

*The Grandmother*

*Project*

*Towards a*

*New Partnership*

*between*

*Family & State*

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TOWARDS A NEW PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN FAMILY AND STATE

*(The Grandmother Project)*

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INTRODUCTION

The *Institute of Community Studies* was founded fifty years ago. As one of the activities to mark this anniversary we are proposing to launch a programme aimed at finding a more effective partnership between the family and the state.

From the inception of ICS, Michael Young and his colleagues were concerned to explore and emphasise the importance of family life at the heart of society, and the need for government to understand and build on it. But governments have not listened. Harmful consequences are now increasingly clear, and it is time for the Institute to spell out more explicitly

some of the practical implications of its work.

This programme has been stimulated by the setting up of *Grandparents Plus*, the last organisation to be created by Michael Young before his death. *GP Plus* shares with the Institute a belief in the fundamental importance of extended families. However *GP Plus* goes further by emphasising that the heart of extended family life lies among older generations. It is this insight which needs to be taken on board by policy-makers, now more than ever, if they are to harness the power of families to underpin the wider society, and to halt the current decline both in family and in community cohesion.

Wide public debate is needed to explore ways of reviving the partnership of family and state. In this paper we look at how and why families have been neglected, and at some possible consequences, and consider some examples of changes in policy that might help to redress it.

General proposition

Our basic argument is that the postwar welfare state in Britain set out to build public support around stable, lifelong marriage and the nuclear family. But the state itself then helped to undermine marriage by its own increasing emphasis on motherhood, including supports for single parents. Public policy also ignored the extent to which nuclear families were built on a foundation of wider kinship ties, which themselves needed acknowledgement and support.

The best way to restore family to the centre of social policy now might be to give much greater recognition to the principle of descent, and in particular to the continuing relationships between parents and *adult* children. These are the core of kinship networks in any society, and they are the ties which most deserve public support and most repay it by helping to sustain

community cohesion.

It is important to note that this is not the same thing as giving extended families primary responsibility (which they have in many countries) for basic individual security. It is more a matter of finding ways of rendering state support more compatible with, and less undermining of, family structures.

The general principle of descent is already established by the state support given towards family care of the elderly, and is beginning to be adopted in fostering. But these applications relate to the oldest and youngest family members as receivers of care. They do not touch the continuing role of family elders as supporters of younger adult family members, and the beneficial public effects of sustaining this private role and influence. The sort of policy issues which arise here concern such matters as:-

the reform of (income) tax allowances in respect of adult kin who are getting family support – whether members of the same household or not;

the creation of more social security options whereby adults can claim support while co-resident with or caring for close relatives;

the incentives for larger family households, to reduce the numbers both of the elderly and of young adults living alone and to halt the proliferation of small households, which has had and will have enormous social and environmental costs.

Such provisions by the state could have many advantages, and deserve fuller consideration. They would be more cost effective than individual state supports or benefits. They would remove many perverse incentives to state dependency. And they would generally reinforce the reciprocity between

generations which is always likely to prove the most satisfying source of support, and which provides the model for good citizenship and public civility in general.

The grandmother project

The central factor is the place of grandmothers at the heart of family life. It is their concern and care for offspring which holds many families together, and which enables other members of extended families to keep up contact with each other and provide mutual support.

Our new Institute programme will revolve around the part played by grandmothers, and the ways in which social policy might be re-oriented to take more account of grannies and their extended families, and to work with them to maximise their beneficial effects.

This discussion paper describes its background, and looks at a few of its features in more detail.

HALF A CENTURY OF MISUNDERSTANDING

Shrinking the family

All human cultures build on reproductive ties in organising social relations. In smallscale societies, with limited resources, kinship provides the principal or even sole framework for organising collective activities and mutual support. Even in more advanced small states, family structures and solidarities are seen as directly contributing to larger identities, and political authority is itself commonly justified as a reflection of family authority. However, as state machines grow in power and complexity, private family roles and loyalties come into conflict with public forms of citizenship: thus the development of the modern state has entailed a steady erosion of the formal value attached to family relationships.

This reduction in the relevance of families proceeded apace in the second part of the

twentieth century, with the extension of *public* services to provide personal security.

Public welfare has itself helped to create its own implicit, administrative definition of families as parents living with dependent children, with the parents responsible to the state for bringing up their children to become responsible citizens in their turn. Once children reach adulthood, parents tend to be seen as having performed their useful role and to be labelled 'senior citizens', where they figure as a potential drain on public resources. This administrative concept of families as household groups represents a much narrower definition of family than people use in general conversation. Over time, though, it has come to be the conventional meaning, especially in any official context, so that any ties outside of or longer-term than the household have had to be designated as belonging to the 'extended' family.

