

**FACILITATING FERTILITY AND PAID WORK:
CONTEMPORARY FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICY INITIATIVES
AND THEIR SOCIAL IMPACTS IN AUSTRALASIA**

Joanne James¹

School of Sociology and Anthropology
University of Canterbury

Abstract

This paper focuses on contemporary public perceptions of the challenges of combining paid work and raising a family, set against the backdrop of concerns about low fertility, structural population ageing and the composition of the future labour force. Australasian policy makers have responded to these issues with various initiatives aimed at assisting people who are raising families and engaging in paid work. The New Zealand Working for Families package, the Australian Family Tax Benefit package, and the two countries' parental leave and women-focused policies are compared, with a focus on cross-national similarities and differences. The most significant difference between the two nations is the lack of a paid parental leave scheme in Australia, but the family-friendly policies are similar in perpetuating tensions between ensuring both present and future labour supply. The policies are aimed at providing incentives to be in paid work when parents have children, but tend to reinforce the notion of work and family as separate spheres, and potentially contribute to social divisions between parents and non-parents by providing cash benefits to families with children. This analysis suggests that Australasian societies may be on the cusp of a more collective articulation of people's obligations to one another and the nation, including the collective consequences of personal lifestyle decisions such as choosing not to have children.

INTRODUCTION

Raising a family and participating in paid work are increasingly recognised as competing demands by many parents in contemporary Western societies (Families Commission 2008; House Standing Committee on Family and Human Services 2006; OECD 2002; OECD 2004). The financial costs of having children, the rising general costs of living, the common physical separation of the spheres of home and employment, and the gendered nature of childrearing and "breadwinning" are issues that many parents juggle on an everyday basis. These issues also frequently form the basis of the decisions by growing numbers of people in OECD nations to delay having children or remain childless. Voluntarily childless people, especially women, commonly experience social criticism for choosing not to be parents, but this negative reaction is often balanced by the increased choices available to them because their employment and non-work activities are not organised around children (Cameron 1997; Maher and Saugeres 2007; Park 2002). The greater career, education, travel and leisure opportunities available in the globalised contemporary world are increasingly being weighed

¹ Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the contribution and support of Associate Professor Rosemary Du Plessis in the development of this paper.

Correspondence

Joanne James, School of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch, New Zealand.

by young men and women against the perceived benefits and burdens associated with parenthood.

Australasian statistics reveal similarities in the social landscapes of New Zealand and Australia as a result of the competing pressures and choices faced by young adults. The numbers of voluntarily childless people in both nations are rising, and total fertility is below levels needed for population replacement, particularly in Australia, where fertility has become an explicit concern for government (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008b; Boddington and Didham 2008; Callister and Didham 2007). Women's participation in both national workforces has increased, yet Australasian labour forces are steadily ageing (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999; Statistics New Zealand 2008a). Australasian governments have responded to these issues with a variety of social policies aimed at the problems faced by people struggling to combine family and career, and at potential deficits in labour supply. In Australia, policy has also recently begun to address sub-replacement fertility.

Besides the historical close relationship between New Zealand and Australia, comparison of Australasian family-friendly policies is particularly relevant in a period where the countries are effectively competing for population and labour force (Hugo 2004:37). The 1973 Trans-Tasman Agreement allows New Zealand and Australian citizens to live and work in either country without negotiating the immigration channels required by other foreign nationals. The direction of current migration flows indicates that Australia is perceived more favourably by citizens of both nations at present, as a large number of New Zealanders are crossing the Tasman in relation to a much smaller number of Australians moving to New Zealand.² The trend to migrate to Australia has been exhaustively covered by the New Zealand media, which commonly represent Australia's larger economy as offering greater opportunities for employment and financial prosperity. In this context, the family-friendly policy initiatives of both countries are likely to be one of many factors that will influence the migration decisions of people who are comparing the benefits offered by each country.

This paper compares current family-friendly³ policies in New Zealand and Australia against the backdrop of media and social research that reflects public perceptions of the challenges of combining work and family. Two sets of policies that are roughly comparable -- New Zealand's Working for Families package, parental leave policy and Action Plan for New Zealand Women, and Australia's Family Tax Benefit package, parental leave policy and 2008 Women's Budget Statement -- are analysed with a focus on the collective social outcomes these policies are directed at achieving. Although the most significant difference between the family-friendly policies of the two nations is the lack of a paid parental leave scheme in Australia, both policy sets attempt to reconcile present and future labour force requirements by encouraging women's participation in paid work, while recognising the importance of women's "reproductive labour" (Maher 2007:169) and its collective benefits. These policy strategies tend to reinforce the notion of work and family as separate spheres, and potentially contribute to tensions between parents and non-parents by providing cash benefits to families

² Over the past decade the ratio of New Zealand migration to Australia versus Australian migration to New Zealand has been approximately 7.5:1 (Whiteford 2007). However, the predominant focus on the exodus of New Zealanders to Australia has often overlooked the circularity of Trans-Tasman movements and the considerable flow of New Zealanders moving back to New Zealand (Hugo 2004:35).

³ Family-friendly policies are those that "facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life by fostering adequacy of family resources and child development, facilitate parental choice about work and care, and promote gender equality in employment opportunities" (OECD 2004:10).

with children. The policies also focus on the family unit rather than gendered roles of mother, father, woman or man, while at the same time having gendered implications.

