

BUILDING A HEALTHY NATION:

POLICIES TO ENCOURAGE STRONG MARRIAGES AND STABLE FAMILIES

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The family in Canada has undergone a dramatic transformation in the last 35 years, with major consequences for society. In the early 1960s over 90 per cent of children were born to parents who were married for the first time and who had not cohabited - with anyone - prior to marriage. Most of these children could expect to survive their teen years with both their mom and dad in the home. How times have changed! These days, fewer than 40 per cent of children can expect to be born to married parents who have not cohabited before marriage.¹ And since 1981, the number of children between the ages of zero and 14 who live with common-law parents has more than quadrupled!² What has happened in the span of one generation?

Family Erosion

The divorce revolution has failed to deliver on its promise of greater happiness. The long-awaited reduction in dysfunctional families has never come. Instead, divorce has wreaked havoc on our children and has left many adults disillusioned.³ The trend towards unwed childbearing has not resulted in greater freedom or equality. Instead, unwed mothers are more likely to live in poverty and hold low paying jobs.⁴ Cohabitation has not turned out to be a good way to prepare for marriage or to avoid divorce, either. On the contrary, "living together" increases the risk of divorce once the decision to marry has been made, and increases the risk of domestic violence as well.⁵ Furthermore, Statistics Canada reports that women who chose to live common-law in their first union were twice as likely to separate as those who chose marriage as their first union.⁶ The marriage license has proven to be much more than just a piece of paper.

That said, the once rock-solid institution of traditional marriage has lately been weakened dramatically. Today 38 per cent of marriages are expected to end in divorce before the thirtieth wedding anniversary. Furthermore, of the divorces in Canada in 2003, the number of husbands who had been previously divorced has tripled since 1971 (16.2 per cent vs. 5.4 per cent).⁷ In the Canadian Census (2001) only 68 per cent of children between the age of zero and 14 lived in homes with married parents (not even taking into consideration whether their parents had previously cohabited).⁸ A 2003 study by Statistics Canada indicates that these statistics will likely increase. In this study, when asked whether they would agree to live common-law at some point in their lives, 74 per cent of men and 64 per cent of women between the ages of 15 and 29 thought they would.⁹ Marriage, for many, has become merely an option—and a

very temporary one at that.

Costs of Family Erosion

It continues to be argued that this is just the innocuous and inevitable evolution of family relationships and consequently not a major concern. But the empirical evidence is clear: family breakdown rarely benefits the adults involved, it victimizes our children and is a crisis for Canadian society as a whole. Policy-makers who ignore this reality place the very social fabric of our nation in danger.

As the authors of the Marriage Movement state, "Whether an individual ever personally marries or not, a healthy marriage culture benefits every citizen.... Marriage is a universal human institution, the way in which every known society conspires to obtain for each child the love, attention, and resources of a mother and a father."¹⁰

Society

Governments around the world are waking up to the fact that promoting marriage and strengthening families is much more than religious moralising—it is good public policy. Consider the example of the country of Latvia which had fallen into a “demographic catastrophe” despite its robust economy. [See page 8 for further details.] The Latvian population is falling quickly and 61 per cent of marriages in that country end in divorce. Latvian Member of Parliament Inese Slesere makes it clear just how important family policy is to building a healthy nation:

As Latvian policy-makers confronted these grim realities, we candidly acknowledged that more than ordinary measures would be needed to secure the survival of our nation. We realized that all Latvians must unite in returning to the old and sacred values of traditional families, the values implicit in the culture of love. Today we as Latvians understand that unless we support the family with strong and integrated policies and with appropriate financial investments, we will find it hard (perhaps impossible) to reverse the country’s demographic slide and to build a strong nation.¹¹

Also, consider the example of former Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating, who asked the State Chamber of Commerce and the two state universities to provide a report on what was holding back the state’s economy. The report he received predictably implicated regulatory and taxation issues, but it also identified high levels of divorce among parents with children and out-of-wedlock births as being obstacles to economic growth.¹²

The Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee of the Australian parliament reported that the direct cost to Australian taxpayers from family and marriage breakdown is at least three billion dollars per year. In the United Kingdom family breakdown is estimated to directly cost taxpayers between five and 15 billion British pounds.¹³

