

EDITORIAL: FAITHERS, BAIRNS AND BASICS

Alexandra Howson

The transition from the Bush era to Clinton-style democracy in the United States has not been smooth, and the (mostly) men on Capitol Hill have been plagued by natural disasters (the Florida hurricane), riots (LA), and scandals (Whitewater). The shift in politics signalled by Clinton's election seems precariously balanced, as the country awaits the Whitewater backlash, and Bill and Hillary struggle to regain or retain some dignity and integrity.

BASICS

As a consequence of the holes blown in the Clinton armour, political debate in the US has focused more than ever on the notion of 'basic' values. In common with British civic culture, there has been much discussion in the syndicated press about the family. Debates about values of course often come from the Right, particularly one which perceives its politics under threat - a threat posed by the civic disaffection which sparked the LA riots, and the fundamental challenge to political culture presented by increasing numbers of African-Americans and women entering both the House and the Senate.

The agenda in the US, as is the case closer to home, has indeed been set by the political right, but, interestingly, a former Reagan/Bush aide, Bill Bennett (1994), has written a book about values in a formal effort to engage a wider community, presenting an argument which at least maps this uneasy terrain with more than a cursory acknowledgement of the pluralism and multiculturalism of contemporary Uncle Sam. This is more than can be said for our own response to the 'Back to Basics' gauntlet.

*Alexandra Howson is a lecturer in the Sociology Department, Edinburgh University, 18 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh, EH8 9LN, and is an Assistant Editor of **Scottish Affairs**.*

Scottish Affairs

Our own debate about values and the consequences of what happens in the family for society (the Thatcherite separation of family from society now entrenched), has been circulating for some months. Except that, of course, while what is lived as the family is expansive and creative, what is understood as the family is narrowly framed, in heterosexual, conjugal and nuclear terms. In our own discourse of values, we know who disrupts that 'universal' understanding of what the family is: single mothers; teenage mothers; step-families; gay and lesbian parents; mixed ethnicity families; your family perhaps; my family.

It is perhaps not extraordinary that at a point in which family and household structure is clearly shifting (again), the dominant discourse should be reactionary and the prevailing ideological current underpinning the state should begin to restructure what the family is along the lines of what the family should be. 'Back to Basics', the reshaping of sex education and the polarisation of debate around the Child Support Agency engenders a rhetoric of family values underpinned by the desire to strengthen patriarchal social organisation, wherein women's informal, unacknowledged ethic of care in the household replaces the space the state used to occupy (health care, social services), and civil society can roll along unfettered by the disruptive and challenging participation by women.

FAITHERS

This return to the 'family' occurs in the context of demographic shifts in the nature of households: the number of nuclear families has decreased; there has been an increase in the number of children raised by never-married or separated women (which creates concerns for the deliberate engendering of fatherless children); and reproductive technologies offer new possibilities (and problems) for accomplishing and organising reproduction (which again throw issues of paternity into dispute). What looks like a debate about the family in fact turns out to be one about perceived threats to male position and power in relation to women and children.

While John Patten's most recent attempts to (re)define sex education clearly ties sex to reproduction in the context of heterosexual, monogamous domesticity, the work of the Child Support Agency at least recognises that social relationships between heterosexual men and women are not necessarily organised in this way. On the one hand, many women are certainly opting to struggle single-handedly to raise their children free from a climate of violence and abuse - and we have seen the contours of this abuse through Edinburgh District Council's 'Zero Tolerance' campaign, financed through the Scottish Office, initiated by the Women's Committee, and now followed by a similar project in Strathclyde. This campaign has powerfully presented

Fathers, Bairns and Basics

information about the 'family' - the one John Patten mobilises - and the sometimes damaging and violent effects it has on both women and children, and forces us all to confront the disjuncture between rhetoric and reality. On the other, some men simply opt out of their paternal responsibilities because no structure as yet exists which compels them to do otherwise. The remit of the CSA, controversial as it may be, at least attempts to institutionalise this constraint.

