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NEW ZEALAND CENTRE FOR POLITICAL RESEARCH

TACKLING THE TOUGH ISSUES

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As the government progresses its so-called “razor gang” line-by-line review of government expenditure, it will be interesting to see whether those controversial and costly policy areas, that are clearly long overdue for reform, go under the microscope. One could expect that such a comprehensive review will not only be searching out programmes that are a waste of taxpayer's money, but also those policy areas that are now failing to achieve the purpose for which they were set up. In particular, there are many government agencies that are generating huge amounts of activity and bureaucracy but are now past their used-by-date.

One area where government intervention no doubt established with the very best of intentions - has now created massive and growing policy failure is the whole spectrum of family dysfunction. An NZIER report published last year estimated that the cost to the taxpayer of family breakdown is in the region of \$1 billion a year, and a 1994 Coopers and Lybrand review put the cost of family violence in the region of \$1.2 billion a year.[1][2] These are conservative estimates that cannot take into account the enormous loss of individual potential and damage to the human spirit caused by serious family dysfunction, nor the full cost of the taxpayer-funded “industries” that have arisen to deal with family breakdown, domestic violence, abused children and solo mothers.

As the NZIER report points out, New Zealand's 100,000 sole parents account for the largest proportion of families with children. These families are grossly over-represented in poor social outcomes from “increased risks of poverty, mental illness, infant mortality, physical illness, juvenile delinquency and adult criminality, sexual abuse and other forms of family violence, economic hardship, substance abuse, and educational failure”.

For a civilised society, this state of affairs is completely unacceptable. To have a large proportion of mothers and children living in a situation of serious risk, with thousands of fathers entangled in the legal system and prevented from having proper contact with their children, is a disgrace. It is a huge indictment on our so-called caring society that we like to think that New Zealand is. Compared to most other countries, we are failing on a grand scale. But instead of undertaking a programme of comprehensive reform to address the incentives in public policy that are creating these problems, to date politicians have only ever been prepared to address the symptoms.

And for those who think that if we just turn a blind eye the problem will go away, it won't. In fact, as Chief Youth Court Judge Andrew Becroft explained last week to a Criminal Justice Forum in Wellington, our crime problem is getting worse: there is a second and third generational underclass living in New Zealand. The most serious youth offenders, who

go on to be serious adult offenders, come from high risk, challenged and disadvantaged families. These people - mostly young men - often come from transient families, are born to young mothers, have left school at an early age, are addicted to drugs or alcohol and have had a significant involvement with Child, Youth and Family.[3]

The Judge's comments should surely be a clarion call for comprehensive reform in this area, and every New Zealander who loves this country can only hope that the new National Government is not only listening, but is prepared to act - especially as the unfortunate situation that we find ourselves in today is no accident but the result of a political agenda that has gone badly wrong.

In 2005, then Government Minister John Tamihere lifted the lid on the fact that the Labour Party was run by “anti-men, anti-family feminists”. In an explosive article, “The Velvet Underground”, Investigate Editor Ian Wishart followed up with an in-depth examination of how the feminist movement had become a “formidable machine” infiltrating the Labour Party and public service with their radical ideas. He explained that “At no time in the past three decades has that battle been cast in sharper relief than it is now, after Labour MP John Tamihere's decision to throw open public debate about the capture of policy and governmental power by Labour's lesbian/feminist wing”.[4]

In the article, he explained that “an aspect of New Zealand society to come under sustained attack from the radical feminist wing over the next three decades was the traditional family. If the family could be crushed, broken down, sidelined as irrelevant or portrayed as no better than other methods of child-rearing, radical feminism could set the agenda for centuries to come.”