Even this modern notion of a nuclear family enjoyed only a short period of validity, before becoming pared down further. The debates which took place at the end of the Second World War, when the structure of the new welfare state was being laid down, made it clear that mothers were recognised as the less dispensable parent. Not only were they seen as more reliable guardians of children's wellbeing and interests, but the father's role of material provision was far more easily taken over by the state if necessary.

Accordingly, as the welfare state has unfolded further in recent decades, the ruling concept of 'family' has revolved increasingly around mothers and children, restricting even more its essential membership.

#### Misunderstanding motherhood

The emphasis on mothers, at the expense of fathers, does reflect actual differences in behaviour reasonably well, and so concentrates state recognition and support on that relationship which in practice is most worth reinforcing. Where policy has been less pertinent though is in its assumption that motherhood effectively stops when children become adults. This was absurd when adulthood was achieved at 21. It is even more so

now that the age of majority is 18, and for practical purposes (such as the ending of child benefit) aspects of independent citizenship are achieved at 16. Parents are not just for childhood. They play a crucial and long-term part in helping young people's transition to adult life: indeed it is arguable that two of the most important stages in parenthood occur when children are adults: first during the period when they are moving out into the world to establish themselves as responsible members of the community, and second when they need support as parents themselves. To treat parents as suddenly becoming 'childless' when their offspring reach a certain age, as so much official thinking does, is to fail to understand family life.

This was what the first studies carried out by ICS in Bethnal Green in the 1950s were to discover. The people surveyed in those early enquiries did not for a moment consider 'family' to be a group that existed only in relation to children, or was bounded by frontdoors. It was a group based on shared descent, containing people of all ages, sharing in numerous daily activities, and identifying itself by relation to a living ascendant – usually the senior mother, who was known as 'Mum'. Mum's house was the hub of her offspring's lives, and sometimes that of a sister's offspring too. Young adults lived with their mothers until they married, and then often with their own or their spouse's mother for the first years of marriage until they could find and afford somewhere of their own. Couples normally lived with the wife's mother, and the husband might soon see her as having a more influential position in his life than his own mother. Mum would find somewhere for them to live, nearby, and often helped find work too. She helped with childcare when her grandchildren were young, taught her own children how to be good parents themselves, and was a constant source of advice and support in managing life's problems. For daughters in particular, the mother's house would remain a focus of family and neighbourhood activity, and a *stimulus* for interaction between other members of an extended family, for as long as *she* remained active. It was also the place where kinship

shaded into neighbourhood. Marriages between families created a network of alliances which gave the local community shape, and mothers were the key players in this matrix, with the knowledge, contacts, kinship authority and experience of life to serve as the communicators and opinion-leaders for representing local interests and keeping social order.

This is what motherhood in Britain in the 1950s was actually about. Since then things have changed a good deal, though perhaps less than we imagine. During the 1960s and 1970s many young people were keen to become independent of their parents as soon as they could. However, in the last decade or so, more adult children appear to stay living with parents for longer. Currently some parents are expressing disappointment at their own lack of freedom. But this may be based on an illusion. Hurrying adult children into a rapid transition may result in more breakdowns of parenting, and in renewal of dependency to be dealt with later by them when they are grandparents. The real problem for parents of adult children may in fact lie in lack of recognition by the state, and absence of appropriate support.

### Rediscovering grandmothers

The shift to a centralised, individualised regime of personal support was welcomed by forward-looking young people in the 1960s and 1970s, by many of their parents glad to see them moving on, and by many elderly people who were enabled to remain fully independent in their own homes. It gave the babyboom generation the freedom they wanted, and it may even – by taking place when it did – have itself helped to mould that generation and its expectations. But as the problems of family breakdown multiplied towards the end of the century, babyboomers have found their own offspring's families prey to breakdown too and have not liked it. As they became grandparents many found they were having to pick up the pieces, and they were angry at lack of support from the state.

So their attitudes changed. The 1990s saw a rediscovery of grandparenting. Firstly younger grandparents themselves, especially grandmothers, and then general public opinion, started to notice how crucial they were to holding families together. Research that was undertaken showed what a difference their involvement made, and what a deep gulf there was between the official idea of how families operated and the lives of ordinary people.

At the same time there were important scientific advances in the understanding of the place of families in society. Evolutionary psychology had emphasised the nature of ‘kin altruism’, and argued that kin solidarity was the basis of and not hostile to wider social solidarity. But much more specifically, a new hypothesis was suggesting that the key role in developing human culture might actually lie with grandmothers. This turned on the menopause, whereby a human female can expect to live for quite a long time after the end of her fertility. The effect of this is to make her free to help her offspring raise *their* offspring – her grandchildren – and to take on a managing role in family life. It is arguable that the selective advantage that grandmothers with time to help children gives to their families may itself be the mechanism giving value to the early cessation of female fertility.

