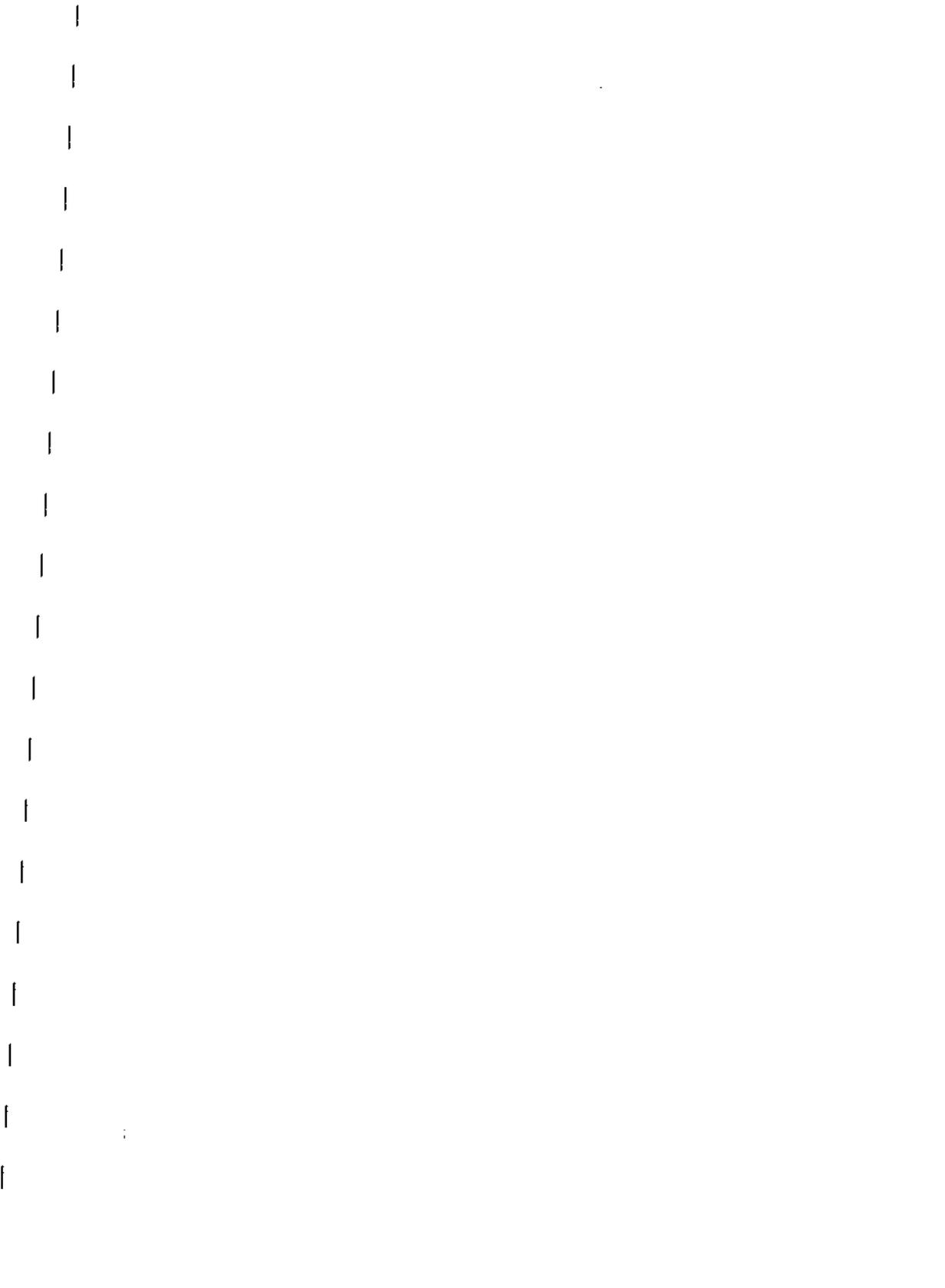


# **Shaping the Social Virtues**

CIS Policy Monographs 28



# Shaping the Social Virtues

DAVID POPENOE • ANDREW NORTON • BARRY MALEY

TAKING  CHILDREN  SERIOUSLY 

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# Introduction

**I**t may be a social law that all adults over 45 believe that their country, and especially its young people, have been going rapidly downhill since they themselves were young. From the walls of Egyptian tombs, from the writings of the Ancient Greeks and on up to the present, there has been no shortage of lamentations about the deplorable state of the world compared to earlier times. Reality is often distorted by the fog of sentimental hindsight. That tendency can be reinforced in our own times by popular media which bring disaster and misery into our living rooms and which constantly present to us examples of violence, decay, social change and criminality to the exclusion of less entertaining examples of continuity, order, contentment and substantial safety. But, for whatever reasons, Australians, in common with many Europeans and North Americans, widely believe that their societies are now more conflictual, less safe and more disturbed in their social relations than they were a generation ago.

This book is a collection of three essays about the 'social' or 'civic' virtues which, when they are strong and commonplace, make living in society better than it might otherwise be. Conversely, when they begin to falter, we rapidly notice the signs in deteriorating quality of life, with more violence and disorder, more dishonesty, more rancour, more quarrelling and less kindness.

*Virtue* is a word used infrequently nowadays. It has an old-fashioned and moralistic ring to it for a 'cool' and permissive age. Yet we still value courage, tenacity, kindness, cooperation, honesty, responsibility, and many other ways of behaving that make individuals admirable and social life peaceful, orderly and rewarding. So virtue is no less relevant to this age than to any other, and those virtues which are especially important for maintaining a high level of civility are the proper objects of our concern and analysis.

