

Chapter Two

FATHERS, FAMILIES, FUTURES: A POPULATION PERSPECTIVE*

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THE LEGACY OF LAURIE O'REILLY

This paper has in part been inspired by the work of Laurie O'Reilly and all that he stood for, and more importantly, to our nation's children for whom he was an eloquent advocate.

We will argue for his crusade to be continued and extended, not by imitating him, but by applying a demographic analysis to the issues for which he was campaigning, along with some thoughts on their broad policy implications. The paper will summarise some of what we know about these issues as they are demonstrated by research we are doing at our Centre on the New Zealand family and on national population trends overall. We also draw on research and experience outside New Zealand, in Africa, Canada and Europe or on that which is in the international comparative and historical literature.

The analysis here is based around two underlying assumptions which were ideals central to the O'Reilly ethos. We summarise his two key principles as follows:

Ideal Number One: That an investment in children is the best investment the society can make. Instead we have devoted our investment strategies to short-term, ephemeral, insecure financial goals, to the detriment of our human resources, and thus, in the longer run to the detriment of our national wealth and security. But human resources cannot be destroyed as simply; of course we need investment in development, but an essential element of this is to invest in *knowledge*, in *skills* and in a *healthy* society.

Given the Code of Social Responsibility, which post-dates Laurie O'Reilly's death, it is essential to note that we must clarify this ideal by stressing that investment in children, and in human resources in general, is a communal or society-wide responsibility; families must be supported in meeting their contribution to ensuring societal maintenance and development so that they do not find themselves stretched beyond the

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limits of their caring capacities. Moreover, this investment in the skill base and training of each new generation can not stop when our children reach 16 years because inter-generational dependencies extend far beyond this age. For society to survive and prosper this investment must go on until they are well into their early adult years.

Ideal Number Two: That the family must play a key role in designing and shaping human resource investment, and, that in order to perform this role efficiently, ideally it must be a “complete” family — two parents and multi-generational.

The central point in this paper is to ask whether the family of today is equipped to carry out this role, and if not, whether it is because of endogenous reasons that the family is frequently not complete; or because of exogenous factors, that society has limited the family’s capacities to meet its responsibilities. Here we must sound a warning that there are powerful groups in the society who are reversing O’Reilly’s logic by pointing an accusing finger at changes in family structures and family values as the prime causal agents for what they perceive to be symptoms of the breakdown or at least dysfunction of western society. In assigning blame to the family for society’s alleged moral and fiscal decay -- yes even fiscal decay produced so it is argued by the profligacy of the unemployed, the poor and the teenage mother -- they point in particular to two groups: the sole mother, and the absent father (which, as we would say in statistics, are two highly inter-correlated variables). Sole mothers, particularly the young ones, that is the poorest of the poor, are the target of many of the leading questions we are asked to respond to in the Code of Responsibility.

As far as the absent father is concerned, if he has abandoned his family capriciously we can invest no sympathy in him, and even fewer excuses. But we must recognise that many absent fathers may be the saddest of all men who, in the face of unemployment and grinding poverty, have crumpled under the intolerable burden of meeting the role that society expects of them, to be the family breadwinner.

At a more general level, some of the perceived dysfunctions of the family, making it apparently incomplete, are in reality the consequence of inexorable *demographic forces*, while others reflect rather more *shifts in value systems* than true social breakdown. Moreover, the critics of current family structures must also ask whether the ideal of the complete family ever existed for a minority, perhaps even the majority, of families.

