Family Matters: Family Breakdown and its Consequences
by Patricia Morgan
New Zealand Business Roundtable, Wellington, New Zealand
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Few people write as knowledgeably and accessibly about family matters as English researcher Patricia Morgan. Her publications on the subject have ranged across the economics of family life, marriage and divorce, child care, adoption, feminism and the family, the consequences of family break-up for children, and much more.

Whatever the topic, she marshalls the evidence, ponders the causal patterns and consequences, and comments on the human and policy implications with arresting insights. The book under review brings these capacities to bear upon New Zealand family life.

Morgan's study was commissioned by the New Zealand Business Roundtable which, under executive director Roger Kerr, has adopted an unusually broad agenda of interests beyond commercial, political, and economic matters to encompass social and cultural affairs as well.

Outstanding among the latter is the parlous state of the New Zealand family. Although this is especially the case with the Maori family, the non-Maori family in New Zealand shares the same trends towards disintegration and flux as the Western family in general, and particularly its English-speaking versions. So the significance of Morgan's findings and comments reach beyond New Zealand to be relevant to other countries, including Australia. For New Zealanders, the book is indispensable reading (despite the minor flaw of an inadequate index).

Morgan chooses as her prime criteria of family decline and fragmentation: the decrease in two-parent households, the increase in sole parents, the rise in the number of children born ex-nuptially, the decline in marriage rates, and falling fertility. She then presents the statistical evidence in time series showing the escalating incidence of these phenomena.

As in Australia, the New Zealand divorce rate quadrupled from 1961 to 2001. In New Zealand, the number of children living in sole parent households has increased by 250% in the last 35 years. This is in part a consequence of the increased divorce rate, but helped along by an increasing rate of unmarried motherhood. In 1962, ex-nuptial births were 8% of all births. By 2001 the figure was 44%—about 10% higher than the high US rate (adversely affected by the very high rate in the black American family) and about 14% higher than the Australian rate.

In 1971, the marriage rate for New Zealand women aged 16 and over was 45 per thousand. Thirty years later it was 15 per thousand. Although cohabitation, in New Zealand as in Australia, has increased rapidly since the 1970s, falling marriage rates are not fully accounted for by the rise in cohabitation.

The New Zealand fertility rate has plummeted. In 1962, the average number of children born to non-Maori women 15 and over was 4.19. In 2001, it was 2.01. Among the corresponding group of Maori women, the figure was 6.18 children per woman in 1962 and 2.5 in 2001. Although these non-Maori birth rates are slightly higher than in Australia, the rate of *decline* is similar.

This, briefly, is the core evidence for what Morgan calls the 'fission in the nucleus of the family' in New Zealand. Given some variations in the relevant figures, the overall picture is broadly comparable to what is happening throughout the English-speaking world. And, as in those countries, reactions to the figures in New Zealand frequently exhibit the same denial, dismissal, and rewriting of history about the real significance of what is happening.

Morgan quotes no less a figure than the New Zealand Minister of Social Services and Employment as urging everyone to accept that the days of the European-style family unit were long gone and being replaced by new sole-parent, reconstituted and extended families. She also quotes the Minister as saying that so long as these new types of families are 'able to provide love, discipline and sound nurturing, things are going to be OK'.

But can such family types so provide? Often, yes; but on average, no. The presence of two biological parents in a sustained relationship makes a difference. The facts about sole parenthood forbid optimism and demand serious attention, not casual dismissal.

In Chapter 7, 'The Consequences for Children', Morgan details some of the huge body of research that consistently shows, across many countries and socio-economic groups, that children—especially young children—who lack the steady involvement of both biological parents in their rearing and socialisation suffer, on average, a range of disadvantages and perils.

These include: higher rates of morbidity and mortality, more accidents, and more abuse and neglect. Educational performance is lower; behavioural and mental health problems more frequent, and the likelihood of failure to form an enduring adult relationship is greater. It is worth noting that the presence of a step-parent or a boyfriend instead of the natural father can often be a particular hazard.

