

# **PLANNING FOR SURVIVAL**

## **A FAMILY POLICY FOR THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY**

**LITERATURE AND POLICY REVIEW**

**January 1994**

**The Jubilee Policy Group**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This document has been produced by CARE (Christian Action Research Education) and the Jubilee Policy Group (reissued by the Jubilee Trust, April 1996) as the foundation paper to their joint project on family policy 'Planning for Survival: a Family Policy for the 21st Century'.

The aim of the project has been to assess the opportunities for closer cooperation between agencies and organisations concerned for the impact of public policy on families today. In particular, its intention has been to examine on what basis Christian and secular organisations can work more closely together in presenting the case for sustaining family life and commitment in family relationships.

A statement is reproduced in this report which sets out the broad parameters of the common ground which does exist between different approaches to family policy. This statement formed the basis of a consultation held at St George's House, Windsor Castle, in November 1993 which was addressed by Alistair Burt MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of Social Security and was attended by representatives from 20 organisations involved with family policy. The provisional statement of core principles which was used to provide a framework for discussions with other organisations is reproduced as an appendix to this document.

CARE is a charitable body involved in caring, educational and campaigning initiatives on medical ethics, sexual ethics and family policy issues. (Charity no. 288485)

The Jubilee Policy Group was an independent think tank and research consultancy based at the Jubilee Centre in Cambridge. Its aim was to inform public policy in Britain and the European Community from a Christian perspective. Much of its work is now being done by the Jubilee Trust. (Charity no. 288783)

## A. PRESSURES ON FAMILIES

The family unit is under pressure from all sides. Any one or, more often, a combination of factors may lead to the irretrievable breakdown of a marriage or a rift between parents and children and the wider extended family network.

Below is an attempt to categorise some of these pressures which have been identified as affecting families under six headings: demographic, economic, fiscal, social, health and psychological/ personal:

### 1. DEMOGRAPHIC

- i) longevity and fewer births have increased the proportion of frail, elderly people as a percentage of the population
- ii) reduction in proportion of 16-20 year olds (causing pressures in the labour market, see below)
- iii) rise in lone parent families and children growing up without the benefit of two parents which has a cyclical element in some sectors of the population
- iv) dependency ratios are likely to increase with a static or falling overall population and rising proportion of retired and frail elderly people.

### 2. ECONOMIC

#### Labour market

- i) unemployment leading to insecure income, poverty. For those in marriage this contributes huge financial pressures; for those outside marriage, unemployment can shorten time horizons and mitigate against commitment to making long term relationships. In some cases it can contribute to a perception of a lack of 'marriageable men'.
- ii) new employment opportunities for women in the growth of part-time, shortterm jobs. This is partly a response to the shortage of young people coming into the labour market but also to achieve lower labour costs and greater flexibility for employers.
- iii) increased Sunday trading preventing families sharing a day off together
- iv) restructuring of industry, e.g. coal, steel, shipbuilding, farming has left many areas dependent on one employer/skill especially blighted
- v) labour mobility which can weaken family and community ties
- vi) long working hours, e.g. overtime, recessionary pressures on those in work. This means less time with family unit, especially by fathers
- vii) lone parents in the unemployment trap who need to earn a salary considerably higher than the cost of benefits and childcare to make employment a feasible alternative

## **Costs of Living**

- i) High costs of housing, especially land prices and interest rate linked mortgages causing debt and repossessions. The economy has become adjusted to, and in some areas, totally dependent on, two incomes for a family to survive
- ii) rising costs of children and childcare
- iii) costs of elder care, caring for the sick and handicapped especially with recent developments in community care provision placing greater expectations on family carers

## **Financial market**

- i) fluctuating borrowing costs and interest rates keeps borrowing rates up to cover risks
- ii) ready availability of credit, lack of scrutiny of borrowers' ability to repay has fuelled personal indebtedness, both housing and consumer related
- iii) lack of incentives to save mean the lack of a financial cushion through hard times

## **3. FISCAL**

- i) combined effort of levels of taxation with the benefit structure can create a poverty trap for those on low incomes
- ii) 'marriage trap' created by the benefit entitlement provisions which favour lone parenting or cohabitation over marriage
- iii) low levels of social security: income support, family credit, child benefit
- iv) withdrawal of benefit for 16 - 17 year olds
- v) child maintenance payments put strain on relationship between parents no longer living together

## **4. SOCIAL**

Attitudes fundamental to the make-up and practice of family life are today in transition creating both confusion because of the loss of social consensus as well as new opportunities:

### **Attitudes to marriage and sex**

- i) changing attitudes towards marriage have altered expectations. Marriage is now seen more as private affair for mutual fulfilment and less as a social institution, no longer a 'rite of passage' which requires public or legal recognition

- ii) cohabitation, illegitimacy, divorce and remarriage have become more socially acceptable and have split the social consensus which connected child-bearing within marriage
- iii) the greater financial independence of women means that marriage is not so necessary for women as source of security and status so that divorce has become a financially feasible option for more women
- iv) advances in contraception have led to widespread sexual 'freedom'. Sex is seen as a 'recreational' activity no longer exclusively associated with a loving relationship and thus values such as fidelity or lone-term commitment in sexual partnerships is eroded
- v) homosexuality and lesbianism seen as alternative 'models' for relationships
- vi) tensions within reconstituted families, e.g. step parent/child and sibling relationships. How should sexual barriers be defined e.g. incest?
- vii) sex education in schools which sidelines moral questions such as fidelity can put young people under peer pressure to become sexually active before they are ready to form committed relationships
- viii) lack of teachers trained to teach on parenting/life skills for young people, etc.
- ix) media portrayals of promiscuity, adultery and pornography have reinforced images of the social acceptability of sexual freedom

### **Attitudes to children**

- i) rights versus responsibilities: confusion about the rights of parents over local authorities, the courts concerning custody, care
- ii) lack of parenting education and support to substitute for the absence of extended family and community
- iii) child bearing as a woman's choice: abortion, family planning
- iv) child rearing as choice: work/career versus family
- v) lower status given to role of parent over bread winner
- vi) children as objects to gratify adults' desires for love, sex, achievement, e.g. sex selection, fertility techniques, disability screening

### **Attitudes to older people**

- i) less commitment by family members to take responsibility for the care of elderly relatives
- ii) our culture values youth and health higher than experience or perspective
- iii) less valued by employers, eg. assumptions about low adaptability to technological change

## **Attitudes to authorities**

- i) declining respect for parents by children
- ii) declining respect for parents by other authorities such as social workers
- iii) declining respect for the police (crime), teachers (truancy)
- iv) declining respect for the church as relevant to addressing family problems e.g. alienation of the lone parent, remarriage

## **5. HEALTH**

- i) stress from juggling competing demands on time, loyalties between work and family
- ii) stress-related illnesses resulting from burden of caring for dependent sick, handicapped or elderly relatives
- iii) substance abuse
- iv) incidence of alcoholism, smoking, heart conditions related to relationship difficulties
- v) child abuse, sexual and physical, with higher incidence in step families
- vi) accidents and visits to GPs and hospitals higher for lone parent families
- vii) health risks especially to children from bed and breakfast accommodation

## **6. PSYCHOLOGICAL/PERSONAL**

- i) financial worries, debt
- ii) huge expectations of marriage as means of security, of achieving happiness and adulthood/maturity and of sexual fulfilment and offering a prime solution to loneliness, insecurity, low self-esteem
- iii) huge adjustment expected of both men and women in a time of transition in roles and expectations
- iv) anger, resentment: society 'owes me a living/livelihood'
- v) boredom - especially young people who are not achieving at school and feel they have little prospect of getting a job
- vi) loneliness and isolation - sense of failure at not having 'succeeded' with relationships, employment, etc.