FEARS ABOUT THE FAMILY: A DEMOGRAPHIC INSIGHT

In looking at family structures and functions, it is clear that demographic trends of such aspects of family formation as total family size, age at marriage or the prevalence of divorce are changing. To assimilate such changes however, with the overall demise of the family as a fundamental structural unit of our society, overlooks other factors which help to broaden the picture both about the causes and consequences of family change. In addressing the significance of these changes for the well-being of children and their families, we need to be aware of four things:

- Firstly, that they have often been used as leverage to achieve a very different agenda: a goal of market libertarianism involving the erosion or elimination of formally organised society-wide mechanisms, above all those developed, financed, regulated and implemented by the state. In the place of these mechanisms, the family and individual come to the front as being the main agents responsible for the provision of well-being. We must also be aware that an intermediate step is to shift the responsibility for health, education and like functions to local communities, without necessarily ensuring them the adequate resources necessary to meet these obligations.
- Secondly, we are aware of the fact that our concerns as demographers about deep-seated, but underlying and latent changes — say the long term consequences for the society of sub-replacement fertility of the level they have in Catholic Mediterranean Europe (ie < 1.5 children per couple) — are not being translated into panics about short-term seemingly more manifest high profile concerns (eg the apparently low proportion of households which are two-parent, something which is really a function of shifts in the demographic factor of timing of first births, from the early-starting model to delayed-starting, and which is not necessarily related to low sub-replacement completed family size).
- Thirdly, we recognise that contemporary fears and problems may not be unique either to New Zealand, nor to this period in history. Nicholas Lazard, the reviewer in the *Guardian Weekly* addresses this point brilliantly

“A falling birthrate, a decline in the institution of marriage. The 1960's (boo, hiss)? No the 1890's and earlier. Looks like the rot set in earlier than we thought.” Nicholas Lazard *Guardian*, May 22 1996

- Fourthly, we also realise that, whether as growing children, adults or elders, we are creatures of our generation's experiences, of our birth cohort's life progress. Today it is possible, perhaps more readily than ever before, for us to change our social status, domicile or marital status; from census to census, we can even change our ethnic identity. But the year during which we were born - our birth cohort - remains with us as a life-long identity. With it, come the experiences each cohort has been through and thus the values it has accumulated. Likewise we do not live without belonging to some sort of inter-generational network, which assigns us a place along with younger and older cohorts. In this context, we must realise that the decision makers of today were the middle or late baby-boom parents, having their children between say 1960 and 1974. Their parenting generation was the most aberrant in Pakeha history since about the 1880s. The parents of the baby-boomers, especially those having children between 1968 and 1974 achieved peak rates of teenage fertility, had high levels of pre-marital conception, and often jumped precipitately into marriage at very young ages, thereby legitimising their offspring's birth, but entering unions which had a significant propensity to come unstuck. In

short, for those of us belonging to these generations, our parenting record may not be a good model by which to judge today's young parents.

FATHERS

One of the more interesting evening sights in Jamestown in Accra, Ghana, a central city quarter which had enveloped a traditional Ga tribal community, was the young children running down the street with a cooking pot on their head, which they were taking from their mother's compound to their father's. Kwame Nkrumah erected a statue to his mother yet had virtually nothing to do with the child-rearing of his son until the son returned from Boston Childrens' Hospital as a consultant paediatrician. In our own society, Victorian fathers may have been present but were often very remote, and their main role was as an authoritarian figure. Many pioneer women faced a prolonged period as a sole parent, as a young widow with children, today a very minor marital status category, but until the Second World War a not uncommon status. In fact, throughout history fathers were often absent for very prolonged periods, sometimes sending back remittances for the family, sometimes throwing them onto seeking support from charity. We often forget that some of us had fathers absent overseas in the Second World War, which for their children often meant prolonged periods of temporary or even permanent separation. These anecdotes underline the fact that fathers have not always been central to family processes, regrettable as this might be, but that throughout history and across cultures many children have grown to be well rounded adults without this influence.

The generation of decision-makers of today, probably have a nostalgic, but inaccurate, picture of two-parent families, drawn from the experience of the baby-boom, when most parenting families were two-parent. But let us take a closer look at those couples. Often married in haste to avoid the shame of the teenage bride's pregnancy, they lived in a new commuter zone in Stokes Valley or Waikowhai, from where dad went off to work each day, leaving mum devoid of adult company except from the commercial radio serials such as Dr Paul, and building up the so-called suburban neurosis which might explode into separation and divorce about 1980.