If so, then the menopause is intimately linked with the emergence of society. Older mothers are by far the best placed, and best disposed, category of family member to promote the fundamental social values and rules which make community life possible. Grandmothers are generally the oldest members of a family group, with the greatest accumulation of personal experience. As women, their reproductive strategy entails long-term concern for the well-being of those around them. So they will also store knowledge about, and care about, the lives of many others of all age and sex categories. Because they are no longer fertile themselves they are, more than old men, ideally suited to stand above the reproductive marketplace and to take an inclusive view of personal relationships. Looked at



in this light, they are far better qualified and motivated than anyone else to devise schemes for the orderly management of family and sexual relations which all other family members can find acceptable.

Thus it is grannies who are typically the guardians of the common good. They are the family peace-makers, match-makers and advisers. And while they mainly operate inside families, in most societies the wider moral systems shaping relations between families and between other groups in the community, and informing law and religion, are themselves rooted in the moral economy of family life. All in all, the grandmother hypothesis provides ample encouragement for the general idea that it is older women who are the main authors of human culture, architects of social structure and trustees of community interests. Even Stalin did not enjoy popular legitimacy until he had listened to ordinary grandmothers, and there is no reason to suppose that contemporary social revolutionaries are any different.

Policies for real families

If there is a kinship position which serves society particularly well, and which the state ought to protect and reinforce, then it is surely motherhood in its later stages.

Contemporary public policy for parents assumes a world of autonomous, rational individuals where late-teenagers suddenly become responsible adults able to make, and desirous of making, difficult long-term decisions and adjustments alone. This is a fairy-tale.

Most young adults remain economically, emotionally and experientially dependent on parents for much longer. Many are liable to find their development to full autonomy seriously disrupted by a system which removes them too soon from parental influence.

What might suit the great majority much better is a welfare regime which continued to channel public support through families for as long as they wanted. In this way the relationships built up during childhood could help to ease difficult transitions as they arose.

This would not suit everyone. Direct public support would need to be available in some form for those who preferred it or did not have families. Perhaps coming of age should not

be marked by transfer to direct access to state benefits so much as by a gradual transition to greater choice in how support is received. Full citizenship would respect family status, and individualised public benefits should be kept mainly for those whose families are not able or willing to serve as a conduit for them.

Before considering some ways in which welfare might be recast, it may be useful to discuss further some of the problems that appear to be aggravated by the present system.

#### CONSEQUENCES OF NEGLECTING FAMILIES

The trap of single-motherhood.

One of the most baleful effects of personalised entitlements surely lies in the explosion of single-motherhood, especially among teenagers. Treating young mothers as legally independent citizens, eligible for public support in their own right, just at that moment when *their* mothers are losing access to support that could assist in looking after them for longer, has made the transition to responsible adult status extremely hazardous. Some girls find the teenage years hard to cope with, even with help. Their growing sexual awareness and power encourages them to believe that a life of independence is within their reach.

During this period it is usually helpful to stay close to their own mothers, who can help them to understand and embrace long-term goals. But the effect of current state support is often to reinforce choices hostile to their best interests, by encouraging them to ignore irksome parental influence. The package of public benefits available to them creates incentives to behaviour which is short-termist in the extreme.

Many young mothers soon come to regret tying themselves down so early in life, and with so little support from the father of their child. In spite of state benefits, their lives are often grim. They remain dependent – or soon become dependent again – on intensive help from their parents, most of all from the long-suffering maternal grandmothers, who themselves cannot claim public support unless their daughter fails to cope completely. The benefits provided by the state soon produce another form of dependence – in which there is constant

pressure to work and put children in nursery care – which makes a mockery of dreams of independence.

The structure of the benefits system itself can make it harder to develop a full relationship with the father of the child or another suitable long-term partner. There are incentives for couples to remain in separate accommodation, especially where the man himself is not working, and to play down the extent of any bond between them. On top of that there is the antagonism from other people. Low-paid couples who do live together, with their children, and struggle to make ends meet, are commonly indignant at the levels of public support – such as priority housing, and childcare - available to single mothers who stay at home looking after their children. These couples may be tempted to solve their own financial problems by splitting up: and some no doubt do so. There are motivations here which further devalue family life and demoralise people trying to manage on the basis of kinship ties and support. This drives a wedge between the welfare system and some ordinary families. This is moreover not something that is passing as the ‘old-fashioned’ attitudes of elders die out. Antagonism is intensifying among *young* people.