- vii) need to look after number one first, no time for others or emotional resources to give self-sacrificially to others in need
- viii) spiritual malaise - loss of faith in moral values, indistinctions between right and wrong, less 'religious' pressure to confirm
- ix) pursuit of short term gratification over long term commitment; the predominance of the 'feel good' factor over persevering at making relationships work
- x) emotional deprivation - neglect and abuse as children,
- xi) rejection by parent through divorce, inadequate parenting models
- x) increase in crime - fear for personal safety, a consequence of the disintegration of community identity
- xi) media images of sexual fulfilment, financial success and status feeding expectations
- xii) lack of good relationship models in private and public life, e.g. Royal Family, from which to learn and to which to aspire

## B. THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC POLICY ON FAMILIES

The impact of government policy on family structure and family life is complex and diverse. In a direct sense, public policy does determine to a greater or lesser extent many choices made by families. In an indirect sense, public policy affects almost every area of family life as it does all life - private as well as public, individuals, family units and whole communities.

Essential to the political debate today on family policy is the question of the rightful scope of government 'interference' in family life. On the Right the traditional concern to minimise the role of the state and the promotion of individual liberty is often associated with the conviction that family life is a private affair. This view works out most clearly in Conservative economic policy, partially balanced by a declared commitment to 'traditional family values'. However, at the level of practical politics, this strand in historical Conservative thought is subsumed by economic considerations.

On the Left there is strong commitment to freedom of choice in personal lifestyle, with a considerable antipathy to the promotion of particular family structures or values by government. There is however much greater enthusiasm for policy intervention to support all families, of whatever structure.

The roots of the trend to 'privatise' the family may differ, but on both Left and Right it has discouraged consideration of the impact of public policy on family structure. This has been challenged by those who understand that economic, fiscal, housing, educational policy all influence our everyday lives and the way we relate to one another [and the primary way in which we relate to one another is within family groupings along ties of affection and blood]. Thus, interest rate policy impacts on mortgage rates, the cost of housing and therefore the costs of living which in turn, given the nature of mortgage tax relief, can influence the choice between marriage and cohabitation, the timing for starting to have children or not to have children, to abort or not to abort etc. etc.

Lord Joseph makes this same point:

*I am arguing that we should foster conditions under which parents stay together: public attitudes which provide approval, security, time and opportunity for bringing up children. Since the quality of a child's environment is to a considerable extent determined by family income, this has implications for tax policy. Economics do affect the question whether or not families are formed, and whether or not they maintain their cohesion.<sup>1</sup>*

The issue is then not whether or not to intervene, but that public policy inevitably and inescapably affects the family. This presents the choice of either ignoring these effects, implying that family structures are not significant, or to be forced to give greater value to some family structures rather than others.

A second argument against privatisation of the family is that the state has a responsibility to promote a 'healthy' society, or at least the right to intervene to reduce the social costs it carries as a result of family breakdown. Thus legislation is viewed as a useful instrument to address society's problems e.g. the Child Support Act designed to extract maintenance payments from absentee fathers.

A third reason is the importance of the coherence of public and private values. The privatisation of the family cannot be sustained because the values embedded in public policy will influence personal values. Policy attitudes to marriage and family, for example, both reflect and reinforce cultural changes, thereby influencing individual attitudes to marriage and family.

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<sup>1</sup> Lord Joseph, Rewards of Parenthood? towards more equitable tax treatment, Centre for Policy Studies, May 1990

It is the thesis of this review of family policy that judgements can and should be made about the trends in our society which have fuelled family breakdown, but that these judgements relate to general factors rather than to individuals and their private decisions. In rejecting the privatisation of the family concept, we are seeking a widespread recognition by society, including Government, that family breakdown is detrimental to social and personal integration and that action, including by Government, should be taken to reverse it. Public policy is an important instrument not merely for change but for signalling public values and mores.

The following sections cover the different realms of government policy as they impact on family structure and life within the family unit: In some areas this impact is direct and intentional; in others it is indirect and therefore difficult to 'prove' a causal link because of the complex interplay of factors involved:

## **1. TAXATION AND BENEFITS POLICY**

**Government Depts responsible:** HM Treasury, Inland Revenue, DSS

### **Aspects**

- i. Personallmarried allowance: income tax affects family income and reflects assumptions about family relationships. A cohabiting couple is taxed like two single people whereas a married couple receives a married couple's allowance (payable to the husband in most cases).
- ii. Additional lone-parent allowance only claimed by 75% of lone parents.
- iii. Carer's allowances: The tax system does not reflect the presence or absence of children but the benefits system does in terms of eligibility and level of benefits paid out:
- iv. Child benefit: universal payment to each child payable to the mother. This is the one benefit paid by the state which recognises the cost of rearing children and it is paid independent of income or lack of income from employment. The problem for the Government in a period of rising public expenditure and falling tax revenues is that, unlike the child tax allowance which it replaced in 1977, it is treated as public expenditure not income retained by the tax paying parent.
- v. Income support and family credit: 2/3rds of lone parent families depend mainly on social security benefits compared with one in 8 two-parent families (1987). Many cannot claim income support because they have never been in work. Family credit claimants cannot cover mortgage costs or child care expenses.
- vi. Child maintenance payments under the Child Support Act
- vii. Occupational welfare benefits: pensions, workplace nurseries (no longer assessed as income)
- viii. Social Fund: availability of grants to the poorest families.

## **Issues for family policy**

- i) does the tax/benefits system affect decisions re marriage/ cohabitation; consequences of divorce; whether or not to have children. On what assumptions about family relationships or roles are they based?
- ii) does eligibility for lone parent premium and income support act as an incentive to single parenthood?
- iii) universal versus means -tested/targeted benefits
- iv) how can one avoid or diminish the poverty trap created by interplay of tax/benefits esp. for lone parents
- v) What will be the effect of the Child Support Act: how will it affect relationships between natural parents and children; will it increase income to lone parents?
- vi) how can the take-up of benefits be increased? Should more government funding go towards special advice centres for families e.g. CAB model?

## **2. WORK AND EMPLOYMENT**

**Government Depts:** D Employment, DTI, DSS, Inland Revenue, Home Office.

### **Aspects**

- a) employment terms and conditions: working hours; maternity/paternity leave; pension rights etc; the 'familyfriendly' firm
- b) other incentives for women to remain/return to workforce: flexible hours, part-time work, workplace nurseries, Opportunity 2000
- c) availability of overtime payments
- d) Sunday trading
- e) incentives/disincentives on family business and working from home eg. 'telecommuting'
- f) retirement age: a higher proportion of the population is post-retirement age. More people are taking early retirement rather than be unemployed. There are moves to equalise the retirement age to 65 to reduce public expenditure

## **Issues for family policy**

- i) how can our economy balance its labour market requirements for lower paid part-time workers (largely aimed at women) with the demands of child/elder care etc. ?

- ii) what should a 'family-friendly' employer provide? What is the overall effect of workplace nursery provision on family life of employees?
- iii) how should job mobility be reduced and jobs created where the people are, rather than expect the people (and their dependants) to move to the jobs?
- iv) what incentives could be given to strengthen family businesses and the trend towards home-based employment?
- v) how should society show its appreciation of work of homebased mothers and carers in comparison with women in paid employment outside the home?
- vi) how can fathers spend more time with their families and less at work?
- vii) how can older people retain good contact with their extended families especially given an increase in retirement span?