Social virtue is both an individual and social achievement; and it is important to know something about the conditions that foster it and the conditions which make achievement difficult or impossible. Those conditions are not wholly social, but they are mainly so, in that the development of virtue requires that individuals be nurtured, coached, cajoled and encouraged to adopt all sorts of moral rules in order to behave virtuously. So it is the institutions and associations of society, and their traditions and functions, that have the task of cultivating virtuous behaviour within as many as possible of each new generation. The capacity of certain key institutions to keep on doing this is therefore a crucial issue for every society.

This is the point of departure for the first essay by the American social scientist, David Popenoe. In considering the state of the social virtues in the United States, he argues backwards, so to speak, from the disturbing state of public action in America to its sources in the failure by the relevant institutions (pre-eminently the family) to develop those personal virtues that sustain civility. Since it is not the main purpose of his paper to spell out the evidence for 'social recession', he takes it as read that America is suffering from 'a declining sense of civic obligation and rising social disorder' with remarkable increases in crime and 'alarming rates of such personal pathologies as suicide, substance abuse' and so on.

His main purpose is to show that there are strong relationships between the forms and emotional content of parent-child interactions and child development; between these kinds of interactions and family structure; and between both of these and the development of the 'social virtues'. Additionally, Popenoe contends that certain kinds of communities promote the development of strong families and he makes a number of proposals about ways in which such communities might be brought into being or strengthened.

For a number of reasons, an understanding of American circumstances can be useful for us. There are similarities and differences between America and Australia. What we share can illuminate the common roots of common problems; and the differences can sometimes provide a kind of 'controlled experiment' where some social factors are varied while others are held constant. Important, too, is the cultural power of America – massively imported via television, books and magazines, films, music, celebrities and corporations. All of this moves the character of Australian culture in American directions. It has been true for a long time, and will continue to be so, that American habits, fashions and sentiments today will find echoes in Australia tomorrow.

In considering the possibility of Australia being in a social recession comparable to that in America, Andrew Norton, in the second essay, does not take it for granted that we are, but looks first to the evidence here for *absence* of the social virtues in the prevalence of personal pathologies such as suicide, substance abuse, stress, anxiety, depression, crime, etc. If those pathologies are unduly prevalent, then that would be evidence for social recession. He then turns to investigate the evidence for the vigour in Australia of the social virtues – honesty, trust, the work ethic, kindness, consideration, etc. If they are in reasonably good shape, this would be evidence against the contention that we are in a social recession. His conclusions are less foreboding about Australia than Popenoe's about America; but he nevertheless warns against complacency.

Any serious reflection on the character of contemporary social life usually leads us to a consideration of the state of the family. This happens because most believe that family life is inevitably the nursery of the wider social life. It is in the family – whether in its traditional nuclear form, or 'blended' or sole parent form – that children have their first, most sustained and most intense interactions with adults at the crucial period when moral and social habits are being established. What happens in those interactions can be decisive for the later character of children and the roles they will play as citizens.

So all three essays devote considerable attention to analysing the present state of the family; and all three find important reasons for misgivings. In the final essay, I have tried briefly to place today's family against the background of some of the historical forces – economic and cultural – which have shaped it and which continue to influence it. But the family is not the only institution that plays a crucial role in developing the social virtues. Others which are especially important are school education, the multiple private and voluntary associations of 'civil society', and the world of work. I believe there is cause for concern in a steady loss of autonomy and choice within them and in the exclusion of hundreds of thousands of young people and adults from the world of work and its moral environment. This is leading to forms of demoralisation and the loss of vitality and enterprise that have important long-term implications for the development of the social virtues.

For the last few years, Australia, in common with most other Western societies, has been preoccupied with its economic problems, and for very good reasons. Many of those problems remain unsolved, but there has been a quantum leap in public and political understanding of economic matters and substantial agreement about what ought

to be done, even though much remains undone. Against this background, and the emergence of the social concerns mentioned above, public attention is turning increasingly to social issues. It is coming to be realised that the economic and the social cannot be considered in isolation from each other and that policies in both areas need to be better integrated. These essays are a contribution to advancing that discussion.

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*Chapter 1*

**The Roots of Declining Social Virtue:  
Family, Community, and the Need for a  
'Natural Communities Policy'**

DAVID POPENOE

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# **The Roots of Declining Social Virtue: Family, Community, and the Need for a 'Natural Communities Policy'**

DAVID POPENOE

**T**o succeed, every society must have a very large percentage of adults who act as good citizens and uphold high moral standards. Yet, with a declining sense of civic obligation and rising social disorder, America today appears in this respect to be in a social recession. Especially over the past thirty years, we have seen a substantial weakening of social virtue. Trust in social institutions and support for public endeavours have withered. More dramatically, we have seen remarkable increases in the most repellent forms of antisocial behaviour, especially violent crime. The social environment that has emerged seems to be generating alarming rates of such personal pathologies as suicide, substance abuse, eating disorders, psychological stress, anxiety, and unipolar depression.

According to a universally-held and, I believe, correct understanding of the situation, high moral standards and prosocial behaviour are largely learned in childhood. To find out what has gone wrong in America, therefore, we must look to the situation of children and the changing conditions of childhood. Unfortunately, what we find is cause for much apprehension. Historians have noted that the socialisation of children has undergone more radical changes since 1960 than at any time in the past 150 years (Mintz 1989:110). The result? It has been said by a number of observers and national

commissions that America may have the first generation of children in its history who are worse off in important behavioural and psychological respects than their parents were at the same stage of life (NCC 1991; NCRSCIAH 1990).

How can this social deterioration have happened? After all, there are fewer children in each family today, and therefore more adults theoretically available to care for them; fewer children are born to teenagers and fewer are unwanted; children in some respects are healthier, materially better off, and they spend more years in school. In addition, there is more national concern for children's rights, for child abuse, and for psychologically sound childrearing practices.

