

FAMILY

September 2004

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given at Harlow Playhouse

Introduction

"By far the most important channel of transmission of culture remains the family; and when family life fails to play its part, we must expect our culture to deteriorate.!"

So wrote TS Elliot in Notes Towards the Definition of Culture.

CARE is a supporter-based Christian charity incorporating more than 160 pregnancy crisis centres, fostering and remand fostering initiatives and day care for people with learning disabilities. In addition to these projects, CARE undertakes research and lobbying on associated issues in the parliaments and assemblies of the United Kingdom, European Union and United Nations.

In all our work we recognise that TS Elliot's sentiments are probably more important now than they were 60 years ago. Societies that seek to create strong families flourish. Those that do not will struggle. It remains an essential and productive institution.

Without families we cannot realise the common good and well-being that we long for in our communities, for they are the principle basis on which stable and cohesive communities are built.

Yet over the last 30 years we have seen a move away from so-called traditional family forms. Looser ties have replaced close relational and legal bonds: divorce rates have doubled, cohabitation rates have trebled and there are now twice as many single person households as there were in previous years. Although the average family size has decreased from 2.9 children to 1.6 children, five times as many children are now born outside of marriage.

These facts are uncontroversial in themselves - it's clear that we have seen a seismic shift in patterns of family formation. What is controversial is how civil society and government should respond to that shift, and I will address my comments today to that subject.

Firstly, I want to establish the positive case for the family. What is their contribution, that politicians and wider society should value so highly?

Secondly, I want to demonstrate that the well-documented changes in family life have had deep and negative consequences for our society, and I shall be questioning the notion that these changes are value free.

Thirdly, I want to establish that Governments and decision makers cannot, in the light of the evidence, afford to be either passive or neutral in terms of families, or the form they should take. Nor can they treat them as peripheral in themselves to issues like child care, parenting, schools or employment policy.

In conclusion, I will address the Conservative Party with specific policy suggestions, challenging your Party to make good on pledges of support for family life.

What do families do?

It is not easy to talk about families in the abstract. So central are they to our daily lives, so very much a part of the fabric of our communities and our society that they are almost invisible. We rarely think of them unless something is going wrong. Latterly, the family has also become harder to define, with people breaking and remaking ties - cohabiting, divorcing, and remarrying - all the while contributing to the sense that we are not quite sure what we mean when we are talking about 'the family'. I will return to the difficult questions around this new diversity later.

Most people accept that the family, the context into which most people are born and in which they are raised, offers the chance to meet a person's material and emotional needs: identity, security, values, morality, purpose, encouragement, direction, citizenship, social skills, knowledge and a shared experience of the world itself. It is not that family is the only institution that is able to serve these purposes - the church, the school, the wider community and even the state have a role, but the family, in turn, is basic to their function. Without healthy families we face an uphill struggle to shape lives in a positive way.

Of course, it is wrong to look at families through rose tinted glasses - families are part of real, organic human life where groups of people manage a life together, facing and suffering from challenges, and setbacks. Families are rarely about motherhood and apple pie - but it is precisely because of this that it is easier and better to navigate human life as part of a family than alone.

How do we know? We most poignantly observe the importance of strong families in their absence. Children who experience parental divorce are considerably more likely to lack formal qualifications, suffer long periods of unemployment and live in property rented from a local authority. We also have known for many years that there is a high financial cost associated with family breakdown - £30 billion a year or more in welfare benefits, higher crime, poorer health and lost productivity. Ironically, the Marriage and Relationship Support Grant, which represents the current Government's efforts in relationship support, is barely worth 1 per cent of this figure.

CARE's work in Remand Fostering lends a human face to such research. We know from experience that the overwhelming majority of the young people that we work with come from homes blighted by broken and abusive relationships. By introducing young offenders into Christian homes, where right and strong relationships are modeled and lived out, we have succeeded in turning a recidivism rate on its head - 30 per cent re-offending instead of the 70 per cent rate for those who go through young offender's institutions. As successful as the scheme is, it is a shame that young men and women should have to find themselves on it to see a glimpse of what it means to be part of a stable and supportive family.

There are no simple conclusions to be drawn about the way family and relationship breakdown during childhood can be linked to adverse outcomes. What we can see is that, in general, children from broken families find it more difficult and have more negative experiences than children reared by both parents. In other words, children do best when raised in a healthy, secure two-parent family.

