

AGEING, FAMILY & FERTILITY By ANGELA SHANAHAN

Introduction

There are two great F words that form the central equation of the population debate- Fertility = Family. **Why aren't we having children? The reasons have to do with lack of family formation, or family formation that is simply too late.**

When you think about it is obvious that a decline in families should lead to less fertility. That this nexus isn't obvious is, frankly the fault of another F word which appeared in late 20th century as a mutation of an earlier purer movement. I am speaking of course of feminism

Fuelled by an adversarial model of the relationship between men and women and armed with the pill, feminism made fertility a woman's issue- but JUST a woman's issue. Men disappeared from the equation. Indeed all the issues surrounding the family were seen as discreet women's issues – not men women's and children's issues. So, from the middle seventies the **family was ripped from the heart of social policy and sidelined.** But people know it belongs in the centre – because it is the centre of people's lives.

And of course we aren't the only ones. **In every part of the western world where family formation has declined – so has fertility.** Look at those former models of family life- the Italians. The prolonged adolescence is institutionalised there. People form relationships – they even occasionally have one child – but they often do all that and they no longer marry, or even leave the parental home. Only the United States is consistently bucking the low fertility trend, and that is largely because of the Hispanic birthrate. The Mexican birthrate in the US is 3.3. That is higher than the Mexican birthrate in Mexico! That statistic alone should tell us something about who has kids and why.

THE PHYSICAL PROBLEM OF INFERTILITY

So let's begin at the beginning.

The feminist obsession with "career" not motherhood as the central element of women's self definition, made fertility the enemy. In fact babies became the enemy. Hence abortion as the first feminist article of faith. Babies can really wreck your career. They consume your life and your heart. Unlike the carefully planned career path, motherhood is instinctive, even making you irrationally unwilling to go out to work! -as I was when I left my first child in care and promptly threw up on the footpath outside the crèche.

The contraceptive pill which was marketed as a glossy package of fertility control and sexual freedom, is a wonderfully insidious method for keeping all this instinctive anarchy in check, and not just because it works very efficiently as a contraceptive.

Amongst women it's no secret that **it has an effect on a woman's libido.** Many women go off the pill because it makes them feel so "flat" **with no awareness of the normal hormonal fluctuations of their menstrual cycle.** Women who have been on it for ten years before they even try to conceive don't even know that this isn't normal and that they are lowering their chances of conception. Meanwhile **doctors unwittingly conspire in this. They have a view of fertility as just a mechanism to be switched on or off.**

The solution to this is education. We desperately need more education about our own bodies and about our fertility. Today, unbelievably, most girls are still unaware of the limits to their fertility –even as they are put on the pill as teenagers. Nor are young girls aware of the threat to their fertility caused by Sexually Transmitted Diseases-particularly Chlamydia - which of course since the advent of the pill is rampant. Education about this is crucial.

The irony is that despite the pill being pushed as an instrument for the liberation of women its greatest beneficiaries are of course men. If anything encourages an abrogation of responsibility and an unwillingness to form lasting relationships it's the pill. But feminists aren't going to admit that part of the trick, better to try to convince women they can do it alone. Who needs a husband? - buy a turkey baster, demand 'the right' to IVF, or, frozen eggs.

But the word is out. Recently a well known ABC TV presenter Virginia Hausegger wrote a devastating account of the realisation of her betrayal at the hands of feminism when she discovered that she couldn't have children when she wanted them.

WOMEN AND WORK

Delaying child bearing for the sake of 'the great career' we now know isn't worth it. So how important a factor is women's working work patterns in the fertility crisis

Now unlike the others of my generation I didn't fall for the pill con. I had to work – I taught the Visigoths of 9E remedial English. I stuck to teaching because I could do it part time. In my case it enabled me to start a career... later. I found that having children early and close not only means that one can concentrate one's youth and energy during the time when one needs youth and energy, but also that one is left with that long span of life to fill.

Instead of encouraging girls to follow a traditional career path- a path that suits men - we should be encouraging them to do something different. Study of course, but marry earlier. Continue to study or work part time while you have children, and THEN embark on a career. Interestingly despite the pressure to work full time --- this is what most women actually TRY to DO. This is exactly what my married daughter is doing – and she is the mother of a two year old at age 25.