Of course, many commentators will argue that the big difference is that today many of the families, even those with two parents, will be reconstituted, so that the biological father may not be the parenting father. In 1995, our Centre undertook the first national survey on fertility and family formation among 3000+ New Zealand women currently aged 20-59 years. We have the only New Zealand data on biological versus parenting fathers for different generations -- the census does not give this as it does not report detailed longitudinal data of this sort. Our data are currently being analysed, but provisional results show that the prevalence of children whose father is present is higher than one might think.

Whilst we would argue that fathers are essential in terms of their role in ensuring the well-being of their children, we can also equally argue that other family members, say grandparents play an essential and unique role in ensuring an extension to the nurturing

and caring assumed by the parental unit. In the pioneer period, young people migrated, alone or as couples, but then found themselves separated from a family support system. Often the children of pioneers would never have known their parents' extended family. The problem is that as populations become increasingly mobile the situation we had in the past has probably multiplied exponentially and thus incomplete families have become more common. Sometimes, moreover, host governments are being less than supportive of family reunion migrations, a point compassionate New Zealanders may monitor carefully in our migration policy.

FAMILIES: STRUCTURES AND CAPACITIES

The family structures of today that are revealed when we do in-depth research on this topic are often rather different from the stereotypes outlined in the popular press or by politicians. We outline here some of the key features, contrasting these where appropriate with what is popularly believed. Then we turn to the other side of the issue by asking not what the family is doing for its country, but what the country is doing for this fundamental unit. That is, we want to review the pressures the family is under, and to ask whether it is fair to put on it the burden of responsibilities being prescribed for it by politicians.

Firstly, family formation definitely takes a different form in the 1990s from that which we discussed for the baby-boom. Our survey results show that first sexual intercourse is taking place earlier, but that young people are far more likely from the outset to use efficient contraception, overwhelmingly so for Pakeha, and also for an increasing proportion of Maori. They are also more likely to postpone marriage, and far, far less likely to become pregnant as a teenager, although there are still Maori-Pakeha differences in this. It is highly probable that a first persisting union will be cohabitation, or even involve living separately, often with their parents, yet pursuing an intimate relationship — this pattern is recorded also for Sweden, France and Australia, among other countries. When they do marry and/or decide to have a baby, if they are Pakeha this will not be until their late twenties or early thirties. In this regard the young are extremely conservative, closely following the patterns of the most conservative generations this century, and differing very much from their own parents or the aberrant cohorts of parents of the baby-boom. New Zealand's levels of cohabitation for first unions are high by international standards, but when one looks at first unions of any sort, marriage and cohabitation, then there are no significant changes over time. Marriage has not gone out of fashion, merely been repositioned and taken a different form. Although in New Zealand we are short of recent data on public opinion regarding the significance of these changes for the future of the family, recent surveys carried out in the European context have shown that despite these changes, family life is ranked highest of all concerns by the majority of individuals, above work, social life, leisure, or politics.

Secondly, family sizes have changed significantly. For Maori this has been due to a rapid decline in fertility in the 1960s and 1970s; for Pakeha there have been decreases since the baby-boom to sub-replacement. Unlike most other developed countries we

have not reached extremely low levels of sub-replacement fertility, and about 1990 we reached replacement again in what we call the baby-blip. The children of the baby-blip are currently putting pressures on primary schooling. The baby blippers were Laurie O'Reilly's constituents and thus we will return to them again.

Thirdly, because of this late childbearing generation there are far more younger people than in the past who spend their 20s and even early 30s living alone, in flats or as childless couples. But just ahead of them are the last of the parents of the baby-boom, now in their late 40s/early 50s, who became parents at a very young age, and whose children have by now flown the nest — or sometimes adult offspring may have returned to a cluttered nest, as the North Americans call it. Together this peculiar and short-run demographic change is putting a squeeze, from the bottom and top, on the two-parent family, which typically is a phenomenon occurring among couples aged say 25-55 years of age. If we add on the growing number of single person, typically widow, households at much older ages, there are good demographic reasons why the two-parent family is not as common as once it was. But these reasons have nothing to do with declines in family values.

