



*Submission to commission on work and family balance issues.
From Angela Shanahan. Columnist for the Sunday Telegraph and
Canberra Times . (formerly for The Australian and The Age.)*

Theoretical background: The gender equity family: a fact of life?

For some time now we have been used to hearing that the Male Breadwinner Model of family is in decline and that it has been superseded by a different more acceptable model the so called Gender Equity model. This assumption underlies most discussion on family work and population policy. But are there really two models of family life or is this a view of life as seen through an ideological prism which sees respect in marriage established by economic equity and personal worth proved by paid work ? It is certainly the old feminist view, that grew out of the sexual revolution of the sixties .

With the backing of feminists the gender equity model of the family underpins most social policy in Europe. The push to get more mothers into the workforce means that many young mothers are now paying a heavy price for a social policy that has relied on a rickety set of women's rights clichés and which has deprived them of the right NOT to work : the institutional care of their children

It is well to remember that before we in Australia go down this road that parents have a single priority which they weigh up against sheer economic advantage: the welfare their children.

Working mothers and the feminist view, a view from the top:

The English sociologist Catherine Hakim has pointed out , the debate about work and family policies is very much a debate 'from the top'. It always assumes that women are working in some exciting career - not just a job. However the vast majority of women are just doing jobs and even many professional women will scale their jobs down and do less work - which might mean less money and less prestige - in order to minimize the burdens on themselves and their children.

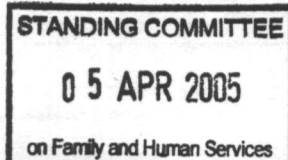
In the eyes of the gender literate benefits like the family tax benefit part B which encourage mothers who want to stay at home at the time when their children most need them , is social engineering of the worst sort. But who has been socially engineering whom over the last thirty years? Think of the regular cry of 'back to the fifties' every time the non-employed mother is mentioned.

Child care , maternal preferences and home makers allowances.

Indeed some feminist assumptions about what is good for mothers and children betray a breathtaking ignorance of Australian family norms. At times this is so topsy-turvy it is unintentionally, comic. For example after the announcement of the baby bonus scheme, the Women's Electoral Lobby had this to say: "WEL has serious concerns with payments that reinforce government preferences for women who stay home with their children before they start school" !

But WEL will not admit that it isn't government preference. It is Australian parental preference.

In fact two thirds of Australian women DO stay home for at least the first year of a baby's life because it is THEIR preference. WEL's point



of view is the classic one from the top. It is a view that all hinges on the provision of outside childcare - even though for most women full time work and long day care is not what they want for their children, as all the research into maternal preferences indicates.

However, it is no coincidence that advocates of full -time working motherhood want tax deductions for child care (which the government has already recognised) and allowances for stay- at- home mums. That is because for feminists what a mother at home receives can't be seen as a right . Tax deductions acknowledge motherhood as socially and economically intrinsic to the welfare of society. In the feminist world view the mother only fulfils this role if she also WORKS. No wonder the birthrate is in decline

Overseas problems and trends: Australia isn't Sweden.

The demographer Peter MacDonald who has been in the forefront of discussion about ways to redress the growing imbalance in the age profile of the population, has rightly pointed out that the decisions that people make about family are affected by both private and public considerations, because the family as a social institution straddles both worlds. MacDonald is a champion of the so- called family friendly workplace and the conditions that go with it, parental leave, flexible hours and all the other policies that make it easier to combine work and family as has been the case in Sweden, and some other parts of Scandinavia. The cornerstone of this argument is the NEW family, the gender equity family. The argument seems compelling, and has some merit. Give women greater freedom to work-- but also NOT to work-- and they might have more children.

The biggest problem with MacDonald's argument is that the Swedish birthrate of 2.2, was a bit of blip in the mid nineties. It seems to have fallen again. A better example is Norway which manages replacement. However Norway is rather a special place. Women in Norway receive a maternity allowance of \$6000 U.S. per child for three years after the birth. It is the same as the state subsidy for a kindergarten place. If they wish it may be transferred to a kindergarten. However, mothers usually keep it and stay home .

Of course the only other country in the western world to replace itself, and the place Australia as n immigrant culture most resembles, is the United States of America, due almost entirely to the efforts of its Mexican immigrant population- and within that population every able bodied man and woman (and sometimes children) does work. But this is also a cultural phenomenon, which encompasses religion and the importance of the extended family that has few parallels . However , the U.S. does have much more generous family tax arrangements than Australia. and Australia as n immigrant culture is the place that most resembles, the US.