FAMILY AND WORK IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALASIA

Public Perceptions

Contemporary media representations of issues of work and family indicate widespread public concern about the challenges of combining parenting and paid work. Voluntary childlessness⁴ is a lifestyle choice that has received increased attention in this context as a new trend that has emerged in response to the stresses faced by parents. Media representations of the experiences of parents and non-parents are largely consistent with themes that have emerged in social research. Relatively few people delay having children or decide not to have children on the basis of not liking them; instead, factors such as career, relationships, finances and lifestyle tend to inform decision making, as well as a common recognition of the potential emotional and financial burdens involved in raising a family (Cameron 1997; Gillespie 2003; Letherby 1994; Letherby 2002; Lunneborg 1999; Maher and Saugeres 2007; Morell 1994). The freedoms that are characteristic of the lives of voluntarily childless people also tend to be what many parents most struggle to achieve. Gray et al. (2008:2) suggest that Australia's "low fertility rate is not due to a lack of wanting children", but rather the influence of contemporary financial and work-related pressures on the fertility decisions of Australian couples. Parents commonly see work and family as to some extent incompatible, and as separate spheres of life with no natural crossover (Maher 2007; OECD 2002; OECD 2004; Probert et al. 2000).

Fertility, Population and Labour Force

Public perceptions of what it means to be a mother, father, parent or non-parent in Australasia have implications for the present social context, as well as for the future. People who perceive it to be difficult to manage the demands of both parenting and career may opt out of either one in favour of concentrating on the other. People withdrawing from paid work to raise children potentially contributes to lower family incomes, a shortfall in the contemporary labour force and the absence of a working-parent role model in some children's lives. Conversely, people deciding not to parent, or postponing parenting, potentially contributes to a decline in fertility rates that has repercussions for the level and structure of the national population and the "financial sustainability of social protection systems" (OECD 2004:10). Although Maher (2007:161) suggests women are most affected by such issues, given that they inevitably "carry the main burden of combining caring and paid employment", it is clear that fathers who, for instance, work long hours to support their families, also experience a burden in combining parenting and employment. In these terms, the key issue is differences in patterns of paid and unpaid work undertaken by mothers and fathers, especially when children are young, and the discrepancy in financial rewards between them.

⁴ Although I use the term "childless" for communicative economy, and because it is the dominant term throughout the literature, it tends to imply "an absence or deficiency" that does not reflect the perspectives of those who choose not to have children (Gillespie 2003). As Cameron (1997) has noted, most terminology used to describe voluntarily childless people is clumsy, offensive or irrelevant to non-parents, parents or both, and does little to make distinctions between those who choose not to have children, and those who find themselves childless as a result of infertility or circumstance.

Australasia is already affected by issues of labour supply and population ageing, and there are cross-national similarities in fertility levels and population and labour-force projections. Despite small overall increases in fertility in New Zealand and Australia over the last decade, both nations experience sub-replacement fertility (Statistics New Zealand 2007). This is perhaps not surprising given that recent census data reveal similar high employment rates for women in the main childbearing age bracket of 20-40 years. Between 60 and 75% of New Zealand women in this age bracket were employed in 2006, as were 60 to 70% of Australian women (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008a; Callister and Didham 2007). New Zealand has high fertility in relation to female employment levels, and in comparison to many other developed nations, but total fertility of 2.0 is still marginally below the replacement rate of 2.1 (Callister and Didham 2007; Statistics New Zealand 2007). Australian fertility currently sits at 1.8, which is significantly below the 2.1 replacement benchmark (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008b). This level of fertility became a concern for the government in 2004, which was made explicit in Peter Costello's famous "one for mum, one for dad and one for the nation" statement (Costello 2004). Unlike New Zealand family policy, contemporary Australian policy is characterised by this incipient pro-natal focus (Callister and Didham 2007; Jackson et al. 2006), although Lattimore and Pobke (2008:xvii) have recently argued that Australian policy is not explicitly pro-natalist in comparison to international examples. Sub-replacement fertility has been framed in terms of societal viability in Japan, Italy and Spain, for instance, where policies are in place specifically to raise birth rates (Callister and Didham 2007; Pool et al. 2007).

Low fertility levels can have implications for the size and structure of the future labour force. New Zealand and Australian statisticians both project their national populations will age dramatically, because comparatively low fertility rates over recent decades have provided fewer people to replace the large baby-boomer generation that is nearing retirement. Half of New Zealand's labour force will be older than 42 years in 2011 (Statistics New Zealand 2008a), while nearly a third of Australia's workforce will be 55 years or over by 2016 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999). The projected increases in older cohorts in the Australasian labour forces suggest that unless people continue to be in paid work until they are nearly 70, there may be a shortage of labour to meet future demands, as well as a reduction in future taxation revenues.

It is important to note at this point the strong link between fertility and migration. Replacement-level fertility is the number of children each woman needs to have to achieve "zero long-run population growth *in the absence of migration*" (Lattimore and Pobke 2008:xviii, my emphasis). As New Zealand and Australia both currently attract high numbers of potential migrants, migration could provide population levels that meet labour-force needs. However, given the low fertility currently experienced by many developed countries, there is considerable competition for migrants. Also, the highly skilled migrants who are most in demand are likely to have similar patterns of fertility to educated, employed people in developed countries, and this suggests low-fertility nations may be forced in future to look to nationals from high-fertility low-income countries to boost fertility (Callister and Didham 2007:8). The family-friendly and reconciliation⁵ policies outlined here are attempts by Australasian governments to address labour-force needs and the negative potential of low fertility and population ageing.

