

# **Year of the Family**

**Parents, Puritans and Poverty**

Workers Solidarity Movement

1994

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**1994 HAS BEEN declared the UN Year of the Family. The Irish Committee for the International Year includes state bodies like the Combat Poverty Agency & the Council for the Status of Women and the Catholic ones like the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Family Solidarity were also members but walked out in protest at token places being given to two groups working with single parents. This committee has received £400,000 from Leinster House.**

The increased violence in society and fears social decay have even liberal commentators calling for a return to family values. Yet what does this really mean? What are those values? In this article Aileen O'Carroll will examine the role of the family and the reasoning behind the Back to Basics campaign.

In the nineteenth century Napoleon III went to war to silence popular opposition against worsening conditions at home. In the US, Bush and now Clinton manufactured the 'war on drugs' in part to deflect attention from the US recession. They blamed Colombian cocaine dealers for job losses, pay cuts and factory closures rather than the policies of the Democratic and Republican parties. In Europe all the major parties are pinning unemployment rates on immigrant workers.

## **Easy Targets**

In the UK under the banner of 'Back to Basics', the Conservative Party embarked on a vigorous moral crusade. The first victims of their offensive were single mothers. Why single mothers? They are an easy target. Most are burdened down by poverty and isolated within the home (50% of single parents live on less than £100 a week, only 42% of them work outside the home). Though there are groups who seek to represent single parents, in general single mothers are unorganised. They do not have economic muscle with which to fight back. They are stigmatised and pushed to the margins of society and so it's more difficult for them to form a pressure block.

The government wants to cut down on the amount it spends on social welfare, making us pay for the recession. The changing age profile of western Europe means that as the proportion of old people in society is increasing, so also will the amount of money required by the government to pay out in old age pensions increase. The recovery that the government has been hyping almost since the recession began has yet to arrive, leaving the government with mounting welfare bills.

Alongside the reduction in the amount spent on social welfare the government is attempting to reinforce the Victorian distinction between deserving poor and non deserving poor. The blame for the cutbacks is shifted onto the poor themselves rather than on the governments own social and economic policies. They're pitting single mother against old age pensioner in an attempt to divide, rule and deflect attention from the real causes of poverty in society.

It has also been argued that Back to Basics is a bid to drive women into the workplace in an attempt to drive wages down. However the facts don't necessarily agree with this. Trends in western capitalism indicate a shift from full time work to part time work and contract work. Women constitute the majority of the part time workforce. Their wages are less than full timers and in the case of contract workers they have fewer rights (to holiday pay, redundancy payment's etc). They can be hired when required and let go when the market slumps.

Union organisation has meant that employers haven't been able to drive wages down for existing workers. Instead a new level of lowly paid contract jobs (such as the 'yellow pack' jobs in Irish banks) have been introduced, which replace full time work. In Britain the number of

women employees will for the first time exceed the number of men with jobs. This trend is mainly attributable to rapid growth in part time posts (often by splitting full time jobs) which had gone overwhelmingly to women (Dept of Employment figures). However, such is the level of unemployment in Britain at the moment, I don't believe the Tories have any problem getting people into low paid jobs as it is. The motivation behind Basic to Basics is to drive down the cost of the Welfare State.

Concerns about Britain's ability to continue bearing the cost of the welfare state due to the rising costs of old age pensions have been "greatly exaggerated" according to a study published by the London School of Economics . The scare is used to justify government cut backs. The Irish government also is a skilled master at this line of argument; playing primary schools against third level colleges, the unemployed against the PAYE sector, with not a mention of the money owned in taxes by business (see the £12 million owed by Xtravision in taxes)

The Back to Basics drive arises not out of pure economic need alone. The Tory party deeply divided internally over Europe and is presiding over the worst recession since the 1930's. Back to Basics is an ideology that unifies the Eurosceptic and the Euroliberal. It's a strong united front that turns newspaper headlines away from the recession, away from the crumbling welfare state and the divisions within the party.

Initially single mothers were targeted, now sex manuals are banned, sex educationalists are cautioned and "political correctness" is attacked. Following a series of sex scandals, the Tories are trying to turn the tables around. The state funded Health Education Authority originally commissioned the sex manual 'Your Pocket guide to Sex'. On seeing the Health Minister banned it, describing it as "smutty". The Secretary of State for Education publicly criticised a nurse in a Leeds school for answering children's questions on 'blow jobs' saying he was 'incensed' when he heard how she was conducting her classes.

While there are no direct and obvious economic gains in these moves, in the long term, forcing people into reliance on the family reduces the cost to the state of social welfare. As Dr John Harris argued in *The Family*<sup>2</sup> "the constant theme of social policy has been the need to ensure stability in family life and whenever social or political elites have felt at all threatened a part of there response has been to argue for a revival of 'stable ' family values."

Back to Basics isn't unique to Britain and the Tory party. The 'moral majority' of Regan and Bush in the US has been replaced by Clintons attacks on 'welfare mothers'.

They aim to create a situation where it is socially unacceptable to rely on social welfare for support. Hence it is argued it is 'irresponsible' to have children on low incomes. Instead of debate being centred round the states responsibility to provide for its citizens, it is centred on the individuals requirement to be self catering.

