

Bruce Logan: Social welfare decisions essentially moral judgments

Keith Rankin, in his Perspectives article, said he was not sure whether Don Brash's Orewa speech on welfare was a moral or fiscal crusade.

He misreads the intent, and disconnects detail from content. The speech is not a purge on beneficiaries at all.

Any welfare policy is an exercise in making moral judgments. Morality lies at its heart. To make us aware of personal responsibility is simply to remind us that welfare is, at its best, about charitable giving and responsible receiving.

To provide for the needy, the poor and the vulnerable is right and just. But that provision is not a birthright. Single mothers and negligent fathers are not used as scapegoats by Dr Brash.

The basic point the National Party leader makes is simple: welfare is not working, it is not achieving its original intention of a hand-up, and it is being manipulated by some recipients and some politicians.

The problem lies in the unwillingness of the Government and many commentators, including Mr Rankin, to admit that some family forms are better than others. Without that admission there is nowhere to go when one gets a hand-up. Hand-up implies something better; it is about restoration of some kind.

Since 1976, spending on the domestic purposes benefit has gone from \$50 million to \$1.56 billion. If it is really true that family form does not matter, as the Government continues to insist, why do we continue to have the entrenched problem of increasing welfare costs?

It is not good policy (or even just) that a married couple with the mother at home looking after a baby and the father earning \$12.50 an hour will generate a net annual income of \$23,254, while an unmarried woman with one child can have an income of \$35,780 on the DPB, refusing to name the father while living in the same house with him as a "boarder".

The former is a contribution to the country's economy; the latter is an ongoing drain on the public purse.

The philosophy today is to be "generous" in allowances, to tax more and more, and for the Government in its "wisdom" to allocate resources to those it sees as deserving.

The consequence is the erosion of self-reliance and self-respect. Government policy is quite simply killing the family. The devil is in the ideology, not in the detail.

Welfare policy must be informed by at least three self-evident principles.

First, the family is a society in miniature, a coherent and productive social unit in itself. We should need welfare only when things go wrong and the family breaks down.

Then, in producing, nurturing and educating children, the family contributes to the moral and economic good of society.

Finally, the family is the main welfare institution caring for young and old dependants. Any government that does not have a historical and coherent understanding of family will be confused about welfare.

Like states, families are social units. They have their own domestic policies, their own boundaries and their own foreign relations. A border exists between the family and the state and, to a lesser extent, between the family and individual.

When families fulfil their legitimate function, taxes are kept low, government is kept small and citizens enjoy a great deal of freedom. More importantly, there is reasonable accountability and harmony. It is in the state's own interest, therefore, to protect the family and not to connive in its disintegration.

Libertarians take note: personal responsibility is a core principle. Men, in particular, must be accountable for children they father. Historically, the most effective way to do this has been to give marriage special status because that encourages men to care for their children.

The gradual devaluation of marriage in our culture is the main cause of the enormous increase in welfare spending. To focus on welfare without acknowledging the role of the family will do nothing to help the next generation.

The DPB was intended to help women to escape destructive relationships. But it has become a means for men to escape their responsibilities, and women to live their lives without men. Both ways, children are worse off.

In the context of the DPB, we must consider children, and what is really in their best interests. Dr Brash is clear on this. It is certainly not right that 32,000 children do not know who their father is.

As a nation we cannot afford to avoid the need to increase the responsibility of fathers, to foster two-parent families and end the culture of dependence.

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