⁵ "All those measures that extend both family resources (income, services and time for parenting) and parental labour market attachment" (OECD 2002:10).

AUSTRALASIAN SOCIAL POLICY RESPONSES

Family Payments

In keeping with the Labour Government's assertion that "the best form of social security is a job" (Prime Minister Helen Clark, TVNZ, 3 June 2008), New Zealand's Working for Families (WFF) package combines elements of family support with incentives to work. Announced in the 2004 Budget, the package had three key objectives: making work pay, ensuring income adequacy, and supporting people, particularly beneficiaries, into paid work (New Zealand Cabinet Office 2004:2).⁶ WFF tax credits cover around three-quarters of families, and entitlement is based on the number of dependent children and the level and source of income of each family. Some key elements are conditional on a minimum amount of paid work. The package comprises six main elements:

- Family Tax Credit -- a payment for each dependent child aged 18 or younger
- In Work Tax Credit -- a payment of up to NZ\$60.00 per week to couples who jointly work 30 hours a week or sole parents who work 20 hours a week, with one to three children (extra benefits apply for more than three children)
- Parental Tax Credit -- a payment of up to NZ\$150.00 per week for a newborn or adopted baby for the first eight weeks or 56 days after birth (parents can claim either the parental tax credit or paid parental leave)
- Minimum Family Tax Credit -- a payment for families who earn up to NZ\$22,645.00 a year before tax through paid work, to ensure a minimum net family income of NZ\$355.00 a week
- Childcare Assistance -- a subsidy towards the costs of childcare for children under five, which is available for up to 50 hours a week for parents in work, education or training, and for up to nine hours a week for other parents; some changes to the Out of School Care and Recreation (OSCAR) subsidy are available for five- to fourteen-year-olds
- Accommodation Supplement -- assistance for low- and middle-income earners with the costs of rent, board, mortgage and other essential housing costs (Inland Revenue 2008).

WFF aims to subsidise some of the costs incurred by parents in having children, while providing an incentive for beneficiaries and employees to return to or remain in paid work. It is predicted that the package benefits "almost all families with children earning under \$70,000 a year, many families with children earning up to \$100,000 a year and some larger families earning more" (Ministry of Social Development 2008a). Approximately one-quarter of New Zealand families are entirely ineligible on the basis of income level.⁷ Although WFF does not attempt to cover the total costs of raising children, the Families Commission considers the gap between WFF subsidies and actual costs to be a significant issue, as "the overall costs of having children (including opportunity costs) are still not fully recognised, and ... may act as a disincentive to some people to have more children" (Families Commission 2008:60). The In Work Tax Credit element is the "key instrument" aimed at making work pay within WFF (Ministry of Social Development 2008b), although it has been

⁶ Key background and policy relating to the development of WFF can be found at: <http://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/policy-development/working-for-families/future-directions-working-for-families.html>.

⁷ Figures for the 2006/2007 tax year show that around 371,000 New Zealand families with children received WFF tax credits in the period. This level of uptake is roughly in line with initial estimates that three-quarters of families would be eligible for the package (Ministry of Social Development and Inland Revenue 2007:10).

criticised for doing little to encourage individuals or couples to take up additional work beyond the hours that are required to qualify for the payment (Dwyer 2005:viii). However, a recent government review found that the In Work Tax Credit is fulfilling its objective “as well or better” than anticipated, with a significant drop in those on the Domestic Purposes Benefit taking place around the time the credit was introduced (Ministry of Social Development 2008b).⁸

The Family Tax Benefit (FTB) package, introduced in 2000, forms the core of the family payments system in Australia. Unlike some elements of the WFF in New Zealand, the FTB is not conditional on employment and offers payments to most families with dependent children and extra help for families on benefits or low incomes. Australian family benefits are subject to income and assets tests, although they are relatively generous in comparison to the thresholds in New Zealand and many other OECD countries (Whiteford and Angenent 2002, cited in Gray et al. 2008:15). Over 80% of Australian families qualify for assistance (Brennan 2007; Gray et al. 2008). The main elements of Australia’s family payments system are:

- FTB Part A -- an income-tested, per-child, age-related payment available to most families with dependent children
- FTB Part B -- an additional per-family payment for single-income families with dependent children, and those with low second incomes (income-tested on second income only)
- Child Care Benefit / Child Care Tax Rebate -- an income-tested benefit to assist with the costs of approved child care providers (qualifying parents who are in work, study or looking for work are also eligible for a tax rebate, which covers 30% of child care expenses to a set maximum)
- Baby Bonus -- a universal lump-sum payment of AU\$5,000.00 per child to assist families following the birth or adoption of a child
- Parenting Payment -- a means-tested, fortnightly payment for a family’s principal caregiver of up to AU\$395.00 for partnered families and AU\$546.00 for sole parents
- Employment Entry Payment -- an AU\$104.00 one-off payment for people who previously received a Parenting Payment, on starting work (Australian Government 2008b; Centrelink 2008; Gray et al. 2008; OECD 2002).