Being part of a family is better for adults, as well as children. There is widespread evidence to show that married people live longer than the unmarried. Research at the Erasmus University in the Netherlands found that married people were healthier than single, divorced or cohabiting men and women. Married people were healthier than any of the others, and spent half as much time in hospital as single people. Married men are less likely to suffer from long-term chronic illness and, when they do, they recover or manage their illness better. Rates of smoking, psychiatric problems, physical violence, suicide, smoking and alcoholism are lower amongst married couples than amongst both cohabiting couples and single people.

Of course, married people cannot expect to be free from trouble, illness, financial problems, unemployment or relational difficulties. What they can expect is that their expressed commitment to each other and to other family members will give them security, space and purpose as, together, they cooperatively face life challenges.

So what has changed?

In 1992, Anthony Giddens wrote in *The Transformation of Intimacy* that our understanding of close personal ties had changed. He spoke of the 'pure relationship', freed from outmoded and traditional forms like duty and obligation. Communication and negotiation become central to the project of building a relationship. There is a kind of exciting risk to the enterprise - success is not guaranteed, but is contingent on the capacity of the relationship to continue to meet mutual expectations. The way adults view one another, for him, had fundamentally changed.

What does this mean for our families? Sociologists speak of 'changing shapes of commitment' and 'blurring of kin', links extended across different households linked by dissolved marriages, reconstituted families, non-resident partners and various people networks. And although the shape of commitments has changed, the claim is that, there has been no loss of commitment. As we reflected before, it is hard to know what we are speaking of when we use the word 'family'.

There is a strong temptation, often intensified by rightful desire to offer support and encouragement to families in difficult circumstances, to adopt a neutral, value free attitude toward this new diversity. This temptation must be resisted, even as our compassion must be maintained. Marriage provides a unique social context marked by legal and relational commitment that increases the well-being of adults, children and wider society. It is not some mystical characteristic that makes healthy marriages such an effective cornerstone to the family, but strong and definitive commitment.

It is our view in that the changes to family life witnessed over the last 30 years are negative. Three weeks ago it was announced that divorces rose by 3.9 per cent in England and Wales to a total of 153,490 in 2003 from 147,735 in 2002. This is the third successive annual increase and is the highest annual number of divorces since 1996. What should our response be? That the statistics represent 153,490 commitments changing shape? No - we see 153,490 human tragedies of disappointment, frustration and loss. 153,490 couples whose life chances suffer because of the loss of the foremost sustaining relationship of their lives. 153,490 wider families sharing the disappointment and feeling the ill effects of relationship breakdown.

And as we witness the rise and rise of cohabitation, what should our response be? That more and more couples are developing pure relationships sustained and defined by their capacity to meet expectations? No - individuals who have often been affected by the breakdown of their parents' marriage now avoid the marriage commitment. It is not that they are unable to commit, but that they are victims of a steady accumulation of fear and all too familiar with the damage caused by the breakdown of relationship. They choose instead unions which, by definition, are of weaker commitment and that ironically are statistically many times more likely to dissolve than marriages. Rather than easing family life, cohabitation leaves children, elderly relatives and the adults themselves relationally, economically and emotionally exposed. This is not to be celebrated, but mourned.

Decision makers cannot be neutral

Recently, we've heard two pieces of news that should wake us up to the dangers of neutrality and passivity over family breakdown. Such neutrality threatens the most vulnerable in our society - the very young and the very old.

Over the next 50 years the number of people over the age of 65 will grow from 9.3 to 16.8 million, the numbers of those aged 85 and older quadrupling to over 4 million. We live in a society already too often guilty of undervaluing and neglecting the elderly. The future is certainly one where we see the state bearing more of the cost - some projections show an annual elderly care bill of over £35 billion by 2051 - but we anticipate a future where the loose and transitory social ties will begin to demonstrate their full human cost. More people than ever who have never partnered permanently. More without children. More without brothers or sisters. The financial implications alone will be difficult, but how will we meet the relational deficit?

Earlier this week, we also heard worrying reports that the mental health of our teenagers has drastically declined over the last 25 years. The rate of anxiety and depression has increased by 70% among adolescents - with a knock on effect that many 15-year-olds will blight their own life chances, and the well-being of their community, with anti-social behaviour such as lying, stealing and vandalism.

It is clear that our children are being sold short, left more isolated in a society that increasingly treats them as adults and demands from them the things we demand of fully mature people - to be economic consumers, to achieve consistently at school and in the work

place and to do all these things as individuals, with less of the support that children could have expected from family in the past.

