

Miriam David and Jenny Shaw

WOMEN AND CHILDREN FIRST



For six months we have been guessing at what the Tories would do. Now there is only room to guess at what they will not do. The axe may seem to be falling anywhere and everywhere but, in fact, what the last Labour government termed the social wage has been singled out for major attack. Despite its somewhat confusing connotations, the social wage usefully drew attention to both the non-financial aspects of social policy and the state's beneficiaries. Most importantly, the social wage affected those not in receipt of wages or tax-cuts, namely women and children, and thus cuts in this sphere are neither relative, transferable nor offset. It is the real impact of cuts on the domestic economy we wish to highlight in this article.

That Famous Slip

The Conservative manifesto had little to say about family policy (or indeed, about much else) but in the months following their election, these laissez-faire Tories have offered, in instalments, their view of the family and of women and their place in the Tory book. Patrick Jenkin stated this baldly and most succinctly on television's *Man Alive* programme about working women (*sic*) when he replied that: 'Quite frankly, I don't think mothers have the same right to work as fathers. If the Good Lord had intended us to have equal rights to go out to work, he wouldn't have created man and woman. These are biological facts, young children do depend upon their mothers'¹. Jenkin may now wish that these words had never slipped from his lips but they did and they express the core of Tory domestic policy.

When examined closely and together, the proposals for the family turn out to be mainly disposals. The Tories plan to do away with much that has rightly come to be regarded as central to a minimally acceptable standard of living for the majority of the population. In this article we look at two main areas, education, which affects young people and their parents, and a variety of measures which specifically concern women as mothers. These policies are informed by a view of the family which the Tory Party wishes to strengthen and which rests on female dependency on men, women's limited and conditional participation in the labour force and their increasing restriction to solitary child care. In theoretical terms these areas are related to arguments about domestic labour, its value (to whom) and how the costs of it should be analysed. However, we do not deal with them directly although some implications for this debate may be drawn out.

An attack on Women

Whilst our central focus is on moves which, if successful, will lead to the return of women to the family, the Tory proposals for education cannot be excluded. For the majority child-rearing remains a private

matter concerning households and parents although the state contribution, by the provision of compulsory education, must be reckoned. Even when children are in full-time education, parental responsibilities do not cease. Whilst this seems like a statement of the obvious, the actual organisation of education and the school-day makes it virtually impossible for both parents (where there are two parents) to enter the labour market on equal terms. In most households children are primarily the responsibility of their mothers and it is they who will be affected by the particular changes in education that are under discussion. Our decision to introduce this discussion with the idea of the social wage is grounded in our belief that whilst the overall aim of Tory policy in education is to shift some of the costs of the child and his/her education back to the 'family', the family is not a singular unit. The welfare of its members cannot be aggregated or assumed to be equally distributed, nor can the costs which accrue to it. The welfare of a family is not simply the sum of the welfare of the individual members. The concept of the family wage has long disguised the unequal enjoyment of the goods and resources that it can buy. In the current context the extra costs returned to the family will undoubtedly be paid for by women. If local education authorities are no longer obliged or provide meals in the middle of the day, for instance, mothers will be obliged to do so instead.

The Main Policies

The major items of policy to display these general principles are

- (a) the proposals to dispose of parts of Labour's Employment Protection Act;
- (b) the lack of support for the private member's bill which aimed to increase and make more widely available the maternity grant;
- (c) the preference for moral rather than practical support for single mothers;
- (d) the contempt and disinterest in provision for the under fives (although in this particular case one measure has backfired and led to a reinterpretation of the 1944 Education Act to the effect that local education authorities might, after all, *be* under an obligation to provide nursery education for all children over the age of two, if their parents want it);
- (e) last, but not least, is the government's 'determination to reduce substantially the number of bureaucratic controls over local government activities'².

Given that education is the largest item of local government expenditure these resolutions will have their most significant impact there. The Education Bill, having completed its second reading, is well on the way to becoming law and has got the whole process off to a speedy start.

Choice and Discretion?

As Corrigan argued in *Marxism Today*³, there is widespread support for any move that appears to reduce bureaucracy or bureaucratic control and this part of their platform is, perhaps, the most appealing to working class men and women. Yet, the Tory claim to give more choice to parents and more discretion to local government at the same time as their disposable income is being substantially reduced, means that the choice or discretion is Hobson's'. Local governments can use their discretion only in deciding what to cut and parents, in the end, have only the choice of state or private education. One lesson that has to be drawn from this is that although there is a social control function intrinsic to the provision of welfare which rightly comes under attack,

¹ Patrick Jenkin, *The Guardian* November 6 1979, p10.

² Department of the Environment, *Central Government Controls over LAs*, Cmnd 7634, London, HMSO, September 1979.