The broad answer to what has gone wrong is that children are creatures of their environment, and the environment for childrearing in America has taken a marked turn for the worse. Much of the attention has focused on the institution of the family, which certainly has declined in major respects (Popenoe 1993a). The break-up rate of families has skyrocketed, for example, as has the rate of births to unwed mothers. Adults – especially men – are less connected to family life than ever before. Parents are spending less time with their children. Is it any wonder that a weakened family is less able to produce children who have the character traits on which social virtue is based, children who are kind and considerate, trusting and trustworthy, responsible and hard working, honest and cooperative, and respectful of rules and authority?

A family focus is undoubtedly correct, as far as it goes. If parents fail, society fails. I shall review below the social science evidence concerning what parents must do to raise socially responsible children. But parents can not do the job all by themselves. Just as the child is dependent on the family, the family is dependent on the surrounding community. Childrearing is a highly demanding, anxiety-producing, and difficult endeavour, one that throughout world history has never been left solely to parents (let alone a single parent) to the degree that it is in our society today. Parents normally have functioned in highly supportive communities, where the entire community is geared to the task. In the words of an old-world proverb: 'It takes a whole village to raise a child.'

Parents need three types of social support in childrearing: emotional support in the form of love and acceptance from other adults, instrumental support such as the provision of information and advice and help with routine tasks, and the reinforcement of social expectations about what is and is not appropriate behaviour (Belsky 1984). For the moral development of children, no aspect of commu-

nity support is more important than the community's ability to reinforce the social expectations of parents; that is, to express a consensus of shared values. Young people need to hear a consistent message about what is right and wrong from all the important adults in their lives; they need not only a social community but a moral community. As psychologist William Damon has noted, 'The acid test of whether there is a community at all is the extent to which moral guidance for the young is shared among all who come in contact with them' (Damon 1992:87).

Therein lies a childrearing problem of enormous magnitude in America today. How many communities do we have left that provide a consensus of shared values, and in which the moral guidance of the young is shared by all? Pitifully few, I suggest. Indeed, it is hard to think of communities that are more poorly designed for children than those of the United States. How we deal with this problem in the future will largely determine our nation's ability to persevere as a society with a measure of social virtue. It is time, I argue, for a radical shift in how we think about our communities, and how we build them.

### **Raising a Moral Child**

Let us begin with a review of the conditions of successful childrearing, looking at parent-child interaction, family structure, and the characteristics of family-supportive communities. A great deal is now known about the childrearing conditions that give rise to socially responsible children and adults who have competence, character, and social virtue (Wilson 1993). The irony is that the more we learn about the optimum conditions of childrearing, the more we see these conditions being eroded before our very eyes.

I should stress at the outset that it is easy to overestimate the effects on adults of the social environment within which they grew up. Children can be very adaptable, and some successful adults come from the worst of social situations. Also, genetic endowment no doubt plays a much larger role in human behaviour than most social scientists are willing to admit. Recent studies of identical twins reared in very different social environments (Bouchard & McGue 1990; Bouchard, Lykken, McGue, Segal & Tellegen 1990), and siblings reared in the same social environment (Plomin 1989; Dunn & Plomin 1990), should give all social scientists pause for reflection. They report a strong heritability of most psychological traits, ranging from 50% to 70%, and there is certainly enough evidence for 'constitutional factors' to provide an out for parents whose children don't turn out well, and to recommend humility for parents whose children do. (The

old saying is that parents tend to be cultural determinists – until their second child is born!) A useful formulation of the nature-nurture combination is that individual development is the result of individual organismic factors acting in relation to aspects of the environment which can facilitate or impede that development (Horowitz 1987). In any event, there is no evidence to suggest that genetic or biological changes explain why the present generation of children is worse off than their parents were at the same age. What has changed is the social environment in which children are being raised.

### **Parent-Child Interaction**

The social science research of recent decades has pointed up three key dimensions of the parental socialisation process as having particular importance for the development of socially responsible children: emotional attachment, prosocial behaviour, and conformity to rules with respect for authority. First, many studies have concluded that, beyond the basic needs for physical protection and nutrition, a critical need of children growing up is to have warm, intimate ‘attachment’ relationships with their parent or parents. As social psychologist Willard W. Hartup recently has concluded, ‘A child’s effectiveness in dealing with the social world emerges largely from experience in close relationships’ (Hartup 1989). ‘The overriding importance of close relationships in childhood is contained in a series of propositions presented to UNESCO by Urie Bronfenbrenner, summarising what he refers to as ‘the main findings of the scientific revolution that has occurred in the study of human development.’

1. In order to develop – intellectually, emotionally, socially, and morally – a child requires participation in progressively more complex reciprocal activity, on a regular basis over an extended period in the child’s life, with one or more persons with whom the child develops a strong, mutual, irrational, emotional attachment and who is committed to the child’s well being and development, preferably for life.
2. The establishment of patterns of progressive interpersonal interaction under conditions of strong mutual attachment enhances the young child’s responsiveness to other features of the immediate physical, social, and – in due course – symbolic environment that invite exploration, manipulation, elaboration, and imagination. Such activities, in turn, also accelerate the child’s psychological growth (Bronfenbrenner 1990).

These findings were anticipated, of course, by such classic figures

as Sigmund Freud and Charles Cooley, and are heavily influenced by the pioneering work of the late John Bowlby and his followers who have conducted the empirical research on 'attachment theory' (Bowlby 1988).

