

From the Kitchen

7 April 2010



Speaking to a business owner just before Easter, I commented on looking forward to a blessed few days off. He said that, not being a practising Christian, he would be working most of those four days. He doesn't believe it is right to take something that is not rightfully his.

It reminded me of an incident about fifty-six years ago. I was in primary school in the Netherlands. The school week was six days, with Wednesdays and Saturdays being half days. I put it to my parents that, being Jewish, I shouldn't have to go to school on Saturday mornings. They agreed and then told me that being Jewish and not going to school on Saturdays, I would have to go to synagogue. I went to school.

Australia is not a Christian country. While the majority (around 70% of the population) may profess to being Christians at census time, relatively few (around 10% of the population) go to church on a regular basis (outside blessed holidays). [1] There are relatively small numbers of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Aborigines (none above 1% of the population and totally outnumbered by non-believers). By dint of our Constitution, we are a secular nation and it does seem strange that Christian holy days are recognised by paid leave while Yom Kippur and Laylat ul Isra are not. People should be able to nominate a certain number of 'belief' days they can take off while being paid.

Even Christians can be left out. The Easter for which *all* of us get paid leave is the Easter of the Roman and Protestant Churches. In many years this does not coincide with the Eastern Orthodox Easter, which means that thousands of church-going believers need to take unpaid leave for their Easter or be compelled to work on what to them are holy days.

Our society officially embraces freedom of religion,[2] but the reality is very different. If, as a society, we truly believe that everyone should be free to follow their chosen religious / spiritual practices, then we should have in place the structures to allow this, in as broad a way as possible for everyone.

In an organisation of which I was CEO for years, the staff had ten days sick leave entitlement annually. It was not cumulative, which meant that unused days could not be carried into the future, while unused ordinary leave could. I allowed staff to take four of their sick leave days each year without having to be sick. We called them health days and they could be taken one each quarter. This practice reduced the total sick days taken and thus saved money for the organisation. Some businesses *do* allow staff to accumulate unused sick leave from year to year and then these unused days can be converted to money when the person leaves the company. This acts as an incentive to workers to not take unnecessary sick leave ('I might as well take it because I'm entitled to it') and saves the business money by reducing overall staffing numbers. If every employee annually takes two weeks off sick instead of one, the business needs an extra full-time employee for every fifty, just to cover this extra leave.

I don't know how many countries have as much leave entitlement as we do in Australia. If we took it all, we would be off work for eight weeks each year – four weeks annual leave, nine to ten public holidays and two weeks off 'sick'.

With the likely official introduction of paid parental leave, we could institute a system in which each person can have enough leave for perhaps three children. Thus, those who choose not to procreate could claim the three periods of, say, six months each and have some wonderful paid leave. If long-service leave is added, each person could end up with two years off on full pay after twelve or fifteen years and come back to work refreshed and ready for another decade or more of honest, hard work. Finding time to care for the children conceived during all the recreation time may present a challenge.

There is, actually, a problem in many workplaces, of people *not* taking all their leave entitlements and letting them build up. In letting them slip by, they are doing themselves and their families a disservice, as they are jeopardising their general health and wellbeing. Our longer lifespan and healthier lives compared with a century or two ago probably has something to do with healthier work practices (including holidays and shorter hours), as well as the other factors of better diets, better healthcare, cleaner air and water. But the more recent tendencies of working longer hours, skipping lunch and not taking regular and frequent breaks are probably all contributing to a decline in general health and the increase in the incidence of preventable degenerative diseases.

Maybe we should mandate that people take their holidays and other days off when they fall due, for the overall benefit of society. And it wouldn't hurt for all of us to ponder on the meaning of many of the public holidays. A little reflection would not go astray.

1. Australian Census 2006.
2. Article 9.2.1 of the Constitution.