Yet, while some of the discourse of the CSA targets absent parents (mainly fathers) and rightly pulls them into a relationship of financial responsibility for their offspring, at the same time it drives a bureaucratic wedge between men and women, and forecloses the possibility of securing emotional and nurturing relationships with those children for whom fathers are required to provide financially. The CSA institutionalises the separation of reproduction and paternity, and further removes men from the possibility of nurturing. And while there is as yet little evidence to suggest that we are witnessing the emergence of a New Man, the irony is that, when men do attempt to reconnect with children and try out their nurturing skills (to allow their partners to take up paid work, for instance), society constrains them in ways which seem unassailable.

From participating in ante-natal care to role-reversal in the household, Scottish society is not yet comfortable with shifts in contemporary masculinity, where men with childcare responsibilities might feel supported in their attempts to engage with the shifting ground of relations between men and women. Where motherhood continues to be an acceptable basis of social identity for women, fatherhood still appears to be an add-on category, an optional extra, an identity to slip in and out of, underpinned by social structures which allow men to do so.

If society fails to cater for women with children, as debates about the domestic division of labour and the female double burden consistently illuminate, it also does so for men. From an absence of nappy-changing facilities in public toilets and places, to an absence of recognition within the labour market that men have domestic responsibilities too, the family - however it is defined - loses out. Long working hours and a labour-market culture of 'out of sight out of mind' places a payload on men to fit with prevailing norms (Marsh 1991), and shunt their domestic responsibilities to the back burner, where women inevitably take up the slack. Interestingly, a renewed recognition in the press of the need to challenge the long hours of parliamentary participation has been one of the consequences of the untimely and sad death of John Smith.

Scottish Affairs

The Scottish press, with some exceptions, has been slow to respond to the debate over values and 'basics', yet there exist civic counterpoints which do more to illuminate the issues at stake than inches of column space. On a practical level, one of Edinburgh District Council's babies, the 'Child Friendly Campaign', and similar initiatives in other Scottish cities, allow men to carry into the public domain the care they sometimes provide for children in the private sphere. Where twenty years ago it was difficult enough to find women's toilets in some of Scotland's city centres, never mind nappy-changing facilities, at least there now exist a small number of retail outlets which provide the bare necessities to allow both women and men to address the physical needs of their charges.

This is a half-step forward which at least acknowledges how far the 'family' has shifted in terms of who (occasionally?) does the caring. But it is important, for shifts in the labour market could mean that more employment is characterised by part-time status, not only, as has been the case for some time, for women, but increasingly for men, as male full-time employment decreases (Equal Opportunities Commission 1985). For people with children, sharing child care may be the only realistic option for taking up paid employment in a society which lacks state-funded nursery provision.

VALUES

If we are to have some kind of debate over values, and it seems to be happening, then we need to be clear about their origin. This requires a clear-sighted reassertion of a will to enter the space which the political right thinks it occupies. From that perspective, 'basic' values are flagged as prescriptive and normative, while the left has welcomed the rhetoric of 'back to basics' only as a way of attacking Tory ministers who clearly fall short of the very standards they would wish society to adopt.

But it has to be more than this, because the collective responsibility for children and their primary carers is too important to be left to the governments of the day, whatever their political card. Will Scottish society have the courage to confront parenthood, and in particular fatherhood, in a way which for ever puts to rest one of the characters in Janice Galloway's book of short stories, **Blood?** Here is a father who cajoles his child to jump from a mantelpiece, and when he finally does jump, (the child assuming that his father will catch him), tells him that he should trust no one. Abuse writ large.

REFERENCES

- Bennett, W. (1994) **The Devaluing of America: an insider's fight for the family**
New York: Focus Family Publications

Fathers, Bairns and Basics

Marsh, C. (1991) **Hours of Work of Women and Men in Britain** London: HMSO

Equal Opportunities Commission (1985) **Women and Men in Scotland: a statistical profile** London: HMSO

May 1994