

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage.



Learning from Sweden and New Zealand

Jonas Himmelstrand, author and consultant from Sweden and Greg Fleming, CEO of New Zealand's Maxim Institute share insight from the experience of family policy changes in their countries.

AN INTERVIEW WITH JONAS HIMMELSTRAND, author and consultant in business for over 25 years, focusing on leadership, education and personal development. He is the founder of the Mireja Institute, which focuses on close relationships as the key to building welfare, development and democracy and author of *Following Your Heart in the Social Utopia of Sweden* (2007).

What is your main area of interest/research with regards to families in Sweden?

Human potential development in family and business is my main interest. I have worked as a consultant with management training in Sweden for 30 years with a focus on human resource development. My experience is that Sweden's culture impedes human growth to some degree, and not only in family. I used to wonder why. About ten years ago I became interested in the high levels of sick leave, the deteriorating psychological health among youth, and the frustrations about a lack of choice in child care. How could this happen in wealthy and socially well-organized Sweden? This became the start of a personal research project and in 2007 I published a book on the subject. A clear theme that emerged was that Swedish family policies, encouraging early separation between child and parent, seemed to play a bigger part in the problems than I had first anticipated. Using health models, humanistic and developmental psychology, attachment theory, neurobiology and social psychology, together with years of experience in working with personal development in my consultancy, this created a pretty clear picture.

In Canada, we hear only positive things about Swedish family policy. We hear about universal, safe daycares and high percentages of women working for pay. Sweden is often cited, particularly when it comes to daycare, as a model to imitate. Why do we hear so many positive things about Sweden?

Well, some of it is true. But there's more to the story, and some of the good things hide bad things. It is true that Sweden has a comprehensive, expensive, daycare scheme starting at age one, at a very low cost to parents. It is true that a high percentage of Swedish women are employed outside the home. It is true that Sweden has a high standard of living, low child poverty, high life expectancy, low infant mortality, high spending on education, practically free medical care and an admirable focus on gender equality and social welfare. Putting these facts together Sweden may sound like a social paradise, and our government enjoys presenting this image both to Swedes and to the world. Therefore it is easy for any nation to idealize Sweden.

But this positive image of Sweden does not include the outcomes after 40 years of these family policies. In addition, some of the facts are out of date. For instance, the quality of Swedish daycare was high 25 years ago. But after decades of political budget cuts, the quality of Swedish daycare has deteriorated. Today the quality is being questioned, both by Swedish experts and by the OECD.

Is this happy impression the reality of the situation in Sweden?

No, Sweden has definite social challenges which can be linked to its family policies. Official Swedish studies show without a doubt that the psychological health of our youth is plummeting at a faster rate than any of eleven comparable European countries. A medical study shows that the first generation of Swedish women working and having children at the same time show high levels of long term sick leave and of early retirement. Educational outcomes have dropped from a global top position 25 years ago to an average position today, and well below Canada according to the latest PISA report. Levels of tardiness, truancy, disorder and bad language in Swedish schools are high by European comparison, according to TIMSS 2003. Swedish parental abilities are deteriorating, even in well-to-do middle class families, according to an EU-sponsored study. It is a reasonable argument that Swedish family policies, at least to some degree, are the cause of these problems. Through these policies the state has replaced the family to a not insignificant degree. This interferes with close emotional relationships within the family.

What are some of the lesser known drawbacks?

Certainly the outcomes just mentioned are some of these drawbacks. Also Swedish families lack choices in child care because of high taxes starting at low income levels, and the restrictive family policies focusing on daycare. Swedish family policies are based on a political ideology which strongly argues that the basis for a happy society is daycare for children, paid work for parents and a rather extreme form of gender equality. A majority of Swedes, on the other hand, say in study after study that they want the possibility of home care at least until the child is three to four years old. There is a kind of family-phobia in Swedish politics on both sides of the political spectrum. Families are seen as being too old-fashioned and not entirely trustworthy in childrearing. In summary, looking at the outcomes for children, family and society, no nation should try and emulate the Swedish family model before it has been subjected to a thorough multi-disciplinary research.

