

# Maternity leave policy is coming home to roost

Often enough, it is possible to pick the moment at which a government begins the process that will end with its defeat. That moment for the Howard government can be said to have come in 2002 when it rejected the report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission recommending paid maternity leave.



DAVID BARNETT

The proposal was that Australia should, as a social welfare measure, pay an allowance to working mothers for 14 weeks to enable them to stay at home and look after a baby. It is near universal in the Western world. Only Australia and the United States don't have such an allowance, and of all the countries that do, only Switzerland requires employers to pay maternity leave. Every other country regards paid maternity leave as an appropriate form of social welfare, along with unemployment benefits. Public servants already get it. So do

some highly valued, highly paid career women whose services their firms do not wish to lose. There were three arguments for the paid maternity leave proposal that the Howard Coalition government rejected, each of them sufficient on its own. It was smart politics. It would give the Coalition a new demographic, working women in their 20s and early 30s, who are not notably conservative voters. It is immensely useful to the woman and her partner. The household goes from having two incomes to having one. In some

industries, it was crucial, the hotel industry being such a case. Margins are so fine in that industry that publicans cannot easily afford to pay their employees to stay at home, and life can be so tough for a barmaid that she cannot afford to take off anywhere near 14 weeks, the period proposed by the Human Rights Commission. At this time of rising interest rates it is worth remembering that young couples have mortgages as well as babies.

The third argument is one that has concerned national leaders as far back as Charles de Gaulle and Lee Kuan Yew. Allowing impediments to exist for capable young women wanting to have families, that is to say excluding them from the national gene pool, would be to hold to a policy the effect of which would be to dump down the population. But that was exactly the policy the Coalition chose to stick with, led by John Howard, Finance Minister Nick

Minchin and Health Minister Tony Abbott, despite the manifest virtues of paid maternity leave as a welfare measure, as a social measure, and as a matter of political strategy. Sexism may have had something to do with it. Women should stay at home and attend to their duties in the kitchen, the laundry and the bedroom. Wives of members of parliament, or some of them, had something to do with it. Nobody paid them when they had to give up their jobs to have a baby. They managed the household on their husband's single salary of \$200,000 a year. These explanations are downright silly, but they are the only ones around. The government had lost its grip. A prime minister who had said at the outset of his time in office that a government had no business in the nation's bedrooms had allowed what he called his social conservatism to set him on a course to defeat. The then Deputy Commissioner at

the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Pru Goward, who conducted the inquiries and whose report it was, wrote the other day that the report was welcomed by the public, was modelled and costed as eminently affordable, but was used and abused by the last federal government and by this one. It had taken a special cocktail of sexism, bloody-mindedness and partisan exploitation to trash paid maternity leave into submission. Goward said the ALP and trade union women who championed paid maternity leave with her should be ashamed. They presumably championed the issue not because they believed in paid maternity leave but to damage political opponents. They had now capitulated. The Rudd Government had shunted the issue off to the Productivity Commission for appraisal, the only entirely government funded health

and welfare measure so dealt with. It made no sense, unless the idea was to make employers pay, Goward wrote. Well, now they are beginning to pay. Coles and the new grocery chain Aldi have both announced, in the wake of Goward's article in the Melbourne *Sunday Age* and the Sydney *Sun Herald*, that they will pay maternity leave to their employees. Lots more dominoes will fall before next February, when the Productivity Commission is due to report. Furthermore, employers have themselves to blame. They did not speak up six years ago when Goward's report was a public issue. But they also have someone else to blame: the Howard government, then, and the Rudd Government now.

David Barnett is a Canberra writer. (Pru Goward, now the Liberal state member for the electorate of Goulburn, is his wife.)

# One cool view of global warming

Don Aitkin

About a year ago I decided that I should look hard at the issue of Anthropogenic Global Warming – the notion that it is we human beings who are responsible for the warming of the earth. I thought we had immediate environmental problems facing us, including our failure to manage water and our over-dependence on oil, and that we should be dealing with them. Global warming seemed a distraction.

