

Families and the Welfare State

*John Hyde*

Since the Second World War, the percentages of government budgets that affluent societies spend upon the alleviation of poverty have more than doubled. However, whatever the various welfare systems have done, they have not reduced poverty.

Charles Murray, the author of "Losing Ground" argues that the best thing that can be done for the American poor 'is to abolish the entire federal welfare and income support scheme for working-aged persons'. On the other hand, Lawrence Mead, author of "Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship" argues that 'the main problem with the welfare state is its permissiveness, not its size'. Both authors are widely respected throughout the English-speaking world.

They come from very different philosophical positions to their differing conclusions. They agree, however, that the welfare state has failed---that it creates the problems it seeks to alleviate.

Neither author, for a moment, denies the existence of people who merit assistance. The issue, for them, is how best to provide assistance to the deserving and to them alone. To avoid a tendency, which both identify, for people to organise their lives so as to qualify for Government-funded payments, Murray wants the (central) government to get out of the way, while Meade wants more government intervention of a type that identifies morally entitled people. Meade wants work tests and the like and he wants to engender a sense of obligation to society. He believes there should be no rights to state-welfare without responsibilities.

In "The Family in the Welfare State" the Australian author, Alan Tapper, argues a third position---help families.

He argues that, in spite of the welfare state, most 'welfare'---from income provision to moral instruction---is still, in fact, provided by families. Compared with the amount that family members do for each other, what is done for them by centralised or decentralised government and the private-sector welfare agencies, is minor. This is obviously the case. Yet when the chattering class is discussing the poor---which it does endlessly---it almost ignores family-based welfare.

What is more, without hesitation, most people will agree with Tapper when he argues that family-based welfare is usually the best available welfare. For instance, only in the most extreme circumstances would we expect the state to take a child from its parents. Indeed, in real life, as opposed to theorising about social obligations, most of us go further, to make the moral judgement that people are obligated to near relatives---an example here is that most people believe that men who sire children should pay for the welfare of those children and do so handsomely!

We have an extraordinary capacity for turning our backs on such truly needy people as foreign refugees, but most of us do not begrudge taxes paid to prevent fellow Australians from being undernourished. However, most of those of us who work do begrudge the taxes that are paid to people who organise their circumstances in order to qualify for state-welfare. In short, we agree with Mead that welfare ought be paid only to people who try to become givers rather than takers. How can this be achieved?

It is almost impossible for a necessarily impersonal government to ensure that people try to care for themselves and then undertake the unrewarded care of others. Governments can neither police work tests very effectively nor, by example and instruction, encourage people to accept personal and social responsibilities. But families can. When they are successful, families offer their members higher quality welfare than the government can offer, at the same time as they very effectively discourage free-loading.

Families aren't perfect, indeed some of them fail dismally. But it is unlikely to be chance that links a high incidence of poverty, particularly child poverty with the break down of the family and high levels of illegitimacy. Dr Tapper argues that the family should be the preferred welfare system---it has been around a lot longer than the state and on the whole has performed considerably better than the welfare state.

We cannot in decency turn our backs on the unfortunate, but we know that the modern welfare state has, if anything, increased the incidence of poverty. Tapper contends, I think plausibly, that governments at present discriminate against families. Further I think that Tapper's policies to remove the anti-family bias from taxes and welfare are within the bounds of political and administrative feasibility. If we really care about the poor, as opposed to the welfare industry, then policies that do not discriminate against family-based welfare deserve more consideration than they get.

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