And as for policy that could encourage this? **Most important thing is to abolish The HECS when young graduates have children. This could be means tested.**

There are a lot of other things which must be aimed at the family as a whole, But governments have to realize that they must do what families want – not what femocrats have told them they want. **Professional women supported by feminists who have benefited most from the debate so far. All the work family debate and provisions to make work easier have largely benefited them. But there is inherent flaw in this view. It is a view 'from the top'.** Unfortunately it is that view that has dominated family policy up until quite recently

FAMILY POLICY- women's preferences – child care – family payments and tax.

Feminism is about the individual woman rather than the woman as wife and mother of a family. It reinforces the idea that mother is only worth something if she works. The mother is reduced to simply another worker component of the great capitalist enterprise- instead of her primary value to society as the nurturer of the young. However, The British sociologist Catherine Hakim has proved that this is a false vision. Most mothers are either home centred or adaptive... that is they are more inclined to dip in and out of the work force, because they already have a job – and they know it. And of course with all talk of self definition through the 'career' another thing the fems forgot that most women don't have careers they just have jobs which they do – as I once did - for money. There is no great attachment to standing up for six hours as a check out chick - especially if you are doing the Friday night shift.

The mother as full time worker dictates the logic of the feminist child care agenda. Never mind the phenomenal cost of good child care or welfare of the baby whose feeling on the matter can't be consulted. Actually the biggest longitudinal study ever done, 3 years ago - the American study

chaired by Jay Belsky America's leading Child psychologist ,found that the children of the middle classes did not flourish in child care.

Most Australian mothers, instinctively know this . They have shown a marked reluctance to participate in full time work when their children are small. In fact only 15% of mothers DO work full- time with infant children The biggest study done by Evans and Kelly for the Melbourne institute shows that more than 72% of Australian mothers want to stay home when their children are small. **Along with adaptive women elsewhere Australian mothers tend to favour job security and longer leave over short term paid leave and fulltime infant childcare . Because they return to work when their children are older So the burgeoning after school care system is a great benefit to these women . (something that doesn't exist in Italy where they still rely on nonna). I think that should be expanded not infant care**

The Gender Equity model of family assumes all mothers either worked or wanted to work full-time.. So what the working mother got –like child care rebates- is seen as right – what the mum at home gets is a means tested social security handout . Mothers don't want to be treated like this, and it is no wonder the single income family lost out, seemingly, spiraling into oblivion as mothers were forced to rejoin the workforce.

But the principal breadwinner family model isn't dead . It has really just sprung an extension with the part time working mother Now the government has finally recognized this and tried to redress the imbalance and give something back to single income families through Family Tax Benefit part B – Now the gender equity theorists want to means test that we hear of nothing but 'welfare ' for millionaires- although it is supposed to be a tax rebate.

Rather than means test FBT 2 – it should be increased and made more flexible so that women doing part time work are not penalized , finding themselves in debt.

The family was removed from the heart of the taxation system some 30 years ago and it is still suffering the consequences in the mishmash we have now. Our tax system is too individualist ?. The system used in France which manages a birthrate of about 1.9 is **a family unit taxation system which is a much fairer way to spread the load of one income** , or one and a quarter incomes over several dependents . Another idea which I favour , is **instead of the complex family payments system , we should have a single neutral non means tested allowance** .Australian mothers would probably keep it and stay home until children are older- As they do in Norway where mothers receive an allowance of more than \$6000 US per child under 3 - per year. It is the same as the kindergarten subsidy .

"Freeing" women from the demands of infant children through better child care doesn't improve the fertility rate anywhere in the world, Remember the great socialist paradises ? In the Soviet union and East Germany ,despite free child care those countries experienced fertility rates below replacement long before this began to happen in the west.

Men's WORKING PATTERNS

One positive thing that has happened since I began to write about this stuff is that a we have at last recognized that the world of Work and the world of the family are not two separate worlds . We live in one world whose values clash. This has been vital for mother's working patterns . I am living proof of it . But as I said before it requires a certain degree of imagination and flexibility. Above all it requires support, and the most important support doesn't come from family friendly policies or more child care.