Although it was plain that the learned academics, governments and the UN all seemed to believe AGW was true, what puzzled me was the stridency of the claims that we had to act now. If it was all so obvious, why weren't our governments acting to save us? What followed were months of discovery and learning.

I think the central AGW proposition can be put like this: Human activity in burning coal and oil, and clearing forests has put an enormous amount of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, where it has combined with water vapour to increase global temperatures in an unprecedented way. The evidence that this has occurred is clear-cut, and the increase in temperature will have, according to our computer models, dire effects on the planet. We must change our ways lest catastrophe strike us. It may already be too late.

That led me to find out what I could about the following:

- (1) the extent to which the planet is warming;
- (2) whether or not such warming is unprecedented;
- (3) whether the warming is caused by burning fossil fuels;
- (4) the likelihood of polar ice melting in a major way;
- (5) the use of computer models in predicting future climates;
- (6) the reluctance to admit uncertainty; and
- (7) the extent to which we need to change to avoid catastrophe.

Twelve months later the outcome for me is, to say the least, uncertain. But this is what I think one can reasonably say. Is the planet warming? Maybe. It depends on what measurements you think are relevant. It doesn't seem to have warmed for the last 10 years. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says 0.6 of a degree plus or minus 0.2 of a degree over the 20th century. I'm prepared to accept that.

Is the warming unprecedented? Probably not. There is abundant historical and proxy evidence for both hotter and cooler periods in human history. Is it our fault? Again, maybe. The correlation of increasing warmth with increasing carbon dioxide concentrations is particularly weak; that with solar energy and with ocean movements is much stronger.

Are we likely to see rising sea-levels? Not in our lifetimes or those of our grandchildren. It is not even clear that sea-levels have risen at all. As so often in this domain, there is conflicting evidence. The melting of polar or sea ice has no direct effect. How reliable are the computer models on which possible future climates are based? Not very. All will agree that the task of modelling climate is vast, because of the estimates that have to be made and the rubbery quality of much of the data.

Given all this, why is there such insistence that AGW has occurred and needs drastic solutions? This is a puzzle, but my short answer is that the IPCC has been built on the AGW proposition and of course keeps plugging it, whatever the data say. The IPCC has considerable clout. Most people shy off inspecting the evidence because it looks like science and must therefore be hard.

The media have been captured by AGW (it makes for great stories), the environmental movement and the Greens love it, and business is reluctant to get involved. Governments simply postpone making the draconian decisions they are urged to make. What should we do? The current Garnaut inquiry is not of much help, because it too is based on the assumption that AGW is correct. A Royal Commission has been proposed, and I would be in favour of that course of action if the inquiry is run properly.

More generally, I would urge people to find out for themselves, because the issue is important. There are around four million Australians who have been to university. This domain is science, but the questions are straightforward and accessible. I warn that there is a lot of reading! What we should not do is go down the path of carbon taxes, carbon trading and carbon caps before it is absolutely plain that there is no alternative. Why? At present such measures seem likely to be unnecessary and futile and to lead to riots.

Professor Aitkin AO, a historian and political scientist, is a member of the Australian Science and Technology Council. This is a much abridged summary of his address to the Australian Planning Institute yesterday.

# Right process for peak effects

A good range of people has been chosen, but extracting the best outcomes from the Australia 2020 Summit will be the biggest problem



JOHN WARHURST

The Australia 2020 Summit participants have been announced amid some controversy. But the steering committee has selected as good a range of people with a right to be heard and with something to say as could be expected. No further correspondence should now be entered into.

There have been complaints from some of those omitted, including the president of the Australian Medical Association, Dr Rosanna Capolingua. Some critics have complained also that certain categories are insufficiently represented, such as marginalised young people, rural and regional Australians, or anyone but the usual suspects.

Professor Glyn Davis, co-chair with Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, has revealed that there was some very hard lobbying of the steering committee. That is to be expected and it is how politics operates.

Rather than arguing over particular individuals, it is more productive now to discuss the composition of the summit as a whole in terms of what it says about Australian politics; and then to look forward to the process by which it might best be conducted.