³ Paul Corrigan, 'Popular Consciousness and Social Democracy' *Marxism Today*, Vol 23, No 12, December 1979.

moves to decontrol are not necessarily desirable, especially not in a right wing political context.

In line with its policy of promoting small businesses the government is considering the idea of encouraging small businessmen to swell the reserve army of labour with recently delivered women. Before protests caused the government to back down it was proposing to release small businesses from the obligation to reinstate a woman in her job after she had taken maternity leave and given birth. Nevertheless it is still hoping to discourage women from returning to work by requiring them to put in writing three times that they intend

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to do so. For a government that is concerned to cut our bureaucracy this Koranic principle is absurd.

The Maternity Grant

Had it held to its original proposal it would have been a serious attack on the rights established by the Labour government through the Employment Protection Act as well as on women and we must be glad that the idea has been dropped, even if only temporarily. However, its general lack of interest in how women manage their dual and demanding roles, in and out of the labour force, is evidenced by the fate of a private member's —Macnamara's — attempt to increase the maternity grant. This consists of a flat rate payment of £25 to mothers, who on the birth of a child, have contributed to national insurance for at least two years or to the wives of men who have done so. Not much, still 'the present administration became the first post-World War government to be paying maternity grant at a level which in real terms is less than that paid to mothers when the benefit was first introduced in 1911'⁴.

Although this was a Labour private member's Bill its failure can be directly attributed to indifference on both sides of the House to providing money for maternity. On this matter, Labour's record may not be much better than the Tories, but the tendency to place the costs of childrearing firmly on the shoulders of those who bear the children could not be more explicit. This last point was forcefully made by Linda Chalker, Minister for Social Security, at a conference for one-parent families. As reported in *Spare Rib*⁵ she expressed her sympathy for the plight of one-parent families and underlined the Government's support for the under privileged. However this support was to be of a moral, not a financial kind, where child care was concerned. When pressed on where money for assistance might come from she mentioned 'local industry and collections at work'. Meanwhile, she praised those struggling and desperate mothers who managed to find time and energy to set up voluntary projects. This laissez faire belief in private enterprise was endorsed by her superior, Patrick Jenkin, when he inaugurated the National Childminding Association, as a support group for solitary and homebased childminders.

The Under-Fives

Hot air is all that is otherwise offered for the under-fives. In their expenditure plans for 1980-81, the Tories claim that 'it should be possible to maintain expenditure on the under-fives at about the present level'⁶. This is meagre, misleading and fraudulent in two ways. Firstly, the present level of expenditure is but a pittance and secondly, insofar as local authorities are being given discretion to enable them not to spend they may choose to spend below the present level. The most notorious example of such a decision being taken is the case of Oxfordshire. There the county announced its intention to

achieve its cuts in education by cancelling *all* provisions of nursery places. This led to opposition by parents and the revelation by Lord Butler of Saffron Walden, that it had been his intention, in drafting the 1944 Education Act, that local authorities should read their responsibilities as including the obligation to provide nursery education subject to demand⁷. The Tories' chickens came home to roost on this one although, in the event of this interpretation being upheld, it is unlikely that the government will waste much time in closing this loophole by adding to the current Education Bill a clause exempting LEAs from statutory provision for the under-fives. If this is done it will constitute a further attack on women, for the less provision of nursery school places the more women are *de facto* excluded from participating in the labour force.

School Meals

As a consequence of reducing bureaucratic control exerted over local government, LEAs are to be relieved of their obligation to provide and subsidise school meals. Not only does this place the cost of providing the midday meal on the family, by obliging somebody to stay at home to serve it, this further places an obstacle in the way of mothers who wish, and indeed may have, to combine this with some paid employment. Although the Government has said that it has no intention, at present, of introducing a shortened or 'continental' school day which would start earlier (probably at 8.30 am and end at 1.30 pm), the way is being paved for this revision if they change their minds. Their concerns with economy and containing the costs of keeping schools open has led to some authorities, such as Barnet, lengthening the winter holiday (and saving fuel costs) and may lead to a four day school week or to a double shift system. All these will also be a direct attack on mothers.

In much the same economising mood the provision of free school transport has been axed. This is expected to hit the parents of children who go to denominational schools hardest but it must, in general, reduce the *real* choice of all parents to send their children to the 'school of their choice'.

