

Corralled back to the kids and kitchen

By Anne Summers

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Who would have thought? Peter Costello vying to be the father of the nation? When he released his Intergenerational Report, at the time of the 2002-03 budget, it showed the potentially dire financial consequences of our ageing population. Implicit in that report was a plea for women to get busy and have babies. That didn't work, so this year's budget is far more explicit. It's all about breeding.

And it was capped by an exhortation from the Treasurer for everyone to go off and have "one for the father, one for the mother, and one for the country". (Or was that "for the fatherland"? Wasn't that the last time a political leader told women to give up their jobs and concentrate on having children?)

Although Costello's comments have largely been greeted with ridicule, we should not ignore the seriousness of what is he proposing. This used to be John Howard territory, a "white picket fence" Weltanschauung that advocated a traditional nuclear family with women firmly in their place as home-makers, preferably full-time. Now the younger generation Costello has joined the fray and presumably the whole weight of government policy is behind the imposition of a "breeding creed" on the women of Australia.

The "breeding creed" is a term I use in my book *The End of Equality* to describe a new doctrine, a philosophy of procreation that I argued was being advocated by the Federal Government and other powerful agents in Australia who are panicking about our declining birth rate. The breeding creed defines women first and foremost as mothers and aims to subsume all of women's other choices and ambitions into a motherhood mentality. This ideology is new in the sense that it is being articulated as a social goal in this country for the first time in almost 100 years (it used to be called "populate or perish"), but it is also, in many ways, a restatement of a traditionalist view of women's role and women's possibilities.

The breeding creed aims to reverse, or at least arrest, that falling rate in fertility by making it difficult, even prohibitive, for women to have jobs, especially full-time jobs, and have children. Since the late 1990s the Government has made ruthless use of child care, employment, family assistance and taxation policy to steer women with children out of the workforce and into full-time motherhood. It has, via Family Tax Benefit A and the Child Care Benefit, imposed substantial financial penalties on mothers who continue to work. The intention is, apparently, to make it financially attractive for women to become full-time mothers in the hope that this will encourage more women to have children, and for those who already have them, to have more.

I did not think it possible that a federal government in 2004 would accelerate this process of providing incentives for women to leave employment to procreate but this is exactly what the budget has done.

It provides a generous maternity allowance which, unlike the invidious baby bonus, is not restricted to the first child and is paid regardless of the employment status of the mother. It does not, however, make any provision for paid maternity leave which is an essential prerequisite if women are to retain some attachment to the labour market so they can re-enter at a time of their choosing. The current prejudice in favour of public sector and large corporate employees, those most likely to enjoy paid maternity leave, continues, with low-income employed women the losers. They are the ones who have to leave their jobs, or soldier on with a year's unpaid leave.

Although some commentators have portrayed this budget as reducing the economic prejudice against two-income families, the retention of the Family Tax Benefit Part A which does not income-test the primary breadwinner proves otherwise. Although income tests have been eased on two-income families, it is still the pin-money-earning wives of millionaires who are most favoured by policy.

And, as was shown in these pages last week, the Costello ideal family, from a tax relief point of view, is one where the mother contributes only 20 per cent of total income. Couples with two full-time earners get very little from this "breeding creed" budget.

There has been an increase in child-care places but no assistance with child-care costs which are skyrocketing (\$350 a week now for a full-time place in Sydney) and set to increase further when child-care workers get their much deserved pay increase. Just this past week the British Government introduced tax credits for parents employing nannies; we in Australia are not even having the national political conversation about how to help working mothers defray these prohibitive costs. For many women, they make employment impossible to afford.

Finally, the only acknowledgement of the problems of balancing work and family was in the context of the increase in child-care places. OK, it was Howard, not Costello, who promised this issue would be a priority of his third term but you might have expected the Treasurer to give the so-called work/life balance, a subject which is one of women's major concerns today, more than a passing acknowledgement. He might, for instance, have wagged his finger at the startling number of employers who think it is OK to flout the Sex Discrimination Act and fire women while they are on maternity leave.

But no, this budget was not about supporting mothers who want to maintain an economic life as well. It's all about breeding. Who would have thought this could happen? That a political leader in Australia in 2004 could urge women to go forth and breed to the virtual exclusion of all else? And that leader would be Costello, not the Prime Minister? If Costello really thinks this is the way to establish his prime ministerial credentials, he might be in for a shock.

I don't think that the women of Australia are ready to give up their hard-won freedom and their continuing quest for equality in favour of full-time Kinder and Kuche (Kirche is probably an impossible sell in modern-day Australia) but the Federal Government is sure making it hard for them. They may well return the favour, come election day.

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This is adapted from a talk presented yesterday to the Sydney Writers' Festival.