It is frequently claimed that the relatively low income of sole parents is a major cause of such problems rather than the absence of one of the biological parents; with the corollary that if only the state provided more

welfare the problems would disappear. American research, controlling for parental income and social class, has shown little or no relationship between income and child outcomes in sole parent families. Morgan quotes the Western Australian Child Health Survey (one of the best of its kind) that showed a significant increase in mental health problems among children in sole parent families, but family income was not significant in predicting child mental health status.

The major conclusions, then, are that family structure makes a difference to family process, that an enduring partnership is a fundamental structural requirement, and that a two-natural-parent structure works better, on average, than a sole parent family or a two-parent family with only one natural parent, other things remaining equal. This leads Morgan on to the issue which has recently been receiving a lot of attention—the monitoring, supervising and providing role of the (natural) father and the regrettable consequences of his absence and reduced participation after divorce or separation.

While New Zealand family structure, family dysfunction and family violence (especially among Maoris), and their consequences form the core of Morgan's study, there is a great deal beyond that. Declining fertility, for example, is discussed but not dealt with at length; wisely perhaps, since it raises a complex of puzzles deserving a book of its own. Nevertheless, Morgan has a useful discussion of family taxation which, in bearing upon the costs of raising children, is directly relevant to that subject.

She gives particular attention to marriage as the institution that has, traditionally, been the linchpin of family structure, and the rapid emergence of cohabitation as its easily-dispensed substitute. From there, she goes on to look at the communal and social repercussions—such as crime, juvenile delinquency, and the perverse poverty traps of welfare—that are linked to the breakdown of marriage and the fluidity of family commitments.

All of this, she claims, is followed by the feedback loops and spiral of decline that flow from inadequately socialised and neglected children and men unattached to family responsibilities and work. At the end of this unhappy road is the deterioration in the nation's human capital and a society bereft of a tradition of enduring heterosexual coupling and the responsible rearing of children.

The book accordingly concludes by stressing the need for public policies focused on promoting family stability and centred on the crucial roles of marriage and appropriate family law.

Reviewed by Barry Maley

The Case For an Australian Bill of Rights: Freedom in the War on Terror
by George Williams
Sydney, UNSW Press, 2004
95pp, $16.95
ISBN 0 86840 767 4

In this book, George Williams makes a strong argument in favour of the adoption of an Australian Bill of Rights. Against the background of recent debates concerning the legitimacy of intrusions against human rights in the context of mandatory sentencing for property offences, the treatment of asylum seekers, legislative responses to the threat of terrorist attack and the continuing deprivations suffered by many of Australia's Indigenous populations, Williams reviews the experience thus far and proposes a Bill of Rights as a necessary and desirable development for Australia.

The author is a professor of law, but this book is not an exhaustive and rigorous academic assessment of the issues involved. It is clearly aimed at a much broader market, and is an affordable, approachable summary of many of the relevant issues in the Bill of Rights debate. Whilst this may disappoint those looking for a more advanced and detailed scholarly analysis, it does have the great benefit of making this book more accessible to the general public. This attribute is surely necessary in a book aiming to improve the quality and extent of community debate surrounding this important issue.

The book is divided into a series of somewhat disparate chapters that nevertheless build to an effective conclusion. The opening offering, 'Questions Without Answers,' illustrates two concerns which are central to the argument as a whole. First, without a Bill of Rights there is insufficient protection of the human rights of Australians, which are thus left largely to the whims of political discourse. Second, the quality of political debate itself is lessened because of the absence of a suitable frame of reference within which to consider human rights issues.

Later chapters of the book expand on these two issues. The theme of insufficient protection of human rights is explored in detail in chapters which analyse Australia's past record on human rights and the existing legal protections of human rights in Australia. Issues relating to the quality of political debate are borne out most clearly in the chapter dealing with the Australian response to the threat of terrorism, where Willams draws attention to the danger that, in the absence of a Bill of Rights, 'the contours of debate may match the majoritarian pressures of political life rather than the principles and values on which our democracy depends.'

Having made its case for a Bill of Rights, the final part of the book considers how this recommendation can be translated into reality. Following a chapter dealing with the history of failed attempts to introduce a Bill of Rights, Williams considers the first Australian Bill of Rights, the *Human*