There is growing evidence that early attachment experiences shape not only child development, but attitudes and behaviour throughout one's life. People growing up without satisfactory attachment experiences are at higher risk of becoming anxious, insecure, or avoidant in social relationships, both as children and later as adults.<sup>1</sup> For example, a longitudinal study that followed people over a 36 year period found that the dimension of childhood correlating most closely with being socially accomplished as an adult (ie. 'having a long, happy marriage, children, and relationships with close friends at midlife') was having had 'a warm and affectionate father or mother' (Franz, McClelland & Weinberger 1991:586). This factor was far more important than having grown up in a family with 'parental harmony,' or with a childhood that was 'not difficult.' Early attachment experiences are also important for developing a trusting view of others. Through attachment experiences people learn to desire the approval of others, and to have the belief that – given certain conditions – they can count on such approval. This is an important basis of social trust.

Humans almost certainly have a genetic predisposition to engage in close relationships, but it is a predisposition which can be facilitated or impeded by the environment. A childrearing environment that generates strong attachments no doubt can be created by the mother – or by some other adult caregiver – alone. 'Survivors' or 'resilient children,' the children from deeply deprived socioeconomic backgrounds who are successful as adults, typically have the common denominator of at least one adult who was devoted to their welfare (Werner & Smith 1992). But it is much more likely that strong attachments can be created when more than one adult is involved, as noted by Bronfenbrenner's third proposition:

3. The establishment and maintenance of patterns of progressively more complex interaction and emotional attachment between caregiver and child depend in substantial degree on the availability and involvement of another adult, a third party who assists, encourages, spells off, gives status to, and expresses admiration and affection for the person caring for and engaging in joint activity with the child (Bronfenbrenner 1990:3).

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<sup>1</sup> The need for close relationships continues in adulthood, and may be the most important factor in adult health and well-being (House, Landis & Umberson 1989).

Although this proposition is written with the non-specific 'third party,' it provides the justification – if any were needed – for the traditional role of the father in assisting the mother, which virtually every society has institutionalised through marriage. The most successful embodiment of this proposition in modern societies is the two-biological parent family where the father takes a strong interest in his children's and their mother's welfare.

It is the lack of a 'third party,' presumably, that is a major reason why single-parent families are less successful in child outcomes than their two-parent counterparts. Much has been written in recent years about the advantages, or lack thereof, of two-parent families. A 1992 front page article in the *Washington Post* referred to 'a searching re-evaluation by social scientists' concluding that 'the conventional two-parent household may be far less critical to the healthy development of children than previously believed.' Some social scientists refer to 'the misguided belief that children will receive better parenting in intact families.' My reading of the research is that the relative success of the two-parent family can be considered a confirmed empirical generalisation, indeed, about as confirmed a generalisation as one can draw from the social sciences (Popenoe 1992, 1993b; Whitehead 1993). A review of research on the relationship between family structure and school achievement, for example, concluded 'I believe the consistency of the finding that living in a two-parent household is a benefit to achievement is evident; while not all differences reach significance, virtually none are found in the opposite direction' (Milne 1989:57). Another research review concluded: 'research on antisocial behavior consistently illustrates that adolescents in mother-only households...are more prone to commit delinquent acts' (Demo & Acock 1988:638). A third states: 'What is clear is that the multiple economic, social, and psychological life stresses of being a single or a visiting or a remarried parent...weaken the family in its child-rearing and child-protective functions' (Wallerstein 1991:359). Finally, a recent nationwide study of teenagers based on the 1988 National Health Interview Survey of Child Health, concluded that 'young people from single-parent or step families were two to three times more likely to have had emotional or behavioral problems than those who had both of their biological parents present in the home' (Zill & Schoenborn 1990:120; see also Dawson 1991).

Beyond attachment, and the emotional security and ability to maintain close relationships that it brings, lies the second of the key dimensions of the parental socialisation process: the need for children to develop 'prosocial' patterns of behaviour, that is, voluntary, altru-

istic behaviour intended to benefit others, such as helping, sharing, and comforting. It is this behaviour upon which the success of any society depends. As with attachment, there is evidence to suggest that humans are genetically predisposed to engage in prosocial behaviour and that the seeds of prosocial behaviour are manifest very early in a child's life, contrary to the classic notion that young children are born purely self-interested and amoral (Trivers 1985; Badcock 1991; Dunn 1988; Hinde 1987). But again, the social environment can either facilitate or impede this inborn impulse.

Warm, supportive parenting of the type involved in attachment experiences provides a foundation for the development of prosocial behaviour. In the words of several prominent psychologists, 'Individual failures in moral development begin with poor attachment bonds between an infant and its caretakers' (Hogan, Johnston & Emler 1978:15). But good attachment is not sufficient. Prosocial behaviour and moral values must be purposefully taught and reinforced by caregivers. This is especially true in individualistic and competitive societies such as the United States where, compared to traditional societies, everyday life is not so marked by cooperation and helping among kin and neighbours (Whiting & Edwards 1988; Whiting & Whiting 1975).

Social science research on prosocial behaviour is of fairly recent vintage, most earlier work having focused on negative behaviours such as aggression and violence. The main conclusions of this research, few of which are counterintuitive, are as follows (Eisenberg 1992; Eisenberg & Mussen 1989): Children often learn by imitation or modelling, and the more consistently caring and altruistic the parent is, the more the child will be. Prosocial behaviour can also be taught verbally, and children continually should be receiving such instruction. But instruction works much better when word and deed are allied; the words of parents who preach altruism, but do not practice it themselves, may have little lasting effect. It is also important to encourage (but not force) prosocial behaviour in various ways so that children have the chance actually to practice it, especially in relationships among siblings. Prosocial and moral issues are encountered daily by children through their relationships with others, and these relationships can provide valuable learning experiences when guided and reinforced by adults (Damon 1988).

