

leave if they know that the government will just take the same amount away from mums on maternity leave?

The policy direction of this government is really concerning - I don't think they really understand the actual impact some of their decisions will have on the lives of thousands of Aussie parents. Please stand with my family and help give parents like Ben and myself the support to allow us to give our new babies the best start in life.

BEN'S TESTIMONY

My name is Ben and I am a 36 year old, and very proud father of two children aged 5 and 6 years old from a former relationship. I am now the husband of Natalie, and we are currently weighing up having a child together. If we were to do so, it would be Natalie's first child. I am a registered nurse by training and now work in health management within the public sector.

Seven years ago, my then-partner and I were working in health when she unexpectedly fell pregnant. At the time we were living in a regional centre and had a large mortgage on our first home. Despite our lack of family planning, in particular the financial aspect, we survived a traumatic pre-natal period, made so because my partner was horribly morning sick. Morning sickness, so it turns out is incorrectly named, as she was *relentlessly* sick, all day and all night, never daring to part with her vomit bucket. I kept her alive by hand feeding her a steady diet of almonds and ginger tea. Despite my dedication, she was hospitalised a number of times for dehydration.

Because we had a mortgage, she stayed at work for as long as possible, sometimes with an IV drip in her arm. Even with all the help she received from myself and the hospital we worked at, she left on maternity leave much earlier than we had planned. With a combined baby bonus payment and her workplace maternity leave pay, we met our mortgage repayments and were able to spend those precious early months learning how to be parents.

For this of you who have kids, you will understand - you do have to learn how to be a parent. Books help, midwives are fantastic, family and friends offer great words of wisdom, but nothing substitutes time with your child. Learning their cues, understanding their cries, and learning how to bond with a little creature that turns your world upside down, it is all new and scary. And we were able to take the time we needed with our firstborn, in large part due to the government baby bonus and my partner's paid leave.

My son did turn my world upside down. We became so 'bonded' that he wanted attention all the time, hourly so it turned out - 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The sound of his cry became torturous. I often joke that he was lucky he was cute, because anything else that woke you hourly for over a year would be flushed down the toilet (please note: there is no need for a child protection notification regarding this revelation as I am sure most new parents have that thought from time to time).

Whilst both my ex partner and I and I became convinced it may have been the immaculate conception, three and a half months after my son was born, we learned that my then partner was pregnant again! We decided to sell our home and move away from our home because we were not eligible for maternity leave again, making it exceptionally difficult to meet our mortgage repayments. We were also desperately tired and needed the support of my partner's parents who lived in a small country town about 65km outside of Tamworth.

Then came my daughter's entry into the world. I was at work, nursing at hospital down the road from home when I received the screaming phone call to get home because my partner's waters had broken. When I arrived, I was calm and prepared. After all I'd done this whole birthing business only 12 months ago. My partner was booked into Tamworth base hospital because the baby was posterior, and she was likely to need an epidural. I should have listened when she told me she wasn't sure she could make the 45 minute car ride to Tamworth Hospital, but for whatever reason I didn't. Ten minutes into a calm car trip, her contractions changed. They were regular and they were close together. You didn't have to be a nurse to know this kid was coming now. I'm not sure a Honda CRV has ever been driven as fast as mine was that night. However, it was to no avail. 35 minutes from the nearest hospital, my partner screamed at me to pull over, and I delivered my new daughter under a chicken farm sign on a quiet country road.

A very happy story turned less happy quite quickly. After the ambulance picked us all up, we arrived at the hospital. When we were inside, I knew my partner wasn't quite right. She was pale and passed out in the emergency room. We discovered she had experienced a massive post partum haemorrhage which required an urgent trip to theatres and a massive blood transfusion. She stayed in hospital in a serious condition for many weeks. Eventually they discharged her, only to have another massive haemorrhage and another lengthy hospital stay. She was chronically sick for near a half year.

Those days were difficult, fatigued as I was from my one year old son who tortured me nightly with his hourly wake ups. I then had to learn to fill the role as sole breadwinner and be both mum and dad to my children, because despite my partner's valiant efforts, the kids' mum was not able to function at capacity. The one relief I had over that period, was that we had family support, and that our cost of living in the country was not an active issue. I look back on those days wondering what it would be like if it happened today?