Fourthly, it is clear that family structures have changed, and most importantly that sole parenting is definitely more frequent than it was in the past. That said, the stereotypical young mother who is isolated from other adults does not fit the data: she, and 80 percent are women, is likely to be 27-50 years of age and getting older. If she is a young Pakeha, or if she is Maori or a Pacific Islander of whatever age, then she will most commonly be a sole parent who lives not as a total isolate, but in a wider household with other adults, frequently her own parents. What is interesting is that there is a slowing of the increases in both divorce and sole parenting. In the first case there are some technical demographic reasons for this — if fewer are formally marrying, then the pool from which divorces can come is also diminished. But more importantly, a major determinant — the early precipitate marriage of the baby-boom — has given way to the conservative late marriage of today. Such marriages have lower probabilities of breaking up. Finally, despite all these changes, most New Zealand children live in a two-parent household.

FAMILIES: BURDENS IMPOSED ON THEM

Families today face unprecedented burdens by comparison with the baby-boom antecedents. Above all, after continuing growth in the access of families to economic resources this trend ceased in the late 1970s and since then this access has decreased in both absolute and relative terms. Moreover, unemployment has been a major factor since the 1980s. We do not have the space here to detail these points, but in papers published and presented at the 1997 Population Conference the Centre showed that employment trends were very different from what is often claimed, mainly by economists using Household Labour Force Survey data from 1991 to the present. When instead we do a detailed accounting exercise, using census data, from 1986 to 1996 the pattern is very different. Summary data from these analyses are presented in Table 1. With the exception of Pakeha women, but across numerous ages, industries and

occupations, the number of new jobs by 1996 barely exceeded the numbers lost in the late 1980s. Moreover, the new jobs were far more likely to be part-time than full-time, and job creation fell well below the rate of change in demographic supply, that is the growth in the numbers at work force ages. These discrepancies were particularly marked for the young, for those in jobs such as manufacturing, and for Maori and Pacific Islanders. To add to this, the value of real personal incomes have also declined since the mid 1980s, while income inequalities have increased between all social categories: between cohorts, age-groups, ethnic groups, family types and quintile in income distribution. The economic miracle of the last decade will clearly not have filtered down to all New Zealand families. For many, the great miracle is a mirage.

The question thus must be raised: how can disadvantaged families meet the responsibilities set out for them in the brochure which was recently put in their mail box? Just how much can our society expect of any family in asking them to assume increasing responsibilities in order to ensure the caring and nurturing functions it has done in the past?

Table 1: Job Gains & Losses at the family age-group (25-44 years) from 1986 to 1996 as a Percentage of the 1986 figures

		Total
All groups	Full-time	0.5
	Part-time	3.1
	Total	3.6
	Demographic supply	12.1
European	Full-time	-2.8
	Part-time	2.1
	Total	-0.7
	Demographic supply	1.6
Maori	Full-time	10.7
	Part-time	6.3
	Total	17.0
	Demographic supply	47.3
Pacific Island	Full-time	7.6
	Part-time	23.8
	Total	31.4
	Demographic supply	48.4

Growth 1986-96 of the population aged 25-44 years

FAMILIES IN OUR FUTURE

We also need to look around the corner, to 2010 and beyond. The great superannuation debate of 1997 was meant to do that. But instead, after a simplistic and often inaccurate discussion of demographic parameters, the debate leapt straight across to investment in securities, equities, shares and the like, ignoring almost entirely investment in human resources. Whilst we cannot seem to predict with any accuracy the return these types of investments will bring - catastrophic declines in share values on the stock exchange are vivid proof - we do know how many young people will reach the labour market in, say 2010, or how many elderly we may have in 2051, simply because these people have been born and enumerated in at least one or more censuses.