Boys without incentives

As a corollary, current welfare regimes promote irresponsible and disorganised lifestyles among young men. Mothers of teenage lads know very well how hard, but important, it is to concentrate their sons’ minds on aiming for a secure occupation that will enable them to become responsible partners and fathers. This is hard enough at the best of times. But those times are disappearing, and now the incentives which come out of the benefits system pull in the opposite direction. First the system allows girls to feel that the state will provide for them and their children, if they cannot find a well-paid partner. Then it snubs men further, by pushing single mothers into signing up for training courses and pursuing employment – even when many would much rather be looking after their children - rather than encouraging *men* to become better providers. Boys who do harbour traditional views on

family roles may be slapped down ideologically as trying to 'dominate' women, and given the sharp message that the best thing that lads can do (apart from helping with child-care) is quietly keep out of the way, which many of them accordingly do. Thus the growth of single-motherhood has been accompanied by the commensurate growth of undermotivated, under-qualified and under-employed men who have drifted from school failure, drugs and nuisance-behaviour into self-destructive lifestyles and serious criminality. There never has been a higher proportion of the male population in prison.

Many communities, especially in poor inner-city areas, seem to have remarkably few adult men living in them, and not many of those who are around lead constructive lives and exercise a positive influence on their environment. Even fathering children fails to pull them into family groupings any more, as it is not linked to an imperative to provide. This not only deprives children of contact with fathers but also reduces the scale of kinship networks where they can find wider support and stimulation. If fathers are not involved, children may not get to know kin on the paternal side, and may not even know whether they have any. For their part, paternal grandparents are often effectively excluded from access to their grandchildren, unless they are (already) in touch with the mother. Paternal grandmothers most of all feel upset at lack of contact, and may spend much of their time seeking access or brooding about whether to do so. More family resources are thereby lost than just fathers. Valuable links between family members are simply not made.

#### Blighted grandparenthood

Changes in parenting are having a noticeable effect on the pattern of grandparenting.

Where parents stay together and bring up children within a family network, both sets of grandparents are likely to be involved, and the rewards and burdens of this role are spread fairly evenly between them. Children benefit by having an extensive kinship network within which to construct their own identity, and through which to find points of entry to the outside world.

Insofar as both parents do not raise children together, styles of grandparenting become polarised. Maternal grandparents are liable to find that they are drawn heavily into supporting a daughter who is a single mother – financially, emotionally and with childcare. If the daughter fails to cope, and becomes depressed or ill, or a drug addict or casualty, then the grandparents may end up being parents a second time round, often with the added burden of a damaged and dependent daughter as well. They may have to do all of this without the assistance from social services that their daughters could have obtained themselves, or even without recognition and against official obstruction. What is more, their other children may resent the extra attention given to the prodigal daughter, just as ordinary families resent the public benefits available to single mothers, and this will create further bitterness for the grandparents.

Paternal grandparents on the other hand may be unable to help – for parallel reasons – and powerless even to let grandchildren know that they care and would like to be involved. The distinctive cross that they have to bear is, paradoxically, of not having anything that they can do. This can be just as exhausting as doing too much. Among both sets of grandparents, there are also more tensions *between* grandparents, which arise from the unequal burdens carried, and this has consequences in terms of contentment and wellbeing.

Today's grandparents, who are not regarded by the state as meriting an automatic right of access to their grandchildren, are no longer able to enjoy the rewards of their investment in offspring over the years. The system does not allow them to anticipate or work for such rewards as a matter of course. Their involvement with grandchildren is increasingly as troubleshooters, pulled in after the event to clear up a mess which they were not allowed to help prevent in the first place. It is a thankless task of responsibility without power, or even much voice, and it is doubtful whether many will be willing to go on playing that sort of role for much longer.

Unravelling trust

There may be wider implications for society overall, in that spread of these problems within families has coincided with a serious decline in political trust and social cohesion. Many older people who have been witnesses to change sense a link between this decline and the dislocation of ordinary family life, and consider that it is mediated by changes in the structure of welfare. When the postwar system was introduced, it did directly reflect the private world of family. Work, sex, marriage and the rearing of children bound men and women together coherently within a pattern of family life, and the system of public entitlements mirrored family responsibilities. So the state benefits available to any individual also represented, materially as well as symbolically, support for their family roles and obligations. Although extended family ties were not directly acknowledged – though they may often have been taken for granted - those within nuclear families were rewarded and reinforced.

