

or two children. But the decreasing duration of responsibility for children will be counter-balanced for many families by a responsibility towards elderly relatives. Few people are aware of the dramatic changes in what is termed the 'dependency ratio' in our population. There are now 8 million people over 65, or 15% of the population. And whilst this proportion will remain relatively stable in the future a growing number in this age group will be over 85 years old and in need of considerable support.

But it is the rate of divorce which has attracted most attention in the past decade. If present trends continue, one in three marriages today can be expected to end in divorce and an increasing number of one parent families headed by divorced women is perhaps the most significant result of this. Today, one in eight families is headed by a lone parent — the vast majority of them women — and a third of these parents are divorced.

Whatever else is reflected in these figures, it would not, however, appear to be disillusionment with marriage *per se*. For a second consequence of today's divorce rate is the increasing significance of remarriage. One in three new marriages involves remarriages of at least one partner and one in six for both.

Such changes in the realm of the family are happening as developments are occurring in two other crucial areas of life: work and the role of the state in the provision of welfare services. These have stimulated widespread debate, although rarely does it have an explicit family focus.

One of the most controversial trends in employment is the increasing participation of married women in the formal labour force. In 1921 they represented only 4% of the labour force, but by 1979 this figure had increased to 26% when married women outnumbered single women by two to one. This general picture, however, hides important details. The participation of *mothers*, for example, is strongly influenced by their responsibility for children and only 6% of pre school children have mothers who work full time.

In the realm of the state and welfare provision, there is also great controversy in relation to a number of factors: a faltering economy and concern about levels of public expenditure; growing concern about the success of 'redistributive' policies; and anxiety about the paternalistic nature of much social provision. Criticisms of the

### THE FAMILY WAY

Following recommendations from the independent Study Commission on the Family, the Government announced in January that a new centre for the study of family and policy is to be established. Undoubtedly, as the Study Commission has documented, there is a great and developing diversity in 'family life' which has important implications for policy makers. But many have grave doubts about the advisability of adopting a 'family perspective' in the development of social policy in general.

The 'model' family — a once-married couple with Dad as breadwinner and Mum at home looking after two children — now represents only 5% of all households. Divorce, lone parenthood, cohabitation, remarriage and changing fertility patterns are all having their impact on family form. So, whilst marriage is *more* popular than in Victorian times, 20% of women marrying for the first time in the late 1970s had lived with their husbands prior to marriage compared with 3% in the late 1960s.<sup>1</sup> And a growing number of couples may be choosing not to marry at all, a trend perhaps reflected in the increasing proportion of births to non married mothers which are jointly registered by both parents.

Whether they marry or not, couples are certainly choosing to have smaller families. Today around 80% of families have only one

<sup>1</sup> *Families in the future: A Policy Agenda for the 80s*, available from the Study Commission on the family, 3 Park Road, London NW1, £3.25 including p&p.

present provision have come from across the political spectrum, but there is radical disagreement about solutions, policy prescriptions and future directions.

Within the debate the role of the family looms large — though not explicitly so. The independent Study Commission on the Family, however has argued for a direct family perspective on policy which would involve three major components: a sensitivity to changing family patterns and relationships; a full recognition of family roles and functions; and the monitoring and evaluation of the effects of public policy on families of different types. In relation to monitoring and evaluation, they argue specifically for the introduction of family impact statements and a regular family policy review.

A family impact statement would spell out the likely effects of a new policy on families, whilst the review would describe key social trends bearing on social policy; discuss their implications for public action; and assess the impact of both new government policies and the cumulative effect of government action on families of different types.

An example will illustrate the value of such an approach. A family perspective would provide a welcome counter balance to what is predominantly an individualistic view of unemployment. In considering its social and economic consequences, is it not

justifiable to include the large number of other family members who are affected? With unemployment seen predominantly as an individual experience, it is not surprising that statistics from a family perspective are hard to find. But one estimate suggests that there were at least 1.3 million children in the families of the unemployed in the autumn of 1982.

A family perspective on policy thus has a valuable contribution to make. But there are reasons to believe that the contribution is limited and that such a focus may actually be detrimental in some instances. Take, for example, the position of women. To address women's issues from the remit of the family could be argued to be reinforcing a quasi-traditional view of women's roles. So one might justify a woman's right to work in terms of her contribution to family finances, but what of her right to choose to work outside the home *per se*?

There is also a danger, addressed by Malcolm Dean in a recent *Guardian* article, that a family focus may actually provide a 'respectable cloak for regressive policies'. This may happen in three crucial areas: redistribution of income to the poor; in relation to women; and in relation to ethnic minorities. In the latter case, as Dean suggests, 'A government which does not want to do anything for this small minority can

easily hide behind a campaign which focuses on white families and ignores the needs of black families'.

The area of family finances provides yet another note of caution for those advocating a family perspective. There is no doubt that existing policies on income maintenance and taxation could be strengthened and improved. But consideration of reform, or restructuring, of fiscal and social security systems from a family perspective may mean too little attention is given to the processes that generate inequalities and to the need to provide every individual with an adequate income on which to live, be they single, married or divorced; male or female; young or old; handicapped or able bodied; black or white.

There are many different dimensions to inequality and many different types of needs. Some of these would fit neatly into a family perspective, others would not. Yet others might in fact be hidden from view by such a focus. What is actually needed is more attention to the intended and unintended consequences of policies for different groups and individuals in our society. Perhaps *social* impact statements are more appropriate — one and only one element addressed in such statements would be the family.

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