Rather than repeating all the figures about the relative size of the elderly populations in the future and the fiscal burden this may produce, we instead, look briefly at fiscal capacity. This will be achieved most efficiently by ensuring that all persons at working ages have access to work, and by most of those people having high paying (and thus highly taxed) jobs plus the capacity to provide fully for their families' needs. Yet we also want couples to have babies, to contribute to the factors of both reproduction and production. Thus we must look carefully at policies relating to the interface between the labour market and the family, such as child care and maternity leave, so as to facilitate the opportunities for all people who so wish to span both.

Secondly, we will need to ensure that the baby-blippers, who will be labour force entrants from about 2008, only ten years from now, are well trained and educated, and fully integrated into the labour market in meaningful jobs which yield reasonable incomes. We cannot do as we did to the last large cohort reaching the labour force ages, just ten years ago around 1988. We simply ignored them, and instead consigned them to unemployment, in the process making entitlements for welfare very much more difficult. If we repeat that unfortunate experiment again in 2010 to 2015 we will have a double problem on our hands — the young will be a fiscal burden drawing welfare, and they will not be in a position to contribute to fiscal capacity. And this will be at exactly the time that we need them to sustain the society in the face of ageing.

POLICY DIRECTIONS

The contribution a population perspective can make to our understanding of children's needs within the family for well-being and caring involves thinking of demographic change as a driving force in creating, changing and explaining shifts in family structures.

A population perspective also enables us to think about *time* as a key explanation to what often appear to be irreversible changes, deemed detrimental to the family unit. Our calendar of the timing of family formation events is shifting up and forward to a later date or time period. As we said earlier, our survey has shown that marriage has not gone out of fashion, but has merely been *repositioned* and taken a different form.

Taking our inspiration again from Laurie O'Reilly, today's children are those who represent our society's stock or source of social, human and cultural wealth or capital (in their broadest meanings - interactions; networks of support; skills; talents; knowledge; linguistic skills, etc.). To bring their capacities to fruition means investing in their development and progress. In the same vein, the accumulation of this 'capital' occurs throughout the life course of each individual from birth (access to health, food, housing, carers), through infancy (recreation) to adolescence (education, training) and beyond into adulthood (employment, family life). The way in which each birth cohort will experience this 'accumulation of capital' will depend upon the particular historical times into which they are born (e.g. war, unemployment, full employment). This stock of experience will be carried through until the end of their lives, and transmitted in part to the next generation. In other words, our future is shaped by our past and present.

Ensuring children's future well-being, within the family, with father or with mother, surely then revolves around setting the appropriate policy goals or objectives which best facilitate our investment in, and development of the wealths or 'capitals' our children represent. Our paper has highlighted the idea that a family's capacity to ensure the accumulation and transmission of this wealth may at times, be limited - not necessarily through lack of will, commitment or persistence - but rather through the cumulative effect upon families of exogenous factors beyond the direct control of the individual.

