

Defending the Traditional Family

Alan R. Barcan and Patrick O'Flaherty (eds), *Family, Education and Society: The Australian Perspective*, Academy Press, Canberra, 1995

Reviewed by *Brian Crittenden*

THIS volume is based on papers presented to a conference held in 1994, the International Year of the Family. A chapter added by Alan Barcan sketches changes in the relationship between the family and education in Australia from European settlement to the present.

Although the authors pay some attention to different interpretations of the term 'family', they use it according to its standard meaning in the Western European tradition: a distinct social group composed of father and mother (joined in the life-long commitment of marriage) and their offspring to the age of adulthood. Variations on this definition that are admitted to the discussion include: a divorced parent (whether remarried or not); parents in a *de facto* marriage relationship; single-parent (usually mother-only) family; and children adopted or born into a previous marriage. I would not quarrel with this interpretation. Yet virtually no attention is paid to important historical variations in the characteristics of the standard nuclear family, let alone differences of interpretation and practices across cultures. There is no reference to the substantial body of recent historical work on the nuclear family in Western Europe. Many of the comments seem to assume that the family (in the standard sense) has exhibited no changes over time or among social groups within a given period. (I have reviewed significant changes in the history of the Western family in Crittenden, 1988.)

Ivan Petch's keynote address criticises various attacks on the 'traditional family', in particular the effort to extend the term to homosexual couples with children through adoption or *in vitro* fertilisation. Families (traditionally understood) are viewed as the primary cells in the social body; their role in moral education is stressed. It is argued that, in view of the high rate of divorce, much more needs to be spent on educating people for marriage and parenthood.

In Chapter 1, Geoffrey Partington notes the generally high correlation between a family's socioeconomic status, the parents' level of formal education and the children's educational achievement. He claims an educational advantage for children of intact two-parent families, and attendance at schools with a broad range of common moral and religious values. He draws attention to the educational harm done by treating different levels of culture in a society simply as instruments in the struggle for power or as expressions of divergent tastes or preferences. He argues that, given the complex diversity of the values that affect the interpretation of education, parents should be free to choose among schools. To facilitate choice, poorer parents should have access to a voucher scheme, and an assessment system should provide sound information on the relative efficiency of schools.

In Chapter 2, Barbara Fraser stresses the importance of collaboration and consistency between parents and schools on discipline. She suggests that schools with an enlightened approach to discipline (involving positive incentives and consistency, and avoiding capital punishment) should actively encourage the parents of their students to adopt a similar approach.

James Cox in Chapter 3 and Alan Tapper in Chapter 4 both address the same issue of how the welfare state in Australia has affected the family. Cox points out that the share of GDP spent by governments on education, health, social security and welfare has doubled over the last 30 years. A redistribution has occurred from childless young married couples and two-parent families (who now pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits) to the childless elderly and one-parent families. At the same time, the move from private to public welfare has brought a qualitative shift from personal to largely impersonal provision. Cox argues that government welfare should be scaled down and families encouraged, through lower taxes, to take more direct responsibility.

Tapper argues similarly that government policies in recent decades have favoured one-parent families and couples who separate, while reducing assistance to two-parent families and increasing the taxes they pay. This encourages single-parent families and parental separation designed to qualify for the single-parent pension, even though the evidence suggests that, generally, the welfare of children is better served by enduring two-parent families. While acknowledging that feminism and other factors may have contributed to the decline of the family, Tapper believes that welfare policies have been the main culprit, notwithstanding the moral ideals on which they were based.

In Chapter 5, Gerard Joseph also addresses welfare policy and the family, but ranges more widely than Cox or Tapper. He draws attention to the very wide degree of public bureaucratic involvement in the family and the tendency to interpret the term 'family' so loosely as to render it almost meaningless. In the process, the spiritual and moral ideals of the traditional family have been displaced by objectives of technical efficiency. The author proposes that governments should not take over functions better performed at family level, and that, while the tax level should reflect the number of dependants supported by an income, discretionary allowances should be replaced by tax credits that are unrelated to income.

In Chapter 6, Rita Joseph defends the traditional nuclear family as morally required by the basic features of human life and the physical world. But although she writes well, she underestimates the difficulty of arguing from the characteristics of the human and physical worlds to conclusions about the moral values by which humans should live. While some answers to the question of how human beings ought to live can be rejected as clearly undesirable, there may be several different defensible answers. Given what we know from history and anthropology, the author's defence of the traditional family would be stronger if it had been based on moral ideals rather than necessary conditions of the moral order.

Joseph underestimates the complexity of several moral issues. However strong the case against abortion, the practice cannot be deemed 'unnatural' on the grounds

that it depends on scientific means. This argument would exclude transplants and other surgery designed to prolong life. Another example concerns the right to procreate, which surely must be qualified by other moral considerations, both social and personal. One need not agree with the agenda of 'perfect ecology' to recognise that changing conditions of the human and physical worlds (for example, gross overpopulation, responsibility to future generations) are relevant to morally responsible decisions on human procreation. In addition, moral duties can conflict, and in such cases more than one conclusion may be rationally defensible.

It would have been helpful if something like Chapter 7 (which Alan Barcan adds to the collection) had been available to the contributors before they prepared their conference papers. Barcan provides an interesting and succinct account of the main changes that have occurred in the relationship between the family and formal education in Australia since European settlement. He also draws attention to varying characteristics among families, both at any one time and over the course of the past two decades. The conditions in the first 30 years or so show clearly the need for some flexibility in defining the family and its related moral values. Whether or not the social changes of the late 1960s were as far-reaching as the author claims they were, they have certainly had a significant effect on the role of the family and on how the very nature of the institution is being interpreted. Barcan concludes by noting that, although the state has been dominant in formal education during Australia's history, there have been encouraging moves during the past decade to increase parental influence on schools.

It would be unfair to expect a one-day conference to address the full range of issues raised by the book's title. Having said that, I am nevertheless surprised by the narrow range of issues with which the book deals. A number of the topics not discussed are mentioned in Barcan's chapter. These include the strength of peer-group values in relation to both family and school, and the powerful influence of television and other electronic modes of communication. There is very little on parental right of choice in formal education; the involvement of parents in the work of schools; and their distinctive role in moral and civics education. There is no comment on children's rights or the legitimate scope of the state's authority over education. (I have attempted to deal with some of these topics in Crittenden, 1988.) The main strengths of the collection seems to me to lie in the critical attention drawn to recent government funding policies for families and the suggestions for reform.

Reference

Crittenden, B. (1988), *Parents, the State and the Right to Educate*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

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