It is as citizenship rights have become detached from performance of specific kinship duties, and as the principle of objective ‘need’ has come to prevail in definitions of entitlement, that the postwar accommodation between nuclear family and state appears to have crumbled. Thus the shift in welfare allocation may have weakened the feeling that the nation was a family ‘writ large’, in which citizens were bound together by exchanges and mutual dependence in the way that members of families were. It may even undermine the whole idea that *reciprocity* is important. Since these changes in the administration of welfare have taken place the government has faced an uphill task in trying to convince citizens that they have *any* duties – privately to each other or publicly to the state – and not just rights. Making need rather than contribution the guiding concept renders the general notion of a community of *mutual* support largely rhetorical.

So these processes of family change may be germane to the breakdown of social cohesion in modern Britain. The social order no longer seems to reward contribution to community; nor to support the links between employment, reproduction and parenting which are at the

heart of family structure; nor even to recognise that citizens need to have any ties between themselves which are not under the direct control of the state itself. The social order now appears arbitrary and amoral, and contemptuous of the private lives which most people until recently assumed that the state exists to protect and promote. Until family life is put back at the centre of national life the decay in political culture and trust is surely bound to continue.

## RESHAPING SOCIAL SECURITY

### A new partnership

British society urgently needs a new concordat between public and private realms; a concordat by which the state once again accepts the fundamental importance of family life. An essential ingredient of this agreement would be that the state itself does not define what that 'family life' is or should be, but listens to what ordinary people, and associations rooted in ordinary, local situations and communities have to say. Most commentators consider that the Beveridge Report and the postwar welfare state legislation were based on an understanding of popular family morality. However, changes since then have not been informed by open, public debates, and insofar as public opinion has been consulted this has been indirectly, through opinion surveys. These offer only a veiled and unilateral engagement with public opinion, in which definitions, selection of issues and questions, and the analysis of responses, are controlled by officials.

What is essential therefore is a thoroughgoing re-examination of the principles on which the social security system is based. This calls for genuine and widespread discussion, which must include – both directly and through sensitive opinion-research - those ordinary people who feel that the political class has long treated their views as irrelevant. The debate could do much to restore confidence in the political system, and in the legitimacy of political decisions, by giving some voice back to the people on matters

which are central to their wellbeing. The declaration of interest contained in this paper is rooted in the belief that such a debate would strongly endorse the restoration of family relationships as the surest foundation of personal security, which the state should work through and strengthen.

We also believe that the pattern of family relationships which people would see as most valuable and deserving of support is not what might be expected. The debate on 'family values' which flares up periodically in the media, and no doubt behind the scenes in Whitehall and Westminster, focuses on marriage, and is conducted between two wellarticulated groups. Those in favour of 'traditional' families argue that it is in the public interest (and that of children) to encourage and reward conventional marital relationships as the basis for parenthood. Those standing for 'new' families prioritise a woman's right to construct the sort of family that she wants for herself - which could well *be* traditional in outward form, but which would be acceptable not for that reason but because she has chosen it. This is a debate which has become embittered over the years by feminist and anti-feminist discourse, and which has been strongly affected by the long decline (and the recent revival) of religious belief and activity. So it has become a complex, many-layered dispute. This may well have inclined policymakers to detach welfare procedures from too explicit an association with family life.

However we feel that this debate does not deal with the essential elements of family life, and that the argument about marriage may not really be the key matter to resolve.

Marriage has perhaps been central to the debate because of the way that the postwar state identified nuclear family households as the primary focus of its provisions. What we suspect is much more important to family life is the descent tie, and parenthood, and above all lifelong motherhood. Unless *descent* relationships are brought into the discussion as possible axes of public support then marriage is not going to have much relevance. In order to uphold marriage, it is essential to recognise and promote descent



first. It is descent which epitomises the enduring shared interests which family life expresses. It may be the failure of the postwar welfare state to appreciate this which has led to the general weakening of family relationships and identities, and to resulting problems of which the current tribulations of 'marriage' are but one manifestation.

To revitalise the partnership of state and family, and re-legitimise public welfare, it will be necessary to start from an examination of descent. Our own effort to promote discussion will focus on the issues that this raises.

### Accommodating choice

The research finding which runs inexorably throughout the main studies carried out by ICS in the 1950s, like a natural law revealed, is the position of *Mum* - as the senior living member of a self-conscious and active descent group. *Mum* embodies the principle of motherhood, but is much more than that. It is also about how family and community roles are constantly recreated over time. As children grow up and become parents themselves they create alliances with members of other descent groups, and through building these alliances help to weave interlocking communities of activity and interest. It is through managing all this that mothers evolve as a driving force in society. By acting on behalf of her offspring, and mobilising connections to help them find and manage partners, work and housing, a mother serves to organise and give meaning to wider expressions of community. If motherhood is regarded simply as domestic responsibility for juveniles then its true importance is easily overlooked. Only by understanding that a mother becomes a granny and a pivotal figure in the community, whose efforts to promote her own offspring constantly regenerate local society, can we appreciate which aspects of family life most need public recognition and support.