### **3. MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE**

**Government Depts:** Home Office, Lord Chancellor's Dept, Dept of Health, DSS

#### **Aspects**

- a) marriage laws: the law maintains certain excluded relationships eg marrying close relatives, prohibits same sex marriage(?)
- b) divorce laws: reforms have resulted in increased divorce rate until recently. Law Commission has proposed further reform to remove the element of 'fault' and to allow for divorce to proceed after one year's cooling off period. The critical issue is now seen to be the welfare of children and speedy settlement of custody contests.
- c) reconciliation/conciliation procedures: public funding goes to Relate and other agencies but nothing like enough to cope with the demand for such guidance. It is likely that even this level of funding will be cut.
- d) remarriage: parts of the church still retain a prohibition on remarriage in church. Is this a helpful signal to a society which increasingly accepts cohabitation especially of divorcees?

#### **Issues for family policy**

- i) should the divorce laws be reformed to make divorce less likely given the escalating costs to the public exchequer of divorce and supporting lone parents as well as the detrimental effect on children?
- ii) is there a place for pre-nuptial agreements?
- iii) how can the welfare of children be best preserved through and after divorce? Problems in step families have recently been highlighted by child abuse cases.

- iv) what is the government's role in expanding marriage preparation/guidance/reconciliation/conciliation services? What should voluntary agencies like the church offer?
- v) should more provision be made for women's refuges and higher criminal sanctions given to abusing husbands and more lenience in cases of grievous provocation?

## **4. THE WELFARE OF CHILDREN**

**Government Depts:** Dept of Health, Home Office, DSS, DEd.

### **Aspects**

- a) operation of the Children Act: the welfare of the child comes first, the rights of the child versus those of the parent; grandparental rights; operation of family courts etc.
- b) local authority social worker's role in child protection: child protection registers, child abuse cases, running of child care homes, family centres
- c) parental responsibility in the home: registration of child minders; discipline in the home
- d) adoption and fostering policies
- e) police/judicial powers and juvenile crime: approved schools for 12-15 year olds.

### **Issues for family policy**

- i) what is the right balance of rights/responsibilities between parent and child, local authority employees, police, judiciary, grantparent etc. Is it right that parental responsibility is given to the unmarried father with the mother's consent? Should children be allowed to initiate legal actions against parents?
- ii) how should responsibility be shared between families, neighbourhoods, voluntary agencies and local and national Government in providing family support services for parents struggling with children?
- iii) is institutional care the best alternative for children needing protection/correction?
- iv) should lesbian and gay couples be permitted to foster/adopt?
- v) when should step parent adoption be permitted?
- vi) how can the adoption 'option' be made more feasible for teenage mothers who would otherwise abort?

## **5. HOUSING PROVISION**

**Government Depts:** DOE, DSS

### **Aspects**

- a) operation of the Housing Act 1985 and the categorisation of those in priority housing need: these favour families and pregnant women but exclude most single people
- b) availability of family-sized public sector housing: the sale of council housing and the lack of investment by local authorities in new/renovated housing has left a severe shortage of housing suitable for families with dependent children and led to extensive use of temporary options eg bed and breakfast, short term leasing etc
- c) local authority housing placement practices which often channel single parent families into ghettos
- d) lack of affordable housing for young families enabling one parent to remain at home with the children lack of affordable housing for first time buyers/renters
- e) cost of maintaining mortgages has necessitated many households needing two incomes, has fuelled personal debt problems, repossessions and bankruptcies

### **Issues for family policy**

- i) there is a need for more research into the causal link between homelessness and family breakdown eg divorce, separation and stepparent/children problems, abuse. Conversely, the extent to which use of temporary accommodation by local authorities has increased divorce etc rates has not been assessed
- ii) a majority of the single young people living on the streets have left home because of family tensions: what should be done to reduce the incidence of young single homeless?
- iii) is there a case for moving away from floating rate mortgages to fixed rate mortgages for residential property as in US, France, Germany(?)
- iv) does the status of priority need for housing encourage lone parenting?
- v) how can the marginalisation of the lone parent be avoided? should there be schemes to encourage contact between lone parents and two parent families?
- vi) the availability of low cost housing for young families
- vii) how does housing availability/cost affect marriage and pregnancy decisions?

## **6. HEALTH AND MEDICAL ISSUES**

**Government depts:** Dept of Health, DSS, Home Office

### **Aspects**

- a) Care in the community: the major cost of this is falling on family members who may not have time, willingness or expertise to deal with physically or mentally handicapped relatives and frail elderly relatives
- b) teenage pregnancies: access to advice is limited esp. to those still at school. Psychological effects of abortion should be more widely recognised
- c) cost to the Exchequer of illness, accidents related to family poverty, stress, housing and debt problems are on the increase
- d) drugs/alcohol: contribute to health and relationship problems especially within families living together under the same roof
- e) TV/media/pornography: affect on behaviour and child development, links between violence on TV and crime etc.

### **Issues for family policy**

- i) what should government do to facilitate family carers and compensate those who give up work in order to look after a needy relative?
- ii) how should families under stress be supported: should family therapy be more widely available?
- iii) should existing marriage support services such as RELATE and One Plus One continue to receive funding via Home Office or more appropriately seen as a Dept. of Health responsibility?
- iv) what restrictions should be placed on the availability of pornography, etc.
- v) at what age should contraception be available without parental consent?

## **7. EDUCATION AND SCHOOLING**

**Government depts:** D Ed.

### **Aspects**

- a) sex education: role of parents and teachers: who should provide the value/moral framework for discussing sex?

- b) parenting education: role of parents and school: inclusion within the National Curriculum, provision of education materials
- c) values in education
- d) parental choice in education
- e) social work in schools, including preventive work by educational psychologists etc.

### **Issues for family policy**

- i) what is the right balance between homeschool input on issues like sex education, values and parenting?
- ii) is extending parental choice in education in the child's best interests? What would be the long term consequences?
- iii) what should be done to increase sex and family education within a moral framework?
- iv) how can school have a role to play in making up the deficit of parenting input for children?
- v) do school size and pupil:teacher ratios have any effect on truancy levels/academic achievements and a child's 'ownership' of the schooling process and the school's values?

## SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES FOR FAMILY POLICY

To conclude this section on the impact of public policy on the family, the key questions among those raised above are listed here. These should provide the focus for reviewing the work of family organisations and their effectiveness in addressing the central issues:

- i) does the tax/benefits system affect decisions re marriage/cohabitation; consequences of divorce; whether or not to have children. On what assumptions about relationships are they based?
- ii) how can our economy balance its labour market requirements for lower paid part-time workers (largely aimed at women) with the demands of child/elder care etc.?
- iii) how should society show its appreciation of work of home-based mothers and carers in comparison with women in paid employment outside the home?
- iv) should the divorce laws be reformed to make divorce less likely given the escalating costs to the public exchequer of divorce and supporting lone parents as well as the detrimental effect on children?
- v) what is the government's role in expanding marriage preparation/guidance/reconciliation/conciliation services? What should voluntary agencies like the church offer?
- vi) what is the right balance of rights/responsibilities between parent and child, local authority employees, police, judiciary, grandparent etc. Is it right that parental responsibility is given to the unmarried father with the mother's consent? Should children be allowed to initiate legal actions against parents?
- vii) there is a need for more research into the causal link between homelessness and family breakdown eg divorce, separation and step-parent/children problems, abuse. Conversely, the extent to which use of temporary accommodation by local authorities has increased divorce etc rates has not been assessed.
- viii) how can the marginalisation of the lone parent be avoided? should there be schemes to encourage contact between lone parents and two parent families?
- ix) what can be done to increase the availability of low cost housing for young families?
- x) What should government do to facilitate family carers and compensate those who give up work in order to look after a needy relative?
- xi) What should be done to increase sex and family education within a moral framework?

## C. APPROACHES TO FAMILY POLICY

This section reviews the issues raised and value frameworks adopted in the current debate on Family Policy.

