

Big Sister

Is New Zealand the First Feminist State?

The relentless pursuit of gender equity by New Zealand women in power is a one-size-fits-all approach to public policy that requires freedom of choice as the sacrifice, argues **Alexis Stuart**

Does New Zealand lead the world in female equality? The British could be forgiven for thinking so. *The Daily Telegraph* tells Britons that New Zealand women ‘hold almost all the levers of constitutional control—the Prime Minister, the Governor General and Chief Justice, the Attorney-General, and until recently the leader of the opposition and the

mayor of our largest city, challenging the popular perceptions of New Zealand as a largely masculine culture’.¹

It could be easy to become sanctimonious about New Zealand being perceived as a haven for career-minded women. But while a smattering of women hold the most powerful positions in the land, how are the rest doing? After all, the real indicators of how women are faring are not the number of women in senior government posts, but the results of the decisions they are making. Such scrutiny is crucial as the Labour government steps up its pursuit of a utopian vision of female power, control and equality.

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The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MWA) is to be reorganised this year into an agency that will advance a 'whole of government' approach to policy development.² This is more than simply stamping out bureaucratic inefficiency. The Ministry's shift from 'the government's primary provider of gender-specific advice, as it applies to all women and to Maori women as tangata whenua' (indigenous people), to a seamless government approach to gender analysis, indicates a renewed push to ground social policy and practice in gender feminist theory.

The MWA's intention to further integrate gender analysis in policy development is not new. 'It has been a longstanding strategic focus of the Ministry',³ and since November 2000 all government departments have been formally required to include a Gender Implications Statement (GIS) in policy papers. Gender analysis and the GIS are essentially a set of rules ensuring the deployment of feminist ideology. It is an aggregate that guarantees a distorted and inequitable approach to policymaking.

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The MWA *Brief to the Incoming Minister* in July 2002 complained that 'departments are either not including a GIS in cabinet submissions, or where a GIS is included, it is of poor quality and shows that gender analysis has not been undertaken at the early stages of policy development'.⁴ The Ministry suggested that 'If submissions are getting through to cabinet with no or inadequate GIS, then officials' committees and Cabinet office need more advice from the Ministry about what constitutes an acceptable GIS. They also need to be encouraged to send back papers that have an unacceptable GIS'.⁵ Vigilance stepped up a notch in 2002.

The 'whole of government' approach is not innocuous politics. The MWA claims to speak for all women, but what has really happened is that feminist political power and influence has reached new heights. In the MWA 2002 report on the 5th

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW),⁶ the Ministry makes it clear that it is not content with a merely advisory and co-ordinating status, but aims to upgrade its decision-making capacity. This is why 'the government now requires all papers presented to the Cabinet Social Equity Committee to contain a gender implications statement, supported by gender analysis'.⁷ What is going on is often disguised—the Cabinet Social Equity Committee has recently changed its name to the Cabinet Social Development Committee. Hiding behind benign labels will remain a theme.

In December 2002, just before the Christmas holiday break, the MWA released the discussion document *Towards An Action Plan For New Zealand Women*. The Plan purports to outline the main issues affecting women and girls. Consultation and 'discussion' on the document was carried out in partnership with the National Council of Women of New Zealand and the Maori Women's Welfare League. Interested parties had only until mid March 2003 to make submissions, which, given the Christmas shutdown, did not leave much time. Meetings were held across New Zealand during February and early March. At these select meetings, women were given a 'brief' of the Plan based on questions in the discussion document. Many women in these meetings did not see the original document and many had not been prepared prior to the meetings. Consequently, the document has not been widely debated—perhaps intentionally. Interestingly, the National Council of Women and the Maori Women's Welfare League are substantially financed by the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

'Seek the right path To benefit your world'

So begins the *Action Plan*. If any doubts remained about the feminist preoccupations of the New Zealand government, this Plan will lay those doubts to rest. Autonomy for women is the objective, and paid work is the salvation. Anything short of that is the 'wrong path'.

This is a confused and contradictory document that tries unsuccessfully to weld together various strands of feminism. It often uses the language of equality before the law or classical liberal feminism to hide a radical gender equity agenda. The Plan uses goals established in 1988 to guide its work: equity,

opportunity and choice, full and active participation, adequate resources, no discrimination, and a society that values the contribution of women. The problem lies in the way these goals are defined.