The agenda being set, is that the problem facing society is the poor themselves rather than the reasons why they are poor. The questions being asked then is how to contain the burden the poor cause rather than how to eliminate poverty.

The state can reduce the cost of maintaining the social welfare by directly cutting the amount of money it allocates. However, many governments are either in too weak a position to do this, or have already cut as much as they can. By reducing the amount of people actually claiming, spending can be reduced indirectly. The ground is also being prepared for future cuts.

The purpose of this ideological battle is to drive people away from the concept of the welfare state and towards notions of individual responsibility. The family rather than the state will bear

the costs of child care as well as support for the old, ill and impoverished in society. A vast unpaid workforce is created by pushing women back into the home.

A single mother claiming benefit will now be forced to name the father of her children. In many cases, rather than be forced into contact with violent ex partners, women will simply not claim. Instead they'll be forced to rely on their own families for financial support or indeed for child care if they intend to work.

## **The family**

So as well as imposing cuts the Conservative party is waging an ideological war against single mothers and in favour of the family. In this respect Capitalism has changed little since its birth. The industrial revolution saw the expounding of the nuclear family as the only acceptable model in society. Responsibilities for child care, housing, health and care of the elderly no longer lay with the community or with the lord of the manor. Instead it was expected that the smaller unit of the nuclear family would undertake all care for the workforce.

Economic circumstance forced women to act as nurses, childminders, cooks and cleaners. Similarly men were forced to sell their labour power to provide food and accommodation. The state reaped the rewards of a self catering, cheaply maintained workforce without having any role in the upkeep of that workforce. Single mothers have been singled out for attack because they do rely on the state for help. Indeed many conservatives have been quite explicit in saying this. Peter Lilley the Social Security Secretary complained that these women were 'marrying the state', that is depending on the State for financial assistance, rather than depending on a husband.

## **Propaganda**

The entire propaganda of the Conservatives has been consistently aimed at re-enforcing the family as the fundamental unit of society. John Redwood, the Welsh Secretary said "the natural state should be the two-adult family". Virginia Bottomley hypes us up with "without [families], individuals are like a frantic whirl of atoms, attached to no one, responsible to nothing, creating a vaporous society not a solid one". Michael Howard, the Home Secretary said "We must emphasise our belief that the traditional two parent family is best, best for parents, best for society and above all best for the child". To be more honest he might have added best for capitalism.

However, instead of honesty the Conservatives have justified their crusade by making up facts and lying about academic research. The Guardian (9/11/93) reported on a paper commissioned by the British cabinet and prepared by senior civil servants. It dismissed three of the key arguments used by the conservative politicians to support their attack on single parents, that benefit rates encouraged women to have children on their own, that there was a link between crime rate and criminality amount children of single mothers and that there was evidence that women became pregnant to get council housing. Yet speeches at the Tory party conference, two weeks after they had seen the paper showed when the truth is not useful it's just ignored. Blatantly lying, Peter Lilley said "I've got a little list...[of] young ladies who get pregnant just to jump the housing list"

## **Victorian values**

This isn't the first time the Conservatives have manipulated and lied about academic work to justifying implementing it's political agenda. Indeed though the Tory party are on a moral crusade to bring back Victorian values, they are particular as to which values they wish to keep, a point which was well made by Gwendolene Stuart<sup>2</sup> in a pamphlet on Thatcher "[they have] picked from that period selectively the sentiments and values of the most oppressive class...deriding the real values of that period, the values of ordinary men and women who struggled to work collectively together to advance their quality of life. "

There is nothing new or original about the present campaign. As Dr. John Harris comments "At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was already a firmly established belief that the family was in decline and decay as a result of the growth of industrial society". The introduction of women into the workforce, the growth of unions and organisations representing youth removed them from the family environment, giving them greater independence.

The move to the cities brought with it poverty, overcrowding and crime. The changing structure of the family was blamed for this rather than the effects of industrialisation. The response of social planners was to re define women's roles within society. Arguments about women being naturally suited to domesticity and about their need for protection in a morally corrupt world were introduced. Concern over declining birth-rate raised "motherhood" to a new level in social recognition. The first Mothers Day was celebrated in 1907 with this in mind. The so called sexual liberation that followed World War I was followed by a moral backlash.

On one hand legislation was introduced which removed many restrictions on women working, on the other ideology was created to prevent women from taking full advantage of the new opportunities available to them. Again and again the family values have been used by capitalism as a bulwark against progression and to deflect from the misery caused by it.

## **Name the real enemy**

It's true that the scandals have undermined much of the Back to Basics propaganda program however this doesn't mean the Tories have failed. The Child Protection Agency, despite negative publicity is still in place. The Agency targets men who are already paying maintenance rather than track down those who pay nothing because this way it is easier to reach target figures. The force of the moral crusade may have collapsed but the policies behind it are still being implemented. More importantly a consensus is being created that the cost of the welfare state is no longer justifiable.

Capitalism is a cruel and unjust system. It has caused people to live in poverty for over 200 years. It couldn't survive without a strong ideology justifying its actions. In England at the moment we can see the repackaging of such an ideology. It is up to us to name the real enemy, not the poor, the weak or disposed in society, but rather capitalism.

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