

Newman Weekly

By Dr. Muriel Newman
12 August 2006



The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

How New Zealanders see themselves

Last week, the University of Otago published: "New Zealand in the 21st Century, A Consumer Lifestyles Study", which provides a five-yearly insight into New Zealand society. The findings present a snapshot of how more than 3500 New Zealanders view our country.

Over the last five years, the survey reports a number of interesting changes: more Kiwis now believe that we are paying too much tax, and with our interest rates being the highest in the developed world, many families are experiencing significant financial pressures from rising debt levels.

Predictably, the survey identified health and education as priority areas for government expenditure, followed by police and - rather surprisingly - the environment.

The attitude to business has become more positive, but not necessarily to the trade unions, and while concerns about racial tensions appear to have eased, there is an increasing view that young people have too many privileges and that more discipline is needed in schools.

At an individual level, there has been a noticeable trend to more conservative values and traditional viewpoints, with the belief that New Zealand has taken too liberal a perspective on many issues. There was less concern with equality and "inner harmony" as guiding principles, with more emphasis being placed on tradition, authority, and politeness, honouring one's parents and attaining social recognition. There was also less agreement that marriage is an outdated institution.

In line with this swing to more traditional views there was an increasing concern that working parents particularly mothers - are not spending enough time with their children. This possibly indicates a return to a more "traditional" view of family roles and responsibilities.

According to the Department of Statistics,

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marriage is in decline with 20470 marriages last year, down from 21006 in 2004. The major factor influencing this downwards trend is the growth in defacto relationships. Meanwhile marriage rates continue to fall from 16.9 per 1000 people a decade ago to 13.2 last year, well down on the 45.5 rate in 1971.

This decline, however, is occurring at a time when new research has just been released showing categorically, that marriage is good for your health!

University of California researchers Dr Robert M. Kaplan and Dr Richard G. Kronick published the results of a major study of more than 80000 Americans in the August issue of the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health. The study found that people who have never married are more likely to die - at all ages - than people who are married.

They concluded that: "The risks of being never married ... rival the risks of having increased blood pressure or high cholesterol" and they found never-married people (usually the ones who claimed to have good health), compared with their married peers, are 5 times more likely to die of infectious disease, twice as likely to die in accidents, homicides, or suicides, and 38 percent more likely to die of heart disease (see www.nzcpd.com).

Other research has shown that married people are less likely to be problem chronic drinkers, much less likely to suffer mental health complaints, are more likely to be cured of cancer, are less likely to be the victims of violence, and are far more likely to have significantly higher levels of happiness than unmarried people.

New Zealand's decline in marriage rates has been largely brought about by the law changes that Labour introduced to elevate defacto relationships to the same legal standing as marriage. Further, their relaxing of eligibility to the Domestic Purposes Benefit has

priced marriage out of the reach of many low-income families with children, who have realized that they are far better off financially if they separate.

This attitude by our government to devalue marriage is in sharp contrast to that found in the USA where Congress has just voted over US\$150 million a year to promote marriage. This is the third step in their goal of overhauling the welfare system: the first step was to reduce welfare dependency and increase employment, the second was to reduce child poverty, and the third is to reduce illegitimacy and strengthen marriage.

One of the more interesting changes identified in the NZ lifestyle survey was a swing to a more traditional view of family roles, especially towards mothers staying at home to care for their children. This is another area where Labour's laws may be detrimental to the family: while the paid parental leave policy sounds caring, what it does is to use taxpayer funding to create a financial incentives to encourage parents of new babies to stay in the workforce. This gives rise to a great deal of added pressure as brand new mums and dads try to not only juggle full-time work, home and new baby, but also have to constantly battle recurring feelings of guilt.

The survey reinforced that one of the best ways for government to improve the way we feel about New Zealand, is to lower the tax burden. This would not only boost the economy and improve living standards, but it would also reduce the

financial pressure on low-income families, allowing them to have a better quality of life.

Ensuring families feel positive about their lives is extremely important, because families are not only a nation's source of labour, but they are also the source of future citizens. At present, New Zealand's fertility rate is very close to the 'replacement' fertility rate of 2.1 babies per woman. That means that our population is relatively stable, unlike the dire situation that many western European countries find themselves in where the decline in birth rates is so dramatic that the only way for them to survive into the future will be through mass immigration.

In January, Mark Steyn, an internationally acclaimed writer, looked at this issue in a thought-provoking column for The New Criterion called "It's the demography stupid" (see www.nzcpd.com). In his article, he warns of the inevitable clash of culture that mass immigration throughout Europe will bring. It is a very sobering article, which serves as a stark reminder of how vitally important marriage and the family are for the future health and well-being of any nation.

The poll this week: *Do you believe New Zealand has become too socially liberal in the last five years?*

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