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COUNCIL FOR THE NATIONAL INTEREST
WESTERN AUSTRALIAN COMMITTEE

APPENDIX (11)



THE FAMILY REALLY DOES MATTER

“The basic unit of society is the family, and the cornerstone of the family is marriage, the union of one man and one woman. Deeply rooted in all societies, marriage is a fundamental social institution that has been tested and reaffirmed over thousands of years. Children especially, need marriage. The family yields significant ‘social capital’ and other benefits to society and children in an intact family have the most promising life prospects. Parents have the right and responsibility to oversee the education and upbringing of their children” (i)

Therefore “the family merits the great attention it receives from both scholars and lay persons, for despite major changes over time and enormous variations across social and economic environments, it remains the most influential of all institutions” (ii)

It follows that the traditional family should be promoted, supported, maintained and protected by government policy. The Family Law Court and the Australian Institute of Family Studies (funded by the Commonwealth Government) should be obliged to support the social utility of marriage.

Some Major Issues Affecting the Family

1 Family Impact Statement

CNI is pleased to see a “Family Impact Statement” is now in place to examine the possible consequences of policy decisions on the family, before Cabinet decisions are made. These family impact statements must be made public not shrouded in Cabinet confidentiality as at present.

2 Promoting the Family

(a) In John Stone’s ‘Australian Social Trends 2005,’ he discusses the encouraging economic changes of the last decade. Though many were positive “not all indicators are so comforting,” he said, especially data relating to families. Of all families with children under 15, the proportion of those living in one parent families rose from 16.4% in 1995 to 20.8% in 2004. Since research points overwhelmingly to the fact that children in intact families are less likely to live in poverty, tend to perform better educationally and socially and have a smaller proportion of drug takers, this is an issue that should be of great concern to Governments. We should be exploring every means of keeping families together.

(b) Who brings up baby?

Why is it that mothers who choose to return to the workplace soon after the birth of their child receive a child minding allowance from the Government, yet the mother who stays at home to care for her child has no equivalent allowance available to her?

Over 600,000 children are involved in child care in Australia with a public subsidy of over \$1.5 billion annually. But this raises many questions about how parental absence affects the child.

Steve Biddulph says “Nurseries, once hailed as the way to give our kids good social skills, have been found in recent studies to be a poor substitute for one to one care. We know that a baby’s brain is shaped in the first three years and that affection and responsiveness are the keys to a happy confident life.” Dr. Steve Biddulph has been researching children in childcare for three decades in UK, Sweden, US and elsewhere and has reversed many of his ideas on the value of child care to children. (iii)

“As parents, we set our children’s emotional tone for life. This is written into the structure of the brain in the first three years, so it is worth going slow,” he says .

Dr. Biddulph notes that while researching this book he talked to nursery-care staff in centres all over the world. He said their honesty was often stunning - it was as if they had been waiting to tell someone the truth about what they really thought. (iv)

The tendency in Australia for Government policy to provide more day care subsidies than home care assistance, is extremely short sighted and out of kilter with what research is finding.(v)

Madelaine Bunting reports for The Guardian. (13/2/07), that in the past 2 decades we have revolutionised how we care for children in the first 3 years of life. In 1981 only 24% of women returned to the workforce within a year of childbirth. In 2001 it was 67% and rising. The number of child care places has quadrupled in a decade. Now Mr Blair is promising nursery education for all 2 yr olds.

“But the popularity of this revolution is at odds with what the experts are saying:- research on both sides of the Atlantic has reached remarkably similar conclusions: namely that large quantities of care in day nursery before the age of three increases the incidence of insecurity and aggression in children and that these damaging effects are still evident years later.”

Child expert Penelope Leach agrees.

Since 1998 she has been co-director of the largest ever UK childhood study: Families, Children and Childcare (FCCC).

She says “It is fairly clear from data from different parts of the world that the less time children spend in group care before 3yrs, the better.”

