

How to support strong families

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"It is scarcely necessary to cite authority for the importance of the family in Canadian law," wrote Beverley McLachlin, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, in a case where the court declined to empower state interference in the specific working of the family, as it related to disciplining children. She then proceeded to cite several, somewhat undermining those of us who feel the courts haven't done much for the family lately.

But then, what exactly has the government done for families recently? If the family is the building block of the nation, you'd think at the very least that the tax system would encourage it, rather than impose a financial penalty.

According to Statistics Canada, it could use some help. If not quite falling off a cliff, more than half of the 26 million Canadians over 15 are not married, living common law, or have ever tried either.

Granted, one would not expect many people in junior high to be married, but even if you remove the teenagers, there are still millions of people living in the single state. Twenty years ago, only 38 per cent of Canadians were single.

It takes more than tax policy to force that kind of a societal shift. Take your pick of possible drivers from among the following:

Science fiction writers of 20 years ago speculated about a generation that could relate through computers, but not face to face; today, there are people like that.

Others are single because they live with parents: And, it's no bad thing if an adult daughter lives at home until she's married. (Or maybe it is: what man with unmarried daughters has not beheld Jane Austen's Mr. Bennett, and shuddered?) Anyway, rent's tough.

And, for the lucky, talented and beautiful -- the essential demographics for a Jennifer Aniston film -- life's too much fun. If you were 28, could afford to live downtown, drive a Porsche, eat out five times a week, were supported by one's urban tribe through life's little crises, and sex was easy to come by -- what exactly would push you towards suburbs, a minivan, commitment, domestic drudgery, and in due course the four kilograms of mewling flesh that vaguely resembles you, except it is even more self-centred?

"Love?" says she, whose body clock is ticking. "Can't we just love each other on sleepovers?" he responds, who thinks it can be like this when he's 56.

And there are those who, having seen their parents' lives ruined by divorce, want to make very sure -- sometimes too sure, for nobody is perfect -- and the moment slips away.

As so many newspaper headlines have proclaimed -- curiously, not without an element of triumphalism, as though the individual's growing isolation in society were a kind of empowerment -- it ain't the 1950s.

So yes, factors other than tax policy are at work.

But let's say two kids in their early 20s have decided to give it a go. (To my unscientific observation, that generation seems more optimistic about marriage than folks 10 years older.)

When they sit down to plan, they find unless they're willing to start off with what their parents started with -- and who these days imagines married life as a 10-year old car and a rented apartment above a corner store? -- getting married and starting a family are not projects for the same decade.

Now, one might suggest they temper their expectations. Good luck. What they actually do is defer having families until they've bought and furnished the house, and starting later, have fewer children. That is, fewer of the people who they're counting on to pay their pensions later, and so forth.

So far, the Tories have made a few moves in the right direction, with an increased child tax credit and most notably in establishing the \$100/month per child to mothers of young children, in lieu of child care.

These are baby steps, however -- so to speak.

Ottawa isn't going to change the culture overnight, but if it wants to send the signal that it's really backing families, here's a couple of suggestions.

According to Dave Quist at the Institute for Marriage and Family Canada, an Ottawa-based research group linked to Focus on the Family, what parents really want is the option that one of them can be a full-time caregiver.

Income-splitting would make a huge difference. That is, an end to the situation whereby a two-person family with a single income pays more tax than a two-person family with the same household income from two wage packets. Depending on the size of the incomes, this can mount up: If the families compared each had two children, and Calgary's 2005 median household income of \$77,000, the spread is \$5,500.

Pensioners are getting it; all Canadians in marriages, or marriage-like relationships, should get it.

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This may not, alone, reverse the trend StatsCan has recorded. But if the Conservative government values strong families -- and surely it does so no less than a Supreme Court dominated by Liberal appointees -- it would give them a push in the right direction. Wouldn't it?

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