FTB has been criticised for discouraging people -- predominantly women -- from entering paid work. FTB Part B, which entails high effective tax rates for secondary earners, contributes to reinforcing traditional male breadwinner / female caregiver stereotypes. This element makes it more beneficial financially for one partner to stay at home while the other increases their level of work, rather than sharing family care and work (Cass 2002, cited in Brennan 2007:38). In addition, the Employment Entry Payment is the only benefit for caregivers who move into work, and is so low as to be practically ineffective as an incentive to employment. The Baby Bonus payment currently provides universal cash assistance on the birth or adoption of a child, although from 1 January 2009 it will become a means-tested fortnightly payment. Eligibility will be limited to families with an adjusted taxable income equivalent to AU\$150,000 or less per year, which will result in around 16,000 Australian families each year becoming ineligible for financial assistance following the birth of a child (Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2008). Other changes to the Australian family payments system are to be implemented over the period to 2012 as part of the new Working Families Support Package, which includes measures such as

⁸ A detailed evaluation of WFF against the objectives of making work pay and improving income adequacy is due to be released in June 2009.

extra tax relief, an increase in the Child Care Tax Rebate and housing affordability assistance (Australian Government 2008d).⁹

Parental Leave

The Parental Leave and Employment Protection Act 1987 provides New Zealand parents who engage in a set minimum of paid employment the statutory right to government-funded, job-protected paid parental leave (PPL) of 14 weeks. To qualify, parents must have worked continuously with the same employer for an average of at least 10 hours a week and no less than one hour in every week or 40 hours in every month in the six or 12 months prior to their baby's birth or adoption.¹⁰ Payments equal an employee's gross normal pay up to a weekly maximum of NZ\$407.36. In addition, parents who qualify are also entitled to up to 52 weeks of job-protected unpaid extended leave. The Act does not provide fathers with any independent right to paid leave, in spite of its stated aim to ensure gender equity within the labour market and within families. It assumes mothers will generally be the primary caregivers to children (Department of Labour 2007:8), and although mothers can transfer all or part of their PPL to their spouses, the Act tends to cement perceptions of women as primarily responsible for child care, whether they provide it themselves or not. Extended leave, which can be shared between both partners and taken separately or consecutively, is the element that most takes account of the role of fathers (or other partners) in caring responsibilities. The Act provides an incentive to be in paid work by making PPL available only to those in stable employment, and aims to balance an employee's interest in job-protected leave with an employer's interest in maintaining qualified staff (Department of Labour 2007:8).

Australia is the only OECD nation besides the USA without a nationally funded paid maternity leave scheme (Brennan 2007; Maher 2007). The Australian Fair Pay and Conditions Standard entitles permanent full-time, part-time and regular casual employees with at least 12 months' service to up to one year of job-protected unpaid leave following the birth or adoption of a child (Australian Government 2008a). In combination with this job protection legislation, the Baby Bonus effectively provides a period of paid leave for many parents, although it is not officially recognised as a paid leave scheme. This arrangement offers support on having a baby, but it fails to explicitly recognise that earnings are forfeited by mothers who take time away from employment for childbirth, breastfeeding and infant care. Over the optimum 14-week parental leave period recommended by the International Labour Organisation, the Baby Bonus is also equivalent to less than the minimum wage rate (Brennan 2007:43). Paid leave is only available via individual negotiation with employers, although some larger organisations offer it as company policy or on a collective contract basis. A significant percentage of Australians do have access to paid parental leave, but the extent of this leave is often far shorter than is ideal, sometimes only comprising a few days

⁹ Comparison of the levels of financial support offered by WFF and FTB is difficult. Payment amounts are often unclear because many benefits are income or asset tested, and a comparison that considers levels of support between economic groups as well as cross-nationally is beyond the scope of this paper. The Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) calculation, which eliminates differences in price levels between countries, provides a potential means of comparing the packages, although economists acknowledge that difficulties exist with PPP which can affect the comparison.

¹⁰ Different entitlements are available to employees depending on whether they meet the six or 12 month criteria. Employees who meet the minimum hours test over a six month period only are eligible for 14 weeks paid leave, but ineligible for the 52 week period of extended leave. Detailed eligibility criteria is available at: <http://www.ers.dol.govt.nz/parentalleave/employees/summary.html>.

(Brennan 2007:44).¹¹ The implications of this lack of paid parental leave scheme for Australian fertility and the labour force are somewhat unclear, because determining the real effects of policies is a difficult task. Recent research presents a range of differing findings that suggest that, at best, family-friendly policies have a limited influence on fertility levels (d'Addio and d'Ercole 2005; Laroque and Salanié 2005; Robertson et al. 2006; Sleebos 2003).¹²

Women-focused Initiatives

Maher (2007) argues that women continue to be those most affected by the challenges of attempting to combine work and family, so it is worth briefly outlining the contemporary Australasian policy initiatives that focus on women. Lack of policy or research focus on men's roles in fertility and parenting decisions means that men are often overlooked in this regard.

The Action Plan for New Zealand Women (New Zealand's Plan), published in 2004, draws together various women-focused schemes to promote women's "suitable access to resources and opportunities; opportunity to choose and pursue a life path; full and active participation in society; adequate resources and support; freedom from discrimination; and ... contribution to society" (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2004:3). The Plan lays out government objectives for improving women's economic sustainability, work--life balance and well-being, as well as specific aims for Māori, Pacific, elderly and rural women. Despite drawing on feminist goals of valuing all contributions made by women in the home or the public sphere, the Plan has been criticised for constituting motherhood as "invisible ... inevitable and undesirable" while privileging women's participation in paid work (Kahu and Morgan 2007:134).