The summit can profitably be seen as a microcosm of Australian politics. It is revealing to see what types of people will or will not be there.

Many will be there as individuals with particular ideas they wish to present or will come with a record of innovative thinking in their field. But to be effective, the summit must have many other types of people playing a role (facilitators, experienced operators, sceptics, wise heads and so on).

The productivity of the summit will come from dynamic interplay, not individual performance. A champion team always beats a team of champions. The mix is important.

This gathering is a wider cross-section of the community than any alternative, including the Parliament itself. It is more representative, in the sociological sense, than the Parliament, though it is unrepresentative in the other sense,



of not being an elected body. There are many more women, for instance. Women are represented fully, as they should be given that they are 51 per cent of the population.

There are individuals who would never stand for Parliament, including some of Australia's richest men (Andrew Forrest, James Packer and Lachlan Murdoch) and some of Australia's foremost actors, such as Hugh Jackman and Cate Blanchett. There are representatives of key

Australian pressure groups, including Heather Ridout of the Australian Industry Group and Lin Hatfield Dodds of the Australian Council of Social Service.

But there are notable categories that will not be represented as a matter of principle, such as judges, public servants and, with a few exceptions, state and federal parliamentarians. That is a shame; no Michael Kirby for instance. They all have other avenues of influence,

of course. Their absence will please those letter-writers expressing the consistent theme that the summit should be for those without other opportunities, rather than those who are already influential.

In very Australian fashion, the participants were grouped in the official announcement by state and territory. Why this was so is unclear (why not by gender or ethnic background or qualifications). But it shows how deeply we think of

ourselves as a federation and jealously guard our states rights.

From this perspective, parts of the federation have not done so well. The ACT has starred because it is a pocket Hercules of ideas, although we are represented miserably in the Parliament because of our small size. But in some important topics other imbalances are obvious. For instance, in the crucial discussion, "Future directions for the Australian economy", South Australia,

Tasmania and the Northern Territory have provided just one representative each; though they have done better on other topics.

The selections are a welcome vote of confidence in Australia's universities and research institutes. In a nation not known for its recognition of the contribution of intellectuals, the talents of academics have been recognised in each of the 10 groups. Overall more professors have been selected than you can poke a stick at. The ANU alone has provided at least 20 participants.

However, not letting the number of professors and other academics get out of hand was probably a consideration for the steering committee. For the summit to be seen as an ivory tower exercise, full of eggheads, would be a kiss of death.

To connect with the community, the participation had to be diverse. The contribution of celebrities from other fields, such as Andrew Denton, Robert de Castella and James Hird, will be not just their own important ideas, but also their recognition factor in the wider community. They have credibility in the eyes of the public, even though their credentials for this exercise might be unfairly questioned by the elitist media.

The process of extracting the best outcomes from the whole exercise remains the biggest problem, whatever the composition. Process matters. The problem struck me on Sunday when I was taking part in another ideas weekend, the Manning Clark House Weekend of Ideas on the subject of Australian citizenship.

That exercise showed me how difficult it will be to make the most of the summit's possibilities. Speakers were restricted to just 20 minutes each, but, even so, generous questions and answers, much less deep discussion and critique, were hard to encompass in the time allowed.

Another model, the ACT 2020 Summit this Saturday, uses working groups and tight plenary sessions to try to knit together eight topics in a single day.

If choosing the participants from the 8000 nominations was hard, then creating an effective structure and modus operandi for the proceedings will be even harder. The most difficult task is still to come.

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# Suggestions for the future that show 20/20 vision

This month's summit will seek good ideas. STEPHEN COATES has come up with his dozen

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has stated that he hopes to get 12 good ideas from the 2020 summit, scheduled to begin in just over two weeks. Well, here are 12 such ideas, all supported by evidence, necessary to develop the "evidence-based policies" he argued for before the last federal election.