It makes no sense to define motherhood as ending when children become adults. Policy should on the contrary be finding ways to ensure that the solicitude, experience and influence of mothers does not get lost once children cease to be minors. In addition to

caring for their own offspring, older mothers (and indeed older women generally) are the most responsible sector of the community. They are committed to public as well as private goals and values, and active in defining and promoting good causes, and in communicating matters of public importance. Mothers are the heart of community, and they used to be more explicitly appreciated as such. Anything the state can do to revive their influence is likely to be good for communal solidarity, wellbeing and morale.

This cannot mean that Mothers should *do* everything. They would not want this anyway.

One of the principles that their hegemony used to embrace was that women's power lay as much in getting other people (not least men) to do something as in actually doing it themselves. As children grow up, a mother's role becomes increasingly managerial or advisory. Much of it lies in understanding how best to draw on the resources available to a family, identifying who should do what, and getting them to do it. So for the state to 'recognise family' would not mean making older mothers responsible. What it does entail is considering their views and positions, being ready to involve them in decisions, and then structuring support to family members in forms which take them into account.

None of this would work if it was treated as a mechanical formula. In practice any recognition by welfare systems of 'extended' family ties would have to be voluntary, and give ultimate priority to individual rights. That is, any use of the descent principle when dealing with adult children (and their offspring) would need to be optional, and would entail a plural welfare regime. Where relevant family members were agreed in seeking public support on a family group basis, then this would be done through one system of entitlements. Where they were seeking benefits in their own right as autonomous citizens, it would be administered on a different basis.

At first sight this may seem impossibly complex, but it need not be. The existence of a dual system could lead to simplifications in what is offered, because one of the advantages to government in this sort of reform – in which citizens are given options -

would lie in the opportunity it allowed the state to reconsider the nature of benefits which it gives to adults outside of family groups. Once it were accepted that breaking up families is a factor in producing current social problems, there would be good reasons for encouraging people where possible and appropriate into taking supports through families, and for reducing the attractiveness of direct benefits – in particular those which set claimants up as independent households at public expense. The growth of living alone, and the social isolation it involves, may indeed be partly a consequence of the present limitations on welfare's ability to provide support to adults within the family. Reform would present an opportunity to cut back on the forest of perverse incentives to nonfamily living which has sprung up in recent decades.

#### The greying of society

Revaluing family groups would go hand in hand with a general revaluing of age and experience. The ways in which the state treats old people in matters of employment and pensions have important repercussions for the manner in which extended families or 'descent groups' operate, and need to be seen as part of the way in which government works with, or against, basic family processes.

The key consideration here is that older generations do seem to be programmed, both by natural inclinations hard-wired into us all, and certainly by family culture, to give priority to the interests of younger generations – both their own offspring and also young people in the community generally. Older people are solicitous and provide care; children and younger people generally soak it up. This is easily forgotten. It is not visible to officers of the state, because it takes place mainly within 'informal' contexts of family and community. In official social audits old people are treated simply as recipients of public resources. This often colours our perception of older people within the family.

If we consider the extent to which older people support younger within the family, our understanding of what is going on in the public realm has to change. For we see that state

resources given to older people are likely to trickle down to children in a way that support given direct to children is very unlikely to trickle up to elders. What is more, the process activates and strengthens family ties, thereby helping to maintain valuable private support structures. The obvious inference is that an adequate standard pension is very effective in maintaining family solidarity and also, more generally, intergenerational cohesion in the wider community. Much of what gets paid to the elderly in pensions percolates back down to younger people, in money and time spent on offspring, in willingness and ability to do unpaid childcare, and in helping look after children generally. Grandparental care of grandchildren may in turn promote reciprocal care for the elderly. Where these flows of private support are understood, people of working-age are more prepared to pay taxes to support reasonable pensions, not just to reward their parents' generation for their past contribution to society, or to invest in their own future security, but also because of their awareness of current effects on reciprocity and solidarity. By supporting elders, the state is seen to be reinforcing family life and supporting those who do most to hold society together.

In contemporary Britain the old are regarded as heavy consumers of public resources. This perception would soften if state support for them was put in the context of the huge importance of family elders in focusing care, advice and positive influence in the community, not to mention their financial help to needy offspring.

The same principle can also be applied in the job market. Because of the greater solicitude of the old towards the young, the widest distribution of resources can be achieved by channelling it *through* the former. In times of high unemployment, giving some priority to older workers will not just help to prevent them becoming an unnecessary drain on public resources, but also reinforce and build on the concern of older for younger family members. It will ensure that all generations receive a share, while at the same time mobilising investment within the family to increase the

employment prospects of the young, for example by supporting their training. Stability and the sense of security will be maximised. Prioritising *younger* workers on the other hand may well result in greater economic disparity between generations, as the young do not invest in the old. As a result the latter are more exposed to poverty - and dependent on public support.

