



Parents or workers?

Alan Johnson – Child Poverty Action Group (2011)

Summary

It is a great shame that the interests of children have not been at the centre of New Zealand's family focused policies. This failure to place children at the centre is in part the result of our present policy paradigm which sees parents primarily as employed or unemployed workers rather than as the carers and nurturers of our greatest treasure – our children.

New Zealand governments do not explicitly produce family policy but instead provide policies and programmes which deliver benefits and opportunities to families as of course most governments do. These policies and programmes include such measures as income support for families, family tax policies, paid parental leave, social support for vulnerable and at risk families and child care and early education. So, while there are numerous and often well funded programmes delivering to families there is no overall sense of why this is being done or of how it all ties together.

This lack of a whole to all the parts means that not only is there room for policies and programmes to contradict each other and for gaps and overlaps to be created, but that we as citizens do not get to see or to talk about the values that underlie these policies and programmes. There is at least two reasons for this.

The first reason is that the social values which underpin our implicit or de facto family policy are shared across the political mainstream and in particular by the National and Labour parties. For example an attendee at the Family First conference in July remarked after hearing interviews with both John Key and Phil Goff that they “*were like twins*” [\[i\]](#) – in other words their positions on the moral questions of interest to those in Family First were more or less identical.

The second reason is that the politics and ideologies around family are fiercely contested although clearly not by the two main political parties. This contest for ideas and influence is based in large part on how we see families in terms of their structure, how they work and what their social purpose or value is. In pluralist societies such as New Zealand, families are seen in loose and broad terms whereby families are more or less self-defined. This self definition is mainly based on the living arrangements of the

parents although wider questions of cultural preference and practice and of sexuality come into it as well. This loose and broad approach suits social liberals while it is a contentious position for social conservatives.

How we see families therefore influences what we see as being good or bad family focused policies. For social liberals especially there is an economic dimension to their view of good family policy. There is on any account always such an economic dimension because most policy is delivered through financial assistance by the state to families.

In New Zealand this financial assistance to families is delivered in three principal ways – through income support policies such as welfare benefits, through tax policies such as the “Working for Families” packages and through subsidies for childcare and early childhood education. None of these delivery programmes is free of values about what counts as deserving or undeserving in terms of family structures or family behaviours.

The economic dimension of family policy favoured by social liberals is designed to serve the interests of the labour market ahead of the interests of children although there is never an explicit admission of this bias. The “Working for Families” for instance was launched in 2004 by former Prime Minister Helen Clark as the means of “*making work pay*”. It is a policy which discriminates against children whose parents are out of work and it is designed to incentivise single parents to take on paid work at the expense of their child caring role.

A second and quite essential way in which the needs of the labour market prevail over the needs of children in family policy is in subsidies to early childhood care and education [iii]. These subsidies have increased dramatically over the past six years from \$522 million in 2005/06 to \$1.16 billion in 2009/10 yet the numbers of children enrolled increased by just 14% over the same period to 189,000. This rapid expansion in subsidies was in part based on arguments that children in vulnerable families and communities needed to be provided with greater access to early childhood education because there was clear evidence of the educational value of such access [iii]. While there has been an improvement in participation rates by children from underserved groups such as Maori and Pasifika, the real beneficiaries have been middle class families who have received more generous subsidies and who have left their children at child care centres for longer periods while they work more. A further outcome of this expansion in subsidies has been the rapid growth of private sector child care centres at the expense of community based early childhood education options such as playcentres, kindergartens and kohanga reo.

It is a great shame that the interests of children have not been at the centre of New Zealand’s family focused policies. This failure to place children at the centre is in part the result of our present policy paradigm which sees parents primarily as employed or unemployed workers rather than as the carers and nurturers of our greatest treasure – our children.

[i] See New Zealand Herald 9th July 2011 “Goff, Key reveal core beliefs” at http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10737381

[ii] As an illustration the Minister of Finance Dr Michael Cullen in his 2004 Budget speech stated *“From 1st July 2007 three and four year olds will be entitled to 20 free hours early childhood education per week. Other initiatives in the Working for Families package will further encourage and support participation, thus making it easier for parents to return to the paid workforce”* p.9

[iii] See Mitchell, L. Wylie, C. and Carr, M. (2008) *Outcomes of Early Childhood Education: Literatures Review – Report to the Ministry of Education*; New Zealand Council for Education Research, Wellington; pp2-7. Available at <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/ece/25158/48867>

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