A most significant research finding is that prosocial behaviour is heavily dependent on developing strong feelings of sympathy and empathy in children, on teaching them to take the perspective of the other (Wilson & Herrnstein 1985, Ch.7). Sympathy and empathy can

be promoted in many ways, but one of the most important is through positive forms of discipline. Certain disciplinary techniques are more effective than others. By far the most effective in promoting sympathy, empathy, and thereby prosocial behaviour, involves the use of reasoning or 'inductions', specifically pointing out the consequences of the child's behaviour for other people ('look at the way you hurt her; now she feels bad.'). Such an approach takes time, but is far preferable to 'power-assertive' forms of discipline that involve physical punishment or the deprivation of privileges. Indeed, such punitive discipline, especially if used to excess, is actually detrimental for a child's prosocial development. Rather than an outward-looking empathy, it generates an inward-looking concern for the self and self-preservation.

The third key dimension of parental socialisation is instilling in children a respect for authority and a sense of obligation to comply with social rules. A healthy family has its own set of rules, such as prohibitions against dishonesty, theft, and violence, that parallel those of the healthy society. In this respect the family is a miniature social system, with parents as the chief promoters and enforcers of social order. Some believe that children who have strong allegiance to family rules and social order will have difficulty developing an allegiance to the rules of larger social systems, but this is not the case. It is through relations with parents (and later other adults) that children learn about social rules in general, and thereby develop a respect for society and its legitimate authority. Using other terms, this can be expressed as the development of conscience – an internalised constraint against certain actions, the violation of which generates anxiety.

The parents' task is to communicate and demonstrate to their children the purpose of social rules, and, when necessary, enforce the rules by applying various sanctions, both positive and negative. In families where children are firmly attached and prosocial behaviour has been promoted, negative sanctions are minimal. The close relationship that parents have with their children is normally enough to insure cooperation.

The outcome of this socialisation process within the family is critically important for the larger society, which in the final analysis is based on regulation and hierarchy and the shared willingness of citizens to conform to social norms. 'The child's respect for parental authority,' notes William Damon, 'sets the direction for civilized participation in the social order when the child later begins assuming the rights and responsibilities of full citizenship.' Indeed, in Damon's

view, 'the child's respect for this authority is the single most important moral legacy that comes out of the child's relationship with the parent' (Damon 1988:52).

### **The Strong Family**

What kinds of families are best able to generate in their children emotional attachment, prosocial behaviour, and respect for rules and authority? Analogous to the fashion in psychological research that has emphasised antisocial over prosocial behaviour, there has been a great deal of sociological research on dysfunctional families, but surprisingly little on strong, successful families. The characteristics of such families, however, have been identified recently by a number of family researchers as follows: 'Enduring, cohesive, affectionate, and mutually-appreciative, and in which family members communicate with one another frequently and fruitfully' (Krysan, Moore & Zill 1990a: 2; Krysan, Moore & Zill 1990b). Strong families are seldom 'trouble free.' Many have experienced health, financial, and other problems, but they are adaptable, and able to deal with crises in a constructive manner.

This set of characteristics holds few surprises; it is one that any grandmother would probably present. One of the characteristics most frequently mentioned by researchers is effective communication; in strong families, communication is clear, open, and frequent. 'Family members talk to each other often, and when they do, they are honest and open with each other' (Krysan, Moore & Zill 1990a:4-5). Another very important, underlying characteristic is commitment. In strong families there is a commitment to the family as a unit, and a sense of the family as constituting a team with special identity and meaning. Members are willing to take action and sacrifice, if necessary, to preserve family well-being (Stinnett & DeFrain 1985). This same quality is found in strong, enduring marriages – not only does each spouse consider the other a best friend, but each is committed to staying with the other for life.

Strong families also tend to have an 'authoritative' disciplinary style (Baumrind 1989). Scholars agree that a child's moral capacities are best developed under an approach 'in which firm demands are made of the child while at the same time there is clear communication between adult and child about the nature and justification of these demands' (Damon 1988:117). Disciplinary styles can be arrayed on a continuum ranging from restrictive to permissive. When combined with a continuum of parent-child relationships ranging from 'warm' to 'cold,' the authoritative style is sometimes referred to as 'warm-

restrictive,' or 'loving discipline.' This disciplinary style encourages children to value adult approval, readily internalise rules, and abide by those rules.

The other major disciplinary styles have different child outcomes. An oversimplified summary of each follows: Warm-permissive parents tend to generate children who will be self-confident and socially outgoing, but who will frequently ignore or bend the rules ('affable but spoiled'); cold-restrictive parents tend to generate children who are anxious and sullen, but compliant; cold-permissive parents (probably the worst combination) produce children who are hostile and rule defying, with a high probability for delinquency. There is reason to believe that both the warm-permissive and cold-permissive approaches are on the increase, especially with the rapid growth of single-parent families in which one person has the sole responsibility for childrearing.

Compared to the others, the preferred warm-restrictive disciplinary style takes by far the most time. Parents must be able to make time for their children, and be with them to provide both love and discipline. Indeed, the ability and willingness to spend time together are powerful factors underlying almost all aspects of the strong family. It takes a great deal of time to have the kind of warm, repetitive interactions on which successful family life is based, interactions which include many routines and family traditions and lead to the development of a rich family subculture that has lasting meaning for its members. This is why the 'time famine' that currently faces so many American families is a national calamity.