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More Like Parental Preference

Despite a rhetorical commitment to increasing parental choice over schooling, closer examination of the Education Bill reveals that parental choice has turned into parental preference: 'Every local education authority shall make arrangements for enabling the parent of a child in the area of the authority *to express a preference* as to the school at which he wishes education to be provided for his child in the exercise of the authority's functions and to give reasons for his preference'⁸, [our italics]

However, the Bill then goes on to give numerous grounds on which the LEA can evade respecting that preference. Prominent amongst these is the removal from parents of the right to appeal to the local ombudsman against the allocation of his child to a particular school. Further, in requiring local authorities to publish 'information' as to schools and their admission arrangements (broadly interpreted as meaning examination results of the schools in the authority) what seems to be given with one hand is taken away with the other. In much the same vein, although parents are allowed on the governing bodies of schools, they remain a minority — only 'at least two parent governors' — and the powers of governors are not to be increased.

An Attack on the Working Class

So far we have been arguing that aggregating individual welfare and interests under the heading of the 'family' blurs the increasing

unequal welfare of the members of those families. This is especially apparent when parents and children's welfare are taken apart by class. We have suggested that Tory policy is grouped into proposals to do away with, and (a few) proposals to introduce, innovations. The disposals fall mainly on parents (working class mothers especially) whereas the few concrete and 'positive' proposals refer to children. *But* the families (or children) who will benefit from these proposals are middle class. Those who will bear the brunt of the disposals are working class. If there is any doubt about this principle compare the costs of the cuts in state education to the already estimated degree of subsidy to private education. A minimal estimate was set by Christopher Price MP as £50 million a year. Rick Rogers, writing in the *New Statesman*⁹, fixed a more controversial figure of £500 million plus, taking no account of future Tory policy.

Inner Cities and Gentrification

The clearest example of this is the 'Assisted Places Scheme' whereby the Government will subsidise 'pupils who might otherwise not be able to do so to benefit from education at independent schools'¹⁰. Notwithstanding that this is also a subsidy to private schools — the children who are likely to benefit from this are middle-class children because of the form of the scheme which allows for up to 50% of the places to be taken by children from private preparatory schools. Even the token gesture towards inner city areas cannot compensate for the loss of income and support to state education. We know from past evidence that inner city areas do not contain only disadvantaged children and indeed the gentrification of such districts increases the chances that the children who will actually be assisted will be those from the middle classes. Under all known modes of formal assessment middle class children do better and, although we do not yet know exactly what form of selection will be used, it is unlikely that it will be able to avoid this bias. We might further note that the Government's intention to life restrictions on the conditions for receiving home improvement grants may accelerate the return of the middle classes to the inner city areas, and thus put them in a position to take advantage of the assisted places scheme. The housing/education mix is an irresistible one for most of the professional middle classes and with the permitted rise in costs of public and private transport a speedy response to such incentives can be expected. Lastly, we note that although the Secretary of State 'should have regard to the desirability of securing an equitable distribution . . . between boys and girls', this may not be possible given the other criteria. It is not yet known exactly which schools will participate in this scheme, but as there are far more (and larger) private schools for boys than for girls, this will make his

task harder. One major implication of this is that all moves to discriminate against girls of this generation is an attack on the mothers of the next.

Women — A Key Target

This Government would not like to be thought unprincipled and indeed it is not. As it states 'Public expenditure is at the heart of

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Britain's present economic difficulties'¹¹. In its determination to reduce the charge on the state it has really only one idea which depends on a strict division between what it sees as public and private costs. In order to make the tax cuts that it thinks it was elected for and to make even more just before the next election, it is instituting a massive assault on living standards. As part of this process the Tories are elaborating an ideology of improved parental choice which is attached to the increased financial costs of being a parent. We have argued that this is a cover for a selective attack on women and lest this is thought to be an exaggerated claim, we think that these particular moves should be seen in their overall context. Notably, the outrageous proposals for the restriction of entry into Britain for British women born abroad and for the foreign (non EEC) husbands of all British women, and the tacit and practical support being given by the Tory Party to Corrie's private member's Bill to restrict further the availability of abortion.

Along with their mentors, the monetarist economists, the Tories believe that unemployment is 'voluntary'. Yet can we really believe that as unemployment in the public sector and in the service sector grows, that the women who lose their jobs do so any more 'voluntarily' than the 52,000 or more steelworkers? •

⁴ Ian Kendall, *Mothers and Babies First? Money for Maternity*, The National Maternity Grant Campaign, November 1979, p2.

⁵ Newshorts, *Spare Rib*, No 89, December 1979.

⁶ November 1979.

⁷ *Times Educational Supplement*, 1 December 1979.

⁸ Education (No 2) Bill, 25 October 1979, Clause 6 (1) p6.

⁹ Rick Rogers 'The Myth of "independent" schools' *New Statesman* Vol 99, No 2546, 4 January 1980.

¹⁰ Education (No 2) Bill, 25 October 1979, Clause 17(1) p16.

¹¹ Cmnd 7746, *op cit*, p 1.

