

Great Aussie breeders

The Government's procreation prod seems to have led to a mini baby boom, writes **Caroline Overington**

BERNADETTE Simpson has four children, not an enormous tribe, but she still attracts comments about the size of her family. "People say: 'You must have your hands full,'" she says. "Or else: 'Don't you own a TV?'"

Like many mothers with large families, she has learned to smile or say: "Yes, we do have a TV, but I know what I'd rather be doing. What about you?"

Mostly, people are too stunned to respond. "I always wanted more than the standard two," Simpson says. "I met my husband when I was 15. I had the first at 17 and we just kept going. People think we're crazy, but we just love kids."

Although she doesn't see herself as a role model, Simpson, who lives in Macgregor outside Canberra, is showing the way for women who are under political pressure to have not one or two but at least three children and maybe four or more.

Federal Treasurer Peter Costello kicked off the campaign for larger families in 2004 when he beseeched Australian parents in a post-budget speech to do their "patriotic duty" and raise the birthrate by having "one for the mum, one for the dad and one for the country". It was a light-hearted way of making a serious point.

Like most industrialised countries, Australia was barely producing enough children to sustain the population and there were concerns it might slip into decline, with numbers boosted only by immigration.

The Howard Government identified population growth as a policy imperative and Costello introduced rewards for parents: a \$3000 bonus paid to mothers of all babies born after 2004; a huge boost in family tax benefits, with the largest rewards going to mothers who stayed home longest; and large increases in the number of childcare places to help women who wanted to return to work.

The cash bonus was increased to \$4000 this year.

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures suggest these measures, and a strong economy, have had an effect. A mini-baby boom is under way. The number of births in Australia last year was the highest since 1992.



Payments no incentive: Sally Robertson with her four youngsters Charlotte, Christopher, Annabelle and Stephanie **Picture:** Lisa Williams

There were 261,400 births registered in the year ended December 31, 2005, an increase of 2.4 per cent (or 6200 babies) on 2004.

The latest ABS data does not state how many of the births are third births or, for that matter, first or fourth births, since the figures are a simple count of all new births. But data regarding birth order will be available in the annual births report, Births Australia, to be released in November.

Costello is happy to take some of the credit for the surge. "I am delighted that at least some families have been taking up the challenge," he says.

His post-budget procreation plug was aimed at women who already had two children rather than those who didn't have any. That's because nine in 10 Australian women will have children. The Howard Government wanted to use policy to encourage women not only to breed but to expand their brood. It's a clever tactic because surveys consistently show Australian women

have fewer children than they say they would like, and that encouraging them to have more naturally boosts the fertility rate.

"The norm is two children per woman over a lifetime." Department of Family and Community Services demographer Habetmaria Tesfaghiorgis says. "And it's not quite what women say they want."

Large-scale surveys such as Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia show that many young Australians would like at least two but possibly more.

"Almost all couples say they would like to have at least two, but something happens along the way and many either don't get two or stop at two," Tesfaghiorgis says.

Some women fail to find a suitable partner or find one too late in life, so their chances of having more than two children are limited. Some parents get divorced, while others don't feel sufficiently financially secure.

"They don't stop because they don't want children," Tesfaghiorgis says. "The desire is

there, but other problems get in the way."

There probably isn't much the Howard Government can do about the shortage of good men or their reluctance to marry, but it can provide financial assistance to those who would like to procreate. In the most recent budget, low and middle-income families received a \$40 a week boost, provided they had at least three children.

Costello also redefined the large family to include those with three children, instead of at least four children, so three-child families would qualify for the large family supplement. It's a pittance, \$248 a year, but it is taken acknowledgment that it's tough to rear more than two children. From this year, families will be able to claim a 30 per cent rebate on the cost of child care, up to \$4000 a year.

Rebecca Kippen, a demographer at the Australian National University in Canberra, who is researching the fertility decisions made by Australian families, has identified that women with two children of the same sex are much likelier to have a third child, compared with women who have one of each. It suggests that Australian parents want children of both sexes in the family and will keep trying to get them.

But Kippen says finances are also important, a sticking point for parents who already have two.

"People are worried about having to buy a bigger car, a house with a bigger yard," she says. "But it's relative: people in higher socioeconomic neighbourhoods were more worried about money than the less well-off. And the really big thing is child care. We heard women talk about it all the time. It's hard to get and it's too expensive."

On the Essential Baby website, where parents chat about personal decisions, two of the most popular topics on the large families forum are "What kind of car do you drive?" (for most families with more than three children, the answer is a Tarago or a minivan) and "Ways to entertain the kids that don't break the bank".

People are always interested in how Simpson copes with her four. "We buy lots of vegies and we eat a lot of good, home-cooked spaghetti," she says.

Simpson would like some help with her medical bills, however.

"We had them, so we are going to raise them," she says. "But there is one thing: the healthcare card [which provides cut-price or free medical care] should be extended to large families. The threshold for Medicare is just way too low for large families. Our medical bills are terrible."

Peter McDonald, head of demography at ANU, says big families are important for population growth. One of his early research reports showed that if younger women who could have three or four children stopped at one or two, the national fertility rate would drop to just 1.4 per cent.

"In Italy, where the fertility rate is very low, only 10 per cent of all families are three-child families, whereas here, in Australia, it's at least 25 per cent," he says.

But McDonald says he would not support a system of benefits that targeted large families over smaller ones.

"Policy should be directed at all women, so a woman who has none might be encouraged to have one or a woman with two might go on to have three," he says. "It's very obvious that nations that have the right policies, like higher financial supports for families and child care and flexible work practices, are more likely to have a higher fertility rate across the board."

Sally Robertson, a Sydney stay-at-home mother with four children, says government incentives didn't influence her decision to have a larger family.

"I was one of three and my husband was one of three, so we were always going to have three," Robertson says. "But No. 3 was such a placid child." And, after the third, the family bought a Kia Carnivale wagon, "so people started saying you're going to have to fill those empty seats".

Robertson receives a "tiny amount" of Family Tax Benefit B because she stays home but gets no childcare benefit because she does not use long day care.

"The maternity payment was helpful because it covers the obstetrics, and we put some of it towards school fees [for the oldest]," she says. "But, honestly, [having more children is] not something you are going to do to get some benefit."