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The politics of parenting

If you have five minutes and are looking for some motivation, do a quick Google Image search for Licia Ronzulli. As the results will show, Ronzulli is an Italian MEP who, since 2010, has been taking her daughter Vittoria into work with her at the European Parliament. The images show Ronzulli's daughter growing up from a baby being breastfed as her mother voted on the working conditions of women, to a little girl joining in with the votes herself, one hand in the air, the other clutching a cuddly toy.

While it is encouraging to see Ronzulli's daughter engaging with high-level international politics at such a young age, it is Ronzulli herself who should be celebrated. Since then, politicians all over the world have demonstrated the compatibility of work and motherhood by bringing their children into the chambers in which they sit, breaking taboos at the same time. In 2016, Carolina Bescansa brought her baby to Spain's lower house, while in 2017, Senator Larissa Waters became the first politician to breastfeed in the Australian parliament. When New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern announced her pregnancy in mid-January this year, she dismissed the age-old question of career versus motherhood by commenting that parliament was already child-friendly (illustrated in the press by a photograph of Speaker Trevor Mallard giving interviews while holding the children of MPs debating in the chamber) (Ainge Roy, 2018).

Ardern's announcement has, naturally, been accompanied by the usual debates and contradictions that hound any high-profile working mother. Comparisons have been drawn between Ardern and former Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, who was branded 'deliberately barren' in the same way in which Andrea Leadsom, a mother of three, distinguished herself from Theresa May, who has no children (Eggert, 2017). Women in politics can be vilified for taking time off to care for families (hence Ardern's decision to take a mere 6 weeks' maternity leave) and yet criticised for lacking understanding of the realities of motherhood when they remain childless. That

this is a uniquely female paradox needs no reiteration.

Politicians can be fortunate when it comes to family life, benefitting from workplace crèches or salaries to cover childcare that other families may not be able to afford. But if a relatively privileged environment still represents difficulties for those who work there, this can only mean greater challenges for women elsewhere. Despite the acceptance of parliaments abroad, breastfeeding is still not allowed in the House of Commons chamber (Full Fact, 2017), in part due to the opposition from other MPs (England, 2016). This forces women to duck and hide from disapproving glances and comments (as is often the case in public places), or to look for alternatives to exclusive breastfeeding. If Parliament cannot support and enable working motherhood, we cannot expect policies that support breastfeeding elsewhere to trickle down and end the interminable debate about women balancing children and a career. **BJM**

Ainge Roy E. Jacinda Ardern: New Zealand prime minister announces first pregnancy. 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/18/new-zealand-jacinda-ardern-pregnant> (accessed 19 January 2018)

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