### **Supportive Communities**

Probably everyone in America would agree that strong family ties raise the probability of producing virtuous offspring. The chances of becoming a successful and socially responsible adult are increased substantially if one is raised in a loving, structured, supportive family environment. Much less well understood, however, is the fact that to be strong, a family requires a supportive environment of its own (Bronfenbrenner, Moen & Garbarino 1983). Strong families tend to be well connected to the local community. They have external resources in the form of friends, family and neighbours, and they participate actively in community organisations; they are not as socially isolated as less successful families. Strong families obviously can be found which are fortresses in an alien community, but these are exceptions. One of the most important distinguishing characteristics of families that abuse their children, for example, is social isolation (Ammerman

& Hersen 1990; Young & Gately 1988; Garbarino & Sherman 1980). Indeed, the recent increase in child abuse could well stem in part from the growing social isolation of families.

What kind of communities promote strong families? The list of characteristics of strong families noted above can just as well be applied to communities: 'enduring, cohesive, and mutually-appreciative, and in which community members communicate with one another frequently and fruitfully;' in short, communities that are stable, have a strong consensus of values, and in which people frequently interact with respect to those values (White 1990).

Turning to childrearing, the importance of the local community is summarised by Bronfenbrenner's fourth proposition about human development:

4. The effective functioning of child-rearing processes in the family and other child settings requires establishing ongoing patterns of exchange of information, two-way communication, mutual accommodation, and mutual trust between the principal settings in which children and their parents live their lives. In contemporary societies, these settings are the home, child-care programs, the school, and the parents' place of work (Bronfenbrenner 1990: 36).

The central significance of the community for moral development is this: Moral development in children takes place in part through repetition and reinforcement, and through adapting fundamental moral values to a variety of social circumstances beyond the family. As the child moves into the outside world, the moral lessons taught by the parents must be sustained by others. In an intensive ten-year study of 10 communities across America, Francis Ianni found the existence of a local consensus of values to be the key predictor of adolescent adjustment, a far stronger predictor than such variables as affluence or ethnicity. In his words:

Congeniality among their values and clarity and consistency in their guidance are essential to the adolescent, who is engaged in a **search for structure**, a set of believable and attainable expectations and standards from the community to guide the movement from child to adult status. If the values expressed by different community sectors are at odds...the teenager cannot be expected to accept their good will or trust their judgment (Ianni 1989:262).

Yet all across America, community value dissensus is in the ascendency. Much attention has focused on public schools, and their failure to provide value reinforcement. Another important area of value conflict is between families and the world of work, which

typically operates as if workers had no families. One of the most significant examples of value conflict in America today, of course, is between the values families try to teach their children and those commonly expressed through the mass media.

American parents today believe that they are a beleaguered lot, living in an increasingly hostile community environment where value consensus is more and more problematic. Their neighbourhoods have become anonymous, their neighbours are disinterested, and crime and personal security are constant problems. They feel isolated and unappreciated, and view their task as a lonely and risky one. Popular culture has become an enemy, not a friend. To make matters worse, their own parents now live at a distance, and they have fewer and fewer relatives on whom to rely for personal support.

### **Human Evolution and the American Experience**

For a fuller understanding of the importance of the community for family functioning, it is useful to provide a brief excursus into human evolution. Human beings are tribal animals; our attitudes, instincts, and behaviours have been shaped by tribal experiences (Maybury-Lewis 1992). For most of our existence on earth, human personalities have been locked into close-knit and orderly social groupings, whether nomadic bands, small villages, or extended families. With the family as their basic building block, these groupings were glued together socially by strong loyalties and commitments based on family relatedness, a shared geographic area, a common religion, and a single ethnic group – forms of social connectedness that today we call 'traditional'.<sup>2</sup> Survival apart from such groupings was rare, and individualism was unknown; the personal and the social were one.

From an evolutionary perspective, it is reasonable to say that we are biologically adapted in large measure to living an intense social life among our own kind, and we suffer when we do not have these strong, primordial ties. Put another way, our natural inclination is to want to have close personal ties and to be included in strong groups that have clear values and a stable social structure, a social situation which can provide us with a sense of identity and belonging. When we don't have close ties and strong groups we feel alienated, lonely, depressed, spiritually empty and often worse – wretched, useless, and self-destructive (Oldenquist 1986). The strength of social ties – what anthropologist Raoull Naroll refers to as a moralnet – varies from culture to culture around the world. Studies of these cultures have

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that all preliterate societies are or were 'harmonious, peaceful, benign and content'. see Edgerton 1992.

shown that the stronger the social ties, the fewer the social and personal problems (Naroll 1983).

In the last few centuries, first in the West and later in other parts of the world, the culture of modernity – noted for its extreme individualism – has been transplanted onto our tribal human nature and our tribal social groupings. Modernity has brought enormous rewards. The creative impulses of individualism generated the growth of science and technology, and human beings have materially prospered as never before. The new focus on the individual brought political democracy, with considerable increases in individual dignity, personal liberty, interpersonal equality, and human justice. And the weakening of group ties has probably been instrumental in reducing inter-tribal warfare, recently on the world scale to which such warfare had become elevated as the scourge of the 20th century. Indeed, human advances under the culture of modernity have been so impressive that it is thought today that civilisational progress and individual differentiation from the group go hand in hand; that individualism is the natural and progressive successor to tribalism and cultural collectivism (Lasch 1991). And certainly, very few people today wish to return to the past.

Because of the tremendous successes of modernity, it is tempting to think that further progress rests on removing whatever tribalism remains, on getting rid for all time of 'localism' and 'parochialism' and enabling us all to pledge allegiance to but a single, universal human tribe. We must be very cautious about this strategy, however. The need for close ties and strong groups is an indelible part of human nature; it can not be stamped out. As Michael Walzer has said:

Tribalism names the commitment of individuals and groups to their own history, culture, and identity, and this commitment...is a permanent feature of human social life. The parochialism that it breeds is similarly permanent. It can't be overcome; it has to be accommodated, and therefore the crucial universal principle is that it must always be accommodated: not only my parochialism but yours as well, and his and hers in their turn....our common humanity will never make us members of a single universal tribe. The crucial commonality of the human race is particularism (Walzer 1992:171).