The Australian Government draws together policies aimed at women in annual statements that accompany Federal Budget announcements. The 2008 Women's Budget Statement (Statement) is comparable to New Zealand's Plan in that it announces a series of initiatives designed to "improve the lives of women and their families" and ensure women "will share more equally in Australia's prosperity" (Australian Government 2008c). Economic security and independence, safety, health and well-being are key areas of focus, along with the promotion of women's influence in decision-making and international affairs. Like New Zealand's Plan, the Statement places most emphasis on women's participation in the labour market. Attention is paid to women's roles as mothers, but having children is framed as something that must be negotiated in addition to paid work. Despite its focus on women as workers, the Statement does not deliver any additional support for women in the workplace, instead announcing that extensions to unpaid leave and the right to request more flexible working conditions will be developed in future, while paid parental leave models will be considered by the Australian Productivity Commission.

¹¹ Estimates of access to paid leave vary somewhat, but most statistics suggest that between 30 and 50% of Australian women have some access to paid maternity leave (Brennan 2007; Gray et al. 2008; Maher 2007). There are fewer statistics available concerning men's access to paid parental leave, but the figures may be reasonably similar; for example, 31% of men had access to paid paternity leave in their job in 2004 (Gray et al. 2008:18).

¹² Laroque and Salanié (2005), looking at France, and d'Addio and d'Ercole (2005), looking at 16 OECD nations, link government family benefit payments to higher fertility rates. However, Sleebos's review of research on the subject found only a "weak positive" relationship between fertility and policy (cited in Gray et al. 2008:14). Robertson et al. (2006:8) argue that "broader social and economic context, and individual values, preferences and attitudes" are more influential than policy on family form.

POLICY IMPACTS ON AUSTRALASIAN “SOCIAL LANDSCAPES”

Even if people do not have direct knowledge of policy detail, the “social landscape [is] ... influenced by the policy landscape” (Maher 2007:159). Comparison of the family-friendly policies of New Zealand and Australia suggests several significant collective social outcomes as a result of the aspects of work, family and gender that are emphasised or de-emphasised by governments. Both nations address concerns about an ageing labour force and future social viability by providing families direct cash assistance with the costs of raising children. This form of reconciliation support has been criticised by the OECD (2002) as being “primarily designed to support workplaces achieving labour market supply ... rather than assisting families per se”. The policies of New Zealand and Australia do, to varying degrees, tend to emphasise the importance of work over family. In particular, both women-focused schemes stress the importance of women’s participation in paid employment, and frame raising children as something women will do in addition to participation in paid work. In this respect, the criticism levelled at New Zealand’s Plan as “primarily designed to meet the needs of capitalism ... the need to increase productivity and to meet ... [an] increasing skilled labour shortage” (Kahu and Morgan 2007:144) is perhaps equally applicable to Australia’s current Women’s Budget Statement.

The childcare subsidies offered by both nations also suggest a strong emphasis on combining employment and raising a family. Because means testing in both countries generally provides this assistance only to qualifying lower- and middle-income families, childcare costs may still be a disincentive to having both parents working in many other families, especially in New Zealand, where income-testing thresholds are lower. There is a tension between the women-focused initiatives, which emphasise employment, and the family payments systems of the two countries, which have been criticised for failing to promote the work of both partners or levels of work beyond those necessary to qualify for particular benefits. This tension suggests Australasian governments are most concerned with ensuring labour supply, and tend to “hedge bets” in order to achieve some balance between present and future demands on labour. As Vincent et al. (2004:581) have noted, “women who have children stand at the nexus of [such] competing policy discourses”, which gender or degender them according to current social or economic policy. While social policy tends to celebrate women’s ‘natural’ mothering skills, economic policy strips away gender attributes to understand women simply as valuable workers who can contribute to the economy.

The competing economic and social discourses in current Australasian policies also support the separate-spheres model of work and family (Maher 2007; Vincent et al. 2004). When policy discourse represents work and family as separate spheres, people become less aware of an entitlement to combine both spheres (Maher 2007:167). This is particularly applicable to Australia, where the absence of a national paid parental leave scheme privileges the needs of employers over the needs of parents, and represents the workplace as a domain with no responsibility to the separate domain of the family. Both New Zealand and Australia have “work--life balance” plans that ostensibly help to connect the two spheres, although the programmes are significantly different. Legislation supports New Zealanders in seeking flexible working arrangements around family and other commitments, while Australia’s programme consists of guidelines for employers of women.

The New Zealand programme aims to manage “the juggling act between paid work and other activities ... including spending time with family” (Department of Labour 2008). Promoted

by the Department of Labour, it informs employees and employers about their rights and responsibilities under the Employment Relations (Flexible Working Arrangements) Amendment Act 2007, which allows employees with at least six months' service to an employer the right to request flexible working arrangements in order to care for family members. Australian work-life balance guidelines are not supported by legislation and are promoted by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency as a potential benefit to employers rather than employees. In line with Australia's parental leave policy, the needs of employers are privileged over those of employees, and employers have the right to choose whether to allow flexible working arrangements. Australian guidelines are targeted specifically towards women, in contrast with New Zealand's gender-neutral legislation, which tends to reinforce the historically dominant Australian idea that women are primarily carers, even if they are also wage earners (Brennan 2007).