‘Equity’ is defined as equal gender outcomes. ‘Opportunity and choice’ are glossed over, because there are some serious issues of conflict between opportunity, choice and equity and they are not addressed. ‘Adequate resources’ becomes highly politicised: the goal is to ensure that ‘all women should have adequate resources that are not linked to their dependency on another person’ (p.10). ‘No discrimination’ calls on the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 and The Human Rights Act 1993, which outlaw both direct discrimination and discrimination through structures or systems. The two Acts provide the legal clout behind gender analysis and are often used as a justification to correct inequality by introducing positive discrimination. That society should value the contribution of women becomes politically loaded, for a ‘valuable contribution’ is also part of the ‘right path’ feminist agenda.

The long timeframe over which these goals have been developed reveals a deep ideological commitment to the key gender feminist vision of 50/50, male/female quotas. These goals were largely framed by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and CEDAW, which was ratified in New Zealand in 1985.

The *Action Plan* is feminist politicking at its worst but also at its most artful. Ambiguous language obscures the intention of raking in the female tax dollar and marginalising the role that men must play in the lives of women and children. Economic autonomy will give women a better quality of life as defined by the Ministry of Women’s Affairs. That is feminist-speak for women in the workforce, children in state day care and men dismissed.

Indeed, men—forget husbands—are not even mentioned, except pejoratively and in connection with violence. Positive and fulfilling relationships with men and children are ignored. Children are a hassle, because they affect a woman’s participation in paid employment and consequently their economic autonomy (p.34). Mothers of large families are eliminated. The intention is to deliver them a fatal wound: ‘Children in large families can be disadvantaged at school, and have poorer health and social outcomes’ (p.13).

Page 23 consists of a vitriolic stumble through what has been achieved over the past few decades. Part of that victory is that more young women than young men study at post-school level and that more women than men are graduating from tertiary institutions at all levels except doctorate. It is also a victory that women work as many hours of paid work as men. The problem is that they work too many hours of *unpaid work*. The Minister of Women’s Affairs, the Hon. Ruth Dyson, claims that women ‘do not have the right balance between paid work and the rest of [their] lives’ and while she gives lip service to women who want to stay at home she insists that it is important to have priorities.⁸ The MWA prioritises economic autonomy for New Zealand women in an attempt to make women equal but requires freedom of choice as the sacrifice.

This *Action Plan* is about pay equity, but do not confuse equity with equality of opportunity or equal pay law. Equity is the radical, benignly-phrased ‘equal pay for work of equal value’ that aims to close the gap between women’s and men’s earnings, (even though this gap remains largely because many women choose to work part-time and casually, and tend to take time out for children and family life). It is old-fashioned 1970s unisex gender feminism that aspires to eradicate any difference between men and women. And it comes at a huge cost: currently \$4.3 million and rising. The Minister of Women’s Affairs justifies this by claiming that ‘left to its own devices, the market is not going to close the income gap between the sexes’.⁹

Diversity, not uniformity

Women have never had so many ‘rights’, yet never has the position of mothers been so precarious. New Zealand women in power have assumed that women want to be liberated from family life. But in treating women as a collective group, they are denying women genuine individual choices.

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Sociologist Catherine Hakim from the London School of Economics tells us that only a minority—about 20%—of women are careerist, or 'work-centred', by choice.¹⁰ About 60% are 'adaptives'; that is, women who want to juggle family work and paid employment. Most women who work part-time after having children are adaptive. They want to enjoy the best of both worlds, seeking to devote as much time and effort to their family as to their jobs. But what about the remaining 20% of 'home-centred' women who are passionate about working at home and who rely on a family breadwinner? According to the MWA, such women have not actually been participating in New Zealand life at all.

When mothers of young children work outside the home against their better judgement, it is not emancipation. When mothers of young children work outside the home because they have no choice, it is bondage. The New Zealand government is engineering this dependency. Attorney General Margaret Wilson has made it clear that the government seeks to increase women's attachment to the paid workforce and to minimise time away from childbirth and parenting.¹¹

The women's movement in the 19th century was right when it criticised society for asking women to make all kinds of sacrifices for children and the family when there was little respect for, and acknowledgement of, women's unpaid work in the home. Perversely, the type of feminism that corrupts New Zealand's current government has returned to that disrespect and disregard for family work by denigrating marriage and motherhood.

Feminism has always been deeply divided about motherhood. Even during the early suffrage period it took decades longer for married women to be included as part of the fight for the 'women's vote'. The feminists of the mid- to late-1800s were much more sensitive about the importance of a woman's

unique role once she became a mother. It was not so much that a married woman's place was in the home but that the child's place was in the home. Some early feminists believed this so passionately that they claimed that married women needed to be 'protected' from the vote.

