

DRAWING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN STATE AND FAMILY

How much should governments be telling parents how to parent and families how to organise themselves? When does state intervention, even advice, become counter-productive? The Government's difficulties in advancing a coherent family policy are partly because of its failure to define the boundaries between family and state.



By Mary MacLeod

It has become a policy cliché to connect social well-being with family well-being. All parties accept this connection. The broad thrust of New Labour social policy emerges from it. But have we fully understood what it means for the relationship between the state and the family? When New Labour said in its *Supporting Families* green paper (1998), shortly after coming into power, 'family life is the foundation on which our communities, our society and our country are built', it was claiming that family business was the state's business. And never has the state been so busy.

Policies and initiatives have flowed from nearly all government departments: on childcare, work-life balance, tax and benefits, the New Deal and welfare-to-work. There are ambitious aims – to eliminate child poverty in a generation; on parenting, the role of fathers, marriage and relationship support, the post-separation family, child behaviour, truancy, teenage pregnancy, crime prevention, anti-social behaviour and parenting orders; and the jewel in New Labour's family policy crown: Sure Start. A mass of activity is designed to encourage, support, cajole or compel parents to raise children well.

'Parenting' is key; families are seen above all as child-rearing units. From the Third Way theorists, such as Giddens (1998), Etzioni (1993), and others has come the rationale

for government-led action to improve the quality of parenting, on the assumption that the unprecedented changes in family life have undermined family relationships, threatening social well-being and the 'bank' of social capital.

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This has happened in a broader context of public anxiety, with massive public attention on family relationships and their rights and wrongs. As a parent, try to read a newspaper without finding something that tells you that you are the wrong kind of family or are doing it wrong. Newspapers are full of headlines, more or less loosely derived from research. Parents are bombarded with advice. Nearly everything in modern life – over which individual parents may have little control – is supposed to be bad for children: computers and computer games, TV, the internet, how long we spend at work, how early we go back to work, not having work, being a lone parent, being divorced, having children too early or too late. It is a wonder that parents

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can sleep at night. For the prevailing message is: parents, it's down to you.

Yet with the economics of family life as they are – child and family poverty in a context of affluence, children dependent for longer as the state pulls back financial support, no job for life, the impact of lifestyle marketing – parents are forced into harried households, where women, particularly, bear the burden of caring and working without the backdrop of provision that is taken for granted in Nordic countries and France. Are we surprised that the birth rate is dropping? Women may indeed be voting with their wombs for a quality of life, unattainable with greater childcare responsibility; but, like many of the facts of social life, the falling birth rate is also the result of more distal factors, like young people's extended dependency, a direct consequence of state policy.

So it is no wonder that the Government struggles to find a coherent family policy. Not only are there vehemently-held opposing political and ideological views on 'the family', but also a complex range of contradictory influences affecting child and family outcomes. There are difficulties, therefore, in anticipating inadvertent negative consequences of policies established to 'put things right' – like the impact of welfare-to-work on the care of children in the absence of sufficient, affordable, high quality childcare, and the simple policy truth that some policy objectives are irreconcilable.

The intensity of interest reflects the fact that family life is being lived differently with less certainty about how relationships should be conducted. A hundred years ago, there was consternation when Britain could not even man its army for the Boer war: working class lads were too malnourished. Now a different kind of malnutrition is imagined, produced by a global industrial revolution and the social consequences on family life of labour mobility and migration, the globalisation of the market, new technologies, the mass media and marketing, changing family demographics and gender relations. But should we be panicking? Are things really worse?

The changes embodied in a new gender and parent-child settlement are neither



totally bad nor totally good; but they have changed the family landscape in ways that make it hard to use the usual maps. A considerable body of ESRC-funded research programmes on children, youth and transition, social capital and consumption are examining the terrain. Alongside the scrutiny of large data sets and the establishment of the millennium cohort to track changes and outcomes over time, the CAVA (Care, Values and the Future of Welfare) research group is looking at how people are actually 'doing' family and how they explain themselves to themselves, drawing out the values that underpin the way people live and aiming to develop an ethics of care to underpin social policy. This is a welcome development - a democratisation of research that offers countervailing voices to policy discourses.

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A new managerialism has entered discourses on the family. Children seem to have become commodified - yet another product for design, with a mass of targets to support the production. There is a pervasive lack of trust that families can be left to get on with it. The locus of intervention has not, previously, been so firmly the state and the focus not so directly on parents' relationships with children. In addition, the scope of new technology gives possibilities for public scrutiny that need to be taken seriously in anticipating the longer-term consequences of state action.

There are urgent policy questions on the regulation of family life posed by the new gender, demographic and economic settlements. These questions relate to the care of children, the elderly and disabled, cohabitation and the law, the extent to which parents are responsible for their children's misbehaviour and how much the state should use conditionality of services and benefits to enforce social rules. There are yet others where the focus should be on the state, the

media and marketing: about the proper regulation of business and the media to make it pro social, direct marketing to children, financial and child care provision to parents and others who care for children. And, to be fair, Government is working on these, too.

Research evidence shows that it is the quality of relationships - the love, care, respect, example, kindness, talking and listening - that raises children well whether in the home or in child care. But caring has always been harder to do on an empty stomach or short of time. Supervising children is much tougher with drugs and alcopops on the streets. Being stressed is inevitable, given the pressures. Being poor is much worse when you are faced every day with images of conspicuous consumption. Being on your own is worse when you hear all the time that it is not good enough.

As New Labour takes stock of its family policies after six years in office, the critical question is over the nature of the contract between the family and the state. Where is the boundary between state and family responsibility? Is it possible to have two guardians of children's well-being: state and family? And do parents have a voice in the process of discovering the rights and entitlements of a parent citizen?

Parents cannot be left to manage the forces of change at home alone; it is up to the State to take on responsibility, too. It is too simple to assume that the quality of family and intimate relationships is what makes schools and offices and streets better places to be; promoting a culture of decency depends not only on 'positive' parenting, but also an equitable social settlement. If it takes terms like 'human capital' and 'family business' rather than love and responsibility to persuade the hard headed that investing in families is sensible social and economic policy, so be it. But as we struggle with the complexities of finding the balance between state and family, perhaps we could refocus the debate and the thrust of policy from seeing children as the foot soldiers of the new economy to the promotion of their well being for its own sake ■

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ESRC RESEARCH

Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA)

CAVA is concerned with how we all fulfil our different family responsibilities and how social policies can help us - whether that is looking after children, earning money and going to work, spending time with spouses and partners, caring for other relatives and/or helping friends.

The aim of the research is to develop a new framework of values to underpin the social policies that support us in fulfilling our varied family responsibilities.

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