In contrast with their governments' considerable focus on the future, the wider publics of New Zealand and Australia are less likely to understand their own working and family practices as directly linked to the future viability of the nation. People tend to be most focused on their present circumstances, and so family-friendly policies are commonly understood as "individual benefits rather than ... part of a broader social project" (Maher 2007:160). In these terms, the payment of cash benefits to families whose size and financial circumstances fit government guidelines contributes to the tensions that have been reported in the New Zealand media between parents and non-parents.¹³ Social policies that increasingly frame having children as a lifestyle choice that may be encouraged and financially supported by the state also tend to highlight the personal decisions of those who choose not to have children. The exclusion of people who choose not to be parents from family-friendly benefits is based on the notion that others benefit from the actions of young adults who produce children who will generate tax to sustain them in their old age. While such policies cannot be said to contribute to the traditional stigma attached to voluntary childlessness, they do articulate distinctions between parents and non-parents in terms of their contributions to national well-being. In this context, those who do not plan to have children, or delay parenting, may well be constituted as not just personally "selfish", but also as undermining the collective interests of their generation.

The nature and level of Australasian family benefits are also unlikely to significantly increase fertility by offering voluntarily childless people, or those delaying childrearing, cash incentives to become parents. High-income, highly educated women are more likely to choose to remain childless than men or women with lower income and education levels (Beaujot 2000; Callister and Didham 2007). Accordingly, the relatively modest financial incentives offered by WFF and FTB are unlikely to compensate for the significant loss of income many childless women would incur if they withdrew from paid work to raise children for even a few years. Although Hakim (2003) essentially limits women's heterogeneity by claiming they can be assigned to one of three "types" in relation to paid work and mothering, her suggestion that lifestyle preferences are now central in women's decision making about these issues is relevant. For this set of people, at least, individual lifestyle preferences will likely remain the basis of decision making about whether or not to have children, and others will be seen as making personal lifestyle decisions rather than acting as "good citizens".

¹³ New Zealand media have recently reported a growing division between parents and childless people over state benefits that are available only to families with dependent children. This sentiment has been pronounced since the introduction of the WFF package, which has been criticised as unfair to childless people, who receive no financial benefit for their contribution to taxation revenues through paid work (ONE News 2008).

Brennan's (2007:32) claim that families, rather than gendered individuals, were the traditional focus of Howard-era reconciliation policies in Australia is broadly applicable to the policies explored here, which tend to favour the family unit. With the exception of the women-focused schemes, descriptors such as mother, father, woman or man have largely been removed from Australasian policy language. Both countries began to phase out gendered terms in the 1980s, when it became necessary to adapt the traditional male breadwinner model that was previously the mainstay of family policy to the new reality of women's increased participation in the workforce (Shaver 1999).

Despite the removal of most gendered terms, the WFF and FTB policies in particular have gendered implications. Both family payment schemes include elements that provide benefits for the work of one partner in coupled families, and discourage any additional employment by the other partner. These elements support rather than disrupt the male breadwinner model by offering little incentive for both partners to work, and potentially encouraging the employed partner (who has historically been male) to work more and contribute less to caring for children. The lack of a paid parental leave scheme in Australia inevitably also supports gendered family roles, as the unavailability of paid leave from work is likely to provide Australian women with less incentive to take a job before or between the birth of children, at the same time as putting increased pressure on Australian fathers to provide financial support for their families. Kahu and Morgan's (2007:135) assertion that "government policy is an important resource in the discursive construction of women's identities" must be extended to recognise the influence of social policy on men's identities.

DISCUSSION

Despite a number of differences, "from afar, the social policy traditions of Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand look remarkably alike" (Shaver 1999:586). This macro-level analysis of contemporary family-friendly policies largely reveals similarities between the two countries. Most significant is the cross-national government focus on current and future labour supply, which results in policies that simultaneously promote the importance of employment and of having children. The tensions between these aspects of Australasian policies are not oversights, but evidence of these governments' competing interests in achieving economic prosperity through adequate provision of labour in the present context, as well as ensuring future labour market supply. Such policies have significant implications for parents and non-parents in both nations. Ultimately, financial assistance is not provided on the basis of employment alone. Having children is crucial to entitlement to family benefits, extended leave from work and many of the women-focused policies in Australasia. Voluntarily childless New Zealanders and Australians experience many freedoms and lifestyle choices that are not available to parents, but their personal choice not to have children has significant implications for the level of financial and policy support they receive from their governments. This analysis suggests that Australasian societies may be on the cusp of a more collective articulation of people's obligations to one another and the nation, including the collective consequences of personal lifestyle decisions such as choosing not to have children.

Although Australasian governments provide many initiatives aimed at supporting parents in their decision to have children, having children increasingly has implications that family-friendly policies struggle to address effectively. "Having children is becoming more complicated and expensive in liberal welfare states" (Baker 2008:78), and issues such as the

rising costs of living, low incomes, welfare dependency, childcare costs and availability, and competition in job markets remain for many parents, in spite of policy programmes that ostensibly address these problems. Means-tested family benefit schemes deliver support for the costs of raising children unequally across economic groups cross-nationally, and initiatives such as the In Work Tax Credit, FTB Part B and Australia's unpaid parental leave scheme offer little or no incentive for both parents to work, or increase their level of work. Contemporary Australasian policies have not yet successfully integrated the spheres of family and work, particularly in Australia, and many parents continue to seek a work--life balance that is suitable to their needs.

