

# LETTERS

All letters intended for publication should be clearly addressed to the Letters Editor, *Family Matters*. They can be posted, faxed or emailed.

Letters intended for the next (Winter 2000) issue should be sent before 10 July 2000.

Letters should be about 300 words, and may be edited.

Post letters to the Letters Editor, *Family Matters*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 300 Queen Street, Melbourne 3000, Victoria, Australia.

Fax letters to the Letters Editor, *Family Matters*, on (03) 9214 7838.

Email letters to the Letters Editor, *Family Matters*, at [Letters@aifs.org.au](mailto:Letters@aifs.org.au)

We prefer letters of about 300 words. Letters must include your full name and address, your professional affiliation (if any), and a daytime telephone number for verification. However, only your name and affiliation will be published with your letter. Letters may be edited. The Institute reserves the right not to publish letters, and on this matter the decision of the Institute's Publications Committee is final and correspondence will not be entered into.

## ■ Children a problem needing a political solution?

I am deeply concerned by the article 'Is the Australian family becoming an endangered species?', by Wayne Swan MP, in the last issue of *Family Matters* (no. 54, pp. 42-46). I am especially concerned by what Mr Swan feels is 'wanted' by Australian families and what he sees as the most appropriate ways to stimulate the national birth rate.

In my experience, the average person (including those thinking of starting a family) desires less government intervention in their lives and less economic influence on their private decisions – they want rights and choices, not political and ideological directives. Yet Mr Swan is offering families more intrusion and more complexity, especially if they want to live on one income and raise their children at home.

Mr Swan's suggestions that participation in parental tuition be a requirement for access to Parenting Payment, and that the 'more stimulating environment' of institutionalised child care is the most appropriate place to raise our children, would probably do little to ease the concerns of those who have chosen to postpone or dismiss starting a family because of perceived systematic complexities, intrusiveness, and persistent anti-family discrimination.

If Mr Swan believes people will have babies purely for the national good, rather than out of a sense of love and selfless commitment, then I sincerely hope he is wrong.

Furthermore, Mr Swan's suggestion that a single-income family might best be supported by bringing forward their Family Allowance appears somewhat discriminatory since there doesn't seem to be a similar condition placed on the provision of child care for those families who choose to operate as a two-income household. I can see no reason why Childcare Assistance should not similarly be paid for from future Family Allowance unless the ideal is to encourage children into institutions from birth while

both parents compete in an already over-supplied labour market.

I note with interest that although Mr Swan acknowledges that parents want more time with their families, no thought is given to relieving the inequitable financial burden borne by single-income families that pay near-personal rates of tax on their family income.

If my wife and I had fully understood the discriminatory nature of the tax/welfare system before starting our family, I suspect we might well have thought twice about bringing children into a system that penalises them because their parents don't toe the ideological 'modern family' line. We might instead have chosen to enjoy the lifestyle of the most privileged group in the community, the true modern family – the two-income couple without children. For now, we bear with the inequitable system and remain thankful for the slightest recognition of the fact we are a family unit (though such recognition usually falls far short of the associated hype) and the fact that through much longer working hours and significant sacrifice we are able to continue to live the traditional lifestyle we believe will give our children the best start in life, although we must do so with near-welfare levels of post-tax income.

Could it be that 'the family' itself is no longer held in the high regard it once was, and that society quite often dismisses full-time child rearers as social failures 'chained to the kitchen sink'? Perhaps if motherhood had not been devalued as the pastime of inadequate women unable to compete in the workplace, we would not now be wondering about the future prospects of families in this country. Whereas mothers were once regarded as managers, economists, nurturers and counsellors they are now regarded as mere servants of their supposedly oppressive husbands whilst children are often seen as a temporary nuisance that prevents women getting on with their own lives.

I see plenty in Mr Swan's article to reinforce the current prejudice against women who choose a career in the family home, and to entrench the perception that children are a problem in need of a political solution.

**Andrew Dolphin**  
*"Breadwinner, husband,  
father of two"*  
Beechboro, Western Australia

## ■ Unconditional income for all

Lawrence Mead's assertion, in the last issue of *Family Matters* (no. 54, pp. 12-17), that the effects of single-parent welfare reform in the United States appear 'strongly positive', is remarkable. One-third of former claimants have neither job nor welfare. Brilliant.

There may be a small minority of Australian social security recipients who are so incompetent that government authoritarianism may help them, but anyone whose welfare payment is significantly reduced, let alone entirely withdrawn, is rendered much worse off. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of Centerlink clients are competent and are disadvantaged whenever they have additional, uncompensated and unwanted obligations placed upon them. Citizens without children can hardly be ordered about of concern for their offspring, and parental preferences should sometimes trump children's interests.

The only sure way to eliminate poverty is through an above-poverty-level unconditional income for all. The justice of something approaching this is obvious when it is noted that it is unfair to illiberally discriminate against people who naturally (and/or due to social factors) dislike work, and that after-tax income flows unearned by marketplace labour (inheritances, gifts, spousal transfers to housewives and househusbands, property income, etc.) directed to able-bodied adults exceed the social security budget by about \$100 billion per year, but go overwhelmingly to members of high-income families.

While ever society is (selectively) obsessed with paid work, welfare recipients will fare indefensibly badly. To weaken this environmentally-damaging obsession, and to promote justice and respect for all people, we need: progressive taxation raising over 50 per cent of GNP; a significant unconditional minimum income; substantially higher welfare payments than currently for those desirous of, but unable to, work; and a mass educational campaign on how to live successfully without employment.