First, it will assess the ideological conflict involved and show why those on the Left and on the Right have been unable to present a coherent stance on families because of inherent contradictions within their parties. Second, the public statements of the mainstream political parties are summarised.

### 1. THE IDEOLOGICAL DEBATE

Because family policy is such a complex and highly emotive issue, the debate in political and academic circles reflects this complexity and controversy. Ultimately, family policy debates revolve around values and fundamental assumptions about humanity and about relationships. It is therefore inevitable that the debate has been preoccupied with questions of conflicting ideologies:

*'What implications does this analysis of (these) ideologies have for family policy today? First it is clear that contemporary trends and developments are tied closely into deep-seated structures of ideas. Second, it shows that it will be very difficult to find a consensus on the substance of a specific family policy in Britain. The family is seen in different ways depending on the ideological perspective from which it is viewed. Third, it shows that often the family is not the prime focus of interest: the family is significant for some insofar as it can be used to further nationalism: for others as a barrier to the advancement of women; for others as part of a wider class system.'<sup>2</sup>*

In order to give weight to their case, rival family policy commentators have used caricature and stereotypes to distinguish themselves from one another, further adding to the polarisation between a 'traditional' position and a 'progressive' position.

Thus, traditionalists are seen to appeal to a 'natural' model for family life (bread-winning father, home-based mother) which is held up to be the only bulwark against the tyranny of the state and the only effective means of socialisation and social and in particular, parental, control.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the progressive or 'left wing radical' family camp are intellectuals, mostly middle class intellectuals who condemn the traditional family as a prime source of repression particularly to women.<sup>4</sup>

A fairer picture of the debate might identify three versions of the argument, two of which might be described as chiefly ideological and one as pragmatic. These three are certainly not mutually exclusive and involve much overlap but nevertheless they are characterised by different assumptions and tend to produce differing agendas:

#### i) The Left versus Right Debate

Ideological assumptions are pre-eminent and the debate is most overtly pursued by think tanks and academics.

#### ii) The Ethical versus Egoist Debate

Ideological assumptions are important but they are articulated in terms of values and principles.

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<sup>2</sup> Craven et al, Family Issues and Public Policy, Study Commission on the Family, 1982 (p.23)

<sup>3</sup> Coote et al, The Family Way: a new approach to policy making, IPPR, 1990 (p. 10)

<sup>4</sup> Davies et al, The Family: is it just another lifestyle choice? IEA Health and Welfare Unit, Choice in Welfare No. 15, 1993 (p.vi)

iii) The 'What's Best for Children?' Debate

This has emerged as a pragmatic antithesis out of the Left versus Right debate and is concerned about protecting the most vulnerable (and voiceless) members of society.

### **i) The Left versus Right Debate**

The 'purist' form of this debate might be said to be conducted between the IPPR and the IEA/CPS.

Their differences can be summarised briefly:

#### **Left**

- ◆ The family is changing, responding to sociological change especially to the pressure for equality of opportunity for men and women. Such trends cannot be halted or reversed, except by an intolerable totalitarian government.
- ◆ The family is a social phenomenon and different family models are valid, there is no natural order or 'golden age' of family life from which we have declined. Very difficult to prove disadvantages of one parent family - poverty a more plausible explanation.
- ◆ Key concepts are equality and choice for both men and women especially to compete in the labour market. Family responsibilities have traditionally hindered women. Public policy should enhance women's choice e.g. provision of child care.
- ◆ The function of the state is to organise the economy to enhance equality of opportunity and to provide for all in need. Poverty is the real menace to successful families and state provision should make up shortfall.
- ◆ Gender roles are open to change. Men should share the parental caring and housekeeping role, as many more women work outside the home. Fathers are often inadequate and mothers better off without them. Employers should adapt working practices to fit around family responsibilities.

#### **Right**

- ◆ The family is in crisis, with deep-rooted disintegration in prospect because of divorce, poor parenting, illegitimacy. Such trends can and should be reversed by reasserting the place of family in society.
- ◆ The family (i.e. 'nuclear') is the essential building block of society, historical - not the invention of the Victorians, biological, anthropologically nearly universal in healthy human cultures, essential to socialisation of children unto maturity. Other models are problematic.
- ◆ Key concepts are commitment, stability and responsibility. Parents have obligations to their children; children have obligations to their elderly parents. Choice is exercised in the context of obligation.
- ◆ The function of the state is to provide a safety net for anyone in poverty or desperate need, but the aim is to enable people to provide for themselves and their own, to break down the dependency culture. Family is a substitute for state provision.
- ◆ Men's role is primarily as breadwinner taking financial responsibility and expecting to be in fulltime employment outside the home, exercising authority and discipline in the home and making financial provision for his children. Women will continue caring with part-time work, but ideally should remain at home.

- ◆ Responses to issues often driven by feminist agenda, eg child abuse viewed as a product of a patriarchal sexual culture and evidence of failure of traditional families and particularly the dispensable role of the father.
- ◆ Responses to issues often driven by concern to bolster 'traditional' family eg child abuse associated with introduction of step fathers, lack of adequate male role models, harmful effects of divorce and lone parenting.

## **The Ethical versus Egoist Debate**

This debate, coined by Norman Dennis and Professor A H Halsey, has been seen as a largely internal debate within socialism. It could be said to be another version of the Left -v- Right debate conducted within the broad tenants of socialism - and not dissimilarly within the capitalist camp.<sup>5</sup> It is about values:

### ethical socialist/capitalist

- ◆ family is a social institution
- ◆ characterised by a moral view of family life and adherence to 'family values' such as honesty, hard work, respectability, consideration for others.
- ◆ freedom means acting with personal responsibility and fostering strong internal controls such as conscience. Liberty is not freedom from oppression but freedom for right living. Individual freedom is to be exercised in ways compatible with others' freedom.
- ◆ human beings are fallible, should take responsibility for their actions, e.g. no automatic links between poverty and crime. Problems come from decline in morality and quality of parenthood, not economic deprivation as such.
- ◆ the function of the state is to set moral tone, standards and to constrain evil or destructive elements in society.

### egoist socialist/capitalist or libertarian

- ◆ family is a private emotional aff air
- ◆ characterised by individualism in personal lifestyle choices and a laissezfaire attitude to the internal processes of families
- ◆ freedom means freedom to choose to please oneself, to be rid of the oppression of imposed obligations or authorities whether to family members, contracts such as marriage either by the state or social convention.
- ◆ human beings are essentially good and will act in their best interests. Problems then spring from poverty, shifts in the labour market leading to unemployment not decline in morality etc. For egoist socialists it is the 'system' which is at fault causing antisocial behaviour.
- ◆ the function of the state is to pick up the pieces

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<sup>5</sup> Dennis & Erdos, Families without Fatherhood, IEA Health and Welfare Unit, Choice in Welfare no. 12, 1992 (p.viii)

- ◆ key concepts are community, obligation, self help, voluntarism and the service of others over individual good
- ◆ typically working class (socialist); also mainstream classical liberal thinking (e.g. Adam Smith, Friedrich Hayek, Michael Novak)
- ◆ characteristic statement of belief on the family: "The family resolves the false dichotomy between individual freedom and collective social responsibility and creates conditions where ordered liberty can exist."<sup>6</sup>
- ◆ attitudes to marriage may change to put greater emphasis on compatibility of partners, personal qualities but obligations still remain to children and to ageing or sick relatives.
- ◆ moral obligations are part of the public domain e.g. cannot divorce your children.
- ◆ key concepts are freedom and choice; for the libertarian Tory, the free market bringing growth, mobility and efficiency are key.
- ◆ typically middle class intellectuals (socialist) and New Right or No-Turning-Back Tories
- ◆ characteristic (but caricatured) statement of belief: "I please myself, but if anything goes wrong, you must be responsible that my children come to no harm. In effect... 'you must be a socialist so that I can be an egoist'"<sup>7</sup>
- ◆ marriage is a social contract which can be ended and family life is a private affair, e.g. divorce contracts are civil matters
- ◆ morality is about difficult personal choices, e.g. abortion

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<sup>6</sup> Davies et al (p.30)

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<sup>7</sup> Dennis & Erdos (p.76)

### **iii) The 'What's Best for the Children?' Debate**

This debate has emerged as the pragmatic solution to the irreconcilable positions of the Left versus Right ideological rhetoric. It has also become a way of forming a consensus within the current Conservative Government - and to a lesser extent within the Labour Party - to avoid internal party splits along the ethical/egoist divide.

