

Suzanne Moore



The end of nuclear power in the home

Family Fortunes

As working mothers now scabble for part-time nursery care, it seems scarcely believable that one of the earliest demands of the feminist movement was 24-hour creches. Or that Shulamith Firestone called for a 'cybernetic communism' in which 'child-bearing could be taken over by technology'. Twenty years later, the Tories gather under the slogan 'Keeping The Family Together', while in the States conservatives methodically hack away at abortion rights and freedom of speech all in the name of the family.

Thatcher warns us of the danger of a 'creche generation' conveniently ignoring the fact that the only successfully established 24-hour creches - public schools - actually produced most of her government. While she may be dangerously out of touch with her call for mothers to stay at home, Labour, with its air-brushed images of decidedly *unclear* families, is still playing safe with its insipid demands for men to spend more time with their children.

Nobody wants to be seen as 'anti-family', least of all the desperately heterosexual Kinnocks, And as *The Family Way: A New Approach To Policy Making* by Anna Coote, Harriet Harman and Patricia Hewitt suggests, changing demographics have refreshed the parts that mere feminism couldn't reach. It is now fully legitimate and indeed sensible to demand more childcare, support for the increasing number of lone parents and parental leave for men as well as women. All of this would be very nice as well as freeing up the women needed by the labour market.

Many would see this pragmatic approach, beating the Tories on their own moral high-ground, as a far more positive one. But in the rush to be more pro-family-than-thou, we stand to lose as much as we gain. It is not that the family is the root of all evil and that we should all go and live in communes. It's rather that, although we are finally in a situation where we can talk about the rights of fathers as well as what's best for the children, we can

still only discuss women's position in the family if we sneak it in through the back door.

Although the critique of the family as the key locus of female oppression remains one of the central insights of feminism, there has been a lot of back-tracking by feminists themselves on this issue. Feminists have families too. Trying to resolve the tension between coming from a family and having a family with an understanding of just how bloody awful it is a lot of the time for a lot of women, has produced some bizarre strategies. Everything from a bovine celebration of motherhood to Germaine Greer's romanticisation of the extended peasant family to the currently fashionable neutered language in which we discuss family policy.

We now talk euphemistically of 'parenting' instead of mothering and fathering as though the two were interchangeable. In the wonderful world of *Parenthood*, *The Movie* and *The Policy*, men magically want to take equal responsibility for their offspring. Maybe they really do say that they want to, but the fact is they don't do it in practice - I won't bore you with statistics.

Yet, as Anna Coote writes, in contrast to the Right's stress on financial responsibility and discipline, the Left stresses men's changing role within the family as a caring, sharing one. Very cosy I'm sure. I hate to be bitter and twisted about it, but how is this to come about? And isn't it just shoring up an already crumbling structure anyway?

If anything, men's role in the family is becoming more and more marginalised. A common pattern is the women and children as the stable unit with men drifting in and out. As the divorce rate soars and women remarry or go into other relationships the children go with her. It is not that the children of single mothers are more likely to be emotionally deprived, the problem is that they are more likely to be financially deprived. Yet the Left was decidedly uneasy at the Tory initiative for increased legislation to make men pay for

their kids.

Labour attacked the policy on the grounds that it was unworkable and not enough anyway. The issue of whether we want men to be financially responsible was dodged, although the image of the man who has to be hunted down and persuaded by law to hand over 11 quid a week is a different one from the nice Labour Party man who would take paternity leave if only he could get it.

All of this leaves women with the worst of both worlds. At the moment they have all the disadvantages of the nuclear family without any guarantee of the supposed 'advantages'. Except for an increasingly narrow class of people, they are neither kept nor protected. Child abuse - the standard or satanic version - rape and domestic violence all occur within the haven of the family.

Although the feminist family may be more flexibly defined, undermining the traditional family is no longer the business of feminism. Resignation has replaced idealism and there is little to choose between left and right pronouncements on the perceived crisis. As more marriages break down under the strain of women's demands it seems to me entirely appropriate that there should be a crisis and that we should once again be pushing to talk about women's position *within* the family as well as outside it. We should be able to demand childcare, not because employers need more female workers nor because it's better for the kids, but because it is better for *us*.

As the authentic family dies its natural death, economically and ideologically, and the family is increasingly defined as being 'whatever you come home to', we should take our cues from the infamous Clause 28. Instead of 'the family way', surely it is our business to promote 'pretended family relationships' because we know that the real thing sucks. •

Suzanne Moore will be writing a regular monthly column.