As the article pointed out, anti-male feminist thinking now underpins wide areas of social policy. It is represented these days, more often than not, as “gender” issues. Gender analysis is the brainchild of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which uses it to test policy proposals to see whether they “will assist in enabling women to contribute fully to society”. [5]

Established in 1984 to promote *equality* for *all* women, the brief of the Ministry of Women's Affairs has now changed to a focus on “M ori women as tangata whenua” in particular, and “equity” instead of equality. As they explain, “Gender *equality* is based on the premise that women and men should be treated in the same way. This fails to recognise that equal treatment will not produce equitable results, because women and men have different life experiences. Gender *equity* takes into consideration the differences in women's and men's lives and recognises that different approaches may be needed to produce outcomes that are equitable”.

After three decades of public policy being changed to

suit women, more and more boys and men are now being significantly disadvantaged, especially in the education and health systems, in many employment sectors, and in the whole family law area. Surely the line by line review of the public service will highlight the fact that the Ministry of Women's Affairs is now upsetting the balance in society and doing more harm than good. In light of this, the Ministry should be abolished and any useful roles picked up by the social policy arm of the Ministry of Social Development.

This week's NZCPR Guest Commentator, Stuart Birks, the Director of the Centre for Public Policy Evaluation at Massey University, explores these themes in relation to the fraught area of family violence in his article "Rethinking Stopping Violence Programmes":

There are strong forces at play that shape the way domestic violence is viewed. The current approach to domestic violence has a long history, and has been a central component of the feminist case that women are disadvantaged. It has been used to argue for gendered policies favouring women for a wide range of areas. These include all aspects of family law, as well as appointment, pay and conditions in the workplace, education, and gendered analyses of proposed law changes. 'Economic independence for women' is the first objective of the Action Plan for Women. Introduced in 2004, the Action Plan *is a whole-of-government approach to improving the circumstances of women in New Zealand, in partnership with women, their communities and the private sector*. Domestic violence is also the subject of a major, gendered, taxpayer-funded social marketing campaign, *It's not OK*.

There are now a large number of people with a vested interest in these agendas, including stopping violence courses. As has been suggested with affirmative action, once an institutional structure has been set up to further the aims of a particular group, there is a strong tendency for the issues to be expanded, and their severity exaggerated, to justify the continued existence and expansion of the structure. In relation to ideas and theories, it has also been suggested that most people simply accept the dominant framework. Even if attempts are made to change the nature of stopping violence courses, most of the workers at the coal face will have a strong

commitment to the current approach. To read Stuart's article see www.nzcpr.com

As Stuart mentions, the present approach to domestic violence is based on the feminist myth that it is a one-way-street, with men the perpetrators and women the victims. This approach that is also strongly promoted by the Government's Families Commission, has been challenged by the heads of the country's two longest running longitudinal studies. Through their comprehensive thirty-year research programmes, Professors David Fergusson of the Christchurch study and Richie Poulton of the Dunedin study have found unequivocally that most domestic violence is mutual. As a result they have recommended that therapy be made available for men and women alike, possibly with joint counselling for couples.[6]

The issues mentioned here are clearly just the tip of a gender-ridden public sector iceberg. With huge vested interests in place to keep things as they are, it is long past time that these areas of government activity came under proper scrutiny. There is clear evidence that much of our social policy framework is no longer producing good outcomes. Other countries are doing much better. It is time for change and a line by line review is surely a good place to start.

FOOTNOTES

1. NZIER, The Value of Family
<http://www.familyfirst.org.nz/files/NZ%20REPORT%20The%20Value%20of%20Family.pdf>
2. Suzanne Snively, The New Zealand Economic Cost of Family Violence
<http://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/journals-and-magazines/social-policy-journal/spj04/04-the-new-zealand-economic-cost-of-family-violence.html>
3. Radio NZ, Legal experts criticize "boot camp" bill
<http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/stories/2009/02/26/12459ecb8b0a>
4. Ian Wishart, The Velvet Underground
<http://www.investigatormagazine.com/pdf's/new%20women.pdf>
5. Ministry of Women's Affairs, Gender Analysis
<http://www.mwa.govt.nz/gender-analysis>
6. Herald, Domestic Violence Campaigners Accused of Bias
http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10410452&pnum=0

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