



Labor minister slams Aston Liberal candidate over childcare column

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Highlight: Anne Aly has seized on a column Liberal candidate Roshena Campbell wrote for The Age that questioned "throw[ing] taxpayer money at childcare".

Body

Childcare will be a key battleground in the fight for the marginal seat of Aston, as Prime Minister Anthony Albanese formally launches the campaign for Labor candidate Mary Doyle this weekend.

Labor has seized on a column Liberal candidate Roshena Campbell wrote for The Age that questioned "throw[ing] taxpayer money at childcare".

There are nearly 6000 families in the seat, held with a 2.8 per cent margin after a swing against retiring member Alan Tudge, who use childcare and could apply for subsidies that will be introduced by the Albanese government from July 1.

While the Coalition ultimately backed Labor's subsidies, in June last year Campbell questioned the \$4.7 billion outlay, which will increase the subsidy rate to 90 per cent for families earning up to \$80,000 and create a sliding scale in discounts for those earning less than \$530,000.

"What is so extraordinary about this essentially bipartisan rush to throw taxpayer money at childcare is it has taken place without any real debate about whether it is a good idea to get mothers back into the workforce so quickly," Campbell wrote.

"If we are serious about giving working women choices, governments need to also be willing to support them in the choice of staying at home in the early years."

"Yet instead we subsidise childcare centres to replace parents for almost all our children's waking hours. In doing so, we send a strong message to mothers that they cannot afford to be out of the workforce for too long."

The minister responsible for childcare, Anne Aly, who will hold a press conference with Labor candidate Mary Doyle on Friday, said Campbell's arguments proved she wanted to "make the cost of living pressures in the outer-east worse, not better".

"I hope Peter Dutton and his handpicked candidate travel to the outer-eastern suburbs to explain to local families why they don't deserve cost-of-living relief. We know quality early childhood education provides lifelong benefits - from improved education and health outcomes all the way to higher paying jobs," she said.

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But Campbell affirmed her position and said she understood the pressures of raising a young family as a barrister and councillor.

"An article I wrote last year put forward one suggestion, that as well as subsidising child care, a portion of the government's assistance could support women who re-enter the workforce after taking extended parental leave," she said. "I believe policy debate is healthy and put forward that suggestion with a view to supporting more working parents."

Dutton has travelled to Aston three times since the April 1 byelection date was called last month, including on Thursday when he played table tennis with Chinese Australians, who [make up nearly 15 per cent of the electorate](#). The Coalition has been working on rebuilding trust with the Chinese diaspora after the community shifted support away from the Morrison government.

The opposition's campaign in Aston has focussed on blaming Labor for the high cost of living and interest rate rises and holding the government to account for [cutting key road projects in the seat](#).

The childcare plan is regarded by Labor sources who were not cleared to speak on the record as an underrated factor in the party's strong election win in May.

Treasury modelling suggests the childcare change will free up 37,000 workers in the policy's first year.

Labor [candidate Mary Doyle](#), a former unionist and finance sector worker, said she experienced the large burden of childcare costs when she raised the two kids.

"Whenever I talk to parents in our community they're telling me the same thing, and they are thrilled when I tell them relief is on the way," she said.

Dutton has pitched the Liberal Party as the underdog in Aston, but it is expected to retain the seat because byelections usually produce swings against sitting governments. Labor figures privately believe it would be a positive result if it avoided a swing against it and held the current margin of 2.8 per cent, which was down from 10.1 per cent in a swing against now-retiring member Alan Tudge.

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