By contrast, post World War II feminism, or second-wave feminism, tended to equate motherhood and family life with the oppression of women. The 1960s popularised the spirit of revolt. The women's movement soaked up cultural Marxism and became a 'carrier' of its modern day version, 'cultural relativism'. At its most basic level, 'cultural relativism' is about shifting power struggles between various interest groups. A simple cut and paste occurred. The feminist borrowed from the Marxist, swapping 'capitalism' and 'the bourgeoisie' and punching in 'patriarchy' and 'men' instead. Yet economists no longer look to Marx for guidance, so why should women look to feminism for guidance?

Power plays between the sexes are always devastating for children in particular, and this is why after four decades, relationships between men and women, parents and children are in free fall. For gender feminists, men are the official scapegoats. They are responsible for all evil and carry collective historical guilt. Women, on the other hand, are society's victims. They need compensation for their collective victimisation throughout history. Remember when Gloria Steinem deemed men as utterly useless?: 'A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle'. Other feminist theorists condemned marriage as female enslavement, and pronounced the presence of a father as unnecessary at best and 'patriarchal' at worst. Divorce was liberation.

The 19th century women's movement understood the female's civilising force in both the family and society. Indeed, many early feminists believed that women were morally superior. They sought to open the public sphere for women so that the whole of society could benefit. But the kind of unisex feminism that exists today has betrayed that legacy. One of the major betrayals has been the understanding that fathers and mothers are essentially the same and that neither offers anything peculiar to their sex. The importance of the opposite-gendered parent for the complete emotional and social development of the child is now recognised. The loss of such parenting can

have severe emotional consequences for children. For example, the absence of a father in the home may result in a daughter having trouble relating to men throughout her adult life, while boys who lack a male role model are more likely to get into trouble with the law.¹²

Ideas have consequences

Feminism's passion for overturning bourgeois norms by discouraging the institution of marriage and thus encouraging single parenting and dependency on the state has done New Zealand's most vulnerable citizens—mothers and children—a serious injustice. The Minister of Women's Affairs claims in *Towards an Action Plan for Women* that the lives of New Zealand women have improved over the last four decades. But to make this claim is to ignore what social statistics are telling us.

The percentage of children born outside marriage increased from 14% in 1971 to 44% in 2001, and is now thought to be one of the highest rates in the world. Although fertility among women has dropped to 1.9, New Zealand has the third highest teenage fertility rate in the world, 28%, behind the US and England. While this is down from 69% in 1972, the difference is that in 1972 nearly all teenagers who had babies were married. In 2002, only 3% of teenagers in relationships were married.

This reflects the movement away from marriage in New Zealand society as a whole, although the change has not been as drastic in other age groups. In 2001, 81% of people in relationships were still married, but sole parent families are making up a higher percentage of families with dependent children. In 1976 they comprised 10% of families with children; in 2001, 31% of families with children. This rate is even higher among the Maori, who in 1996 (the latest figures available) had 73% more of their children in sole parent homes than Europeans.¹³

When the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB) was introduced—originally to provide an income for a mother and her children to escape a violent relationship—17,230 women received it in the first year. But numbers grew by over a third annually until 1976, and have maintained a generally steady 9% growth since. There are now in excess of 104,000 women on the DPB and it has increased from 5% of welfare expenditure in 1974 to more than 15%. When health, education, police, welfare and other costs are taken into account, family breakdown

generally is estimated to cost the NZ taxpayer at least \$5.5 billion dollars annually.¹⁴

This has a big effect on incomes. Whereas in households comprising a couple with child(ren) only 6% had an annual income in 2001 of \$20,000 or less, in households comprising only one parent with child(ren), 61% had an annual income of \$20,000 or less.¹⁵

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The effect of fatherless families has been pronounced in crime statistics. In a speech given at a Parliamentary breakfast in April this year, Principal Youth Court Judge Andrew Beecroft identified the main characteristics of the young offenders who appear before him:

85% are male, the majority have no contact with their father, 80% do not go to school and have chronic drug or alcohol addictions, most have psychological or psychiatric issues, and 50%—up to 90% in some courts—are Maori. Many of these boys have no adult male role model: 14, 15, and 16 year-old boys seek out role models like 'heat seeking missiles'. It's either the leader of the Mongrel Mob or it's a sports coach or it's Dad. But an overwhelming majority of boys who I see in the Youth Court have lost contact with their father . . . what I'm saying is that I'm dealing in the Youth Court with boys for whom their Dad is simply not there, never has been, gone, vanished and disappeared.

