Towards Liberation:
which step now?

Mavis Robertson

In the fourteen months since the formation of a Labor Government in December, 1972, many social policies, once only discussed in the left, have become subjects for wider consideration.

From the viewpoint that everyone should be entitled to a minimum living wage, it seems feasible, at first sight, for payments to be made to those who do housework in the family, or, more particularly, to those mothers who care for children at home.

It is well known that there is sympathy for a 'mother's allowance' amongst ALP caucus and Cabinet members. The motives of the politicians have not been clearly revealed. Some may wish to give recognition and financial compensation to women who now perform necessary, but unpaid, work. A stronger pressure was, and is, for the government to tackle the serious lack of child care facilities. This pressure comes from various quarters, from women who want to work outside the home, from parents and others who value a social framework for the early training of children, and from employers who want women in the workforce.

It is known that some politicians, reflecting the 'women's place is in the home' ethos do not favour extensive child care facilities catering for the age group 0-3. The ALP has placed its main emphasis on developing pre-school education for 4 and 5 year olds. A 'mother's allowance' may have been seen as a means to take the heat out of the growing demand for an all-embracing child care scheme and in any case limited payments to individuals who stay at home precludes the necessity to provide expensive buildings and staff. In a society where, despite challenges, a prevailing view is that the child, when
young, needs mother, such a scheme would not tread on too many toes. The scheme was given serious examination at various levels of government but now appears to have been shelved because of the enormous cost involved.

This suggests that any redistribution of income within the framework of a system based on profit will be limited. There may be adjustments in present pension rates and some extensions but the idea of a minimum wage for everyone, and especially for women not now in receipt of any income, is just not on.

Although the introduction of a 'mother's allowance' is not an immediate prospect, the principles advanced in the debate are important for socialists who do propagate the idea that everyone is entitled to a minimum wage.

In the women's movement, the question has not been seen simply in terms of payments to mothers (or fathers), but for housework. At a women's trade union conference in 1973, the need for an industrial award was canvassed. In other discussions a 'mother's allowance' has found both support and opposition.

It is admitted that most women are housewives and that almost all women do housework. It is part of reality that society depends on a large amount of unpaid work, mainly performed by women in the family. Since it is important to disclose this reality to show how capitalism benefits from the exploitation of women there is justification for the demand that this work become paid work.

At first sight, it seems a simple and principled solution to demand a rate of pay which would be made if the houseworker were an employee, but the matter is not simple and the principles involved are by no means clear-cut because other questions intervene.

Should everyone who does housework be paid?

Does that mean that the woman who works in industry or office, and then comes home to do a 'second shift' in the home be paid twice? Should single men, as well as women, living outside their families, be paid for the housework they do? Should the payment be divided when a man helps with the housework, and who determines the percentage? Who supervises or determines efficiency ratings?

These questions, and others, pose issues which go far beyond the provision of a minimum wage for everyone by touching upon many aspects of wage fixation policy, on the 'traditional' expectations of women, and their role in the family.

If, for example, an industrial award took account of the many skills involved in housework and the hours worked, the wage would have to be fixed far above the present minimum unskilled wage paid for a 40-hour week, with annual holidays and sick leave.

More importantly, if a wage was paid, large or small, it would confirm most women into their traditional role of houseworker and child rearer, reinforcing the capitalist value that women's place is in the home. Far from freeing women through the provision of this form of economic independence (an important factor) payment for work in the home would divert attention from the need to find social solutions for much of the work now normally done by women and increase the burdens upon them. Wages for housework would, for example, provide a much more telling argument than any now existing that it is proper for women to stay at home. Some men would surely cut down on their financial contribution to the upkeep of the home on the grounds that the woman already has been paid money for this purpose. Economic independence would be an illusion in such circumstances.

And it would be understandable if men then refusal to give any help in the home on the grounds that women have been paid to do that job(s).

One basic theory of wage fixation could be challenged, but not necessarily to the advantage of women.

In capitalist society, it is the clear aim of the owners of industry to return to workers, in the form of wages, as little of the value that the workers have produced as is possible. Although the wage rates are mediated by struggle, circumstances and prevailing social expectations, the general idea is to provide sufficient for the worker to be fed, clothed, housed, rested and healthy enough to come back to work the next day, and for the next generation of workers to be reared.

It is because provision must be made for the future that wages are deemed to provide sufficient for a worker to reproduce himself, that is, for the bearing and rearing of children. It is not a question of whether wage fixation tribunals speak in terms of an amount 'sufficient to keep a man, his wife and children in frugal comfort', as it was once so quaintly expressed, or whether wages are fixed by some other formula such as one rate for each job, but the assumption that wages will cover these costs.

