



THESE PEOPLE ARE IN CHARGE

Andrew Norton on how ‘familism’ has gradually taken over both the left and the right.

Kevin Rudd never tires of talking about ‘working families’. But like John Howard’s frequently expressed support for families, this is not spin. Both major political parties give families with dependent children an extraordinary amount of policy attention and taxpayers’ cash.

The Family Tax Benefit (FTB) alone is the third largest federal expenditure, after the aged pension and defence. The FTB was a favourite of John Howard’s—he more than doubled spending on family benefits during his term in office—but Kevin Rudd has been just as enthusiastic in throwing money at families. The government’s economic stimulus spending was partly directed to families. Its Education Tax

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Refund is a paperwork-intensive way for FTB A recipients with student children to add to their benefits. It planned to increase FTB to compensate families for the costs of an emissions trading scheme.

Other programs add to total family spending. Publicly-subsidised childcare is a rapidly increasing cost to government, with Australian government financial support to families for childcare nearly twice what it was five years ago. The Howard government's baby bonus, paid on birth or adoption, aimed to encourage couples to have 'one for your husband and one for your wife and one for the country,' as Peter Costello famously put it. A universal publicly-funded parental leave scheme is the next step in family policy, with Tony Abbott trumping the government's plan with a more expensive one of his own.

Support for families is not restricted to taxpayer-funded benefits. The Rudd government's workplace relations laws also give parents of young children a special status, awarding them greater rights than other workers to request flexible working arrangements, such as different hours, patterns of work, or place of work. Employers can refuse only if they have 'reasonable business grounds', must give written reasons for their response, and cannot disadvantage an employee for making such a request.

While politicians are interested in parents' votes, this alone does not explain the pro-families-with-children policy trends we observe. Demographic trends count against family policy as a winner of self-interested votes, as children have steadily declined as a proportion of the

population since the mid-1960s baby boom years. The proportion of adults with dependent children has never been lower. Yet payments to this group have never been higher. Something more is going on than just electoral calculation.

Familism breaks out

That something is what I call the new familism. Historically, the term 'familism' refers to a traditional view of the family. Individual and community interests come second to those of the family. Gender roles are clearly differentiated. Single parenting, unmarried cohabitation and divorce are all strongly discouraged. While Australia was only ever moderately familist by world standards, through much of the 20th century public policy supported a conservative view of family life. Australia's system of wage fixing was based on giving male workers the wage they needed to support a wife and children. Women did not get equal pay because it was assumed that they would be supported by men. Penalty wage rates and restricted shop trading hours helped enforce free time families could spend together. Children born out of wedlock were typically given up for adoption to married couples, and divorces were difficult to obtain. Since a child endowment policy was introduced in 1941, families have received financial assistance from the federal government.

Though contemporary Australian families are far more open and flexible than in traditional familist societies, they are—perhaps partly as a result—seen as in greater need of government support. The scale and range of this support warrants the overarching label of 'new familism.'

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intellectual and ideological histories and policy detail, but share a broad policy direction.

Familism on the right

Right familism was the first to gain intellectual and political momentum. It was a reaction to the decline of the nuclear family, as social, economic and legal changes hit it from every direction. As sexual attitudes liberalised in the 1970s, marriage rates declined, birth rates fell, and more children were born to cohabiting couples or single women. Women increasingly sought work outside the home; in just a decade between the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s the proportion of married women in the labour force increased from less than a quarter to more than 40%. Women's greater workforce participation, welfare benefits for single mothers, and no-fault divorce all contributed to higher rates of family breakdown. Divorce rates skyrocketed after family law reforms in 1975, before stabilising at around one-and-a-half times the pre-1975 rates.

Conservative critics of these changes were dismissed by progressives and feminists as patriarchal and out-of-date. When John Howard's 1988 Future Directions manifesto was released with a cover picture depicting a mum and dad with two kids in front of a white-picket fenced house, and a discussion inside of 'families in crisis,' it was widely ridiculed. Yet through the 1980s and 1990s social science evidence increasingly showed that even if conservative concerns were partly reactionary nostalgia for a sexist and repressed past, they were not just that. Children from 'broken' families were at greater risk of social and educational problems than children from 'intact' families. Boys without fathers in their daily lives—the children usually

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Right: Wayne Swan displays the 2010-11 budget papers | Alan Porritt | AAP/Image.
 Left: Peter Costello delivers the 2007-08 federal budget | Torsten Blackwood | AFP Files

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go with their mother when relationships fail—seemed to be particularly disadvantaged.

On the political right, the concern for families was not restricted to self-described conservatives. John Hewson’s radical liberal 1991 Fightback! package proposed modest increases in family support amidst cuts for many other government programs. The ‘Taking Children Seriously’ program run by the classical liberal Centre for Independent Studies in the 1990s also proposed more financial assistance for families. An analysis of maiden speeches of the 36 new Coalition MPs who arrived in Canberra after the March 1996 election found that 33 upheld the family as a social ideal. In 1975, none of the then incoming Coalition MPs had felt the need to do so. In the intervening decades, the family had lost its taken-for-granted status, and was instead thought to be in need of active support.