There are many perspectives from which this broad issue could be addressed. To me, the most important one is that modernity not only has rewards, as noted above, but also social costs: personal pathology and community disorder. These have become as much the hallmarks of modernity as material and technological growth and

democracy. And the negative impact has been greatest on children, who are the most sensitive expression of social conditions. At the personal level, radical individualism has an uneasy fit with our biologically-evolved human nature, and it is not at all certain that a further loosening of social ties in favour of individual choice will generate more human happiness and well-being. Indeed, we may not be as happy today as in times past. The generation of new personal pathologies can be seen all around us, mainly of the kind now labelled 'psychological.' At the social level, while we may be making progress toward an international social order, our internal, 'tribal social order' has fallen on hard times. The gradual weakening of family and community ties, in short of the traditional forms of social connectedness, has generated an alarming increase in community disorder.

The social costs (and perhaps also the rewards) of modernity are greater in the United States than anywhere else. This may not be the view of immigrants to this country from the Third World, people who have not yet shared many of modernity's benefits, but it is the growing opinion of close observers of American society who have done careful, comparative examinations of recent social trends. Especially since the 1960s, a time when American society underwent a massive attempt to rid itself of 'tribal mentalities' and traditional social relationships, the social costs have grown. (So, of course, have some important rewards, such as greater equality for women and minorities.)

The United States has become possibly the most multi-tribal society of all time. In the sense of trying fully to blend together multiple ethnic, racial, and religious groupings, our diversity and cultural pluralism are legendary. This is both our strength, and our weakness (*Utne Reader* 1992). It is a strength because diversity can be stimulating, generating creativity and achievement. It is a weakness because diversity can be psychologically and morally overwhelming, generating moral relativism, hyper-individualism, and, ultimately, community and social decline. As fellow sociologist Peter Berger recently has commented, 'Pluralism creates a condition of permanent uncertainty as to what one should believe and how one should live; but the human mind abhors uncertainty' (Berger 1992:45).

Tolerance of the strange and the diverse in America today has become a social essential (*The Economist* 5 September 1992). Indeed, tolerance and 'intergroup relations' have become consuming goals of our nation (some might say all-consuming because – as necessary as they are – they increasingly distract us from other important concerns and issues). Often implicit in these goals is the weakening of group

identities and group ties, the idea being that people with weaker ties will be more tolerant. But the emergence of a society in which all semblance of tribalism is gone poses a serious threat to social order and further human development because it mismatches with human nature. In the words of political philosopher Michael J. Sandel: 'Intolerance flourishes most where forms of life are dislocated, roots unsettled, traditions undone' (Sandel 1984:17). Along similar lines, ethicist Andrew Oldenquist has written: 'Our social problems are not due nearly as much to the competition of loyalties as to their absence.. they are due to alienation, loss of belonging, to not having affiliations about which one deeply cares' (Oldenquist 1986:127).

A major task of our age, therefore, is this: While seeking to maximise individual development and respond to the exigencies of an ever-diversifying social environment, we must at the same time maintain some semblance of tribalism – which boils down to protecting and cultivating the primordial institutions of family and community.<sup>3</sup> This may sound like a tall if not improbable order, but it is the only reasonable choice we have.

### **American Communities and Family Life**

American communities are strikingly unfit for children. If the building of American communities had been left to the wise planner in the sky, and if the needs and interests of children had been the primary goal, our residential communities would be very different from what now exists. The major drawbacks for children, considering the optimum conditions of childrearing discussed earlier, are as follows:

**First**, children need and want social stability and a stable social structure. They want to feel psychologically and socially secure in a place where they can 'belong' and feel at home, and where common values are shared by those with whom they come into contact. Yet American communities are transient, anonymous, diverse, and increasingly unfriendly and even hostile to children.

**Second**, children need and want a community where they feel physically secure, a place where they can freely play in the neighbourhood without fear of bodily harm. Yet American neighbourhoods are the most crime ridden of any industrialised society.

**Third**, children need and want a community that is accessible to them. Yet most American metropolitan environments are built at a scale that

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<sup>3</sup> This is closely related to the ideas of protecting 'social capital' advanced by James Coleman (Coleman 1990), protecting 'mediating institutions' advanced by Peter L. Berger and Richard Neuhaus (Berger & Neuhaus 1977) and protecting 'civil society' advanced by Alan Wolfe (Wolfe 1989).

depends on the use of the automobile, a mode of transportation that is available to children only through adults.

**Fourth**, children need and want a community where their parents and other adults will be with them a great deal of the time. Yet most American communities are arranged in such a way that parents have to commute long distances to work, further extending their already long work hours. The typical American neighbourhood is now filled during the day with empty homes.

**Fifth**, children need and want a rich local community life, with many community activities and events that draw families together to share good times. Yet community events across America, such as parades and community fairs, are in decline. The typical 'community event' for most children has become a trip to the mall or movie complex, or a few friends getting together to rent a video.

**Sixth**, children need and want free time, with a certain sense of carefreeness in which they can follow the path of their own imaginations. Yet the community lives of many American children have become increasingly regimented and scheduled, through day care, school sports and other organised recreation, part-time jobs for teenagers, and many other activities that typically take place far from home (and often involve elaborate car-pool efforts).