Women want families, and for that we need good men, IVF or frozen eggs are no substitute We need husbands for ourselves, and we need fathers for our children The economic agenda on work and family is largely aimed at working mothers of infant children. the debate about leave provisions and statutory provisions for part time work ,(which I favour),and family friendly

provisions are all useful as part of the achievement of balance for women So where does this leave men?

. For thirty years while we've been encouraging women into the work-force, we've been trying to tell men that they should work less. But this ignores the fact that men are still the main providers of families ,slugged with income tax burdens that cannot be offset unless their wives work at least part time.

So although we are told that it is a white picket fence fairy tale that once upon a time a man proved his worth as a father by the amount of work he did, most men still think and act like this and so they are understandably confused by the current wave of resentment against the ideal of the good provider, The current trend to introduce better leave provisions is very laudable , but it benefits women not men. Men can't take advantage of these things. In Sweden, the gender equity paradise, when paternity leave was introduced the take up rate was 2% it had to be made 'compulsory for it to go to 15% .Why? Men are still the ones bringing home the bacon. It's no accident that the vast majority of editorial staff still in news rooms at 10pm are men --- it is the same in offices everywhere.

But these white collar working men already have children – What about those in another economic group that don't ?

The latest Australian Institute of Family Studies report on what would make people have more children shows two main things : A steady income stream and steady relationships. The latest review of the HILDA data notes the close relationship between secure partnering status and birth expectations ' For all groups , current partnering status is the most significant factor associated with predicting whether individuals expect to have children in their lifetime....'—to quote the bard DuuuHH . people do not want to have children in difficult circumstances and most important of all they want a secure relationship they want MARRIAGE. – not cohabitation .

But when that great chemical revolution happened ,it was all too easy and people opted for casual relationships or serial relationships – which De Vauss has identified as the growing trend. Marriage has declined .

The result of this is infertility in the better educated, who society wants to be fertile because they delay marriage,- and fertility in younger less stable people .Why? Monash university's Bob Birrell has done the most comprehensive study of this in a recent publication called 'Men and women Apart" he has found that the better off delay settling down and therefore delay having children , But there is a growing trend for single men and women in their twenties with no post school qualifications to have children . These children are fathered by young men who are not discouraged from having children with many baby mothers. The women have little expectation of marriage-even though they might WANT to marry but most importantly , because of their precarious economic circumstances the men can't marry.

And there is a growing trend for lone parents to never marry by age 39 ,25% had never married in contrast to 8% in 1986. Almost 50 % of ex nuptial births are unpartnered. That is the child begins to live in this situation from day one.

Birrell has found that in family formation it is not the middle classes that are failing. They are marrying , eventually and although they delay having children they usually have at least one child and they are relatively stable (the leveling off of the divorce statistics shows this) It is the lower socio economic group that is plummeting into chaos. Birrell has looked at the problem from the point of view of the men who in the past would have been solid prospective partners. But he has found unskilled young men are now simply too poor to form a family. This is a direct result of the casualisation of the work force .It is this group that the

government should be concentrating on NOW. (Although I don't think the new IR reforms are going to help this situation.) Until now, the work issue has all really about women and only some women at that. To a certain extent the middle class men have entered the debate-particularly with the work balance. But Too bad if you're a young man and you haven't any work to balance!

Young unskilled men are out of work for long periods , or only do piecemeal work. Hardly any of these young men form families in their twenties- when they would have in the past . "A lot of them are still at home .," Add to that the attitudinal change wrought by the sexual revolution , which doesn't encourage male responsibility, and shrugs at women bearing children out of marriage with multiple fathers and we have the recipe for the underclass.

We must support these women and their children – and believe me we will have too – no one else will. But **the social consequences of this trend continuing would be pretty disastrous. All the research done on this is clear- that children born out of wedlock , in families headed by a mother who has children to more than one father are at great disadvantage --**-particularly if they are boys. Birrell's work has been the most valuable addition to this debate, and it has really turned the tables on the gender equity theorists turned the tables

But all the research – (notably the latest from de Vauss: Diversity and change in Australian Families for AIFs , Nov. 2004) shows that despite all the propaganda AND the fact that the nuclear family is a shrinking HOUSEHOLD type , people still want a stable family for their children . They think nuclear when it comes to families- whether they all live in one household or not. Mother -father -child – we are almost hard wired to thinking about family in that way **So we need good stable families because and this is very important , because those sorts of families are BIGGER families.**

The Importance of Bigger families

Demographers all tell us that if the people having two children had a third – we wouldn't be in this predicament.