But it should be remembered when invoking these comparisons that all societies are different and so are the families which constitute those societies. Australia is like the US but we are different in many ways . And we certainly are not Sweden or Norway.

Summing up - gender equity family true false or a bit of both?

So are there really two models of family in Australia ? Or is it more realistic to see modern families as in a state of flux-sometimes

identifying with the brave new gender equity world but, in practice because of the exigencies of child rearing in a hostile world and because we often do make choices independent of the economy or society actually living a version of that old bread winner model.

Most families in fact still rely on one person at least to be working. Mothers work to make ends meet and provide extras. It is this fact, not glass ceilings or gender politics which accounts for the persistent gap between the earnings of men and women. (Where long paternity leave has been part of working conditions, as in Sweden, fathers rarely took it, with take up rate of 2%) Furthermore, according to the most reliable studies, the preference for the majority of Australian mothers with children under five was overwhelmingly either to be at home or to opt for part-time work. The amount they wanted and the balance between full-time and part time shifted -sensibly enough - according to the age of the youngest.

Furthermore Australian women with small children do not exhibit much attachment to work. The latest editions of People and Place confirm that although about 53% of mothers with children do end up working by the time their children turn five most of this is part-time and casual. Furthermore according to the research undertaken by Evans and Kelly 70% thought they shouldn't work at all, and only 2% wanted full-time work. This shows an interesting GAP between the professed ideal and actual practice which should make us ask whether mothers are being forced to work when their children are young. We should be wary of policies based on theories which assume that because they ARE working they WANT to.

Some general recommendations.

1-Tax.

My first preference is a radical overhaul of family taxation. Income splitting is the fairest and simplest way of doing this. However failing that, the thresholds for cut off of family Tax benefit part B should be lifted. The value of Family tax benefit part B is being badly eroded and there is a lot of pressure from some women's group to abandon it. This would be a mistake and it would be detrimental to mothers who do not want to work or only want short part-time hours while their children are small.

However the government needs to continue to refine the problem of withdrawal of benefits and the consequence to families as children get older and mothers return to the work force. It should be remembered that it is not until the youngest child is about TEN that most mothers will return to work on any regular part time or full time basis.

2- child care:

Long day care for infants should NOT be the priority of governments. An increase in benefits for young families, should enable mothers who would have worked very few hours to stay at home during a child's infancy. There is a professed unwillingness to leave very young children in long day care because of possible detrimental developmental outcomes, and long day care for children under two is very expensive. There should be no expansion of the tax rebate for child care which should be means tested. The state should never assume the responsibility of primary career of infants

However, the shifting debate over the past ten years has focused on the need for more FLEXIBLE child care arrangements such as part time, occasional care and especially before and after school care because it is at that stage that mothers begin to work more. It is relatively cheap .It needs to be expanded and more programs introduced to stimulate the children.

Alternatives to insitutionalised care need to be promoted, particularly organised home based care such as NSW Family Day Care which is less impersonal than institutional care (I am drawing on my own experience here) There is a definite lack of part time places for Family Day Care and more women should be encouraged, by subsidies and perhaps by a government funded publicity campaigns to become family day care mums.

Recently there has also been some debate about single mothers reentering the work force. (I support this and it is not discriminatory I have noticed myself that single mothers who cope best tend to have a job , because it helps them with their sense of self worth , independence and of course financial security .) These mothers should be given priority, in child care.

3- Pro child= Pro family:

It is to be remembered that the child flourishes within the family . I do not support pro- natalist policies per se. I do support pro family policies , which will allow more couples the freedom to produce children. To this end, I strongly believe that ALL government policies need to be reviewed in the context of their impact on families and on the welfare of the child within a family. I support the right of a child to have a family . Therefore I believe encouraging single women to have families is not in the child's or the nation's best interests.

3- older children :

After the period of infancy the family has many stresses as children get older and move into adolescence . many parents are continuing to work way past retirement age , not for love of work , but because they still have children to support . **This is a phenomenon that will get worse as the age of first parents is increasing.**

The government should review the rules on youth allowance and student allowances . People on very modest incomes often have no access to any of these allowances. There is a tendency to simply forget that most parents are still supporting children right into their mid twenties. The age at which a student can declare themselves 'independent' is presently 25. That is too old. Some large families , especially with children born close together will have several students living with them - and absolutely no prospect of them being able to move away . Many students are giving up their studies for at least a year or going part time , because they are so cash strapped.