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Goward's warning on maternity leave

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THE hard-won gains of maternity leave will be junked if the Government is cavalier in its quest to simplify awards under its newly passed workplace relations reforms.

Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward, a Howard government appointee, has warned that a proposal to reduce hundreds of awards to a core group of 17, must preserve the rights to maternity leave, generally 12 weeks' pay.

"Many award provisions, such as those relating to paid maternity and parental leave and carer's leave, including those granted by the **AIRC (Australian Industrial Relations Commission)** in the Family Provisions Test Case, will no longer be allowable matters," she says in a submission to the Government.

"It is critical that these entitlements must remain as preserved award entitlements, and are preserved in a way that ensures that employees and employers are aware of their entitlements and responsibilities."

Ms Goward also said current proposals for award rationalisation "(do) not meet the Government's objectives of reducing complexity of awards and moving toward a simpler and fairer national workplace relations system".

The critique is part of a Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission submission to the Government's Award Review Taskforce, which is examining key aspects of the reforms, including the rationalisation of award rates and classification structures. Business groups such as the Australian Industry Group have been pushing for duplications and differences across state and federal awards to be resolved.

But several employers, including Australia Post and Rio Tinto, have raised concerns about the rationalisation process in submissions to the taskforce that were released late on Friday.

In a surprise criticism, one of the Government's strongest allies in the industrial relations revolution, Rio Tinto, has warned that getting rid of too many awards could undermine its groundbreaking approach to dealing with workers through its already simplified 2004 enterprise award.

Rationalisation could draw Rio Tinto back under the Coal Mining Industry

Protection and Engineering Consolidated Award 1997, which has more conditions, it said.

Rio Tinto Australia managing director Charlie Lenegan said he was concerned the taskforce's terms of reference were biased towards outcomes on an industry sector basis.

``Our experience has highlighted the importance of enterprise-based outcomes which best meet the needs of the enterprise and its employees," Mr Lenegan said.

``We have concerns that rationalisation of awards and award wage and classification structures on an industry sector basis could limit flexibility and drive sub-optimal outcomes."

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