This is characterised by the slogan 'Children Come First', the title of the Government's White Paper on the Child Support Act.<sup>8</sup> It is also an important strand in the philosophy behind the Law Commission's 1990 proposals to reform the divorce laws and the subsequent consultation paper from the Lord Chancellor's Department published December 1993.

The debate therefore concentrates on the welfare of children and what factors - economic, social, material, emotional, spiritual, psychological etc - enhance healthy child development and which factors hinder it. Research studies become very significant here, e.g. the educational achievement or delinquent tendencies of children from divorced, separated, lone and reconstituted families.

Policy issues then raised are how to reduce the detrimental effects of parental conflict on children, e.g. by making divorce proceedings less adversarial and lengthy. A child-focussed family policy highlights the issue of children's rights which might be motivated by a protectionist, liberationist or pragmatic approach.<sup>9</sup> Thus, a new balance is called for between the rights of parents, guardians, social workers etc and those of the 'client', ie the child. Some advocates of child-focussed policies believe that it is the existence of a loving environment which is the primary element in a child's well-being not the type of family structure they are in.

This approach to family policy has been variously expressed:

- a) *"Family policy should be primarily concerned with the process of bringing up and caring for children a starting point for a family policy". One goal for policy should therefore be that every child should have the right to be dependent and to grow up in conditions which enable it to become a dependable adult" (IPPR).<sup>10</sup>*
- b) *"Children's needs come first at The Children's Society. The principles on which its work is based have been carefully developed and are constantly under review. The Society will take a stand to help children wherever they are locked away from their communities, exploited and abused, impoverished, grouped together and labelled a problem, and where they are not involved in decisions, affecting their lives." (The Children's Society)<sup>11</sup>*
- c) *"NCH believes that most children are best cared for in their own families, and actively seeks to help families remain together where this is in the best interests of the child". (National Children's Home)<sup>12</sup>*
- d) *"Central to the philosophy of the Act is the belief that children are best looked after within the family with both parents playing a full part and without resort to legal proceedings. This is reflected in the new concept of 'parental responsibility'. Parents retain parental responsibility*

<sup>8</sup> HMSO, Children Come First, The Government's proposals on the maintenance of children, reprinted 1992. Cm 1264

<sup>9</sup> NCB An Introduction to Children's Rights, Highlight no. 113, June 1992

<sup>10</sup> Coote et al (P.33/34)

<sup>11</sup> The Children's Society, Annual Review 1990-91

<sup>12</sup> NCH Strategic Plan 1991-6, 1991 (p.2)

*when they separate following private law proceedings and continue to do so when their child is looked after by the local authority. Parental responsibility is only lost when a child is freed for adoption or adopted. Unmarried fathers may obtain parental responsibility by agreement with the mother or through court orders." (The Children Act 1989) <sup>13</sup>*

- e) *"If we are genuinely concerned with producing a healthy generation of children, we must see that our society does its utmost to preserve the well being of their parents. Children depend on the health of their parents for their own health." (One Plus One)<sup>14</sup>*

## **2. APPROACHES TO FAMILY POLICY: THE POLITICAL PARTIES**

Recent months has seen the debate about family policy and the social costs of family breakdown dominate the political agenda. Some have seen the 'back to basics' campaign in a cynical light as an attempt by Government to distract attention from economic difficulties, others have risen to the challenge to take seriously the public's concern that solutions need to be found to address the social and economic consequences of relationship and family breakdown.

Below is a summary of the main positions held by the three mainstream political parties on policies affecting families from materials they supplied:

### **The Conservative Party**

- i) In the Prime Minister's celebrated address to the Conservative Party Conference October 1993, he coined the phrase 'back to basics' and defined it as the return 'to selfdiscipline and respect for the law; to consideration for others; to accepting responsibility for yourself and your family and not shuffling it off on the state'.
- ii) The value of the traditional two-parent family should be emphasised and together with responsible parenting. The establishment of the Child Support Agency aims to ensure that both parents fulfil personal responsibility for their children and that, even when parents split up, both parents support their children.
- iii) Lone parent families as a result of bereavement, divorce or separation deserve not blame but support as many find themselves in such families against their will. Single 'never married' parents represent a minority but rising proportion of lone parents.
- iv) The Government's White Paper, Health of the Nation, sets a target of reducing unwanted teenage pregnancies by at least 50 per cent by the year 2000.
- v) Homelessness legislation will be amended to remove the automatic priority given to pregnant women for local authority housing.
- vi) The introduction of Family Credit in 1988 was designed to enable lone parents and couples with children who are less well off to enter employment. A further measure to improve work incentives such as the earnings disregard for child care costs were announced in the November 1993 Budget.

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<sup>13</sup> HMSO, Children Act Report 1992, Report from the Department of Health, Cm 2144, February 1993

<sup>14</sup> Dominian (p.4)

- vii) There is no positive affirmation of the importance of marriage or long term commitment in relationships. However, in the Lord Chancellor's recent Consultation Paper on divorce law reform he states his objectives for reform:

*'I believe that a good divorce law will support the institution of marriage by seeking to lay out for the parties a process by which they receive help to prevent a marriage being dissolved. If that is not possible it should seek to eliminate unnecessary distress for the parties and particularly for their children in those cases where a marriage has broken down irretrievably.'*<sup>15</sup>

The 1992 General Election Manifesto committed the Government to other measures largely concerned with child care:

- i) to create more nursery places and initiatives to extend childcare for working mothers; employers child care costs to be offset against corporation tax; abolition of income tax on workplace nurseries; encourage provision of after-school facilities by schools, employers and voluntary groups to be paid for through TECs; local authorities to be required to produce a local Childcare Plan;
- ii) to transfer responsibility for issues concerning women and the workplace from the Home Office to the Dept of Employment which would coordinate Government policy;
- iii) to maintain the level of Child Benefit in line with inflation as 'the cornerstone of our policy for all families with children';
- iv) to set up a new 'family support initiative' in partnership with voluntary and statutory authorities; to set up a new Family Credit telephone advice service to support working families;
- v) to introduce new measures to deter persistent offenders.

## **The Labour Party**

The Labour Party has been reviewing its policies on the family and currently has a frontbench committee, the Family Policy Forum, looking at all aspects of family policy.

Key components of Labour's family policy as recently expressed were:

- i) Comprehensive, integrated childcare services, 'Childhood Partnerships', to be provided by local authorities for all under 5s and 5-14 year olds out of school care. These would be provided on a partnership basis between public and private sector agencies including employers. They urged the removal of tax penalties on workplace nurseries.
- ii) Fiscal measures to improve the earnings capacity of women on low pay, to include increasing tax allowances and amending N 1 arrangements. A commitment to restoring the value of Child Benefit was made as well as the option to split married couples' allowance between partners.

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<sup>15</sup> Lord Chancellor's Department, Looking to the Future: Mediation and the ground for divorce - a Consultation Paper, December 1993. Cm 2424.

