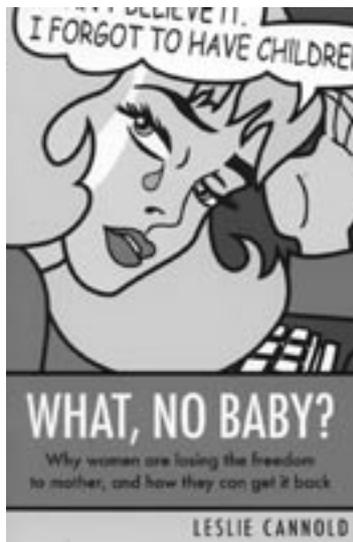


# Baby boom or baby bonus?

Margaret Fitzherbert  
reviews

*What, no baby? Why women are losing the freedom to mother, and how they can get it back*

By Leslie Cannold.  
(Curtin University Books,  
2005, 336 pages)



There is never a convenient time to have a baby', the young mother said to me, 'and once you get over that, it's fine'.

According to Leslie Cannold, it's far from fine. The hurdles that Australian society places before women of child-bearing age mean that many will never have children. The problem is not a lack of desire to reproduce, but circumstances that stifle the birth rate.

*What, no baby?* is well researched and scholarly, and written with humour and flair. It includes a thorough but non-obtrusive literature review and engaging personal interviews. Cannold considers recent media commentary on women's childlessness. This includes a well-deserved bucketing of journalist Virginia Haussegger who, in 2003, wrote in *The Age* that it was feminism's fault that she was not a mother, and that no-one told her she would run out of time to get pregnant.

Australia's birth rate has declined for decades, and Cannold considers the women behind the statistics. Few have made a genuine choice, she says, that is, 'a decision a person makes when she has a full range of possible options from which to select, and is equally free to choose any one of them'.

Her assumption is that most women want to work and mother, or must do so. Little consideration is given to women who want to opt out of the workforce after starting a family. In fact, Cannold makes the provocative

statement: 'When women do nothing but nurture, they miss out on the sense of mastery that comes from meaningful and valued involvement in the work of society'.

The most family friendly nations—where women have comparatively generous paid maternity leave; access to low-cost childcare; support to maintain paid work; and male partners who significantly contribute to domestic chores—are those with the highest birth rates. Cannold seems to believe that the societal conditions mean that women, knowing of the support structures available to them, are confident to become mothers. I wonder if this could be too simple an assumption. Leaving aside the reinforcement effect of the policies, did they cause the behaviour, or did they follow it?

Australia's now-rising birth rates also offer a practical challenge to Cannold's thesis that a significantly more family friendly society is the answer.

In the twelve months to September 2004, 255,000 births were recorded in Australia—the highest number of annual births in almost a decade. This rise preceded the Federal Government's \$3,000 baby bonus, which commenced in July 2004, and it is expected that an-

nual birth figures will continue to rise.

In fairness to Cannold, it's unclear whether Australia's recently increasing birth rate is a true reversal of the trend. It may represent a catch-up for women of my generation, who have delayed rather than discounted having children, but will probably still have fewer children than our mothers' generation. The current rise in births may yet taper out.

For Cannold, there are two groups of 'circumstantially childless' women: thwarted mothers and those who wait and watch.

A thwarted mother wants a child, but is stopped by practical barriers. This may be the breakdown of a long-term relationship, just as children were planned, as the thwarted mother-to-be approaches her late thirties. For waiters and watchers, the circumstances are never quite right. 'They neither pursue [motherhood] nor actively avoid it; they simply wait to see how their feelings and their circumstances develop.'

It's not clear how changes to government policy, or more supportive partners, could really make this group get on with it. Is the answer really that many don't want to be mothers, but don't feel comfortable admitting it? There are practical problems with assessing this, and Cannold rightly criticizes a post-feminist tendency to label almost all childless women as having chosen this outcome. Nonetheless, surely it is not the role of governments actively to push women to have children when, frankly, they seem very half-hearted about the prospect of being mothers.

Aside from this reservation, *What, no baby?* is a strong and considered contribution to the debate.

*Margaret Fitzherbert is the author of Liberal Women: Federation to 1949.*

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