

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
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