In this context, the unpaid work of housewives and mothers is not a proper description
since women so employed are actually paid in kind with food, shelter, a degree of protection and status. The quality of the payment depends on the resources and the attitude of the husband. Direct exploitation is experienced by those who produce value but receive only a part of that value as wages. Their dependents, who perform an essential part of the worker process, share that exploitation and suffer specific oppression because they are dependents.

If a redistribution of income is seen from within the capitalist system, wages for housework could leave profits untouched. It is possible to conceive of a redistribution which in monetary terms would preserve the status quo, with those now in the work force receiving less and those at home receiving a direct payment but with the total no more than the amount now paid as wages. This form of economic independence for women would be 'won' at tremendous cost. It would make more permanent the division of labor based on sex, and further alienate men and women from each other.

But now let us assume that it is possible to force a redistribution of income which subtracts from capitalist profits. The demand for, and the achievement of, equal pay can achieve a certain redistribution. This demand has the added value of challenging the concept that all wages have a 'family' component and that the work of women is less than the work of men. In general, however, if redistribution is forced in terms of individual wages and not in terms of social responsibility for child care, some areas of housework, etc., there will be little or no recognition of the fact that the area of exploitation in capitalist society extends far beyond the factory or office, and for women is primarily centred in the home.

This suggests that when income can be genuinely redistributed in a society which has ended capitalist exploitation, payment for housework would not be a suitable option. This becomes clear if we consider the cost of the modest scheme investigated by the present Labor Government, which was designed to provide a mother's allowance of $20 per week. Estimates show that if this payment were made to women who stayed at home to care for a child or children under 16 years of age, the annual cost would be at least $1,220 million. The cost could be reduced to $435 million per annum if the allowance was only paid to mothers with children under the age of three. Those making these estimates (John Mahoney and John Barnaby in Social Security, Winter 1973) note that their figures may be understated since some women, presently employed in low-wage industries, might cease working if such an allowance were introduced.

It is difficult to think about a sum of money of the magnitude of $1,220 million. It is approximately the amount allocated for 'defence' in the 1973-74 Budget, and on that fact alone, some might wish to argue that the country could afford that sum to pay mothers but the fact that large sums of money are now wasted, as much of the defence allocation is, should not be an excuse for substituting other forms of wasteful expenditure. If the payment was not an allowance but a wage fixed by an industrial award, and was paid to everyone engaged in housework -- not just mothers -- the cost would be close to half of all money now allocated through the national budget. As such, the demand is a fantasy. Its one value lies in pointing to the fact that so much socially necessary work for society is done without monetary reward.

In principle, to avoid the further legitimisation of the role of houseworker for women, and in practice to avoid a very wasteful and costly method of ensuring that necessary work be done it would be more rational to invest money to provide facilities which would end large areas of private housekeeping. It is thus more logical now, and in the future society, to demand, instead of wages for housewives, the extension of social responsibility to provide:

1. attractive, comfortable housing designed both for private and collective living
2. multiple child care facilities to take account of a variety of needs for children and parents
3. industrial cleaning services
4. community laundries and laundry services
5. meals for children at school, meals for adults at work, a major expansion of pre-prepared foods and neighbourhood dining rooms.

All these facilities exist now, there is no technical problem, but they are available only to those who can afford them. The further development of such service industries, under capitalism, depend primarily on whether or not they are profitable. The problem is the prevailing values of capitalist society.
At the same time, it is relevant to raise the need, also technically feasible, to reduce working hours for all workers. A shorter working week and more flexible hours would make it possible for both men and women to share the burden of those areas of private housekeeping which cannot yet be solved socially.

If trade unions recognised that the payments returned to workers are for the purposes previously outlined, unions may cease to worry about the 'family component' in the (male) wage, with all that implies for both housewives and women in the work force, and begin to see why it would be valuable for both men and women if demands were made on employers for additional and different forms of payment.

Demands for child care facilities should be the demands of parents (not simply of women), while the cost should be a charge on all employers, and not only on employers of women. Demands for health insurance, for dining rooms, for industrial cleaning and bulk-buying food facilities are quite practical and, if introduced into negotiations when wage claims are being made, could begin to undermine the capitalist value that everything which takes place outside of the work situation is a private responsibility.

The position of women as mothers is a connected but different matter.

The health and welfare of women as mothers ought to be a growing social concern and one which is not confined to the period when a woman is pregnant or gives birth. All women who are potentially mothers experience biological functions which can disadvantage them. It would, in my view, be reasonable to insist that sick leave provisions for working women be of sufficient duration to enable women to take time off if they have problems associated with menstruation. Some women do not face menstruation problems, but many do. Until medical solutions are found, this condition ought to be recognised and compensated for.

Pregnancy may or may not be difficult but it is certainly not a condition which can be taken lightly. Medical practice and labor laws should reflect the need to make pregnancy less disruptive and difficult than it is now.

The question again arises: Who pays?

