

FAMILIES, COMMUNITY SERVICES AND INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS LEGISLATION AMENDMENT  
(CHILD SUPPORT REFORM CONSOLIDATION AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2007

We support the section of this bill that makes registration of birth a condition of eligibility for the Maternity Payment.

A system of birth registration that leads to all births being registered in a timely manner is crucial for planning as well as for administrative purposes. Birth registers should provide an accurate count of annual births by parental and other characteristics. These counts form the basis of birth-rate calculations, which feed in to projections of future population at a local, state and national level. They also allow fair scrutiny of the impact of government policy on birth rates.

Currently, Australia does not have a complete and timely system of birth registration. There is strong evidence that several thousand births go unregistered each year. It is a legislative requirement that births be registered within 60 days of the birth taking place. However, as the law stands, there is little incentive for parents to register the birth of a child. Parental payments, including the Maternity Payment, can be claimed without proof that the birth has been registered. Proof of birth registration is not required for immunisations, school or childcare enrolment, or adding a child to the family Medicare card. As noted by McDonald (2005), 'complete and timely registration could be guaranteed overnight if payment of the new Maternity Payment were to be contingent upon production of proof of registration. This would also limit the scope for fraudulent claims'.

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**Excerpt from P McDonald 2005. 'Has the Australian fertility rate stopped falling?', *People and Place*, 13(3):1-5.**

Based on the ABS [Australian Bureau of Statistics] registration data, except for a dip in 2001, the TFR [Total Fertility Rate] has been relatively stable at around 1.76 births per woman since 1998, and its value seems to have risen slightly in 2004.

From these data, the conclusion must be drawn that Australian fertility appears to have stopped falling. Based on AIHW [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare] data, however, the TFR remained relatively constant (and above 1.8 births per woman) from 1996 to 2000 but fell from 2000 to 2002. Thus, conclusions about both the levels and the trend of fertility vary according to the data set that is used.

There is reason to believe that the difference between the two data collections is due to under-registration of births in the ABS official collection. While the AIHW series is more reliable, unfortunately, well into 2005, the most recent data available from this source is for 2002.

The balance of the evidence seems to be that the Australian TFR has stopped falling and, it is likely that in 2004, it rose. The story would be clearer if the coverage of the registration data matched that of the [AIHW] data collection.

In regard to the registration of births by parents, complete and timely registration could be guaranteed overnight if payment of the new [Baby Bonus] were contingent upon production of proof of registration. This would also limit the scope for fraudulent claims on the Maternity Payment and on Family Tax Benefit payments.

Finally, such a policy would bring pressure to bear upon State and Territory Registrars to complete the registrations in rapid time.

...the apparent fall in fertility in the 1990s may have been exaggerated by the apparent increasing under-registration of births across the decade. Under-registration introduces a degree of uncertainty into what the trend in fertility actually is but it seems very likely that Australian fertility has been higher than the 'official' figures have indicated.