

British government proposes unprecedented state interference in family relations

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14 November 1998

The Labour government has become the first administration in British history to produce an official policy paper on marriage and the family. Launching the document 'Supporting Families' last week, Prime Minister Tony Blair and Home Secretary Jack Straw distanced themselves from the previous Conservative government's 'family values' campaign, which ended in disaster after a number of sex scandals involving its MPs.

These pronouncements aside, Blair's government is proposing an intrusion by the state into personal relations that goes beyond anything attempted by its Tory predecessor.

'Supporting Families' claims that the rising number of divorces and record low number of marriages is proof of a crisis in the family. There is an element of sleight-of-hand here. Divorce signifies that a relationship has irrevocably broken down and separation is the only means of resolving an unhappy situation. The relatively low number of marriages, however, indicates only that people are choosing not to wed. That people exercise this right does not necessarily mean that their relationships are less stable or committed than a formal marriage.

To the extent that these figures warrant any action, it should be of a clearly circumscribed character. It would be entirely legitimate to attempt to gauge the change in social attitudes that lies behind the decline in marriage, for example, or establish to what extent external pressures disrupt personal relations. Relationship counsellors report that financial worries are the main source of family tensions. Government action aimed at limiting the negative impact of such factors on personal life would be legitimate and worthwhile. At any rate, the principle must be that personal relations between adults are precisely that--a private matter involving the individuals concerned.

Labour's document begins by opposing this approach, which it condemns as an 'anything goes' liberalism which denies the fact that how families behave affects us all'. Its target is the once widespread consensus that state involvement in adult relations should preferably be restricted

to protecting the most vulnerable family members against abuse--women and children--and, as in the relaxing of divorce laws, removal of all elements of compulsion from relationships. In the 1960s and 1970s this approach informed the introduction of a series of welfare measures aimed at safeguarding children's educational and physical development and lessening the economic dependence of women on men.

These measures came under repeated attack by successive Tory administrations throughout the 1980s and 1990s--all in the name of preserving 'family values'. In publicly renouncing 'liberalism', Labour is making it clear that it intends to renew this offensive.

Blair's 'third way', when applied to the family, is to insist it must conform to state diktat. 'Supporting Families' proposes to strengthen 'the institution of marriage' by making divorce harder to obtain. Couples seeking a divorce would first be made to attend counselling sessions to determine whether their relationship is over. Only then will they be able to go on to consider the terms of separation.

The document also proposes to extend the role of registrars, who currently perform civic weddings. They would preside over 'baby naming ceremonies', which would set out the responsibilities of each member of the family for the child. Secular marriage ceremonies would be altered to establish the personal and legal responsibilities of marriage more clearly. The document states that a guide should be prepared that 'would cover the position of married people in relation to income, property, the tax and benefit systems, and rights and responsibilities towards their children'. Couples planning to wed would have to attend counselling services in which they agree beforehand who should look after the children, work, etc. Prenuptial written agreements about the division of property upon separation should also be made legally binding, the document suggests. Ways should also be found of establishing the 'rights and responsibilities' of cohabiting couples.

Labour's aim is to restore the family as the basic unit for enforcing discipline and social cohesion under conditions in

which an entire generation of young people--branded 'Generation X' by some--has no hope of a decent and stable future.

'Supporting Families' complains that 'declining educational performance, loss of traditional 'male' jobs, the growth of a 'laddish' anti-social culture, greater use of drugs, irresponsible teenage fatherhood, and the rising suicide rate' has 'worrying implications for the stability of family life and wider society.'

Its solution is to strengthen 'discipline in the home'. Under this heading, the policy paper redefines child neglect as, 'the failure to apply any discipline or set boundaries'. It continues, 'The law recognises that there are occasions when moderate and reasonable physical punishment may be appropriate, and if a case is brought to court, the parents may introduce a defence of reasonable chastisement of a child. If the jury decides that the punishment was reasonable, no crime has been committed.'

Recently, this aspect of British law was successfully challenged in the European Court of Human Rights in a case brought by a 13-year-old boy whose stepfather beat him so severely he required hospital treatment. A British court had earlier ruled that the beating constituted 'moderate' physical punishment and exonerated the father. The British press ran a campaign defending the 'right to smack,' and Blair confided that he had 'lovingly' disciplined his children. With one eye on the European Court, 'Supporting Families' states that whilst the law needs clarifying, 'we do not consider that the right way ... is to ban all physical punishment'.

Blair's 'family' policy is retrogressive and this is intimately bound up with the government's overall policy. Labour has repudiated its previous reformist programme in favour of open support for the 'free market' and tax breaks for the rich. It is committed to running down welfare provisions and cutting public spending. 'Supporting Families' repackages labour's 'welfare to work' policies as measures supposedly designed to strengthen the family unit. These include the so-called 'new deal' for single parents and a new Working Families Tax Credit, both of which seek to end the payment of social security benefits.

The document establishes that it is no longer the responsibility of government--or more broadly speaking of society--to provide certain social guarantees. In Blair's new model for Britain, everything falls on the family and the individual.

On the issue of education the document proposes parents and their children sign legally binding Home-School Agreements. Parents could be subject to court orders governing their children's behaviour that spell out certain obligations, such as enforcing curfews.

The document stresses that grandparents are 'the most

important source of day-care of children' and 'may provide a very effective placement' where a child has to be taken into care. 'Older volunteers' can also help in schools, teaching subjects such as music. The effect will be to undermine the state provision of care and education services.

'Supporting Families' cynically packages its attacks on 'carers' benefits--currently paid to thousands of people providing full-time care for elderly or disabled relatives--as 'empowering' families to 'balance work and home'. Carers should continue to provide support but must also be made to work. It also proposes to 'empower' carers by encouraging employers to adopt 'flexible family-friendly working arrangements'. Part-time work and flexible hours--which are in reality often the most exploitative and difficult to sustain--will, says Labour, enable carers to 'balance their family responsibilities'. Employers adopting these arrangements could win government awards for their services to the family!

The plan to impose such sweeping responsibilities makes a mockery of Labour's stated concern for the family. State coercion, coupled with even greater economic insecurity, will only exacerbate the pressures on millions of parents and children.

The attempt to force people to remain in failed relationships is bound up with Labour's defence of a society in which the raising of children is largely--and, if the government has its way, wholly--an individual responsibility. Personal relations cannot be truly free when they are constrained by economic dependence and financial hardship. Genuine support for parents and children is inseparably bound up with the struggle for an egalitarian society, in which relations between adults and their offspring are based on love and respect, and not any form of compulsion.

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