A future without a family would be a bleak future indeed. Such is the significance of this institution that we stand or fall together. Families cost money, security and educational achievement when they fail and add huge value when they succeed - and while families are fundamental in society, and exist without need for Government intervention, in these times of high pressure there is a role for Government in helping them to succeed.

Conclusions - Policy Proposals

Removing tax and benefit disincentives for family formation

It has long been controversial and unpalatable to policy makers of any persuasion to suggest that the tax and benefit system should be used to promote particular kinds of family formation, not least because any effort to support marriage, an established and strong relationship in itself, can be seen to penalize others who already can be said to be in a more vulnerable position.

CARE maintains that the benefits of marriage are such that it should be supported in some way by the tax and benefit system but before we even consider that, we need to redress existing biases against family formation in, for example, the tax credit system.

The new tax credits do not lift an in-work two-parent family out of poverty whereas they would work for most in-work lone parent families.

The influence of this kind of imbalance is not marginal - we are not talking about the kind of people for whom £10 or £20 over a month is pretty irrelevant, but about people who must count every penny, people at high risk of being caught in crippling debt. But the problem is perhaps less to do with the financial issues but more about a message being sent about a State that makes no distinction between the relationships that people form or even a State that would prefer a person to struggle alone with children, rather than build positive, life sustaining relationships. Even the present Chancellor of Exchequer knows that our tax and benefit system sends critical signals about 'activities a society wishes to promote or deter.'

Family time

Secondly, Governments must establish ways of helping parents spend more and better time with children, for time is the currency of strong relationships. While recent research has found that parents report spending more time with their children, there is an increasing perception that families need to be helped toward developing work-life balance. CARE, partnering with the new initiative, Keep Time for Children, understands that more needs to be done to ensure that children get what they want most from their parents - not money, or material goods, but time.

In 1994 the last Conservative Government changed the law on Sunday working. This is water under the bridge, but we do need to learn some lessons. Decisions were made with little understanding of their effect on the family: the huge explosion in Sunday working, combined with the growth in atypical working patterns is indicative of an employment market that has been let out of its cage - intruding on time that we should have free to build relationships with one another. An estimated 10% of parents with children under 14 are working regularly on both Saturdays and Sundays. Work outside what used to be the 9-5 'standard hours' Monday to Friday is now the norm for most parents. In 91% of working couples, one or both are now frequently working atypical hours.

Currently, employees of young children have a right to ask employers for flexible working - we would like to see a future Conservative Government attacking the problem in a different way. We need to restore the principle that there will be a guaranteed, shared and regular day off - for parents, this should be at the weekend.

Relationship support

For too long we have been giving our children the impression that sex can be decoupled from long-term commitment and relationships. So supporting stable homes will mean a greater emphasis on relationship, as opposed to sex, education in our schools, delivered within a simple and evidence based relational and moral framework and emphasising the value and importance of marriage and family as a fundamental to happiness and well-being. In this way, we would be investing in a brighter future for families. *Evaluate* Informing Choice, our new sex and relationship education programme, is up and running and we have 30 teams of educators trained and ready to deliver the programme. As ever, CARE commits to making itself part of the answer.

Supporting stable homes would mean a future Conservative government investing in better relationship support, learning from the churches that already give marriage preparation to people with and without faith. Research shows that many people marrying in registry offices have never thought about some of the most difficult questions in married life - how to manage finances and careers or how many children they intend to have. Is it surprising that couples run into difficulties later in the relationship?

Conclusion

We all have a responsibility to create a culture in which families thrive - churches must take this to heart as much as Government.

But together we need to be certain of our roles - the place of Government is often to enable the voluntary sector to deliver what it cannot, and to entrust communities and families to those best placed to deliver. At the same time, this should never provide a rationale for Governments' to absolve themselves of responsibility. As much as organisations like those represented here today can invest in communities, we cannot continue to do this if the Government is not behind us. Our Remand Fostering Scheme, for example, has suffered because local authorities cannot afford to pay for referrals to foster care. In contrast, central Government always has enough money to place a young person in a remand centre.

The future has families; that does not depend on state intervention and support. But we know how people and where people thrive, we know that is about being part of a healthy and stable unit. I know that the churches and political parties can partner as we work towards a culture with the kind of legislative and social framework within which healthy families can flourish.