

# Newman Weekly

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The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

## A Licence for Parents

The whole country continues to wait anxiously for news that the killer of Chris and Cru Kahui, the twins brutally murdered in July, has been arrested.

Born eleven weeks premature, the two tiny babies had only been kept alive through the round-the-clock dedicated care of the doctors and nurses at Middlemore's neonatal intensive care ward. Yet, just six weeks after going home – while technically still patients of Middlemore Hospital – the babies were dead of massive brain injury consistent with being smashed against a solid object.

The brutal death of these babies has given rise to a range of initiatives aimed at reducing the country's atrocious rate of child abuse: a child in New Zealand is killed every five weeks, and in this year alone, 250 babies have been taken into Child Youth and Family care, almost double the rate of two years ago.

Last Monday one such initiative to emerge from a meeting of senior social workers, paediatricians and child advocates was the introduction of a "parents licence test". This test, which all New Zealand parents would have to sit in order to be able to keep the care of their children, would be administered when a baby is born, and repeated when they turn 1, 3, 5, 8, 11 and 14.

The parents licence test was proposed by Judge Graeme MacCormick, a former Family Court judge, who suggested that parents who refused to be assessed or accept help should immediately be referred to Child Youth and Family with a view to suspending any child related benefits and removing their children.

In an interview on Radio NZ, when concerns were raised about the excessive level of intrusion into family life that the proposal would create, Judge MacCormick argued that a universal system was necessary to avoid stigmatising those high risk families where children were in danger. He went on to justify universality by arguing that: "Children

are children of the country as well as their parents... and social justice for the child over-rides parenting rights". (Radio NZ interviews on the matter can be heard on Tuesday's Nine to Noon, (see [www.nzcpd.com](http://www.nzcpd.com)).

The Parenting Licence Test concept has won the full support of the Children's Commissioner who has already proposed a national database of children. But the problem is that these responses to reducing child abuse are typical of a big government approach whereby the so-called solution involves building a more intrusive bureaucracy, which will impose high levels of state intervention on all families with children, rather than simply targeting the minority of families where children are at serious risk.

In an article *How the Government Creates Child Abuse*, political scientist Stephen Baskerville warns: "the real scandal is the armies of officials who have been allowed to acquire - using taxpayers' dollars - a vested interest in abused children. Devising child abuse programs makes us all feel good, but there is no evidence they make the slightest difference. In fact, they probably

make the problem worse. Child abuse is largely a product of the feminist-dominated family law and social work industries. It is a textbook example of the government creating a problem for itself to solve. Child abuse is entirely preventable. A few decades ago, there was no child abuse epidemic; it grew up with the welfare system and the divorce revolution. It continues because of entrenched interests who are employed pretending to combat it" (see [www.nzcpd.com](http://www.nzcpd.com)).

The Parents Licence Test would indeed create an army of officials with a vested interest in child abuse. The end result would be that families going through rough patches – where, in spite of the turbulence, children are in no danger of abuse – would suddenly find themselves being investigated by risk-averse Child, Youth and Family social workers. Meanwhile the five percent of seriously

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dysfunctional families, like the Kahuis, where the children are at grave risk of abuse, do not get the targeted assistance they need for fear of stigmatisation over the fact that they are a sole parent family on welfare – and Maori!

This week's NZCPD guest commentator, Bruce Logan, the founder and a former Director of the Maxim Institute, in an article entitled *Welfare – who needs it*, discusses this contemporary orthodoxy of being non-judgemental about people in need and concludes that rather than helping those who are disadvantaged, such an approach is harming them (see [www.nzcpd.com](http://www.nzcpd.com)).

If state intervention really worked, the Kahui twins would not have been allowed to go from hospital to that Mangere house: "Down a narrow right-of-way, it is small and shoddy", the Herald reported. "The walls are grey-blue fibreboard, misted with green mould, the guttering sprouts grass and weeds. The high back fence is topped with two lines of barbed wire... Until last Tuesday 12 people and two small babies lived in this cramped three-bedroomed house, drinking, smoking dope and cigarettes, partying, fighting".

Of the fourteen people living in that state house, only one had a job. Estimates are that well over a thousand dollars a week in welfare benefits was going into that household: "Party nights are Tuesdays and Thursdays, when the rest of the adults get their benefits. The parties rage through the night until the fighting gets dirty and the sickening crunch of bodies being hurled against walls begins. Alcohol is a priority. One night recently, a 16-year-old fled to a neighbour's place after one of the older men tried to sexually abuse her. "It was 3.30 in the morning," said the neighbour. "She was

terrified. We took her in but we were scared too". (To read the full report see [www.nzcpd.com](http://www.nzcpd.com).)

A nurse visited Chris and Cru Kahui in that three bedroomed house where fourteen people lived, and while the twins were judged healthy, two weeks later their 12-month-old brother and a six-month-old cousin were removed by CYF, so malnourished they had to spend two days in Middlemore Hospital.

A hospital social worker informally raised concerns about the home situation of the twins with a Child Youth and Family worker, "but the alert did not reach the threshold required to constitute a formal notification".

The government would be well advised to forget about political correctness and target these seriously dysfunctional families with their parental licence test. But they urgently need to go further.

At the heart of the child abuse problem in New Zealand is welfare dependency: not only the lack of responsibility that arises when a welfare habit replaces a work ethic, but also the breakdown of the family and the alienation of biological fathers - traditionally the primary protectors of children - that occurs when unmarried mothers realise they can get more money from the DPB if they remain single than if they live as a family with their child's father. Replacing the present system, which seriously undermines the family unit with one that strengthens it should surely be a key recommendation coming out of meetings like the one last Monday!

**The poll this week asks:** Would you support the introduction of a universal 'Parents Licence Test' for all parents?

*"If state intervention really worked, the Kahui twins would not have happened."*

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