Given that some federal ministers appear not even to grasp that it is capitalists and people in well-paid and satisfying jobs, not welfare recipients, who owe society a debt, I fear that life is about to become worse for many of Australia's worst-off citizens.

**Brent Howard**  
Rydalmere, New South Wales

### ■ Welfare: solving or recycling the problems?

In his article 'Positive and negative welfare and Australian indigenous communities' in the last issue of *Family Matters* (no. 54, pp. 30-35), Noel Pearson effectively outlines the undermining of the integrity of the Aboriginal people due to what he calls 'negative welfare'. He defines this as 'the provision without responsibility of income support to able bodied people of working age'.

The principle of social reciprocity is really the focus of Pearson's extensive and even passionate argument. According to his discussion, reciprocity was very important in the economy of traditional Aboriginal communities, and likewise it is central in the modern white economy.

As well as containing a serious flaw, Pearson's argument illustrates a useful point. The flaw hinges on the concept, theory, or principle, of reciprocity. As welfare is, by definition, the condition of doing well, there can be no such concepts as positive or negative welfare – even though they may sound useful and allow the writer to

build up a statement which seems, on the surface, to be useful and insightful. One does not wish to be pedantic about language, but its misuse can at times direct attention to deeper problems.

Pearson's error has risen from his insistence on the efficacy of the principle of reciprocity, which illustrates the matter of common sense, and social justice, it seems, at the same time. If the writer wishes to claim that reciprocity was a mainstay of Aboriginal society before white invasion then I must take his word on this, but principles have just not worked in Western society. In the same category as principles of social exchange, we may also put commandments, dogma, theory and manifestos, from which is derived socialism and, in turn, welfare. (Welfare theory has not worked, but positive welfare, whatever it is, and reciprocity will work!)

If it is true, and surely it is, that these concepts often have different and indeed opposite effects to the intentions of those who champion them, it can be seen that the implementation of 'positive welfare' will come out at the coal face, sooner or later as 'negative - positive welfare'. Someone will then try to change this to 'positive - negative - positive welfare!' Clearly we can keep going with this sort of re-cycling or move right out of the endless destructive cycle.

Thus, picking up on the language problem can direct attention to the deeper problem. From this we can also see the more important (indeed vital) point about principles, and identify one invariable principle – all principles are made of rubber.

It is neither possible nor appropriate to describe in detail where we go from here with respect to the devastating problem of Aboriginal society described by Pearson. In short, if the problem is to be resolved rather than recycled, it will demand creativity.

**David Allan**  
Devenish, Victoria

## Families in the news

Something interesting seems to be happening in the media of late. Writers and commentators who have not previously addressed the impact of political and economic decisions on families are now regularly doing so. Families are now firmly on the front page and increasingly occupy large parts of the opinion and editorial pages of most of the nation's newspapers as analysis of the new tax system and proposed welfare reforms dominate the newspapers and airwaves.

### ■ WELFARE REFORM

With its focus on families, welfare and social policy, the last edition of *Family Matters* (no. 54, Spring/Summer 1999), could not have been more timely. The January deadline for submissions to the Federal Government's *Reference Group on Welfare Reform* sparked a flurry of media reports on welfare issues and opinion pieces from various welfare sector stakeholders. The Institute's Research Manager, Professor Peter Saunders, participated in two panel discussions on mutual obligation and welfare reform on Radio National's *Life Matters* (24/1/00 and 31/1/00).

The release in March of the Reference Group's interim report, *Participation Support for a More Equitable Society*, saw a number of media outlets revisit the themes addressed in *Family Matters*. The *Sydney Morning Herald* ran a full-page feature article "Making welfare work" (28/3/00) which included an examination of the influence on Australian welfare policy of the ideas of *Family Matters* American contributor Lawrence Mead. Mead's arguments also received the endorsement of *Herald Sun* columnist Paul Gray, "Everyone can kick goals" (5/4/00).

### ■ FERTILITY

Underpinning much of the analysis of the proposed welfare reforms are the likely population effects of a continued decline in fertility, reported in the November 1999 release of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Births 1998*.

Debate on the reasons for and implications of a continued decline in fertility was reignited by the *Population, Gender and Reproduction Forum* held at the University of South Australia in February. The focus is on women who choose not to have children at all. Reasons cited for the trend are: the difficulty of juggling work and family responsibilities; uncertainty about long-term financial and employment security; the high cost of child care and education; increasing levels of female education; and individual selfishness.

Institute researcher Christine Kilmartin has had a busy schedule of media interviews on this topic including "Birth trends urge policy change" (*The Australian*, 11/2/00). The steady stream of opinion pieces, letters to the editor, and radio talkback shows no sign of abating.

### ■ CHILD CARE

Other issues have emerged in the light of concerns about fertility. With child care cited as a possible contributor to people's decisions about starting a family, and the Prime Minister's comments about the need for a closer fit between work and school hours in his Federation Speech (28/1/00), spirited commentary on child care followed.

In this context, Australian Institute of Family Studies research was used in articles about the quality of child care, "Child care the verdict" (*Sunday Age*, 20/2/00); and grandparents looking after their grandchildren, "Her first word was gran" (*Sunday Mail*, 19/3/00), and "Second time around" (*Sunday Age*, 16/1/00).

– Catherine Rosenbrock  
AIFS Marketing Manager