This is of course what has happened over the last twenty years in Britain. An ever-greater state emphasis on the young, across the board, has accompanied deeper dependency among the old and lesser capacity to help younger people. Generation gaps have been aggravated, and the influence of older over younger generations has been weakened. All of which has cranked up further the direct dependence of all needy sectors on the state, and the shrinkage of family life which could have provided a balance. A state that is too directly youth-centred, drawing young people quickly into the public realm, may not actually be good for *children*. The restoration of old people as favoured recipients of public support, with more influence over public agendas, would help to correct a number of worrying trends, such as the 'loss of childhood'. Not only might it do much to reduce disparities in wealth and influence, and to halt the explosion of direct claims for support on the state, but it could also help to restore the private realm of the family as a protected location for childhood.

#### Recognising descent

More directly it might prove beneficial to pay specific attention to descent ties in the operation of the welfare state. This is highly relevant in areas like public housing. For some time there has been a tendency to identify adult children living with parents as 'concealed households' who are, it is implied, only there because they are hindered from escaping into independence. This is misconceived. There may be many positive reasons for co-residence, and as this practice is efficient in its use of resources it should be welcomed – for example through promoting the availability of larger housing units and

more generous rules for inheritance of tenancies within families where there has been coresidence.

Public housing in general offers a number of opportunities for constructive appreciation of descent relationships. The behaviour of children who have grandparents living nearby appears to be much more amenable to control than that of those not within the orbit of such influence. Tenancy allocation systems which take this into account could do much to improve the quality of life on those housing estates most resistant to public control, if not more widely.

Another area where state recognition of descent ties might well be strengthened is in tax relief for dependent relatives. At present, parents can claim income tax rebates on behalf of minors; but there are strong arguments for bringing back significant family allowances on account of non-working partners, too, in order to give parents more flexibility in managing family life. Many parents do also transfer considerable resources to *adult* children and, through them, grandchildren. Extending the availability of tax relief where help is being given to adult offspring, in particular unemployed offspring, might prevent many young adults who would otherwise be socially vulnerable from becoming a longterm burden on the state. It might also be valuable if working parents could claim childcare tax credit not simply when registered childminders are looking after their children, but also to enable them to pay *unregistered grandparents* as well. Similarly it would be helpful if grandparents could get carer's allowances for doing childcare to help parents undertake training courses, when these parents are not working. Proposals for supporting family childcare have a strong economic base, as many parents are far happier to leave children with carers inside the family, and so are much more likely to return to work. A prudent tax and welfare regime would capitalise on this preference.

Defending the inclusive principle

If the state is to work *with* descent groups it should try to avoid encouraging them to split prematurely – that is while senior members are still alive and happy to go on playing their

kinship role. The issue of single-motherhood is significant here, in that state provision does appear frequently to create incentives for new family groups to hive off before they may be ready to do so. Insofar as social services treat teenage single mothers as fully autonomous citizens, they are effectively enabling very young and inexperienced people to set up new, independent descent groups of their own.

Some of these young mothers do quickly find partners – which may then pull them quickly into the life of larger family units. And many of the ones who do *not* find partners manage to rebuild their relationships with their parents, and are re-absorbed into their original family. But what is also true is that quite a large proportion of young mothers regret the way in which their own lives have developed. Soon afterwards they wish that they had not broken away as they did, and commonly feel that it would have been better if they had not become mothers so young. Even where they have no regrets they may be prevented by benefit traps from stepping back into conventional family life. Most of those who do not find partners, and are unwilling or unable to find work, may find that they become long-term dependents on the state, with all the demoralisation that this can entail. In many cases a presumption that becoming a single mother will trigger independent benefits may have played a part in weakening parental influence just at the moment when it could have helped young women to make decisions that would have better served their long-term interests.

More direct research is needed here: but on the basis of case-studies collected for other purposes it does seem likely to us that it would help young women to avoid short-sighted decisions if the state responded less readily to their wish for independence and gave more attention to keeping effective descent groups together. Where there are descent ties or kinship groups capable of helping young women to organise their lives realistically for the long term, then it makes sense for the state to stimulate and reward such bonds. This would include measures already indicated, such as larger public housing units to enable

young adults to stay with parents, appropriate tax relief (especially to replace child benefit when that ends) and allowances for looking after unemployed young adults. It might also be worth allowing grandparents automatic right of access to grandchildren, unless a court order specifies otherwise. Present heavy emphasis on maternal rights promotes the belief among some young mothers' that their children 'belong' to them alone, and makes it easier for them to prevent other kin from seeing their children. This does no-one any good, and especially not the children.

