

EUROPE'S FAMILY TOMES

by Andrea Mrozek

What encourages good family life? Good social programs? Perhaps a nearby daycare centre? These are just some questions Europe and Canada are asking because of low fertility rates. For industrialized nations the replacement fertility rate is 2.1 births per woman, in Canada it is 1.5. Governments tend to look for solutions within themselves. But if demographic decline goes hand-in-hand with economic decline, then new state-run measures – daycare centres and other assorted programs – may be the cause, not the solution, of dwindling populations.

France, Ireland and the United States are among the very few Western countries to achieve a replacement fertility rate – each having enough babies to maintain population levels. How they do so differs – France offers extended maternity leaves and daycare (they also have immigration from countries with high fertility rates); the other two have lower taxes and fewer social programs. What causes a country to have slightly more robust fertility rates, in the West at least, remains somewhat of a mystery.

This didn't stop *Der Spiegel*, a trendy German magazine, from examining family policy for a cover story and concluding the fatherland's dwindling fertility rate of 1.3 is the result of government money – spent in the wrong places. The German state is spending on traditional families, which, the authors assert, no longer exist. If Berlin would only re-direct government funds to single parents and dual-income families – ensuring moms can work – well, then perhaps Germans would have more kids and avoid a demographic implosion and the corresponding economic slowdown.

Der Spiegel might be right about Germany's traditional family disappearing. Marriage rates are fairly low. Still, it is inaccurate to argue that non-traditional unions have picked up the slack. The article's title, "The gold-plated cage: How the state keeps women away from their careers – and in spite of this, no more children are born," sums up the bias. The thesis: When women are free to work and do what they really want they will have more children. This includes freedom from the cage of stay-at-home motherhood. The secret is to offer generous social services, lots of daycare and no stigma – women will have more kids provided they can also work – whether that be behind the counter at a restaurant, in an assembly line, or in the executive suite of the office tower. Forget Ireland and America, freedom in mainland Europe is state-funded.

Freedom is important to childrearing. Russia and the countries once under Moscow's Communist rule in Eastern Europe have some of the lowest birth rates around. "Freedom" there means the abortion rate is higher than live births. Yet most mothers tell public-opinion pollsters they would like to have more chil-

dren – not fewer. *Der Spiegel* skips over the inconvenient argument that high taxes limit freedom and instead concludes more government funding is what is needed. But if this is true, why hasn't it worked so far?

The German state is über-involved in families and has been for quite some time. Germany already spends more on family benefits and daycare than the average Western nation—three per cent of GDP (above the OECD average of 2.4) on family benefits and over one per cent of GDP on daycare and pre-schools, again, above the OECD average of 0.8 per cent. They are about to spend more. The new family minister, Ursula von der Leyen, wants to create 500,000 daycare spaces by the year 2013. If enacted, this means that one of every three German babies will have their own taxpayer-funded bassinette.

Columnist Mark Steyn has recently written extensively about demographics in *America Alone*, his bestselling book. His concern is that Western nations are failing to reproduce, which is in stark contrast to Islamic nations. He notes, "One should be cautious seeking correlations between social structures and fertility rates. They're falling around the world and no expert knows how to reverse them."

Actually, *everyone* knows how to reverse them – the birds and the bees are not the substance of expert panels. But Steyn did not intend to address the "whys" of depopulation in the West. Others are not so circumspect. The Madrid-based Institute for Family Policies, a new think tank dedicated to tackling family issues in Spain, says that "[e]ach day in Europe, 2,880 children are not born, representing 120 terminations per hour." One in every six pregnancies in Europe ends in abortion, which can be better contextualized, when one considers that "[e]ach day in Europe, two schools are closed due to insufficient numbers of children."

So what does increase family size, strength and freedom? It's fair to say we have few solid answers, especially when it comes to tax policy and government funding. We should avoid sweeping generalizations on the whys of population decline. But as Canadians we should also avoid turning to Europe as an example. Right now Germany, like most of Europe, is spending money like water via its bureaucratic taps – if funding creates freedom and fertility, they should have it in spades. Instead, the state is radically involved in individuals' lives and the very highest fertility rate continental Europe sees is merely replacement level – most countries are well below that. But credit where it is due: At least Germany is discussing its population decline. The same can hardly be said of Ottawa.