

Newman Weekly

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The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

Rich Country - Poor Families

In a sense, New Zealand is one of the richest countries on earth. We have a great climate, beautiful countryside, and a more leisurely pace of life. Our people are friendly, hard working and caring. We are close to each other in a way that comes from being a small country remote from the rest of the world.

On top of that, we have a wealth of natural resources, we are great innovators and entrepreneurs, and we have established international recognition for our creativity and achievement in a multitude of fields of endeavour.

So why is it that so many New Zealanders have a deep-seated sense of foreboding about the future? Sure, it could be the negative growth (no economic growth recorded in the second half of last year) or the rapidly falling dollar (the Minister of Finance sent officials to Japan last year to talk the dollar down). Maybe it's the burgeoning balance of payments deficit (foreign debt grows as the dollar falls), or the rising price of petrol (adding in today's 1c petrol tax increase, 91 octane is expected to rise to \$1.62 a litre). But I suspect that the issues that are driving that sense of gloom are much more personal.

At the heart of the problem appears to be a growing sense of despair about the state of the New Zealand family. As a country with a strong tradition of two-parent married families, many New Zealanders feel that Labour's interference in family matters has been detrimental. In particular, law changes introduced as part of their social engineering agenda are manifesting themselves in negative ways.

There is a new reticence for young people to commit themselves to marriage - why bother, when de-facto relationships have the same legal privilege as marriage? Yet common sense tells us that marriage

signals a commitment for life, giving young women, in particular, the promise of stability and security they need in order to begin thinking about starting a family.

There is also a new tendency for relationships to break up just before the three-year joint property claim threshold is reached. Couples who are not quite sure whether things will work out between them, are not prepared to take the risk of staying together if it means signing over half of their assets.

With the Domestic Purposes Benefit already incentivising the massive breakdown of the family, these more recent changes are making the situation worse by giving rise to more unstable, transient relationships. It is therefore little wonder we are seeing an escalation in child abuse and domestic violence as well as the fall-out from the breakdown of stable families - marginalized fathers, alienated children, and excluded grandparents.

Just this week, New Zealand's top Family Court judge said that violence in the home is blighting the country's image as a good place to raise children. Yet I do not hear the Judge - or any of the other professionals who work in this field - calling for a change to the policies that are driving this social collapse.

And, with Labour's new family welfare package coming into effect today, resulting in 350,000 families receiving income support, we urgently need to review the wisdom of massive government interference in the family, before more lives are damaged or lost.

A new publication released by the British think tank Civitas this week, examines the wisdom of state interference in the family from an international perspective. In her book *Family Policy, Family Changes*, Patricia Morgan compares the state of the family in Sweden, Italy and Britain, and concludes that

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families thrive in countries where there is less government interference.

In Britain, where an anti-marriage agenda is being strongly promoted by the public service, universities and government funded social agencies, family problems are rife, with Britain topping the league tables in several of the most worrying indicators of breakdown, including divorce and teenage pregnancy. In Sweden, where a comprehensive social engineering programme has transferred many family responsibilities to the state - to a degree unseen outside of the Soviet bloc - there are even higher rates of out-of-wedlock births and cohabitation than Britain.

Italy, however, has effectively had no government intervention into the family, and is still the home of the traditional family unit. Divorce rates and out-of-wedlock births, including teenage pregnancies, are extremely low. Cohabitation is so rare as to be difficult to measure. Young people live with their parents until they get married, and, for most women, marriage will represent their first living-together relationship.

While government interference in the family is a cause of major concern, there are many other matters that are driving that feeling of despondency felt by many New Zealanders. In particular, there is an overbearing sense that things could be so much better, especially in those important areas that the government is responsible for.

With 12,000 hospital beds and 12,000 hospital managers and administrators, is the growth

in New Zealand's hospital waiting lists being caused by too much bureaucracy? Are we confident that our welfare system is working properly when we all know fit and healthy young men and women who are languishing on benefits? Would primary and secondary school education improve if vouchers were introduced in order to give parents the same choice that they currently have at pre-school and tertiary level?

And why don't we take a common sense approach to the small business sector - the engine room of our economy - by freeing them up from the mountains of unnecessary cost and red tape that inhibits their growth and productivity? Why not lower taxes across the board not only to boost the economy and create a competitive advantage for Kiwi businesses, but also to establish New Zealand as an attractive destination for international business?

There is so much that can be done to solve those problems that are holding us back - as a nation that responds quickly to positive incentives, with good leadership and sensible ideas, we could really fly!

The NZCPD guest comment this week comes from Sir Roger Douglas who outlined to the ACT Party conference last week, the importance of creating a vision for a better New Zealand.

The poll this week asks: *Do you think that the family related policies that Labour has introduced are good for the country?*

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