■ Make criminal law federal: Australia is one of the few federal countries in which many areas of law are within the jurisdiction of the states. Having a single criminal code under Commonwealth jurisdiction would eliminate the wasteful legal process of interstate extraditions and not burden the legal profession and courts with having to deal with the current duplicated sets of such laws. As family law and corporations law have been transferred to Commonwealth jurisdiction in recent decades, such a transfer is achievable.

■ Abolish pensioner discounts: Few would argue that those living on one or another pension aren't doing it tough, even with all the discounts to which their status entitles them. However, not only does this plethora of discounts incur a significant administrative cost to bodies such as transport providers, utilities and state and local government instrumentalities, it distorts spending behaviours. Whereas a non-pensioner might find it cost-effective to invest in roof insulation, a pensioner in a comparable dwelling with discounted electricity probably wouldn't. The answer: abolish all pensioner discounts and increase pensions.

■ Addictive drugs on prescription: If ever there was an idea whose time had come, surely it is for addictive drugs such as heroin and methamphetamine to be available to addicts on prescription – addicts whose addiction to the drug in question had been determined through rigorous testing and with safeguards such as on-premise administration of single doses to prevent overdosing or resale. The primary benefit would be to deprive criminal drug distribution networks of their customers and significantly reduce their incentive to recruit new ones. With these drugs being affordable and of precisely known dosages and purity, addicts would be spared the risk of "street quality" drugs and wouldn't have to commit crimes to pay for them.

■ Decentralise major corporate head offices: Almost all of the head offices of Australia's largest corporations are in Sydney and Melbourne, and not just within these cities but highly concentrated within their central business districts. One result is that the very high-paying senior management jobs they offer are similarly concentrated in these locales. What is also not generally recognised is the connection between this concentration of high-end jobs and the current housing affordability crisis. Those with career aspirations beyond managing a local car yard or supermarket will want to live within comfortable commuting

distance of major city CBDs and as businesses continue to merge and centralise, the demand for the finite stock of such housing will only increase.

■ Mandating decentralisation of major corporate offices – and we're talking Perth, Townsville, Newcastle, Wollongong, Penrith, Albury etc, not Chatswood and Toorak – would, by dramatically decreasing the cost of an average house within commuting distance of corporate head offices, decrease housing prices overall.

■ Strengthen anti-discrimination legislation: A variety of state and Commonwealth government legislation prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, religion, sexual orientation and age. However, enforcement is limited and there are a ridiculous number of exemptions. Significantly toughening anti-discrimination legislation and giving HREOC adequate resources to enforce them would be a step in the right direction.

■ Tax non-agricultural land based on agricultural land value: If the tax on non-agricultural land was based, in part, on the agricultural value of that land, there would be a greater incentive for warehouses, factories, shopping centres and parking lots as well as housing to be sited on land of lesser agricultural value and leave higher quality agricultural land, even that which is flat and easier to build on, for agriculture.

■ Increase R&D tax deduction to 150 per cent: In 1996, the Howard government reduced the tax deduction allowed for R&D from 150 per cent to 125 per cent, with the result that the research and development undertaken by the private sector, small by world standards, became even smaller. Reversing this deduction would be

straightforward. The problem is that Australia lags the industrialised world in numbers of both engineers and research scientists yet leads the world in numbers of accountants, each measured per head of working population. And the executive directorships are inevitably of finance and sales and marketing, never R&D.

■ The great idea is thus to increase the R&D deduction back to 150 per cent but to allow it only for companies whose boards have at least as many scientists and engineers as accountants and lawyers and with an executive director of R&D whose remuneration at least equals that of the other executive directors.

■ Mandate agricultural drought insurance: Although it would be difficult to implement in the middle of a drought, requiring primary producers to have adequate insurance coverage would be entirely consistent with the requirements placed by home mortgage and business finance providers to take out insurance cover for fire, storm damage, public liability and other mishaps. More significantly, if primary producers were required to take out such coverage, insurance premiums would reflect the proneness of the locality to drought.

■ Require large insurance companies to offer all types of insurance: Back in 1995, HIH was one of only three providers of