Fast forward five years to my current situation where Natalie and I were married last December, and are seriously discussing having a child of our own. My situation is quite different now. I'm now a Sydney-sider bound to live here to stay close to my children, priced out of an impossibly unaffordable housing market, yet still having to pay ridiculous rental costs. We don't even aspire to own a house in Sydney anymore, as public servant wages with two small children puts home ownership well out of our reach.

I tell you these stories because complications can happen to new parents. What if Natalie has a significant post partum haemorrhage? What if we had a child who woke every hour every day for over a year? What if Natalie got post-natal depression or any of the varied complications that occur to mothers or children, because as my story shows, complications happen all the time. We can't afford to have one of us off from work for an extended period, and the loss of \$11,500 which we would have received under the government's paid parental leave scheme will definitely have a significant impact.

The loss of the parental leave payments will drive Nat back to workforce, ready or not. Our child will be weaned from the breast within three months, and we will be stretching our workplace leave policy's to spend as much time with our child as possible, carting our young child to expensive daycare and friends houses, all of which takes a phenomenal amount of negotiating. Natalie and I will be tired, we will be stressed and we will be stretched financially. This is very taxing on parents, and I say that from a personal experience of a failed relationship.

The other alternative is that I leave the public health system and a job which I love and excel at, to get a higher paid job in the private sector, and Nat leaves her current role or takes extended leave. This would not only be a loss to both our workplaces, but a loss to my family as the work will involve longer hours, travel, and time away from Natalie and our new baby. When I think of this, I see a wife starved of support, I see a children who have a distant relationship with their dad... I see disconnect.

As a younger man I spent a number of years running homeless refuges. I actually lived in the refuge with homeless young people and mentored them as they struggled with the effects childhood trauma and their daily reality of drug and alcohol abuse. Whilst the backgrounds of these youths varied - some from privilege, others not, the one consistent theme was a disconnected relationship with their parents. I have seen first-hand the fruits of disconnected relationships between kids and their primary caregivers. I have no desire to bring a child into the world only to foster a disconnected relationship. Surely we as a society should be moving toward fostering stronger relationships between kids and their parents, not moving in the opposite direction?

I urge you the Australian Government to carefully consider the impacts that the proposed cuts will make. As my stories reveal, pregnancy and early parenthood are vulnerable times for families. The proposed cuts not only adversely impact the families of public servants and others who have access to workplace parental leave schemes, but also adversely impact society as a whole by lowering the bar rather than raising it. I want to see a government that is interested in investing in fostering strong family relationships, not burdening them.

JO BRISKEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR – STATEMENT

Thank you Committee Chair and fellow committee members for affording The Parenthood the opportunity to come before you today to provide evidence to assist you in your review of the Fairer Paid Parental Leave Amendment Bill 2015 currently before the Australian Parliament.

With a national membership of over 30,000 parents The Parenthood is Australia's leading parent advocacy and campaigning organisation. We have several thousand parents who we know will be directly affected by the proposed changes as outlined in *Bill*.

And so we value the opportunity to provide the Committee first hand accounts of the impact this Bill will have on the lives it will directly affect - the mums, dads and children of Australia.

As stated in our written submission, The Parenthood fundamentally rejects the Bill and is urging Committee members to do the same.

There is nothing fair about stripping away the paid parental leave thousands of Australian mums and dads, mums in particular, depend on to take the time they want and need to spend with their newborn babies.

There is nothing fair about taking away thousands of dollars in paid leave from predominately low to middle income earning women – compounding the financial strain on already stretched household budgets.

There is nothing fair about discouraging employers to expand and top up paid parental leave as their way to attract and retain talented women.

There is nothing fair about creating a meagre maximum entitlement as opposed to a minimum.

There is nothing fair about taking an already fairly inadequate scheme in comparison to much of the developed world and stripping it back even further.

There is nothing fair about women who have spent years in study, skill acquisition, career progression and development to then be struck by greater financial burden when taking time out of work to start or expand a family.

There is nothing fair about forcing mums back to work sooner than they would have otherwise planned – increasing stress during an already stressful time, decreasing likeliness of continuous breastfeeding, increasing cost to families and government by forcing more families to find childcare sooner and therefore for longer.