One could consider pregnancy in a similar category to an industrial accident where compensation is paid. The analogy isn't very good since it can be argued that pregnancy is a matter of choice (although that isn't always the case). I would argue that the months of pregnancy and the initial period of nursing represent the basic element in the production of the most valuable asset of society, the child.

Given the population explosion and a growing consciousness that the resources of our planet are finite, there is a tendency to suggest that this is not so, that women should not have children, and might be penalised if they do.

Certainly, the need to place different facts and possibilities before women is essential. This is a complex matter involving sex education, availability of contraceptives and contraception knowledge, access to safe, legal abortion, a real understanding of the problems of consumerism, population growth, and conservation of resources.

But punitive action is quite a different matter. This would be directed against already disadvantaged women. Socialists should be for choice, based on a growing consciousness of the issues involved, and the absolute right of women to control human reproduction.

Since most women will continue, in the foreseeable future, to want children and to have children, their position as mothers must be a primary concern and the view, alienating to most women, that it is rather unliberated to have children should be rejected just as the description of the objective position of women in the family should not appear to be a demand to end all personal relationships and views on the need for social responsibility for children should not assume that there is no need for individual love and care for children or that we can jump over stages in human development and demand that everyone love all children equally.

Instead of beginning a program for mothers at the point when they are caring for children, it would be more logical to insist that substantial maternity leave becomes a right. Maternity leave is, in one sense, a payment for the use of one’s body, the physical effort involved in birth, and compensation for damage done to veins, womb, etc. It should not be a payment made only if a woman ceases employment, but one which is made whether she works outside the home or not. The cash equivalent of six months’ pay does not seem unreasonable, in my view, since such an amount would allow considerable choice in respect to employment and adjustment. To prevent such a social service (or even a more limited maternity leave scheme) being used to deprive a woman of employment prospects on the grounds that she may become a burden on an individual employer, a system of payment involving all employers, similar to that which covers workers’ compensation, could
be introduced so that there is no particular disadvantage.

A nursing mother should have the right to shorter hours of work without loss of pay, funded in a similar way. The right to light work at this time should not be sought to point up her weakness, but in recognition of the service she is providing to a child and to society. There would be many other reasonable demands which could be introduced for the benefit of women as mothers which need not reinforce the traditional female role, but would provide much needed support. This would require a turn from the capitalist notion of private responsibility to one where the birth of a child is seen as a value to society for which due compensation is necessary.

No set of demands can be taken in isolation. It could be argued that such provisions for child birth would encourage women to produce too many children, but this ignores the fact that the poor and disadvantaged, in general, have the largest families. Contrary to the facts, such notions suggest that women want to be pregnant most of their lives. When they are widely propagated, they divert the struggle for real aid to women and reinforce the reactionary view that at base women are just breeding machines.

But what then of the mother who wants to stay at home with her young child or children, for whatever reason.

First, it should be clear that many women have no other alternative, and paternity leave, while a useful addition to the early days of a child’s life, is no substitute for the multiple choice which should exist but does not.

Until there is a variety of child care in the community, and at workplaces, providing part-time and full-time care, specialised care for the sick or the disadvantaged, after school care and holiday care, and until there are flexible employment prospects for both parents, we will never know how many women will, from choice, remain at home with young children.

It will not be possible to prove that social care of children is more desirable (for the child and the parents) than individual care until social care is available to be experienced. Even then, there may be exceptions.

The question here is priorities. A massive allocation of funds (and not only funds) would be needed to provide adequate child care. Once that priority is achieved, but only then, I would not regard it as unreasonable to pay to any male or female who decided to stay at home to care for a child the equivalent of the cost of maintaining that child in a nursery school. (The amount would probably be $20). Here it would not be a question of forcing acceptance of one solution but of showing by example and convincing people that the social solution is preferable to the individual solution.

In Australia we are a long way from the point where this option is open. The need now is to channel campaigning energy into winning conviction that child care must be the priority, that the demand for a mother’s allowance is a diversion which, in any case, is less likely to be achieved, and if achieved would not solve, but rather enhance the problems most mothers face.

At the same time, I believe that child endowment should be maintained as a direct social service, representing some social responsibility for children. It is a scandal that child endowment payments have remained stationary for many years without much protest from anyone. If the payment were a fixed percentage of average wages, paid to the mother when the child is young, and paid to the child when she or he is older, this would represent some redistribution of income and could force the capitalist system to hand over a larger part of the social product for the reproduction and care of the new generation.

A total view is needed. While child care is crucial, policy on social services, hours of work, employment opportunities, holidays, etc. are all connected. No one may expect great changes immediately, even when social responsibility has been widely accepted for what is now ‘women’s work’. Thousands of years of tradition cannot be eroded quickly, but the point is to take those steps which begin to replace ‘women’s work’ and not to seek solutions which will maintain it, albeit in more comfortable surroundings.