

It's much more than maternity leave in the real world of working families

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While it's clear that taken alone the Coalition's Paid Parental Leave (PPL) policy is generous, according to the [Work and Family Policy Roundtable](#) (WFPR), there needs to be a balanced approach to meeting the demands facing modern families from all parties.

Co-convenor of the Roundtable, Professor Barbara Pocock from UniSA's Centre for Work + Life says a Mills and Boon approach to family life is too simplistic.

"We all know that the romance novel ends when the couple gets married, but in life that is when the real [work](#) begins and it is the same with children," Prof Pocock said.

"The first six months of a baby's life, albeit very important months, are only the start of things.

"So while it is important to have a good paid parental leave system we need to consider what happens after that – and make sure that families have access to affordable quality childcare, job flexibility, equitable superannuation, and help to care for ageing parents.

"We also need to be sure that what is put in place is sustainable and that it works in a kind of ecosystem of social policies that support working parents."

The Work and Family Policy Roundtable is co-convened by Professor Barbara Pocock and Associate Professor Sarah Charlesworth and the University of Sydney's Dr Elizabeth Hill. The Roundtable brings together 30 of Australia's leading academics and researchers in the area of work and family policy from 18 research institutions to examine new and proposed policies.

In March 2013 the Roundtable identified eight priority areas in the context of the election that should be a key focus for improvement – childcare; paid parental leave; job security; flexibility and working time; pay equity; workforce participation, superannuation; care for the ageing and workplace leadership.

Reviewing what's on offer, Prof Pocock said while the Coalition PPL scheme is superior to Labor's existing scheme in providing superannuation, a longer period of leave and a higher payment; its funding arrangements are large and uncertain, and some details of its implementation are unclear.

"While the Coalition scheme includes superannuation, they also plan to abolish Labor's superannuation tax rebate of up to \$500 per annum

which is especially helpful to women and low paid workers," she said.

She said childcare was of particular concern to families with young children and there was little action from the Coalition on this pressing issue.

"Labor has promised \$300 million to boost childcare worker's wages and another \$450 million for schools to extend or improve out-of-hours school care programs and a continued roll-out of its National Quality Standards for childcare. The Coalition has said it will support a productivity inquiry into childcare affordability. While an inquiry is necessary, it will not address the immediate challenge of affordability, nor will it ensure good quality care," she said.

The Roundtable found that while neither party had addressed the issue of insecure work, the lack of paid leave for those who work long term in casual jobs or the lack of appeal mechanisms for those refused a request for work flexibility, Labor had been more active in broadening the right to request flexible work arrangements to more workers with caring responsibilities, including older workers and those caring for older family members.

The Coalition has said it will make minimal changes to industrial relations policy in its first term and that it will hold a Productivity Commission review into industrial relations.

The Roundtable noted that the gender pay gap has widened in Australia.

"Labor has responded to the widening gap by establishing a Pay Equity Unit in the Fair Work Commission but the Coalition has not as yet made any commitments on this issue which is so vital for gender equality, productivity workforce participation and retirement equity," Prof Pocock says.

"The body of evidence on work and family suggests that a balanced policy approach is essential.

"Having children is the time in which couples transition to becoming a family and PPL is a very important part of that transition but it is by no means the whole story.

"It is also important to deal with the long haul of childcare provision, as well as ensuring flexibility in workplaces.

"And there are emerging challenges of caring for older family members often at a time when children are still at home – these issues are affecting more and more Australians and their capacity to contribute to the workforce.

"The Coalition's PPL puts a lot of fiscal eggs in the one basket and research evidence suggests that a more balanced spend - and other policy changes – might do more for families in the long term - and do more to boost labour market participation."

The Work and Family Policy Roundtable Election 2013 Evaluation can be found [here](#).

Provided by University of South Australia

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