

## The Family Conference

*John Hyde*

During a discussion on family breakdown, a friend who professes moral philosophy said, quite perceptively, "Perhaps you liberals have a lot to answer for".

The political Right---I dislike the term for its authoritarian overtones---is divided between liberals and conservatives. Those wishing to explore the distinction on an academic plane will appreciate the latest CIS publication, "Traditions of Liberalism". However, in Australia, rather less is made of the liberal-conservative distinction than in most Western Countries. This may be intellectual laziness.

In practice, few professed liberals press liberalism to the limit. They support some institutions and practices on the conservative ground of demonstrated worth. An obvious example is the support liberals give to the complex traditional forms of the parliaments and courts. Remember Gough Whitlam, whose government championed liberal social causes, appealing to that most conservative institution, the monarchy?

Twenty years ago, the family was another such social institution, tested by time and found, on balance, to be good---very good. According to a song popular in the 1950s 'Love and marriage went together like a horse and carriage', and almost nobody doubted it. Since then, however, the talking class, that is academics, teachers, journalists, policy makers, activists and social reformers, have popularised the anti-family ideology. The talking class accord heterosexual till-death-do-us-part marriages no special status, and the talkers dominate governments. From being a glorified institution as recently as the 1950s, the family has come to be seen as \_\_passe\_\_ and, what is worse, oppressive. Governments which once illiberally favoured families now illiberally subsidise anti-family propaganda. The tax system discriminates against home-makers.

A paper by Dr Alan Tapper, to be delivered in Perth next Tuesday at an AIPP seminar, "The Family in the Welfare State", will have this to say: "[The family] is not wholly immune to the effects of demoralisation. It is an old principle that if you call a person a dog often enough, and treat him like a dog, eventually he will bite you. It is perhaps the same with

families. Talk down all their achievements and eventually they will wonder why they bother".

The campaign against the family is prosecuted most vigorously by loony-left feminists. Dr Tapper quotes an English feminist, <sup>Wendy Clark</sup> ~~Sage~~: "The family has become a catch-all phrase for everything that we, as feminists, condemn in society. Family equals oppression..." It is odd that those who rail against the 'oppressive' family tend to be the same people who favour oppressive states. Such people are not liberals.

The legal equality of the sexes was an early liberal cause. No fair person would claim that marriages are not sometimes oppressive. Nor would he or she claim that children brought up in familial surroundings are always well and wisely treated. Liberals have campaigned to free women, men and their children from oppressive legal ties. Therefore, to the extent that liberals have facilitated the legal dissolution of marriage contracts and protected women's property rights during marriage, they have facilitated divorce----but I doubt my philosopher friend would complain thus far.

No fault divorce, on the other hand, has perhaps made it too easy for men to leave their wives for younger women. Even so, the family has a far better record than its alternatives and denigration of the family is no part of the liberal tradition. Dislike of families has its roots in state collectivism and its sub-species----socialism, communism and fascism. As early as Plato, the family was seen as a prime rival to the state.

It is only 22 years since the Western Australian Government repealed the legislation which required a woman, upon marriage, to resign from the civil service----legislation enacted by politicians who, no doubt, sincerely believed that a woman's place was in the home. The pendulum has swung a long way since 1966. Now we subsidise parents who rear children out of wedlock. Thanks to social security, children can be raised without the inconvenience of a husband. Courtship, love and marriage, once considered necessary precursors of parenthood, are no longer. Monogamous families, never biologically essential for reproduction, are no longer economically necessary. And, on top of that, thanks to the efforts of the talking class, they no longer confer high status on their members.

But one thing has not changed: the evidence is all around us that most people still benefit from family ties. Sigmund Freud said that to work and love are basic elements of sanity. Alan Tapper observes that it is the family which gives children a sense of their own identity, and that a child's successful development, defined as the ability to love and work, depends upon the anchorage of the family. When this basic sense of belonging is missing the social consequences are mostly bad----for instance, most juvenile offenders who repeatedly get into trouble come from seriously disturbed family backgrounds.

State welfare frees both men and women from the responsibilities (some would say 'repressions') of monogamy. It allows men to have children and leave them and women to have children and keep them and, far less frequently, the other way about. Biologically, that is like other mammals, but socially the break-up of the nuclear family does not work. The breakdown of the family has reduced respect for the 'civil rights' which are dear to liberals, and for the 'brotherhood of man' so dear to socialists---oops: 'siblinghood of person'. The lesson from districts such as Harlem in New York is that although unattached females form relatively law-abiding, child-rearing sisterhoods, unattached street-wise males are not so law-abiding.

We may not want to stop welfare payments to single parents, but a stable and prosperous society depends on stable monogamous families. Don't let us kid ourselves: there are no successful polygamous societies---at least, not as we measure success. The sooner we regain respect for the people who form and stick to monogamous relationships and the sooner we stop heaping contumely on mothers who stay home to look after their children, the better.

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