There is nothing fair about stripping back a scheme that was designed to combine government funded entitlement with employer funded entitlements – a scheme that was designed to be an incentive for employers who do not currently offer PPL to make a start – even it's only one or two weeks in recognition of the value of sharing the responsibility of PPL between employers, employees and government.

And Committee members there is absolutely nothing fair about labelling hard working Australian mums and dads as “double dippers” and “fraudsters” because they have used the current scheme as it was designed to be used.

I think it's worth stating clearly again the objectives of the current PPL scheme –

- a) Signal that taking time out of the paid workforce to care for a child is part of the usual course of life and work for both parents
- b) Promote equality between men and women and balance between work and family life
- c) Provide financial support to primary carers (mainly birth mothers) of newborn and newly adopted children
 - Allow those carers to take time off work to care for the child after the child's birth or adoption; and
 - Enhance the health and development of birth mothers and children
 - Encourage women to continue to participate in the workforce

And extensive evaluation of the scheme clearly shows the scheme has been working - that as a result of having extended supported time to spend with their newborns, mum as well as baby's health and wellbeing improved, more mums breastfed for longer and less mums felt rushed or pressed for time improving their mental wellbeing.

The evaluation also demonstrated that the current PPL scheme is responsible in supporting and encouraging more women back to work. The scheme has also helped more employers retain their

employees with increases in the number of women returning to the same job following parental leave.

The results of the evaluation were also reflected in the results we obtained from our national survey of 1431 Australian parents

Of the total number of our national survey respondents who had used government and employer co-funded paid parental leave, 84 per cent had done so to extend the time of paid leave they were able to take, of which 62 per cent indicated it was so they could *afford* to stay home longer.

This scheme is not unfairly benefiting a few it is making a significant difference to many in their ability to afford to extend the time they are able to bond with and breastfeed their baby.

It just does not make sense to effectively dismantle a scheme that is clearly working – nor does it make sense to dismantle a scheme that is one of the least generous in the developed world.

Australia is well behind the rest of the developed world when it comes to supporting women in the workplace. Sweden introduced a universal paid parental leave in 1974, which now provides 60 weeks of paid leave. The United Kingdom scheme, introduced in 1999, now provides 39 paid weeks. In Canada, mothers have access to 50 weeks paid leave.

When you compare Australia on the payment rates as a proportion of gross earnings replaced by a maternity benefit over the length of the paid entitlement for a person on average earnings – we rank second last only above the USA who simply have no scheme.

And it should be further mentioned that ANZ's recently released women's report revealed that 34 per cent of working mothers in Australia are currently denied paid parental leave.

So why is it that instead of increasing support for mothers in the paid workforce the government is looking to make it harder for thousands of women – taking away significant money and therefore time and opportunity to spend with their newborns?

Why is it that the government appears determined to force many mums and dads back to work sooner than otherwise planned?

As highlighted in our submission parents are already struggling to find a childcare place for their 0 to 1 year olds with demand outstripping supply for many nursery places across Australia's long day care and family day care sector.

So when forcing mums and dads back to work sooner than planned this will increase demand and place significant added pressure on an already stretched system.

This increase in need for early education and care will also come at significant cost to parents and the government with nursery places costing more than places for older children.

The Parenthood asks Senate Committee members to seek advice on the additional financial cost to government expected with an increase in the number of families accessing government childcare subsidies sooner and therefore for longer as a result of the cut to PPL.

We need to be doing better on PPL – not worse.

Committee members, 94 per cent of the 1431 Australian parents we surveyed oppose the government's changes to PPL as outlined in the Bill before you.

49 per cent respondents reported feeling anxious at the stress of having to go back to work before they were ready.

94 per cent were angered, hurt and felt like the government just didn't understand the purpose of the current PPL scheme when they labelled mothers double dippers.

And so I, on behalf of the several thousand parents who have joined the Parenthood's campaign against these changes urge Committee members to reject this Bill – to stop Australia falling even further behind in this vital area of economic and social policy

This policy is not a welfare measure – it's not about providing a safety net. It is a productivity measure – it's about recognising that women in the paid workforce must spend a period of time out of the workforce to start and extend a family but that they should not be disadvantaged financially or otherwise for doing so.

This is about gender equality in the workplace, this about improving the financial security and independence for women. And fundamentally this is about helping Australian parents give their children the very best start in life.