In the past the birthrate never fell to today's levels because of the very large number of women who had three or more children – nearly 40 per cent. Today, however, the proportion of women with three or more children has fallen to 27 per cent.

But "more than 50 per cent of the total fertility is contributed by the 27 per cent of women who have 3 or more children.."

It is has only been the number of relatively big families in Australia which keeps our fertility rate from falling as low as Italy and Spain. Italians and Spaniards do not have greater numbers of childless women. Rather, they have fewer women who have more than two. So if the Government wants to keep fertility from plummeting to suicidal Italian levels, it ought to identify the women who do the lion's share of producing the next generation and support them.. We need to privilege families of three or more children.

But who are these fecund mothers ? Why do they want more kids?

In an article by Rachel Meyer in *People and Place* a couple of years ago suggests that the dumb barefoot and pregnant stereotype might be wrong. Using data from a telephone survey conducted by the Research School of Social Sciences at ANU, rather than from the census, she was able to examine **why** some women decide to have more than two kids. Oddly enough these people sound just like me!

Meyer found that career orientation, educational qualifications and income did not keep the women she surveyed from having three or more. The factors which did predict family size were **NOT JUST economic, but demographic and social:**

- **Marrying** – women who had NOT been in a *de facto* relationship that did not lead to marriage were 2.6 times more likely to progress to a third or fourth child.

- **Marrying young** – “Women who were 27 or younger when their second child was born were 3.8 times more likely than other women to have three or more children.”
- **Having children quickly** – “women who had two or fewer years between their first and second births were twice as likely as other women to have a larger family.”
- **Having unplanned children** – women who said that their first child was unplanned were 1.6 times more likely to have more children.
- **Having religious values** –practising Catholic and Moslem women were also 1.6 times more likely to go on to have more children..

This implications for attempts to raise fertility rates in Australia are obvious

First: economics might be less important than culture.

Second : the increasing number of de facto relationships is depressing the birthrate. It is simply not in Australia’s demographic interest to promote policies which make de facto relationships easier .

Third: certain types of values, mostly religious, clearly make couples more open to bearing children. I know from my own experience that a sense of worth which transcends what people might think about you is more important than anything in raising a large family .

N.B.Bigger stable families of married parents are the secret of increasing Australia’s birth rate..

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Immigration.

Perhaps if we can’t succeed in raising the natural birth rate and we need to fall back on **immigration we should look to a returning to a policy of higher FAMILIAL immigration and from people who will HAVE bigger families and are culturally well attuned to our way of life .** This is the case in the US where the Latinos virtually carry the birth rate . The cultural implications are obvious . But we should n’t be afraid of that.. **But my suggestion is that whatever their ethnic background we should award EXTRA points to families who meet the criteria AND already have three or more children . I believe New Zealand does something like this**

But above all We need a cultural climate that is pro family and pro child, where fertility is regarded as precious and as a naturally good thing rather than naturally inhibiting . **Above all we need cultural reform , values based reform of education and reform of child welfare services (which are a disgrace).** Above all we have to realize that we can’t bribe people to have children , we can only create a climate which makes it a ‘good’ thing to do . **We have to recognize that the people that we most want to reproduce , are afraid . They are acutely aware of the dangers to children from an anti- child culture.** I know from 28 years at the parenting coal face the fear of the cultural milieu. It is a fear is justified Drugs, violence and pornography in the popular media and on the internet need to be tackled. I only know one family that hasn’t been touched by this stuff- and it isn’t mine.

The situation is illustrated by a conversation I had recently with a friend of mine who is French. After telling me about all the wonderful economic provisions that are in place for families in France , where if I moved with even half my kids I’d be paying no tax and have a substantial allowance at the end of every month , asked her ‘well Camille why do you only have two “ Ah” she said “because Angela , you have to bring them up.”