Leonie Morgan - Victorian Co-Convener of EMILY’s List

This is just fantastic to see so many of you here today, people who I know are going to be putting in submissions to Pru Goward’s report so that we get a really good system of paid maternity leave up in across Australia.

I would like to firstly acknowledge Nicola Roxson who is a Federal Labor MP and Shadow Minister for Children and Youth and she’s representing Deputy of the ALP Jenny Macklin who is Minister for Employment and Education, so it is great that you can be here today, Nicola.

I thought I would start with a little bit about EMILY’s List. Some of you may not be familiar with EMILY’s although I see that there are lots of members here today. EMILY’s List is a national organisation, we began in 1996 and we have focused on getting more progressive Labor Party women into parliament. Since 1996 70 new women MP’s have gone into parliaments around Australia with EMILY’s List support. Mary Delahunty who spoke with us previously is one of those women we supported to get into parliament. We have well over 2,000 members across Australia and over 700 members in Victoria so we are quite a big women’s organisation within Victoria. We ask the women we support to sign up to the principals of pro choice, child care diversity and equity and so the matter of paid maternity leave is right up EMILY’s List’s alley.

EMILY’s List began a thorough look at the issue of paid maternity leave at our AGM last November when we heard from Dianne Yates, MP from the New Zealand Labour Government about the scheme they are bringing in on July 1st this year. And Lisa Heap who is also here today ran a terrific workshop on initiatives to date with paid maternity leave and got us really fired up about the issue.

We don’t think it is a when… we will get that paid maternity leave, we think it is a how ….will it all work. The most important thing for us at EMILY’s List is that as many women as possible are able to access the paid maternity leave scheme and that any paid maternity leave scheme must reflect the reality of women’s working lives. We know, as Marion (Lau) mentioned previously, that many Australian women are employed in casual, part time and contract work and they don’t necessarily have that period of continuous employment with the same employer. They haven’t worked with the same employer for 12 months. They must be able to access the paid leave scheme.

We believe that the paid maternity leave scheme must be based on a principal that is a fundamental human right and that paid maternity leave is required to address systemic discrimination against women in the workplace ensuring they are not disadvantaged through the whole of their lives due to their role and their time out in child bearing.

EMILY’s List additionally believes that a paid maternity leave scheme must maintain income security. This is vitally important for working women and for families and any paid leave must be for a minimum, a minimum period of 14 weeks.
What sort of principals do we think should apply to such a paid maternity leave scheme? Well we support the ILO maternity protection convention 183 and we think that provides the basis for a scheme which would work well in Australia. The Australian Government hasn’t as yet ratified this Convention, but we do hope that they will and we trust that the State Labor Governments will pressure the Federal Government towards signing this convention. It provides the following provisions. That the majority of women should be covered. That the period of paid maternity leave should be not less that 14 weeks. That payment during maternity leave must be in a cash benefit form and equivalent to at least 2/3 rds of a woman’s earnings and also amongst other things it emphasises the right to breastfeed or express milk upon return to paid work. We think that is really important for women too.

With any scheme we believe there is certainly a need for a review period. The New Zealand Labour Government scheme will be reviewed 12 months after implementation. Even though they are yet to come into actual implementation on July 1st, they are already finding there are some things that they would like to tinker with within their scheme, so this review period is really essential. We believe that the review period will ensure that the scheme can be adjusted to work for the advantage of all and that’s what we are all about.

So who should pay for the paid maternity leave scheme? Well in regard to who pays, EMILY’s List doesn’t have a definitive position. In order to get a position on this we asked our Victorian members though our email list, what their views were and there seemed to be two views about who pays. Some members maintained that it should be a three tiered scheme with the Government paying a share, the employer paying a share based on a levy determined by the number of employees and a top up to full wage negotiated through Enterprise Agreements. Others, myself included believe that a two tiered scheme with Government funding to average weekly earnings and a top up to full wage negotiated through Enterprise Agreements is the way to go. Notwithstanding this, we all agree and it sounds like a lot of you do too, that the scheme should be mainly Government funded.

We believe that asking individual employers to pay for individual employees will ensure discrimination in the workplace against women.

Paid maternity leave is also only just the start. There should be an option for the principal carer, if they are not the mother, to also access the paid leave, as well as parental leave for the father or same sex partner to take time off work to care for the new baby. It also goes without saying that adoptive parents should be able to access the maternity leave scheme.

However as other speakers today have already emphasised, paid maternity leave is not the only thing that is necessary for equality for women in the workplace. There are three things that we think are most necessary. Firstly good quality, affordable child care which includes both pre school care and school age care is really important for equity for women in the workplace. Secondly flexible working options to ensure that balancing
work and family is a real possibility. And we think within those flexible working options there should be a real focus on quality part time work, not just any part time work, but quality part time work that includes the opportunity to move between full and part time work, as well as access to training and opportunities for promotion. And finally and most importantly, and Mary Delahunty mentioned this as well, for true equality for women in the workplace we believe at EMILY’s List that pay equity is certainly a must for Australia’s women. Thank you very much.