

NZCPR Weekly

21 July 2008

NEW ZEALAND CENTRE FOR POLITICAL RESEARCH

MORAL NEUTRALITY

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Earlier this month Britain's culture of "moral neutrality" came under attack. In a speech in Glasgow, Conservative Party Leader Rt Hon David Cameron said that the obese, drug addicts and the poor have no-one to blame but themselves.

He defined moral neutrality as the refusal to make judgements about what is good or bad, right or wrong: "We as a society have been far too sensitive. In order to avoid injury to people's feelings, in order to avoid appearing judgemental, we have failed to say what needs to be said. Instead we prefer moral neutrality, a refusal to make judgments about what is good and bad behaviour, right and wrong behaviour. Bad. Good. Right. Wrong. These are words that our political system and our public sector scarcely dare use any more. Refusing to use these words - right and wrong - means a denial of personal responsibility and the concept of a moral choice".

He went on to say, "We talk about people being "at risk of obesity" instead of talking about people who eat too much and take too little exercise. We talk about people being at risk of poverty, or social exclusion: it's as if these things - obesity, alcohol abuse, drug addiction - are purely external events like a plague or bad weather. Of course, circumstances - where you are born, your neighbourhood, your school, and the choices your parents make - have a huge impact. But social problems are often the consequence of the choices that people make".

David Cameron believes that there is now a very real danger of Britain becoming "a de-moralised society, where nobody will tell the truth anymore about what is good and bad, right and wrong. That is why children are growing up without boundaries, thinking they can do as they please, and why no adult will intervene to stop them - including, often, their parents. If we are going to get any where near solving some of these problems, that has to stop".

The parallels with New Zealand are surely plain for all to see. We have now become so non-judgemental that speaking the truth and calling a spade a spade, all too often leads to complaints to the Human Rights Commission - not to mention the Press Council, the Advertising Standards Authority, and all of the other organisations that sit in judgement on such matters. The danger is that human rights laws, which were originally introduced under the guise of protecting individuals from discrimination, impinge on the most basic human right of all - individual freedom. Under the Labour government, human rights arguments have been used to impose the political agendas of favoured minority groups onto the public at large to the extent that, for example, Maori cultural beliefs now dominate the New Zealand education

curriculum[1] and sexual orientation has ceased to be a private matter but - with a question on sexual orientation being planned for the census - one in which the state has a particular interest.[2]

According to the prevailing culture of political correctness that has developed during Labour's regime, nothing is anyone's fault anymore. If you are too lazy to work, the government will pay you to stay at home; if you are one of the 5,279 drunks and druggies drawing a benefit, the government will contribute \$1 million a week to keep your habit going [3]; if you are a teenage girl with little education and no career prospects, the government will pay you to bear and raise the next generation of children; if you are grossly obese, the government will pay \$25,000 to have your stomach-stapled.[4]

Yet individuals make myriads of choices almost every moment of every day, and learning to live with the consequences of those choices is an important part of life. That's how society operates. It is surely not the role of the state to interfere in the free choices that people make (so long as they do not harm others), nor to shield people from the consequences. To do so creates a 'victim' culture whereby the state rewards those who make poor choices with ever-more generous taxpayer-funded compassion.

As John Stuart Mill said so eloquently - in defence of the freedom of individuals from the power of the state - in *On Liberty* in 1859, "... the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise or even right. These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him or visiting him with any evil in case he do otherwise... In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute."

Society's primary role of moral teacher - instilling in children what is good or bad, right or wrong - has traditionally been the family. Children who are given strong boundaries of what is and is not appropriate behaviour, and are imbued with a clear understanding of the consequences of the moral choices they make, generally become responsible members of society. But when parents fail to properly bring up their children, the results can be disastrous.

Just last month the Christchurch Press told the story

of a recovering drug addict: John's drug use started at home with parents who smoked cannabis and took pills. By age nine he was drinking alcohol, and by age 11 smoking cannabis. At age 14 he started using intravenous opiate. It was all downhill after that.

John admitted that he had committed over 500 burglaries, robberies and dishonesty offences to fund his drug habit: "I committed a lot of crime. I committed crime I've never been caught for over the years. I'd go out and commit burglaries four, five or six burglaries a night. Every night. Every day. Even while I was at work I'd go away at lunch time and commit a crime to support my habit that night. I was using anywhere up to \$2000 daily..."

John has five children, all girls; two of the older ones, aged 17 and 18, use drugs: "I definitely don't want them to have the same life as I've had. I had a choice to say no. It's not a sickness it's a personal choice. For these younger generations I pray for them not to get into it." 5

When the Labour Government introduced the anti-smacking law last year, the vast majority of New Zealanders opposed it. Not because they condoned violence against children – no-one condones that. They opposed the smacking ban because they understand that the dynamics of family life are delicately balanced. Anyone who has raised children knows that there is a fine line between good outcomes and the abyss. And the last thing that a family needs is the heavy hand of the state interfering in private matters.

By banning smacking, the state has now intruded deep into the heart of family life. A predictable wedge has been driven between parents and children. It has created a situation where many parents, now fearful of prosecution, are afraid to set proper boundaries for their children in case the children object and complain to the authorities. This is now inhibiting the way that parents raise their children to the point where, when the going gets tough, many parents are now throwing in the towel and passing the problem of their unruly children onto the wider community.

In his speech, David Cameron acknowledges that the social breakdown seen in Britain is caused by family breakdown, welfare dependency, debt, drugs, poverty, poor

policing, inadequate housing, and failing schools, and he warns that society, "is in danger of losing its sense of personal responsibility, social responsibility, common decency and even public morality".

The fractures that we now see in New Zealand families and communities have deepened over the last nine years. The bonds that link our society have become weaker. The people most at risk are the vulnerable – those without an education, without a good job, without strong family supports. These are the very people that a Labour Government should have been protecting through sweeping social reforms to ensure that every child succeeds at school, that no-one is left to languish on welfare, and that family life is encouraged and supported. By failing to make the necessary reforms, Labour has entrenched disadvantage for far too many New Zealanders.

David Cameron claims that in Britain there has been a relentless erosion of responsibility, social virtue, self-discipline, and a respect for others. He believes that the only way to turn it around is to encourage personal responsibility as a cornerstone social value.

Encouraging personal responsibility as a cornerstone social value – as well as throwing off the stultifying political correctness that has weighed this country down for far too long – would undoubtedly be a step in the right direction for New Zealand too.

FOOTNOTES:

1 Muriel Newman, Selling Our kids Short,
<http://www.nzcpr.com/weekly108.htm>

2 Dominion, As you like it: A sexy census
<http://stuff.co.nz/dominionpost/4619527a6479.html>

3 Waikato Times, The benefit and the doubt
<http://www.stuff.co.nz/waikatotimes/4611703a14517.html>

4 Dominion Post, Hundreds to get taxpayer-funded stomach stapling
<http://www.stuff.co.nz/4599815a10.htm>

5 Christchurch Press, P makes addicts human crime waves
<http://www.stuff.co.nz/thepress/4596941a27726.html>

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