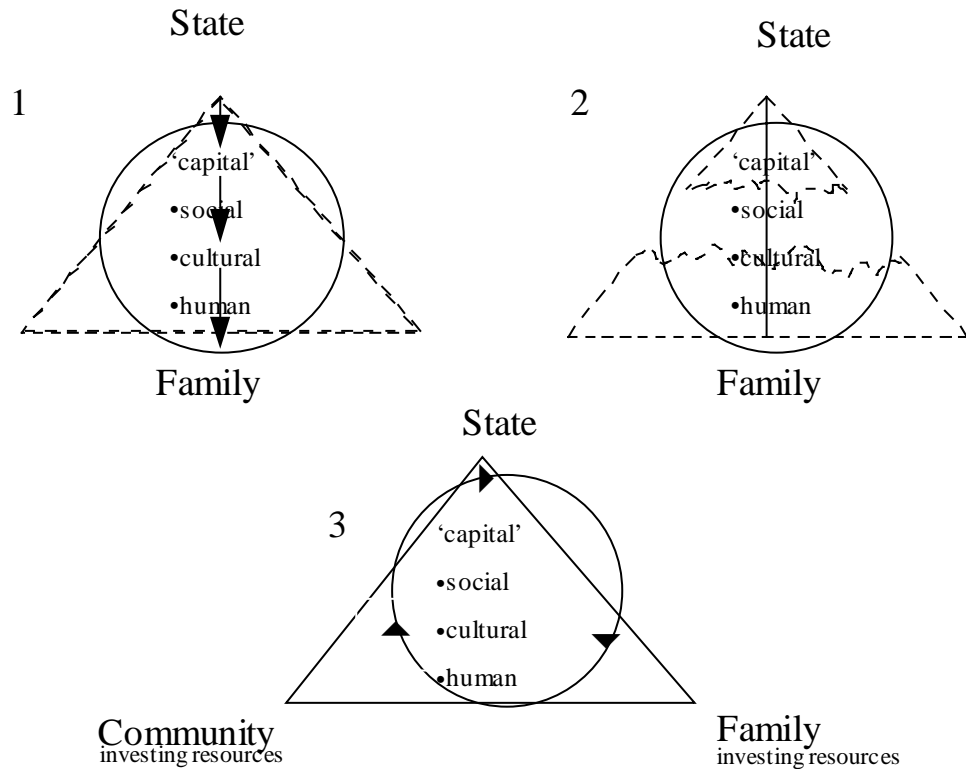
The three conceptual models depicted in Figure 1 indicate three agents - the state, the community and the family (in their broadest and most encompassing definitions) who may be involved in the provision of measures and means by which to help the family develop its caring capacities. We have in New Zealand as in many other OECD countries recently seen a shift in policy orientation from a State-driven form of welfare provision and support for the family (Triangle 1) to one in which the family and the individual are being called upon to be front line providers of this support (Triangle 2). Policy analysts will be familiar with the different types of conceptual models which have recently emerged in the New Zealand literature to try and capture this shift of responsibilities from the public to the private spheres.

In the context of considering just how able the family may be to accommodate an even greater share of these responsibilities, we outline a third model (Triangle 3) which provides for a mix of partners in the provision of welfare - a mixed economy of welfare. As the arrows indicate, the viability of this type of model depends upon the adequate distribution and circulation of resources between the respective partners. Depending upon the particular focus group we are looking at - in this case, the child - the model can be refined to include specific policy areas, objectives and delivery mechanisms. Research begun recently at the Population Studies Centre to explore the role access to informal (family support) and formal (maternity leave, child-care facilities, government family support) support resources may have in helping women take up employment after the birth of a child, illustrates the importance of an integrated approach to family support as indicated in triangle 3.

We found that women’s entry or re-entry into work after the birth of their last child is influenced by a number of demographic, cultural and socio-economic factors, most importantly, access to formal and informal support resources. In terms of an eventual ‘shift-share’ between men and women in the responsibilities taken for care of children, our research suggests that for Maori women (but not for other ethnic groups), taking up work was facilitated if they were living with their partner or spouse. These results suggest that men may be providing informal family support which in turn facilitates entry into paid work for their female partners. Further research needs to be done to help us develop clearer guidelines concerning this ‘shift-share’ in traditional family roles so that policy directed towards helping families reconcile work with family life does not miss out on these changes.

Figure 1

THE FUTURE



CONCLUSION

This paper is a plea for us to fight for Laurie O’Reilly’s ideals: to look after children by sustaining the family, preferably a complete family with two parents and with positive multi generational interactions. It is a plea to minimise or eliminate the extreme burdens and inequalities faced by less fortunate families, by providing them with an environment which truly sets them on a path for independence. But this independence will be achieved progressively, as we provide them with the support needed for

completing their share in the development of the social, cultural and human wealth or capital capacities of our children. Investing in the future of our children will involve considering how, through partnership as parents, policy makers, citizens, and community members, we help our families achieve this goal - so that when in turn children themselves become parents or guardians, they will be able to reap the capital of this investment for a broader project - the well-being of the next generation. If we do not do this, our future as a nation will be extremely bleak; we will have failed to make an investment in our most tangible security - the children, the human resources of the future.

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