Stats & Facts

- Among Canadian-born adults aged 20 to 44, more than 80 per cent of those from two-parent biological families completed high school, compared with 71 per cent of those from lone-parent families. Those who lived in blended or step-parent families at age 15 fared no better, with a 70 per cent graduation rate.¹⁷
- Canadian high school graduates from two-parent families were more likely to attend university than those from single parent-families (44 per cent v. 35 per cent).¹⁸
- Reflecting the greater stress, children from single-parent families are roughly twice as likely to receive special education as children from two-parent families.¹⁹
- Not only do children whose parents were divorced put off marriage relative to children from intact families, but once married they are more likely to suffer separation or divorce.²⁰
- Canadians living in lone-parent families are almost seven times more likely to live with low income continuously [four consecutive years] than the overall population.²²
- Four percent of [men and women] living in common-law unions reported spousal violence compared to only one per cent of those who were married.²³
- The rate of spousal homicide for women in common law marriages was 25 per million common-law unions, more than eight times higher than married couples.²⁴

Adjusting for population and currency, that translates into approximately 4.8 to 15.3 billion dollars in direct costs to Canadian taxpayers stemming from family breakdown.¹⁴

Children

If good economics are not a sufficient incentive for policymakers to act, then the personal and emotional trauma that family breakdown causes children and adults should be.¹⁵ The research is clear: the breakdown of the family and the weakening of the institution of marriage comes with a very dramatic cost to Canadian society. The impact on children is devastating.

As opposed to children who are born to parents that are not married, or who are affected by separation and divorce, children who are raised in healthy families with a father and mother are more likely to experience:

- + better new-born health,
- + faster cognitive and verbal development,
- + higher educational achievement,
- + higher levels of job attainment,
- + fewer behavioural and emotional problems,
- + decreased dependency on welfare,
- + better financial well-being,
- + decreased exposure to crime,
- + a smaller risk of being sexually abused, and
- + less probability of having marital problems of their own.¹⁶

In April 2004, the federal government released its latest children’s agenda, *A Canada Fit for Children*. While it referenced the importance of families, it stayed completely clear of encouraging healthy family structures. Children who are raised in a home with a married mother and father are by far the most advantaged when compared to children in other family situations. Thus, in the best interests of children, everything possible should be done to encourage this situation.

Adults

The benefits of a healthy family for adults are very encouraging. Parents who are divorced, single or living common-law do not share the many positive outcomes that married people do. Married couples benefit in that they:

- + have better physical health,
- + have a higher life expectancy,
- + are happier,
- + have fewer mental and emotional health problems,
- + are better off financially,
- + have more satisfying sex lives,
- + have more stable relationships, and
- + experience less domestic violence.²¹

Hope for Families

While the trends are disheartening, there is evidence that Canadians are beginning to evaluate the impact this past generation of changes has had upon the national fabric. Although Canadian

society has suffered the consequences of family breakdown, we still care deeply for the institution of the family and long for successful marriages that last. The Vanier Institute of the Family performed *A Survey of Canadian Hopes and Dreams* and determined that 97 per cent of Canadians say the family is essential to personal well-being and 95 per cent believe that the family is essential to a healthy nation. In 1967, Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson said “the strengthening of family life in Canada [is] the basis on which our nation’s moral strength and vitality depend.” In the same Vanier Institute survey, 94 per cent of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the former Prime Minister’s statement.²⁵ Canadians long for stable, intact families. We cannot expect governments alone to solve the problems of family and marital breakdown. The same message of restoring healthy families must be heard from our business leaders, our religious communities and our civic associations. However, governments do have a major role to play. It will take the efforts of all corners of society to once again restore a culture that supports and cherishes marriage, and government must play a vital role. The enormity of the task should not be an excuse for inaction.

The Policies

The following are the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada’s recommendations for policies and initiatives that governments could put in place to halt—and even reverse—current negative trends for the family:

1. **Set objectives:** On a wall of the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa a visitor can read the following inscription: “Where there is no vision the people perish.” Governments continuously set goals for all kinds of economic and social initiatives. But they have been reluctant to set goals for strong marriages and two-parent families, even though the evidence of their social value is overwhelming. This is an area where governments can and should provide more leadership.

2. **Collect accurate data on marriage and families:** In Canada we fail to collect adequate data on marriages and families. We know very little about the people who get married or divorced, the family settings children are growing up in, the

characteristics common among strong families or the impact of marital status on domestic violence or poverty. These are important facts that must be known if we are to make wise public policy choices. Governments need to produce regular reports combining all the current data on family matters and redirect research funding into projects that examine marriage and family.