And “The trend towards more day nurseries is out of kilter with what the research is finding.” She has been urging better paid parental leave policies.

This view is replicated in America in the national Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and again from Prof, Jay Belsky and colleague Prof. Ted Melhuish at Birbeck University of London.

They point to the case of Sweden as evidence of what parents might want if they had a real choice.

The Swedish case is very revealing - there was high quality infant care available to all and heavily subsidised. It was widely used in the 70s and 80s, but in the early 90's

parental leave was increased and now there is remarkably little use of childcare under 18 months. Parents voted with their feet.

All researchers agree on one factor, the importance of infant/parent bonding and how closeness of the relationship immunises a child against future stresses and develops resilient mental health. - Infant parent bonding cannot be achieved in a child care centre. In the United Kingdom rapid adoption of nursery care in childrens' early years has been a huge social experiment. The first generation of these babies is now in their teens and twenties - a generation in crisis!

- I. Teens with behavioural problems have doubled since 1980,
- II. Anxiety and depression have risen by 70%
- III. In Britain 24,000 teens were admitted to hospital following an attempted suicide.
- IV. Rise in self harm is 65% in 2 years.
- V. Attention problems, violence, eating disorders, binge drinking has risen dramatically.

The danger signs are there for us to see.

In relation to Australian children Professor Fiona Stanley highlights an "epidemic of emotional and behavioural problems and increased rate of depression, anxiety and teenage suicide." She suggests some of these problems in today's teenagers could be blamed on a lack on nurturing at an early age by working mothers. (vi)

As Steve Biddulph suggests in more advanced countries such as Sweden Governments are moving towards the "Big Three":-

- I. Paid parental leave
- II. flexible working hours and
- III. return to work security and to do so would be a more effective use of taxpayers funds (vii).

This encourages mothers to defer career options while their children are very young but at the same time provide more freedom of choice.

The Swedish approach would appear to be the right one as in a UN survey of childhood well- being in 21 developed countries Sweden is ranked in the top three by comparison the UK is ranked last, the USA second last and Australia in the middle of the range. (viii)

Australian mothers must be given true freedom of choice as to whether they wish to stay home to care for their children or whether they wish to return to the workforce. The inequity of the taxation system which penalises the single income family versus the dual income family must be corrected. This can be done by restructuring the Federal Government's Family Tax Benefit arrangements to effectivity provide a home child care allowance (HCCA) as a substantial direct payment to mothers or (fathers) who choose to stay at home to care for their children.

For those who choose not to stay at home there should be no obligation on Government to subsidize their childcare costs.

It can be argued that to place very young children into day care at child care centres in the knowledge of the deleterious effects which flow from these would be in a sense “bad parenting”.

Well respected Canadian Dr. Mustard, a medical doctor who has specialised in childhood development, has cited the latest research into the human genome to warn governments and parents of bad early-childhood environments. He says “Gene structures are susceptible to nurture, touch, sleep, movement, smell and so on” Genes for learning problems - and more serious problems such as depression and anti-social behaviour - could be turned on by bad early-childhood environments.

But good environments could lead to genetic structures that were resilient and could “insure against” learning difficulties and more serious problems. (ix)

Spending a year or more in a long-day care centre increases the likelihood that a child will be disruptive at school according to a recent study by National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (x)

The overwhelming conclusion to be drawn from all of this research is that the Australian Government must change direction and accept an obligation to inform families of these research results so that being informed they can make better choices about what they want for their children. To help them do so key policy changes must include a substantial HCCA, more generous parental leave, more flexible working hours and return to work security. Government must also work with employers to encourage and facilitate training and education of young people to effectively fill the gaps as more mothers choose to stay at home.

Failure to do so will lead to a bleak and costly future of rising levels of mental illness in the nation’s young.

(c) The image and role of motherhood should be strongly promoted. As Dr Elizabeth Reid Boyd lecturer in International, Cultural and Community Studies at Edith Cowan University, says, “all mothering work is undervalued.” (xi) We need to value this as the most important work of all.