Children deserve dedicated fathers; women deserve loyal and loving husbands. The pursuit of female political, economic and social independence is helping to reduce dramatically the quality of lives for thousands of women and children. They may

be called sole parent families, but in fact they are fatherless families.

The family is the foundation on which a civilised society is built. It is grounded in marriage between a man and a woman who intend to live together and look after one another for the rest of their lives. To even define a family in this way, though, has become a brave and somewhat radical thing to do. Indeed the family has come to represent a dull and boring joke. Steve Maharey, New Zealand's Minister for Social Services, proclaims that the days of the nuclear European-style family unit have gone:

It has . . . been incorrect to assert that the focus of policy has been on the breakdown and attempted restoration of old family structures, rather than supporting the new forms existing now. [As long as sole parents are] able to provide love, discipline and sound nurturing, things are going to be OK.¹⁶

Utopia or dystopia?

Former National MP, Simon Upton, once said of New Zealand: 'we are prey to imported intellectual viruses that—like so many introduced pests and diseases—take hold with unnatural virulence . . . [O]ur lack of nationhood and historical vacuum make us prone to hot house experiments as a land of utopian visions condemned to dystopia'.¹⁷

Feminism wants to shape all aspects of public and private life. It is also deeply personal in its attack on the most intimate relationships. It invalidates them, deconstructs them and, in many cases, legislates to change them. Yet truly progressive politics is not about gender analysis, nor is it about chasing the shibboleth of taxpayer-funded equity. New Zealanders must be free to make choices that prioritise children, family, marriage and career in a way best suited to them. The keepers of feminist doctrine claim to be liberals but in the relentless pursuit of gender equity they are threatening a fair and free civil society.

Endnotes

- ¹ *The Press* (Christchurch: 31 March 2001), NZPA.
- ² *Brief To Incoming Minister* (Ministry of Women's Affairs, July 2002).
- ³ K.S. Birks, 'Gender, Policy and Social Engineering', Paper presented at the New Zealand Association of Economists 1998 Annual Conference (Wellington: 3

September 1998), pp.2-3.

- ⁴ Birks, 'Gender, Policy and Social Engineering'.
- ⁵ Birks, p.15.
- ⁶ *Brief To the Incoming Minister*, p. 71. The CEDAW is the most comprehensive international legal document on women's rights. The convention sets minimum standards for overcoming discrimination against women. The Convention was adopted by the United Nations in 1979. It entered into force in 1981.
- ⁷ The Ministry of Women's Affairs, 'The Status of Women in New Zealand 2002: The Fifth Report on New Zealand's Progress on Implementing the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women', (November 2002), p.23.
- ⁸ R. Dyson, *The Press* (Christchurch: 28 February 2003). Dyson was writing in response to one of my columns.
- ⁹ R. Dyson, Address to the *Women's Action Plan Meetings*, as quoted in a media release on Friday 14 March 2003, 3.16pm, less than two hours before the deadline of submissions.
- ¹⁰ C. Hakim, 'Competing Family Models, Competing Social Policies', Paper presented to the annual conference of the Australian Institute for Family Studies (Melbourne: 12 March 2003).
- ¹¹ 'The Government has already started to act through the introduction of paid parental leave. This is intended to increase women's attachment to the labour force and minimise the income effects of time away from work due to childbirth and parenting.' M. Wilson speaking at a PSA Pay Equity Seminar. On 22 May 2003, Wilson announced the establishment of a pay equity taskforce. The taskforce will report to a ministerial reference group comprising the Ministers of Labour, Women's Affairs, State Services and Finance by the end of the year.
- ¹² William S. Appleton, *Fathers and Daughters* 72 (1981); J. Buckingham, *Boy Troubles: Understanding Rising Crime, Rising Suicide and Educational Failure* (Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 2000).
- ¹³ All figures are from Statistics NZ using the following sources: Table, 'Live and Still Births by Nuptuality', 1962-2002; 'Hot off the Press-Births and Deaths, December 2002 Quarter; Table, 'Age Specific Fertility Rates, New Zealand and Selected Countries'; 'Marriages and Divorces' (Year ended December 2002); 'Demographic Trends 2002'; and 1996 Census.
- ¹⁴ J. McNeil, 'The Cost of Killing the Family', *Evidence* (Maxim Institute, Winter 2002).
- ¹⁵ Statistics NZ, 'Demographic Trends 2002'.
- ¹⁶ *Christchurch Star*, (27 September 2000).
- ¹⁷ S. Upton, 'What Sort of Nation is New Zealand and Who Does It Belong To?', Address to the Wellington City Council Chamber (6 December 2000).