AN INTERVIEW WITH GREG FLEMING, Chief Executive Officer of the Maxim Institute, a public policy think tank with a mission to foster ideas and leadership that enable freedom, justice and compassion to flourish in New Zealand

How has legislation affected New Zealand family life in recent years?

For good and for bad, we New Zealanders tend to think of ourselves as innovative and at the forefront of social change. We are proud of being trendsetters. When it comes to family life, this has meant some significant law changes have been forged in recent years. I would argue that whilst the contentious changes – such as the decriminalising of prostitution in 2003 and the banning of spanking as a form of child discipline in 2007- have dominated the headlines, the more significant changes have often slipped beneath the radar.

For example the Property Relationships Amendment Act of 2001 treated de facto relationship break ups the same as marriage dissolutions. Like many law changes, it was trying to address some practical challenges, but in the process it further encouraged the view of marriage as just one relationship choice amongst many. We have seen many similar changes, particularly in welfare policy and family law, which now all too often tend to undermine, rather than support, the family unit.

The pragmatic decisions we make in forming legislation will always have deeper origins and broader consequences than we tend to realise. These laws find their genesis in the culture and the ideas that we build over time.

I would argue that core to a lot of recent legislative changes in New Zealand, is the notion of the free and isolated individual as the basic unit of society. Family is often seen as subservient or incidental to the individual. This view of people has filtered its way through our culture and now shapes a lot of the ideas that become law in our country.

Canada is currently considering some policy changes that New Zealand has already undertaken, for example, the decriminalisation of prostitution. What advice would you as a New Zealander give on this matter?

Although difficult to concretely measure, anecdotal evidence indicates that prostitution – and the challenges associated with – has increased rather than decreased since its decriminalisation. New Zealand’s model of law change effectively handed the problem of regulation from the Central to Local government and there the headaches are numerous including, prevalence of street workers and zoning of residential brothels.

Like all such law changes the majority of the proponents were well intended. They believed that allowing woman to freely make the choice of prostitution was the best way to assist them. But in that approach were two significant assumptions. Firstly, that the women involved were genuinely making a free choice; and second, the exercise of that choice would have no wider consequences – on others or on society.

I argued at the time, and still do, that both those assumptions were flawed. Research is clear that for well over 90% of women it is precisely a lack of choices and support that drives them to prostitution; and that the consequences are considerable both on the woman, the buyer and on the community.

When a society decriminalises something it is in effect saying that it no longer considers that activity to be problematic. Sex is officially just another commodity to be traded and there are no consequences attached. Such a move is consistent with what I previously observed regarding the elevation of self and choice above all other considerations. The truth however is that private decisions do have public and cultural consequences.

And we’re not always in such denial. Ironically this has all occurred at the same time that tobacco smoking has been very effectively hammered through continual legislative, policy and taxation changes. As one commentator observed, “it’s now ok to buy sex, you just can’t smoke afterwards.”

I would add that the problems with the sex industry aren’t solved simply by resisting legislative changes, any more than they are solved by decriminalisation or legalisation. Whenever law is offered as a thin solution to a real social problem, the challenge for those of us resisting the law is to also find ways to offer other forms of hope in the debate. This is easier said than done, but it is an important road to walk.

Is there anything that makes you optimistic about the future of family life in New Zealand?

I am excited to see New Zealanders talking again—often quietly at this stage—about family as a source of hope. With evidence of social decay seeming to confront us all the time, there is a growing recognition that strong, functional families are crucial for a healthy society. Interestingly it is our native Maori people who know this well, and who are pushing for it to be recognised in the policy directions the country takes. They know, far better than the present dominant culture that “no man is an island.” They have signalled that we need to follow policy directions where families and communities are strengthened. Their leadership in this field may prove to be our best hope as they, as the people of the land, are most able to speak counter-culturally.