In this context, having children is likely to emerge as another potential lifestyle choice alongside voluntary childlessness. Public perceptions about the difficulties of reconciling work and family, and the notion of choice offered by schemes such as work--life balance programmes, will likely contribute to a new Australasian context where young adults will increasingly make more considered decisions about fertility and employment on the basis of their personal circumstances, demands and opportunities, in spite of family-friendly policies inspired by broader societal goals. Pool et al. (2007:343) predict couples may consider having children in future in terms of what is "bio-socially and financially possible". This will include issues such as how parenting might restrict or permit other lifestyle and leisure opportunities, whether income and debt levels can sustain raising children, entitlement to family benefits, how benefits might affect, facilitate or negate parents' involvement in paid work, and how caring and breadwinning can be negotiated to both partners' satisfaction. As Baker (2008:78) has noted, the social and economic pressures that influence people's fertility decisions are not easily addressed by social policy. This is particularly applicable to the contemporary Australasian context, where future-focused policies create a tension between working and parenting, and contrast markedly with people's focus on the present conditions in which they live, work, raise children, delay parenting or choose not to be parents. Even if fertility is not an explicit concern of governments at present, there remains a need to consider how the challenges of combining paid work and parenting might affect levels of fertility in the future.

REFERENCES

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (1999) *Labour Force Projections: 1999--2016*,
[www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/CA25687100069892CA256889000A645C/\\$File/62600_1999%20to%202016.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/CA25687100069892CA256889000A645C/$File/62600_1999%20to%202016.pdf) [accessed 10/6/2008].
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008a) *Australian Social Trends: Labour Force Participation across Australia*,
[www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/76166F0D01673E4ECA25748E0012A348/\\$File/41020_2008_13.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/76166F0D01673E4ECA25748E0012A348/$File/41020_2008_13.pdf) [accessed 25/8/2008].
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008b) *Fertility and Its Effect on Australia's Future Population*,
www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/bb8db737e2af84b8ca2571780015701e/680969f2eba89874ca2572360000ec8c!OpenDocument [accessed 10/6/2008].
- Australian Government (2008a) *2008--09 Commonwealth Budget: Overview -- Delivering Working for Families*, www.budget.gov.au/2008-09/content/overview2/html/overview_01.htm [accessed 20/7/2008].
- Australian Government (2008b) *Family Assistance Office*,
www.familyassist.gov.au/Internet/FAO/fao1.nsf/content/payments [accessed 12/6/2008].

- Australian Government (2008c) *Women's Budget Statement 2008--09*,
[www.fahcsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/VIA/budget2008-09/\\$File/2008-2009_fahcsia_wbs.pdf](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/VIA/budget2008-09/$File/2008-2009_fahcsia_wbs.pdf) [accessed 10/6/2008].
- Australian Government (2008d) *Workplace Rights & Rules*,
www.wo.gov.au/asp/index.asp?sid=7407&page=right-rules-view&cid=5370&id=767
[accessed 12/6/2008].
- Baker, M. (2008) "Restructuring reproduction: International and national pressures" *Journal of Sociology*, 44:65--81.
- Beaujot, R. (2000) *Earning and Caring in Canadian Families*, Broadview Press,
Peterborough.
- Boddington, B., and R. Didham (2008) *Busy Making Other Plans: Increases In Childlessness in New Zealand*, www.stats.govt.nz/NR/rdonlyres/DE8BA7D2-E8CC-44C4-88FD-40DF08195A4B/0/Article.pdf [accessed 4/3/2008].
- Brennan, D. (2007) "Babies, budgets, and birthrates: Work/family policy in Australia 1996--2006" *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 14:31--57.
- Callister, P., and R. Didham (2007) "Sub-replacement fertility: Is this an issue for New Zealand?" *Policy Quarterly*, 3:4--10.
- Cameron, J. (1997) *Without Issue: New Zealanders Who Choose Not to Have Children*, Canterbury University Press, Christchurch.
- Centrelink (2008) *Payments*,
www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/Payments/index.htm [accessed 17/7/2008].
- Costello, P. (2004) Transcript of the Treasurer, The Honourable Peter Costello MP, Budget lock-up press conference, Parliament House, 11 May,
www.treasurer.gov.au/tsr/content/transcripts/2004/047.asp [accessed 25/8/2008].
- d'Addio, A., and M. d'Ercole (2005) *Trends and Determinants of Fertility Rates in OECD countries: The Role of Policies*, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers No. 27, OECD, Paris.
- Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2008) *Responsible Economic Management: Better Targeting and Delivery of Baby Bonus*,
www.fahcsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/aboutfacs/budget/budget2008-08_fs-07.htm [accessed 20/7/2008].
- Department of Labour (2007) *Parental Leave in New Zealand: 2005/2006 Evaluation*, Department of Labour, Wellington.
- Department of Labour (2008) *Work--Life Balance in New Zealand*,
www.dol.govt.nz/worklife/index.asp [accessed 18/6/2008].
- Dwyer, G. (2005) *Dissecting the Working for Families package*, New Zealand Business Roundtable, Wellington.
- Families Commission (2008) *The Kiwi Nest: 60 Years of Change in New Zealand Families*, Families Commission, Wellington.
- Gillespie, R. (2003) "Childfree and feminine: Understanding the gender identity of voluntarily childless women" *Gender and Society*, 17:122--136.
- Gray, M., L. Qu and R. Weston (2008) *Fertility and Family Policy in Australia*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.
- Hakim, C. (2003) "A new approach to explaining fertility patterns: Preference theory" *Population and Development Review*, 29:349--374.
- House Standing Committee on Family and Human Services (2006) *Balancing Work and Family*, www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/fhs/workandfamily/report.htm [accessed 17/6/2008].

