

John Hyde

The Family

In most cases families deliver 'welfare' to their members better than any available, or likely, alternative. People bound together as 'a family' have unmatched ability to care for each other and they apparently benefit from this. When families fail the consequences are often tragic. I don't want to force a conventional family structure on anyone but surely I do not become a 'dogmatic conservative' by not wanting the government to subsidise alternatives to the family.

Following what I thought was a mild attack, three weeks ago, on 'sundeck intellectuals' who expect the state to care for their children while they enter the formal workforce, I was accused of being 'a catholic'. While I don't mind being called a catholic, in fact I am not. My affection for the family is derived from observation not dogma.

At the risk of saying the obvious, a family is a social institution within which people co-operate for ends that individuals cannot attain alone or can attain only with greater difficulty. In this it is like all social institutions---clubs, firms, communes, states etc.---but the things provided by a family are our most fundamental needs. There can be no question of doing without affection, food, shelter, company, moral and social instruction, and mental and physical care. The only possible question is: can another social institution provide these better?

Before the rise of the 'Welfare State' responsibility for this 'welfare' lay primarily with families. Children and old folk deprived of families were thought to be seriously deprived indeed.

Of course, some families failed with even the basics but in general the family was responsible for the material and moral welfare of its members. Only when families failed (often because of death) did other agencies---church and secular---assist. With the exception of aid directed to the chronically poor and infirm, these agencies tried not to supplant the welfare functions of the family.

Today an influential school of thought that believes the state can and should take over responsibilities that were once fundamentally familial, such as the care of young children. At bottom this is what the publicly-funded child care debate is about. The people who think the state is able to do the

family's work are educated and therefore vocal but surely they are still a minority. Others know there is no other social institution with the track record of the family. To think otherwise is to fly in the face of evidence.

Family members are normally physically and emotionally close---they are in a privileged position to know the wishes and interests, detect the needs, discern the problems faced by, and mark the development of, their members. Anecdotal evidence and learned opinion suggest that the family produces a 'good product'. Children from stable family environments are more likely to display socially valuable forms of behaviour than are children from broken homes or those who have never known the bonds of family. Doctors, social workers and church workers alike, attest to the damage done to the development of children who have never known, or who have imperfectly known, the life we call 'family life'. Old people who do not enjoy the company of children are often lonely.

Most people now believe that the state has *prime* responsibility for some less fundamentally familial personal services---formal education, nursing the sick and providing retirement income, for instance. The transition from family to state was gradual. First the church provided schooling and hospitalisation and alms houses for the needy then the state, provided education, health care, and retirement income for the needy and gradually the state expanded 'needy' to include the greedy.

Parental responsibility has been diminished. The choices that parents can exercise on behalf of children are fewer, and the desire to exercise responsibility discouraged, because of the costs involved in attempting to provide goods and services already financed from tax revenues.

Filial responsibility has been diminished too. When parents are provided with an income by the state it is easy to forget that income is not their only need. The loss goes two ways; the archetypal working mum does not feel she can call on Gran, for whom she feels no responsibility, to mind the children. Since the archetype working mum was created by people with well-paid jobs in the civil service and universities she is not poor, Italian, or a single parent from a stable (once called 'good') home. Archetypal and typical are not yet synonymous; grand parents do help, often. On the whole that pleases me.

Well-being is more than the satisfaction of material wants. When 'welfare' becomes identified with 'social security', we lose sight of a wider meaning of the term and neglect the crucial role played by the family in its provision.

As the state has supplanted the family as the primary unit of welfare provision, the family has atrophied. It is breaking down. The divorce rate is extraordinarily high. Homeless children remain a problem. Child delinquency is endemic to modern Western society. People die lonely.

Obviously some families fail for reasons that have nothing to do with the state and these failures leave uncared-

for 'dependents'. And a person locked into a failed but unbroken family, for financial or other reasons such as protection of the children, might lead a miserable life. We have an obligation to aid our fellows in times of unmet need. The state might be the most efficient social institution to meet that obligation although the task might also be better done by a church or secular charitable foundation.

Equally obviously most families succeed in meeting the welfare needs of their members and succeed far better than the best alternatives. To create unmet needs by weakening the social institution that is pre-eminently successful in meeting fundamental needs, and that has been around for millennia, is an act of collective madness of the type that destroys societies.

One doesn't have to be a catholic to ask that the prime responsibility for providing 'welfare' be left with families. Neither does one have to be 'conservative'; just humane and prudently cautious.

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