3. **Clearly define marriage in the Canadian Constitution as between one man and one woman, to the exclusion of all others:** Previous to the passing of the Civil Marriage Act there was no formal legislation defining marriage

IMFC Policy Recommendations

1. Set objectives
2. Collect accurate data on marriage and families
3. Clearly define marriage in the Canadian Constitution
4. Reform divorce laws
5. Introduce family impact legislation
6. Promote family-friendly taxation
7. Promote family and marriage education
8. Enforce child support
9. Confirm the role of parents/protection of family interests

in Canada. Although marriage was clearly understood by the vast majority of Canadian society and was firmly entrenched in our common-law history, this was clearly not enough to protect the institution of marriage. Canadian courts were more than willing to erase centuries of common-law history in the name of political correctness. Canadians should be given the opportunity to restore marriage and enshrine it in our constitution. This would signal that the historical understanding of marriage is foundational to our society and even activist judges should not be allowed to tamper with it.

4. **Reform divorce laws:** Since 1986 Canada has allowed “unilateral no-fault divorce” which permits a husband or wife to end a marriage after one year separation for absolutely no reason. Marriage is the most important relationship two people will ever enter into, yet a business contract has more legal protection. Divorce laws should be reformed to indicate the importance society places on marriage. Divorce should be more difficult to obtain, especially when contested or when children are involved. When contested, the waiting period should be longer, providing a greater opportunity for reconciliation. Parents who wish to end

their marriage should be fully informed of the impact their decision will have on their children; if they still choose divorce, they should receive instruction on how to minimize the impact.

5. **Introduce family impact legislation:** Whether through design or ignorance, laws that deal with very specific problems or issues sometimes have detrimental impacts on the family. Every policy proposal should therefore take into consideration the potential negative effects in that regard. By making family issues a central concern in the development of new policies, policy-makers would be forced to consider

beforehand the detrimental effects their policies might have.

6. **Promote family-friendly taxation:** Our tax system should at least be neutral on family matters, if not weighted in favour of the most stable family structure. This is not currently the case in Canada. For example, in 2005 a one-income family of four, earning \$60,000, pays over twice as much federal income tax than a two-income family earning the same amount.²⁶ Parents who decide that one of them should stay home to raise their children should not be penalized. Fair and family-friendly tax reform has tremendous popular support among Canadians.²⁷

7. **Promote family and marriage education:** It is a tragic irony that we teach sex education in schools, but little if anything is taught about marriage and family. Fortunately some governments are starting to recognize the need – and are doing something about it. Florida has passed the Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act that requires a “marriage and relationships course” for high school students. The state also reduces the cost of a marriage license for couples who take an approved marriage-preparation course. As a positive development, similar legislation has also

been passed in the province of Ontario.

8. Enforce child support: In Canada, one of the strongest indices of poverty is the category of single women with children. In almost all instances, children are a result of consenting relationships. If one parent chooses not to live up to his or her responsibilities, then society must act on behalf of the child. It should be clear that once someone has a child, parenting is no longer optional. The British government has set out a plan to improve its child support system. It aims to ensure that support is collected, children benefit from greater enforcement, non-custodial parents have greater access to their children, and taxpayers are not forced to pay for absent parents.

9. Confirm the role of parents/ protection of family interests: In Canada we have seen the encroachment of governments and courts upon the role of parents in caring for their children as they see fit. Governments need to recognize that they are a poor substitute for parents and should not interfere in normal family life. Child neglect and abuse laws should be vigorously enforced, but the state should not superintend the parenting process. If parents are expected to be responsible for their children's behaviour, then they must be empowered to choose how their children will be raised. Governments should support parents, not replace them.

Conclusion

These are policies that can help strengthen marriages and families. They are policies that encourage families as they fulfill their vital roles in society; policies that recognize marriage as a unique relationship that cannot be replaced by a government program.

Troubled marriages in turn create troubled families, but government must reach out to help people in those situations while not supplanting the societal role played by families. As many single parents and the children of divorce will attest, overall, marriage is by far the best relationship for adults and the best environment for raising children.

Strong families built on stable marriages are the foundation of a productive and

vibrant society. If, as Canadians, we truly want to implement a "Children's Agenda" then we must pursue a "Marriage

Agenda." If our aim is the "best interests of children" then the "best interests of families" must be our priority. 

ENDNOTES

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