

Baby, Costello's a wonder of science

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PETER Costello is one of few politicians in the developed world who has been able to generate a baby boom, according to a report in *Science* magazine.

The study, titled "The baby deficit" reports that fertility rates continue to decline in the industrialised West despite "big incentives" in the form of subsidised childcare and paid maternity leave.

The exception is Australia, where women in their mid to late 30s are driving a mini baby boom. The Australian Bureau of Statistics' latest report said 261,404 babies were born in 2005, the highest number since 1992. The birth rate has been climbing steadily since Mr Costello introduced the "maternity payment" of \$3000, boosted in July to \$4000.

But fertility rates continue to fall in Europe. The report in *Science* says the EU will lose between 24 million and 40 million people during each coming decade unless fertility is raised.

Russia's population is declining by 700,000 people a year, prompting President Vladimir Putin to describe the shrinking

population as the country's most important issue.

In a speech about "the most important matter: love, women, children" Putin urged Russian women to procreate. His incentives included raising the childcare benefit to 1500 roubles a month (\$50), and paying 18 months' maternity leave at 40 per cent of a woman's wages.

Poland's parliament recently approved a one-time payment of 1000 zlotys (\$328) for each child.

France — which has the second-highest fertility rate in Europe, after largely Catholic Ireland — has 38 pro-family measures in place. But the fertility rate in all these nations remains below replacement level.

Australian National University demographer Peter McDonald told *Science* that Australia's fertility rate, by comparison, is likely to rise from 1.76 to 1.82 when the next set of figures is released in November.

He said most of the additional births are to women in the middle to late part of their child-bearing years — most of whom already have at least one and possibly two children.

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