- iii) Flexible working patterns which recognise family responsibilities. Extension of full-time employment rights to part-time workers; six-month maternity and paternity leave on full pay; career breaks and returner programmes for women returners; ways to encourage men to play greater role in caring for children e.g. career breaks, paternity leave.
- iv) Expansion of nursery education with a commitment to provide places for all 3 and 4 year olds if required.
- v) Proposed a Children's Minister and a Children's Commissioner to ensure all legislation is audited for its impact on children. Also proposed a Women's Ministry.
- vi) Reforms to support children's rights, e.g. pupil school governors and school councils elected by pupils; young people to have same rights of access to existing Ombudsmen; establish system of Family Courts to deal with all legal matters involving children including divorce, custody, care proceedings, juvenile crime along lines of Scotland's Children's Panel.

Malcolm Wicks MP, former Director of the Family Policy Studies Centre, published in December 1993, a 10-point agenda for family policy<sup>16</sup>:

- i) Sex and Family Education - the need for a more open educational programme to reduce the teenage pregnancy rate;
- ii) Education for Parenthood - information about pregnancy and post-natal care to be more available; courses for improving parental skills; more open-access family centres offering a range of services for parent toddler clubs to family therapy;
- iii) Marriage Guidance and Counselling - make investment in counselling and support services a priority;
- iv) Divorce Law Reform - endorse the Lord Chancellor's proposals for a cooling off period, when parents with trained counsellors can consider the best interests of the children;
- v) Child Support Agency reform - ensure that most of the money goes to the mother and child;
- vi) Policies for Lone Parents - an imaginative package of policies to cover education, training, employment and child care;
- vii) Child Benefit - introduce a premium for children under five;
- viii) Provision for the Under-Fives - substantial investment in child care and nursery education provision for all 3 and 4 year olds, where parents wish this, within five years;
- ix) Work and the Family - family-friendly work and employment practices which go beyond child care;
- x) Family Care Support - develop a range of services such as respite care, domiciliary provision and suitable housing to support family carers.

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<sup>16</sup> Wicks, Malcolm, Putting Families First - a 10-point policy agenda, December 1993.

## **The Liberal Democrat Party**

1. Families are 'Building Blocks for Society' and a vital part of the cohesion of communities. Although family structures are changing, change is not, by definition, all bad. There is no automatic reason why a family unit based on something other than a heterosexual marriage should fail. The record of such marriages is, after all, not great at present.
2. Family breakdowns contribute to social problems and society cannot be content merely to pick up the pieces. Healthy families are too often taken for granted; they should be supported and encouraged.
3. Traditional concepts of the family are losing their relevance but this is a matter for individuals; the state should not dictate what families should be like but should not stand back while families are torn apart by economic forces controlled by government.
4. Financial support should be given via increased child benefit, restoring social security entitlements to 16-17 years olds and students, replacing Council Tax with a Local Income Tax based on individual ability to pay, substantially increasing state pensions and creating a Carer's Benefit for those looking after elderly or disabled relatives. A longer term objective would be to eliminate poverty traps by integrating tax and benefits systems and creating a single Low Income Benefit replacing Family Credit and Income Support and a Citizen's Income payable to all.
5. Children's Rights should be guaranteed by ratifying the UN Convention. Family courts should be established to ensure a nonadversarial atmosphere for cases involving children.
6. Pre-school education should be available for all from age three.
7. Provide more flexible working conditions including flexi-time, job-sharing, homeworking and career breaks and invent in education and retraining for women returners.
8. Establish a tax-free voucher system to assist parents with child care costs provided through employers. Local authorities to improve and increase creche facilities and be advised by a National Childcare Development Agency to coordinate provision.

Their 1992 manifesto also included these commitments concerning working mothers:

- women's work at home to be recognised by payment of an independent state income, part of the Citizen's Income
- Invalid Care Allowance to be replaced by Carer's Benefit to enable carers to combine caring with part- or full-time employment.

and young people:

- young people's rights to be protected, including access to confidential medical advice and treatment
- local authorities to provide accommodation for 16-17 year olds, and their access to claim income support restored
- reduce voting age to 16
- pupil governors in schools.

## **D. IDENTIFYING THE COMMON GROUND IN THE FAMILY POLICY DEBATE**

Despite the considerable divergence of approach to family policy today, the consultation participants believe there are some common threads which could form a framework of principles within which different groups could work together. The main points of agreement are:

### **1. Common Humanity**

All human beings are of equal worth. All have basic physical, emotional, mental and spiritual needs which are essential to health and well-being. All share responsibility to help meet those basic needs. Public policy should therefore seek the well-being of all people irrespective of their family circumstances, to enable people to provide for themselves and their families, and to protect the most vulnerable members whose health and well-being is restricted by disability, economic disadvantage, lack of opportunity or personal motivation.

### **2. Healthy Relationships are Vital**

Healthy, mutually supportive relationships enhance human development; harmful, conflict-ridden relationships undermine human development. Healthy relationships within families are crucial to human growth and fulfilment. In particular, children need nurturing in a loving and stable environment to develop their full potential as adults. Parents, for better or worse, are the basic influence and resource for their children's development. The wider network of family members, friends, carers and teachers are also important nurturing relationships.

### **3. Long-term Committed Relationships are Best**

Most men and women aspire to stability and commitment in their intimate relationships. Statistically, this is still today expressed primarily through the heterosexual marriage relationship. Research studies confirm that stable and intimate relationships are the primary way in which physical and psychological wellbeing are developed and promoted for both adults and children.

Commitment enhances the possibility of stability and creates boundaries within which relationships grow and mature. Nurturing children requires a long-term commitment on the part of parents which can be both rewarding and burdensome. Commitment is also an important factor in the ability of families to care for one another through sickness, handicap and old age across the generations.

The development and sustenance of long term committed family relationships, therefore, should be a central goal of public policy.

### **4. Two Parents Are Usually Better Than One**

The presence of mother and father makes it possible for the burdensome responsibilities of childcare and breadwinning to be shared. Nurturing by a loving mother and father provide balanced role models for adult behaviour.

Many children are, nevertheless, raised very successfully by one parent. The quality of relationship between parent and child is key. Acceptance of the advantages of two parents points to the need to support lone parents. The responsibility for parenting should be underpinned by the law.

## **5. Family Life and Expectations are in Transition**

Family relationships are dynamic, changing and developing under the influence of social, economic and cultural factors. Economic pressures, the changing labour market and higher educational levels for both men and women, are among those factors bringing about significant changes in today's expectations of family life. At the same time moral and religious constraints which placed emphasis on commitment and self-sacrificial relationships are less prevalent than in previous generations.

Many women successfully combine child rearing with bread winning. More men share in domestic duties. Children are expected to grow in independence at an earlier age. However, periods of transition can create tension as well as opportunity for growth as men and women adjust to changing roles and expectations.

Family stress can be increased by the loosening of wider family and neighbourhood ties which previously supported the nuclear unit of parents and children.

## **6. Family Breakdown is a Fact of Life**

More frequently, couples find that their (perhaps unrealistically) high expectations of marriage are unfulfilled and part. Parenting can place heavy burdens on couples: the majority of divorces occur between 5 and 9 years of marriage, typically a time when young children present their greatest demands on parents.

Intimate relationships have the potential to be both the most positive and most negative environment for human well-being. Where relationships are violent or abusive, divorce and separation may be the best solution.

## **7. Family Breakdown has Social and Economic Costs**

Relationship breakdown leaves people vulnerable, and often both emotionally and economically worse off. It also affects society as a whole.

During the past two decades figures for crime rates, juvenile delinquency, truancy, teenage pregnancies, young homeless, divorce, child sex abuse, abortions, and births outside marriage have all increased placing a greater burden on the public exchequer to fund social services, welfare benefits, health care, legal and conciliation costs, as well as the police and other criminal justice agencies.

