

CHAPTER 1

RECONSTITUTING TRADITIONAL FAMILY

Partial Transcript of the Prime Minister The Hon. John Howard MP Speech at the Launch of the Family Tax Initiative, Wentworthville, Sydney. 16th December 1996.

This represents the delivery in full, on time, without subtraction, without qualification of probably the centrepiece of the policies that we took to the last election and it is true that over a long period of time I have talked a lot about the importance of policy supporting the family. I regard them as very critical to the future society that I would like Australia to have. I want to in the period that we are in Government, I want us to leave a permanent mark on the Australian community, a mark that restores and strengthens the role of the family unit within our society, a strengthening within our society that gives to parents more choice. The key to our family tax initiative is that it recognises the additional costs of bringing up children and it also seeks to give to the parents of Australia's children a lot more choice as to how they order their lives. We as a Government don't seek to impose stereotypes on Australian parents. We don't seek to tell Australian parents that when their children are young, one parent should be permanently at home while one is in the workforce but we do want to give them increasingly the option to do that if that is their choice but whether or not they do it is a matter for the choice of individual parents.

I can remember about eight or nine years ago making a speech in which I said that a taxation system that doesn't recognise the cost of raising children, a taxation system that adopts an antiseptic, economic neutrality towards the cost of raising children is a taxation system without a social vision. And this family tax initiative which will deliver one billion dollars of tax concessions to people with children, it is carefully targeted to help low and middle income families. It helps sole parent families as well as helping two parent families. We recognise the enormous struggle of many sole parents in our community and we applaud them for the contribution they make single-handedly to raising their children and although all of us in an ideal world would like to see children raised by a mother and a father, we must always recognise the massive burden that is carried by sole parents when usually through no fault of their own and against their wishes. I have never met a sole parent yet who really in an ideal world would like to be a sole parent but it happens that way, but we're not into judgemental things. We are into espousing the cause of traditional family values and espousing the importance and value if it's possible, the role model of having both a mother and a father but also recognising that in some cases, that's not possible and having a willingness to support those within our community who raise children on their own.

So we have committed ourselves in so many areas of Government policy to supporting families. I have often said that apart from the emotional value that a family brings, apart from its capacity to inculcate values from one generation to the next. Apart from the male and female role models that it provides for young children, the family also happens to be the most efficient social welfare system that any nation has ever devised and a united, fully functioning family provides the most valuable social security safety net that mankind has yet devised. So for all of those reasons I am immensely proud of what the Government has done in this area and I am immensely proud that on time, to the very last dollar and cent, without any subtraction and without any qualification, we

are delivering on the commitment we made. We made that commitment, we carefully targeted it. We wanted it to be a symbol of our commitment to the role of the family in Australian society and it is but one example of the many ways in which you will find the Government that I lead, that I am very proud to lead, will always place the family at the centre of policy making considerations.

INTRODUCTION

Immanuel Wallerstein once said, "It is safest to presume that long-standing intellectual confusions are deliberate and the fact of the confusion should itself be the starting point of the analysis" (1991, p. 159). The nuclear family is a perfect example of a long-standing intellectual confusion. It has become one of the folk theories (Ogbu 1987) of modern western society, yet it is rarely seen as 'deliberate'. Perhaps it is time.

In contemporary public discourse, 'family' is represented as both the source of all social problems and their solution, generally in terms of the breakdown and then restoration of 'traditional' family values or structures. The idea of 'family' is linked directly to the prevailing political and economic climate and it is easy to think about it only in terms of decline and crisis. This is not a new phenomenon. Talcott Parsons, in the 1950s, was arguing that the family was not in decline, but instead that a new family form that suited new social and economic conditions—the nuclear family—was emerging. Ironically, contemporary conservative politics argues that the nuclear family constitutes 'traditional family' and that *it* is now under threat and in decline and, along with it, the very fabric of our society. Links are made between the breakdown of this traditional family and any number of crises from falling literacy rates through increasing single motherhood to increasing juvenile crime. What we understand by 'family' is itself contested and fluid, enmeshed within the politics of nationhood, economics and identity: the composition of 'family', and who has the power to decide what constitutes 'traditional' or acceptable, becomes an ideological battlefield as opposing perspectives manoeuvre for political and economic advantage. The stakes are high because accepted representations of nuclear family very quickly become self-evident social 'truths' transmitted via mass media and folk theories (Ogbu 1987), making these narratives difficult to dislodge. It is the constitution and reconstitution of that family that is the subject and object of this text. In order to ground the theoretical work of this text, I draw at times from the Australian experience of the last few years, particularly the ethnic and racial shift that has become part of the contemporary cultural landscape. It is, I believe, illustrative of the complexities of conceptualising family within new economies.

NEOLIBERAL RECONSTITUTION OF 'TRADITIONAL' FAMILY IN AUSTRALIA

John Howard's term as Liberal Prime Minister has been characterized by a conservative, neoliberal agenda—a commitment to minimal government intervention, pullback of social welfare from the working and middle classes,

attempts to weaken trade unions and other employee representative bodies, and a belief that all social groups will ultimately benefit from the effects of corporate profit and the increasing wealth of the already-wealthy. Neoliberalism is both a political and cultural ideological position, described as the “defining political economic paradigm of our time” (McChesney 1998, p. 7). It is both political and cultural because the impacts of policies coloured by this paradigm reach far into the daily lives of individuals and groups. Depending on who and where you are, these impacts include:

a massive increase in social and economic inequality, a marked increase in severe deprivation for the poorest nations and peoples of the world, a disastrous global environment, an unstable global economy and an unprecedented bonanza for the rich (McChesney 1998, p. 8).

In the context of this political climate, Howard (1996) has openly called for a restoration of what he identifies as the traditional family unit. He says, “I want to leave a permanent mark on the Australian community, a mark that restores and strengthens the role of the family unit”. The ‘traditional’ family for which Howard harbours such nostalgia is the nuclear family, understood as a patriarchal mother-father-child/ren formation. This public rhetoric positions the family as the natural and neutral social unit, the family unit of “an ideal world”. However, the nuclear family is anything but natural and neutral. Howard’s call for a reconstitution of traditional family is, therefore, much more than simply the hope of a return to a happier time. The family of which Howard speaks does not exist unattached to an entire economic, political and social milieu and it is simply not possible to selectively recreate one or two isolated paleosymbolic traits. A government agenda to selectively ‘reconstitute’ such a family form must, therefore, be carefully scrutinized.

The 1996 Australian Family Tax Initiative was constructed to aid in the delivery of this restoration, as Howard’s “permanent mark on the Australian community”. The beginning of a new government’s drive to reshape the social and economic landscape. As part of this process of strengthening the family unit Howard’s government proposed a way to allow one parent to remain permanently at home. This was represented as a government offering families—nuclear families—‘choice’ via changes in taxation:

We [Government] don’t seek to tell Australian parents that when their children are young, one parent should be permanently at home while one is in the workforce but we do want to give them increasingly the option to do that if that is their choice.

As a precursor, changes in childcare and family payments had the result that for many parents employed in part-time or in low paying jobs—and overwhelmingly this sector of the workforce was, and remains, female—the benefit to the family of their income was lost in childcare payments and cumulative reduction of other benefits. This structural change made their ‘choice’ to stay out of the paid workforce

¹ Unless otherwise stated, John Howard is quoted from the transcript of his Family Tax Initiative Speech, 16th December, 1996.



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