Such measures as mooted here would represent great savings of public resources when compared with the expense of direct state support for new 'independent' families, especially those of single mothers, and perhaps far more when set against the costs of handling the *consequences* of single parenting. The state should try to develop a support regime around existing family groups, as its first and routine strategy for dealing with single motherhood, because this would offer the best way to minimise perverse incentives to create new 'independent' family groups.

#### Rewarding marriage

It is not suggested that the new partnership with the state should be built around marriage, as the previous one was intended to be. The principle of descent is much more compatible with motherhood, which it subsumes. However it is not actually antagonistic to marriage, either, and we know from many studies that marriage can be a strong factor in promoting the cohesion of family groups, and in building wider kinship networks which are beneficial to children. Marriage is also linked generally with good outcomes for children. So as long as descent is understood to be more basic, there is everything to be said for reviving rewards for marriage too.

What is important about marriage is that it provides a mechanism for getting men fully involved in family life. Without marriage, descent groups become heavily dependent on women, and burdens are concentrated on them. Marriage places demands on men, and



gives them a public and 'external' impetus to behave in ways which may be prompted more naturally among women by maternal drives. Historically marriage has been upheld most vigorously by religious groups. In modern society it is such groups that seem to have the better understanding of differences between men and women, and of the need to create additional incentives for men to respect family ties and obligations. Religious beliefs create symbolic rewards for fathers, by identifying fatherhood with supreme creative spirits, and find ways in which men can discover their 'true nature' and redeem themselves through responsible family behaviour. Insofar as notions of responsible fatherhood have been upheld since the creation of the welfare state, much of the credit must go to religious associations.

Benefits under the postwar British welfare state have made formal reference to marital status. But official ideas about men and fatherhood have failed to maintain incentives to men to take marriage seriously. Over the last decades many of the duties of fathers to support dependents have been variously imposed by the state on biological fathers and cohabiting male partners, regardless of whether or not they are actually married. In effect, public policy has constructed involuntary forms of fatherhood, to replace the voluntary pattern entailed by marriage. This new, objective 'fatherhood' however does not seem to create ties as durable as those of marriage, and rarely gives children such extensive or permanent kinship networks in which to grow up. So there is still plenty of room for bringing back material rewards to bolster the spiritual incentives provided by religion. The suggestions already made for channelling welfare support through descent groupings should have some impact for marriage and men. But what would reward marriage most directly would be a revival of tax benefits for all married people, on top of those for the support of dependent offspring, and regardless of the working status of *spouses*. It is well established that marriage – certainly the heterosexual union which most people understand by the term - is associated with significantly lower burdens on the state from

family members, and more responsible attitudes towards kin and the wider community generally. So these tax benefits would almost certainly earn their keep in a financial sense. It is likely, given ballooning state expenditures on the consequences of family breakdown, that such reforms could prove cost effective.

#### THE DEBATE AHEAD

The work of ICS over the years has touched repeatedly on these issues. Some relevant publications are listed at the end. Most of this work has however remained at the level of analytic commentary. The Institute now hopes to increase its direct attention as well to the *policy* questions which both prompt and arise out of the research, by promoting relevant discussion and publishing policy proposals. The common aim would be to identify ways of making the operation of the welfare state more consistent with the realities of extended family life as revealed in our enquiries.

Some of these topic areas might be:-

*Reshaping support for single mothers.*

*The needs of grown-up children living with parents.*

*Unlocking men's potential contributions to community.*

*Rebuilding local communities around three-generational families.*

*Public housing tenure for long-term families.*

*Childcare in the extended family context.*

*Supporting churches as centres for integrating family needs.*

*Inter-generational contracts and care of the elderly.*

Relevant publications at ICS.

Michael Young & Peter Willmott *Family and kinship in East London*

Peter Townsend *The family life of old people*

Peter Marris *Widows and their families*

Peter Marris *Loss and change*

Peter Willmott & Michael Young *Family and class in a London suburb*

Peter Willmott *The evolution of a community*

Peter Willmott *Adolescent boys of East London*

Geoff Dench *Transforming men*

Frank Field *Making welfare work*

Michael Young & A H Halsey *Family and community socialism*

Geoff Dench *The place of men in changing family cultures*

Michael Young & Lesley Cullen *A good death*

Michael Young & Gerard Lemos *Communities we have lost and can regain*

Geoff Dench & Jim Ogg *Grandparenting in Britain*

Geoff Dench *Rediscovering family*

Jim Ogg *Living alone in later life*