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New meaning to 'nanny state'

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When an 88-year-old grandmother was busted for trafficking cocaine, late night comedian Jay Leno asked the age-old question: Where were the parents? Sure, it's funny when the culprit is so advanced in years, but it's a question posed often enough in serious moments, too. In recent decades, Canadian public policy has made it more difficult for parents to be responsible for their families.

It begins with the micro-management of the legal status of our households. More Canadians are foregoing marriage, or at least testing the relationship waters by living together first. But cohabit for two or three years and, depending on the province, the state will legally commit you in ways you may not have chosen. Just try leaving. You could find yourself on the hook for assets, including real estate.

But, paradoxically, for those who do go through with a real marriage, the introduction of no-fault divorce in 1968 means it is easy to end the commitment. No-fault divorce made it simple for one spouse to give up on their vows when the going gets tough (or a better-looking/higher-earning/ less-nagging partner appears on the scene).

The result has been a fivefold spike in the divorce rate. The courts are now filled with family-law cases, helping ex-spouses and lawyers sort through the minutiae of domestic life. Courts pick through the unsavoury business of marital breakdown, deciding who gets what, including the children themselves.

Speaking of children, when it comes to their safety, there isn't much the government won't regulate. From secondhand smoke in cars, to the plastics in toys, to the design of playground equipment, no sandbox is left unturned in a quest to protect our kids.

Yet at the same time, high tax rates make it nearly impossible for one parent to stay home and care for their families. But children don't raise themselves. This has led some to call for national state-run daycare programs -- adding a new, more literal meaning to the words "nanny state."

Since successive federal governments have failed to implement national daycare, the push for institutional care for toddlers has gone provincial. In Ontario, draft plans given to Premier Dalton McGuinty in June 2009 included a recommendation for the Ministry of Education to establish an "Early Years Division" to create programs for kids age "zero through eight."

The vision? A seamless day of state-provided care, including care before and after work. Under the proposal, some three-year olds would log longer hours in school than many grown-ups do at work, healthy lunch and snacks included. All at taxpayer expense, of course.

The reality is that parents aren't clamouring for such sweeping childcare visions. When the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada did a poll in 2006, parents chose institutional care as the least desirable child-care option for their youngest boys and girls. This result echoed existing research.

Often, when it comes to raising kids, daycare and schooling, we hear talk from qualified experts and smart people with degrees -- as if parents aren't quite up to snuff. Today's smaller families mean we seldom learn from parents or grandparents who successfully raised large broods, so it's easy to assume the experts have a better handle on our kids.

But it's gone too far. The public school curriculum is now devised largely without parental input, yet attempts to usurp some of the most important family responsibilities, including teaching ethics, values and sex education. On that front, studies suggest that parents are still the number-one influence in teen sexual decision making. Good news perhaps, since but for rare cases, teachers aren't exactly jumping over couches in staff rooms to grab the sex ed curriculum.

Checking government web-sites -- Service Canada, for example -- reveals links to help you with "having a baby" and "getting divorced," among other deeply personal life events. Young Canadians may think this is normal, without realizing the sharp turn this represents from past decades when families were able to earn a wage, keep it, and raise their kids as they saw fit.

So where are the parents? After examining the landscape of family policy in Canada, one might be forced to conclude they up and moved to Ottawa.

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