- Hugo, G. (2004) "Future immigration policy development in Australia and New Zealand" *New Zealand Population Review*, 30:23--42.
- Inland Revenue (2008) *Working for Families Tax Credits*, www.ird.govt.nz/wff-tax-credits [accessed 11/6/2008].
- Jackson, N., R. Rottier and A. Casey (2006) *Procreate and Cherish: Australia's Abrupt Shift to Explicit Pronatalism*, <http://ips.ac.nz/events/completed-activities/Fertility.html> [accessed 25/8/2008].
- Kahu, E., and M. Morgan. (2007) "A critical discourse analysis of New Zealand government policy: Women as mothers and workers" *Women's Studies International Forum*, 30:134--146.
- Laroque, G., and B. Salanié (2005) *Does Fertility Respond to Financial Incentives?* Discussion Paper 5007, Centre for Economic Policy Research, London.
- Lattimore, R., and C. Pobke (2008) *Recent Trends in Australian Fertility*, Productivity Commission Staff Working Paper, Productivity Commission, Canberra.
- Letherby, G. (1994) "Mother or not, mother or what? Problems of definition and identity" *Women's Studies International Forum*, 17:525--532.
- Letherby, G. (2002) "Childless and bereft? Stereotypes and realities in relation to 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' childlessness and womanhood" *Sociological Inquiry*, 72:7--20.
- Lunneborg, P. (1999) *The Chosen Lives of Childfree Men*, Bergin & Garvey, Westport.
- Maher, J.M. (2007) "The fertile fields of policy? Examining fertility decision-making and policy settings" *Social Policy & Society*, 7:159--172.
- Maher, J.M., and L. Saugeres (2007) "To be or not to be a mother? Women negotiating cultural representations of mothering" *Journal of Sociology*, 43:5--21.
- Ministry of Social Development (2008a) *Working for Families*, www.workingforfamilies.govt.nz/ [accessed 4/6/2008].
- Ministry of Social Development (2008b) *Working for Families Tax Credits Review*, www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/evaluation/working-for-families-tax-credits-review/index.html [accessed 28/10/2008].
- Ministry of Social Development and Inland Revenue (2007) *Receipt of the Working for Families Package: 2007 Update*, www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/evaluation/receipt-working-for-families/receipt-working-for-families-sept-2007.pdf [accessed 28/10/2008].
- Ministry of Women's Affairs (2004) *Action Plan for New Zealand women*, Ministry of Women's Affairs, Wellington.
- Morell, C. (1994) *Unwomanly Conduct: The Challenges of Intentional Childlessness*, Routledge, New York and London.
- New Zealand Cabinet Office (2004) *Cabinet Minute: Working for Families Package*, [www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/policy-development/working-for-families/cab-min-\(04\)-13-4.pdf](http://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/policy-development/working-for-families/cab-min-(04)-13-4.pdf) [accessed 28/10/2008].
- OECD (2002) *Babies and Bosses: Reconciling Work and Family Life (Volume 1): Australia, Denmark and the Netherlands*, OECD, Paris.
- OECD (2004) *Babies and Bosses: Reconciling Work and Family Life (Volume 3): New Zealand, Portugal and Switzerland*, OECD, Paris.
- ONE News (2008) *Budget to Benefit Childless Couples*, <http://tvnz.co.nz/view/page/1318360/1792755> [accessed 23/5/2008].
- Park, K. (2002) "Stigma management among the voluntarily childless" *Sociological Perspectives*, 45:21--45.
- Pool, I., A. Dharmalingam and J. Sceats (2007) *The New Zealand Family from 1840: A Demographic History*, Auckland University Press, Auckland.

- Probert, B., P. Ewer and K. Whiting (2000) "Work versus life: Union strategies reconsidered" *Labour and Industry*, 11:23--47.
- Robertson, J., V. Rogers and J. Pryor (2006) *Review of the Empirical Literature: Assessing the Impacts of Government Policies on Family Form*, Families Commission, Wellington.
- Shaver, S. (1999) "Gender down under: Welfare state restructuring in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand" *Social Policy & Administration*, 33:586--603.
- Sleeboos, J. (2003) *Low Fertility in OECD Countries: Facts and Policy Responses*, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers No. 15, OECD, Paris.
- Statistics New Zealand (2007) Table 2.12, Total fertility rate: New Zealand and selected countries 1994--2006, www.stats.govt.nz/NR/rdonlyres/6CCE8B83-9BFA-43F5-89C4-8C175CF9A991/0/TablesPart2FINAL.xls [accessed 24/8/2008].
- Statistics New Zealand (2008) *National Labour Force Projections: 2006 (base) – 2061*, www.stats.govt.nz/products-and-services/hot-off-the-press/national-labour-force-projections/national-labour-force-projections-2006-base-hotp.htm [accessed 10/6/2008].
- Vincent, C., S. Ball and S. Pietikainen (2004) "Metropolitan mothers: Mothers, mothering and paid work" *Women's Studies International Forum*, 27:571--587.
- Whiteford, A. (27 Oct. 2007) "Concern as more Kiwis leave for Australia" *Press*, p.