

Supporting Mother's Benefit

1973 –

Other Names: • Supporting Parent's Benefit

Details

The Supporting Mother's Benefit was a Commonwealth allowance introduced in 1973 by the Whitlam government. It extended equal access to income support to all single mothers. In November 1977, it was replaced by the Supporting Parent's Benefit, with sole fathers becoming eligible for payments. This payment made it possible for many single mothers to keep their children and played a significant role in adoption rates declining dramatically in Australia after 1973.

A number of submissions to the [Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices](#) Senate inquiry (2011-2012) showed that lack of financial support was a key factor for many single mothers who adopted out their babies.

Before 1973, there were Commonwealth and state payments that some single mothers could access, however they were insufficient to support a child. Furthermore, many mothers reported that hospital staff and social workers withheld information from them about the available benefits, a factor that heavily influenced their decision to have their child adopted (Senate report, 2012, pp.105-6).

For example, some sole parents managed to access the Special Benefit, introduced under the Unemployment and Sickness Benefits Act 1944. But it was only temporarily available to single mothers. Social worker Teresa Wardell wrote a report about Commonwealth financial assistance for children in 1957. Her notes reveal the financial difficulties encountered during this period by single mothers who kept their children:

Unmarried mother who keeps her child. In great need after 6 wks when [Special Benefit] ceases – she can then go on [Unemployment Benefit] or get a job – if girl under 21 (lower wages) she can't possibly retain child and work. These girls usually alone. Other countries give a living allowance for girl to stay at home and care for child. Australia's attitude still a punitive one (Teresa Wardell, quoted in Senate report, pp.108-9)

The Senate committee acknowledged that information about financial assistance was withheld from single mothers. Notwithstanding this, the Senate committee concluded that “there was not appropriate government funding available to mothers prior to 1973 that would have provided the ongoing financial support necessary for mothers to keep their babies if they lacked any private source of income or family assistance” (p.113).

Minister for Social Security Bill Hayden spoke about the new benefit in the House of Representatives in May 1973:

The classes of women to whom the new benefit will be payable under this Bill are unmarried mothers, including deserted de facto wives and de facto wives of prisoners; and (b) married women not living with their husbands (deserting wives) or wives who have been separated for various other reasons, provided that the women be living with, and have the custody, care and control of a child (or children) of whom they are the mothers. These women are those who are not at present eligible for a widows' pension under the Social Services Act and who, with their children, have been subject to discrimination in the level of assistance available to them in the past (Hansard, 22 May 1973, p. 2382, quoted on p.104 of Senate report).

The announcement of the Senate inquiry in 2011 was an acknowledgement that the Commonwealth government's failure to provide adequate financial support for single mothers contributed to forced adoptions.

The introduction of the Supporting Mother's Benefit in 1973 provided single mothers with the means to keep their children, and it also helped to address the social stigma of single parenthood in Australia. Following the introduction of this benefit, the rate of adoptions in Australia decreased dramatically. This drop in numbers was directly related to the new Supporting Mother's Benefit, however there were also other factors, including changing social attitudes, increased availability of birth control and declining birth rates (Higgins, 2012).

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International Women's Day rally, Melbourne, 1975

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Resources

- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, [Answer to Questions on Notice provided by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Received 9 December 2011.](#), Submissions received by the Committee, 2012

Other Resources

Title: Commonwealth Department of Social Services: Benefits available to girls in homes for unmarried mothers

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