Lone parent families are among the poorest sections of our community, many of whom rely on state support. There is some evidence that children fare worse in conflict-ridden homes and that those brought up in lone parent families have a higher incidence of ill health, accidents and low educational achievement than those from intact two-Parent families. The causal relationship for these correlations is a complex dynamic and needs further study.

While remarriage offers hope of a fresh start and new extended family relationships, stepparent/child relationships can complicate family life and lead to the loss of contact with the first family, particularly grandparents. This also has implications for the care of elderly people who have lost contact with relatives through family breakdown.

## **8. Government Policy is Inadequate and Inconsistent**

Pragmatic and piecemeal public policy responses, often driven by short term political considerations, have failed to stem family breakdown.

No consistent public policy response has emerged from either local or central Government which takes seriously the costly public consequences of 'private' family problems.

At least ten different departments of state currently bear responsibility for aspects of public policy impacting directly on families but no adequate mechanism exists to coordinate their aims or effect.

## **9. Families Need Financial Support**

Meeting the shortfall in the financial situation of the poorest families is important, not least because children are often the chief losers. Welfare and taxation policy should take account of the true costs of raising children, but should not encourage passive dependency but enable families to make good choices for themselves.

Many lone parents and two-parent families find themselves dependent on temporary housing, often highly unsuitable for children, and reliant on state benefits. They are caught in the 'unemployment trap' because of social security restrictions on part-time earnings and the costs of childcare.

Acceptance of the benefits of two-parent families implies taking seriously the difficulties faced by those bringing up children without a supportive partner/spouse or wider family network.

## **10. Limits to Public Expenditure**

Decisions about the level of social security expenditure to be afforded are especially tough during periods of economic recession, rising unemployment and reduced taxation revenues. Earlier assumptions about the role of the welfare state were premised on an economy in which full employment was envisaged for all men. Therefore change is inevitable as public expenditure cannot be left to rise indefinitely.

New thinking is needed to decide how to limit the demand placed on social services and how best to utilise available resources. A new consensus is needed about how responsibility for welfare provision should be shared between individuals, families, local communities and local and central government.

## **11. Prevention is the Key**

There have been some fundamental shifts in popular values over the last two generations. The existence of self-reliant stable families capable of passing on models of mutually supportive behaviour to the next generation and of mutually supportive local communities can no longer be taken for granted.

Family breakdown need not be inevitable. The deficit in parenting and relationship skills should be filled through intermediaries such as voluntary agencies, schools and churches. Marriage preparation and parenting assistance should be made more available. Alternative avenues to divorce for resolving marital conflict should be developed.

A preventive family policy must include financial and practical measures to support families, access to advice at different stages in family life, and therapy and counselling for those facing difficulties.

## **12. Family-friendly Employment Patterns are Essential**

The work - family conflict is best solved by enabling families to choose to have one parent stay at home or work.

This can be achieved by increased tax relief or allowances to families with dependent children, more opportunities for part-time work for women and the provision of high quality childcare facilities. Flexible working hours for both men and women via job-share and annualised hours schemes, career breaks and telecommuting should be more widely available. These options should extend across all private, public sector and professional enterprises.

The more fundamental issue of the low status given to child rearing in our society must also be addressed by employers, trades unions and policy makers.

### **13. No 'Putting Back the Clock'**

Fundamental changes in attitudes, beliefs and behaviour are taking place in our society which have raised important questions about the nature and purpose of institutions such as the church, marriage and parental authority. These have had a profound effect on our understanding of family life and values.

It is not possible to go back to some mythological golden age of family life when everyone 'knew their place', when near full employment existed for men, when women were **completely fulfilled** as wives and mothers, and when a social consensus existed based on Christian values and ideals of conduct.

Neither should we assume that current trends in family and marriage breakdown are inevitable or irreversible. However, it will require a fundamental renewal of our understanding about the centrality of healthy stable relationships to our social, economic as well as emotional well-being. It must be recognised that responsibility for fostering healthy relationships fall on us all. It is not solely a private matter nor solely a concern for public policy; but without a lead from our political and spiritual leaders it is hard to see how the tide can be turned.

## **E. CONCLUSION FROM A CONSULTATION ON FAMILY POLICY**

The contention that common ground might be found among a variety of approaches to family policy was tested at a consultation held in November 1993 at St George's House, Windsor Castle.

The names of those who attended and those who otherwise contributed to the consultation process are given in Appendix II to this report.

There were a number of themes which emerged from the two-day discussions:

### **1 . The central importance of long term stable family relationships for healthy human development**

There is a body of medical, psychological, educational and sociological evidence to make this case which was referred to by both Dr Michael Schluter, Director of the Jubilee Policy Group, and Professor Richard Whitfield, Honorary Chairman of the National Family Trust. The tendency for a cycle of unstable relationships and poor parenting to develop in certain situations was mentioned by Penny Mansfield, Deputy Director, One Plus One.

In particular, the case for the place of marriage in our society needed to be made over again in non-religious terms in order to acknowledge people's need to form committed relationships which were not static but dynamic and able to develop and mature.

It was agreed that this evidence should be collated and circulated as a resource. Any attempt to argue this case in public should be wary of promoting 'ideal' patterns of human behaviour but should concentrate on what realistically can be done to help the development and sustenance of healthy stable relationships over the long term.

### **2. Need for further exploration of 'commitment' as a definition of good relationships**

The consultation was not able to address in any detail what were the full implications of endorsing the statement: 'long term committed relationships are best'. The concept of commitment needed further exploration, whether it was to be understood in a contract or covenantal sense, whether it is a static or dynamic concept, and what forms of commitment equate with long term stability, eg. the parental responsibility contract in the Children Act. Does commitment involve a quality of relationship as well as a quantitative element? How can commitments be made in rapidly changing social, economic and cultural environments? What is the role of law in defining and requiring particular kinds of commitment eg marriage contracts, community care orders.

### **3. There is no clear distinction between public and private family matters**

Despite Alistair Burt's reservations that Government could not and should not interfere in the private area of family relationships, the consultation strongly agreed that it was not possible to make a clear distinction between private and public issues. It may not be possible to engineer family structure via public policy but, in the Child Support Agency and in the Children Act, the government has firmly stated its belief that the law should be used to affirm the principle of parental responsibility. It was also agreed that children were a public issue because of the role of the law in protecting the most vulnerable members of society.

#### **4. The role of Government in setting the agenda for family policy**

Government clearly sets the agenda and the tone for debates about the family as has been well demonstrated in the previous two months with the issue of lone parenting and concerns to reduce social security expenditure dominating the political scene.

However, it was observed by Alistair Burt and others that Government Ministers and their civil servants were often in sympathy with moral concerns but uncomfortable about being prescriptive. They were only happy to talk in terms of creating the right conditions (ie. economic) for families to choose themselves how best to cope with relationship difficulties.

Nevertheless, the Government has no qualms about being 'interventionist' where there are cost benefits to be gained but tends to limit its actions to tackling symptoms not causes.

#### **5. Recognition of the scale of the challenge facing policy makers:**

Several speakers and participants referred to the enormity of the task of reversing some of the fundamental trends underlying the breakup of the social fabric:

- million children growing up with only one parent
- the erosion of the significance of commitment and of fidelity in relationships and the absence of a moral context or consensus within which to discuss boundaries to personal freedom
- present Government's preoccupation with reducing public expenditure
- the difficulty of breeching the media's libertarian agenda and of getting fair coverage for ethical issues and the moral dimension to relationship breakdown.

For some, including Alistair Burt, these trends were so entrenched they were pessimistic about whether action by Government could relieve them. He was concerned that the sheer scale of the problem would have to involve an unacceptable level of public expenditure and intervention, also that the causes of breakdown were complex and long term and relate to moral and religious beliefs as well as economic and labour market trends.