At the same time, there was no going back to the old familism. Ideas about women’s role in society had been transformed; men and women both preferred the new arrangements. The economy

and the living standards of many households depended on women’s work. The old familist industrial relations system needed reforming for economic as well as social reasons. If a new familism was going to work, it had to take account of these realities.

John Howard’s right-familist solution was what he called ‘modern conservatism in social policy’. He regularly stressed that his aim was to support the choices parents wanted to make, whether this was women entering the labour market full-time, part-time or not at all (or men making these choices, though most men still plan to work full-time). His main policy instrument was the FTB, supplemented by increasing childcare subsidies and from the early 2000s the baby bonus. Payments were driven by household structures and income, not formal marital status. Single parents were eventually required to seek work at an earlier time in their children’s lives, but the FTB itself boosted their welfare income. The overall policy intention was to create a facilitative conservatism that made family life easier and more attractive, rather than a prescriptive conserva-

tism that told families how to organise their lives.

Opposition Leader Tony Abbott surprised many with his March 2010 proposal for a six-month parental leave scheme on full-pay for those earning up to \$150,000 a year. While its funding source in a new tax was unexpected, the policy itself should not have been. A child’s early months are widely seen as crucial for his or her future development. On this, the social science evidence tells conservatives what they already believe. A parental leave policy that matches past income encourages mothers to spend more time with their infants, rather than maintain their income by rushing back to work. Once conservatives accept that mothers are going to work, paid parental leave fits logically into a conservative family support policy.

Familism on the left

Left familism also has its origins in the social changes that began in the 1960s and 1970s. But while the right worried about the effects new family arrangements had on children, the political left, and particularly feminists, saw

women being liberated from unhappy relationships and limited life choices. A woman who could work full-time, and whose partner shared equally in household chores and parenting duties, was the 'have it all' repudiation of the past, of the stay-at-home housewife who put her own interests behind those of her husband and children.

Feminists saw Howard's FTB scheme as claiming to support women in the choices they want to make, but in reality favouring Howard's personal preference for stay-at-home mothers or women as the household's second income earner. FTB B was the clearest example of this. It was a non-means tested payment to families with one principal income earner (a partner could earn a small amount before benefits were phased out). FTB B endorsed the family structure feminists had most opposed, and regressively gave benefits to affluent households. Though the Rudd government put a means test on FTB B, alleviating one of its problems from a left-familist perspective, it kept the benefit for low and middle single income families.

But now both FTB B and FTB A, which had always been means tested and which is paid to most families with dependent children, impose high effective marginal tax rates. The left-familist family payments alternative to the two FTB programs is a more progressive tax system, financing universal child benefits. This would encourage women to combine care and career.

The left-familist preference for flat family benefits financed through progressive taxation is reflected in the Rudd government's parental leave policy. Though the length of leave and the minimum wage payment are less than most supporters of parental leave want, the principle mixes support for families with egalitarianism—unlike Abbott's plan. Paying a professional woman \$75,000 to care for her baby, while a minimum wage cleaner receives \$14,000 to look after her infant, offends egalitarian sensibilities.

These differences between left and right familists are important to program

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design, but viewed in this history of Australian public policy it is the parallels that stand out. While there have been cash payments to families for nearly 70 years, their current scale is unprecedented. With family payments, childcare subsidies and soon publicly-funded parental leave, both traditional male breadwinner and traditional female care-giver responsibilities are being increasingly shared with the state.

Left and right familists differ more sharply on workplace regulation. Since the 1980s, the political right has advocated less labour market regulation. While the previous government argued that this gave families the opportunity to create more flexible agreements, left familists want employers to be forced to do more to accommodate employees' caring responsibilities. Kevin Rudd embraced this theme in his first speech to parliament as Labor leader:

... families are such a basic social institution that they deserve special protections. When you instead have a set of laws which says that you can be told to work at any time of the day, at any place and for virtually whatever rate of pay, that it can include weekends or whatever and that you can have your shifts and rosters changed at a moment's notice, just pause for a moment. Let us think through where that all goes in terms of the impact on working families.

The new Fair Work Scheme is designed to implement this view. In addition to the special benefits exclusively for parents mentioned, other provisions in the National Employment Standards or the

new awards are designed to resolve conflicts between 'work' and 'life' in favour of employee free time. It is rather like the original centralised industrial relations system, except that this time regulation supports women's, rather than men's, traditional family responsibilities.

Is there a way out?

Much political debate in Australia is conducted within familist assumptions: the family must be supported and the question is how best to do it. Right and left divide on largely predictable lines according to prior views on ideal family arrangements, income inequality, and regulation. Less attention is given to the idea that perhaps both left and right familism now go too far.

Can it really be the case that despite, on average, fewer children and more earners in the typical Australian family household than 40 years ago, it is less capable of self-support? Do the modest improvements we have seen in family indicators—slightly higher fertility rates, slightly lower divorce rates—justify the vast expenditures? Will singles and childless couples start to resent paying more tax and receiving fewer benefits, and always being asked to cover for absent parents at work (tasks do not go away just because Fair Work lets some workers go home)?

The social changes starting in the 1960s and 1970s were partly a reaction against a family system that too many people found stifling and unsuited to the lives they wanted to lead.

Perhaps the new familism, with its high taxes and interventionist regulation, will one day inspire the same reaction.

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