#### **6. Need to invest in preventative strategies**

However, the meeting did not share Alistair Burt's pessimism about the potential for preventative measures as an effective response to trends in relationship breakdown.

Penny Mansfield detailed findings of research at One Plus One into the causes of relationship and marriage breakdown and, in particular, their own study on the transition to parenthood which showed the importance of couples accepting the potential conflict that children bring to their relationship.

She concluded that a three - pronged preventative strategy was needed involving:

- i) information about what triggers breakdown, what types of couples are more susceptible to splitting up or more/less suited to parenting; where dissatisfaction with the relationship starts, what are the more common periods of conflict or readjustment, eg onset of parenting. Such information to be used in producing materials for use with couples at various stages, e.g. contemplating marriage, when expecting the first child and when difficulties first arise - not just when divorce proceedings are initiated.

- ii) educate wider web of professionals who people turn to when difficulties arise, eg GPs, health visitors, teachers. One example cited was the One Plus One course called Brief Encounters in listening skills.
- iii) provide regular opportunities for marriage review. She commented on the beneficial effect on several marriage relationships of the researchers taking an interest and providing occasion for discussion about how the relationship is going.

## **7. Importance of educating young people for relationships**

Schooling has a vital part to play in meeting the parenting deficit for young people who have not had the benefit of 'secure attachment' through their family relationships.

The values of our educational system should recognise that psychological well-being is the key factor in a child's ability to 'learn' at school and is a prerequisite for progress in any subject area. The content of education should seek to develop that well-being and include concern for personal relationships, wider community responsibilities and the moral context for sexuality. This was acknowledged by educationalists irrespective of awareness of any religious dimension.

## **8. Need to develop better strategies for handling the media and Government**

Various suggestions were aired including:

- i) back up all statements with thorough research
- ii) concentrate on examples of good practice where progress can be demonstrated, eg juvenile crime prevention through moral education in schools.
- iii) bring together different interest groups wherever possible to show credibility and marshal a range of different arguments; distinguish social, economic, psychological material from ethical considerations.
- iv) demonstrate opportunities for cost benefits eg getting lone parents back into employment.
- v) be careful in use of language in this whole field because of the emotive nature of the issues. For example, the distinction between 'partnership' and 'relationship' is helpful when discussing marital difficulties: there may be problems with the relationship (how parties are relating) but still room to believe that the partnership, the framework within which the relationship develops, is worth sticking with.
- vi) issue-focussed campaigns can be more effective, eg. retaining child benefit levels.
- vii) work on local as well as central government especially in key areas such as community care provision, pre-school education. Bodies such as the AMA and ACC may be more receptive than Government and carry considerable weight.
- viii) the validity of outside agencies (such as those represented at the consultation) to provide regular commentary on the impact of Government policy on families, being in touch with the grassroots and representative of a major constituency of 'ordinary' people and also free from the demarcation lines of departmental interests.

## **9. Desire to see momentum of the consultation continue**

Many present accepted the benefits of a broad coalition approach to family policy where interests across the generations could be represented together. Also, that there should be a lobbying vehicle which is clearly identified with promoting the value of long term stability in family relationships and which argues for the importance of the moral and ethical context in policy formation.

As there appeared to be general agreement among participants on the principles outlined in the 'Common Ground' paper (Section D of this report), it was agreed that a shortened version of that paper would be circulated to participants for their approval. This would then form the basis of a joint statement of the consultation's position and a framework for working together in the future.

## **F. THE NEXT STEP: THE NEED FOR A NEW FAMILY POLICY INITIATIVE**

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this review of current literature and public policy affecting families.

1. There is no shortage of public policy issues which impact on families and which are not receiving sufficiently thoughtful attention at present. Much of the debate in political and think tank circles is predictably driven by ideological concerns. Thus attention is concentrated on particular agenda issues such as child care provision or support for lone parents rather than on more fundamental issues about how to maintain long-term commitment in family relationships. The rift within both the Left and the Right along the 'ethical/egoist' lines, has so far prevented any form of internal party consensus from forming.
2. Little integration of family policy issues takes place within government. Such action which does happen is piecemeal and inadequately assessed for its overall impact, and, some would argue, contradictory in effect.
3. No mechanism exists outside government for providing consistent expert commentary on the impact of public policy on families which takes full account of the breadth of social, economic and moral factors at work. Often attention is focussed solely on those issues which are seen to directly affect families. Factors such as those outlined in Section A of the review which have an indirect (but nonetheless significant) impact frequently fail to be assessed from a family viewpoint.

No 'neutral' public forum exists for the open discussion of values/moral implications for family policy (the nearest model is the private meetings at St George's Windsor). Nor is there any consistent attempt to provide policy recommendations which takes seriously Christian principles and values.

4. There are a plethora of organisations concerned about aspects of family policy and family life. Those which are most respected in Government circles are those actively involved at the grass roots with families and their struggles and which have a long-term engagement in service provision. They have both a platform and track record from which to speak out on present trends.
5. There is a well-established practice among voluntary organisations concerned with families, and particularly children, to form joint platforms on specific issues, eg. the 90-strong 'Save Child Benefit' coalition, the 30 organisations whose responses to the Children Act were coordinated by the National Children's Bureau, and the 10-point 1992 election manifesto supported by the 5 major child care providers.
6. There is considerable individual sympathy among those working for organisations in this area for the kind of principles and approach proposed in our study. However, this is matched by great reluctance on the part of those same individuals as to the possibility (or appropriateness) of their organisations publicly endorsing such principles or a modified version of them.

Concerns expressed related to the procedural problems of working in coalitions such as the lengthy bureaucratic procedures for formal adoption of statements of principle and the

perception that for some existing pragmatic alliances were achieving good working relationships between organisations.

Other concerns were related to the principles underlying our proposed framework, in particular unease about promoting an ideal model of life-long commitment in marriage which does not square with the actual state of so many families today and the dangers of promoting the positive virtues of marriage being interpreted as a negative attitude towards those who have 'failed', in particular lone parents.

7. Nevertheless the basis of a broad consensus can be drawn from the different approaches evidenced. This has been outlined in Section D of this review and focusses on the central proposition that the development and sustenance of long term committed family relationships should be at the heart of a family policy for the 21st Century. This proposition should be debated at a forum of those involved in family policy formation.

In our view, these all point towards the need for a new policy initiative which would provide regular and consistent commentary on family policy issues from a perspective which upholds the central importance of maintaining long term commitment in family relationships.

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## **FAMILY POLICY INITIATIVE**

### **Statement of Core Principles**

This statement of principles has been adopted by CARE and the Jubilee Centre, the two sponsoring organisations to the Family Policy Initiative. It is proposed that they should undergird the work of the Initiative and be used as a basis for discussion with other organisations interested in working together:

- The family is a network of people linked by blood, marriage or adoption, spanning the generations.
- The foundation principle is that the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being of all members of society is the chief goal of family policy. In particular, the most vulnerable members should be protected.
- Love and security are essential to human development and are the foundation of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being from the earliest age.
- The family is the primary means by which love and security are provided and nurtured in society. A stable long term committed relationship of husband and wife to each other and to their children is the ideal environment for the healthy development of children.
- All share a responsibility to care for those without the support of an extended family, particularly those involved in parenting including lone parents, elderly and disabled people as well as those living alone.
- National and corporate economic goals should not be pursued at the expense of family relationships.
- The local community should be structured, protected and developed in such a way as to maximise the support the neighbourhood and the wider family can give each household and individual.

## **PARTICIPANTS IN THE FAMILY POLICY CONSULTATION**

The following people participated at the consultation in November 1993 or contributed to the drafting of a joint statement identifying the basis of common ground on family policy:

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