The list could go on. Some of these drawbacks apply especially to the inner-city ghetto. But many apply to the type of community in which the average American now lives, the low-density suburb of a medium-sized metropolitan area. If not for children, we might ask, then for what or whom were such suburbs built? They were built primarily for economic efficiency; most residents would gladly leave such areas if they could find employment and services in smaller, more friendly places. They were built for the adult who has maximum use of the automobile, disregarding the situation not only of children but also the elderly, the poor, and the infirm and disabled. They were built by and for men, who are generally more mobile and whose lives, more than women's, are enriched by places of work (which have become the principal community for many); women as well as children do not thrive in such areas. And they were built with the goal of privatising family life, the opposite of what children want. The building of most American low-density suburbs involved simply constructing spacious houses on whatever land was vacant, with little thought given to the very real social needs of the majority of residents.

What can be done? How can we foster communities that are more oriented to the needs of children, communities – if you will – that have more of the qualities of a tribal village? There are two broad

approaches to fostering community life in America. One focuses on residential areas or locality groups, people who live together in a common neighbourhood or local area. The other focuses on non-residential 'interest' communities, or groups of people who live apart from one another but who constitute a network of social interaction and who share common interests and values. The second is the approach that is gradually being played out in America, partly by default.

Historically, most residential areas have also been 'functional communities' where people have networks of social interaction and share common values and interests. But physical proximity of residence is no longer the principal basis for social relationships among most adults. Increasingly unfulfilled by the locality group, people's strong desire for community largely has taken on a non-geographic dimension, what sociologists refer to as 'dispersal of social ties.' This reliance on non-residential communities is not a wholly satisfactory solution to the problem, however, and in some ways exacerbates it.

### **Non-residential Communities**

As residential areas in America have become increasingly diverse and amorphous, the strategy of Americans has been to give up on these as social communities and create 'communities without propinquity' or far-flung social networks – communities of interest made up of like minded people who live in many different residential areas. This has been the characteristic strategy of urban dwellers. As cities grow and become more diverse, neighbourhoods weaken and urbanites develop city-wide social networks. Many cities still have the mostly working-class 'urban villages,' remnants of a prior urban form, but these are rapidly disappearing.

The best example of non-residential communities in America today are those formed through religious institutions. More Americans belong to religious groups than to any other type of voluntary association. One reason is that, of all the social institutions, religious institutions are the only ones that are involved with the entire family over each stage of its life cycle. Typically, a strong local church will draw its parishioners from a great distance, and much of the social life of the members takes place through the church. When schools are added to the mix, the religious community becomes even more insulated from the locality; neighbourhood schools in the residential community are given up in favour of private, religiously-oriented schools, a phenomenon that has grown like wild fire in recent years.

The strength of such religious communities in America today, fewer and fewer of which are organised along parish lines, is something that sets us apart from almost all other advanced, industrial societies. Especially outside of cities, fundamentalist Christian groups have become one of our strongest and most rapidly growing community types. They have also been quite successful, not incidentally, in maintaining social order and high moral standards among their members.

The important role of non-residential communities in contemporary American life has been raised forcefully by the work of James S. Coleman and Thomas Hoffer in their comparison of public and private high schools (Coleman & Hoffer 1987). They make the point that the comparative success of Catholic schools is due in large part to the fact that these schools are connected to functional communities, made up of parents who share similar values about education, and who interact to promote their children's educational achievement. They note that such functional communities greatly augment the resources available to parents in their interactions with the school, and in their supervision of their children's school work and associations with others. It is important to point out that to be a fully functioning community, both sharing values ('value communities') and social interaction are important. Many private schools constitute value communities, but the community effect is weakened because parents do not interact much with one another. Public schools, in contrast, are typically attached to neighbourhoods which lack both the value consensus and social network components (Steinberg 1989).

To promote academic achievement and moral behaviour in children, it is undoubtedly important for schools to share the same values as the families who send them students. This proposition has long provided the impetus for those favouring 'neighbourhood schools.' And, as neighbourhoods themselves weaken as functioning communities, it has provided the impetus behind today's concern for 'school choice' through use of vouchers. As Nathan Glazer recently has suggested, school choice permits 'those who can create stronger communities to choose the schools in which the norms they respect and want to see realised can be enforced and will be generally accepted' (Glazer 1992:75). A major issue with school choice, however, is the potential negative consequences for those pupils who are left behind in the old neighbourhood schools.

Other non-residential sources of community are less encompassing of the full range of life activities. Examples are voluntary associations, such as adult service organisations and organisations

based on ethnic heritage, and especially places of work. Much has been written about how the work place in America has become a community for many people, especially those without families. In Japan, the workplace is much more community-providing than in the United States, although there the family is also strong. Much more can and needs to be done in America to make the workplace family-friendly, but the problem with the workplace as a source of community is the inherent instability of employment. Once a person is laid off – an all too familiar event in America today – that is the end of the community relationship.

A case can be made for fostering each of these non-residential community forms. Without them, with what are people left? The problem is, however, that as each becomes stronger, the residential area grows weaker as a functioning community – toward a state of obsolescence in which each family and even each individual family member has its own set of personalised and non-overlapping non-residential communities. A clear example is the shift to private schools, and its inevitable consequences for neighbourhood schools.

### **Residential Areas as Communities**

Is it really such a good idea to largely give up on the residential community and shift to a wide range of non-residential interest communities? I think not. In my view, we, as a nation, should be doing everything possible to bring neighbourhoods and towns back to their historical, natural form – as functioning communities.

First, let us review why residential areas have declined as functioning communities:

- 1) most residents no longer work in them;
- 2) the distance between home and work has increased.
- 3) they have become culturally diverse;
- 4) they have a high turnover of population;
- 5) mothers are no longer at home during the day;
- 6) the automobile has reduced pedestrian interaction;
- 7) security problems have grown, leading to increased privatisation; and
- 8) households have shrunk; with fewer people at home, the household becomes less attached to the locality. An additional problem for childrearing families is that these families have become a distinct minority in most American localities; they now make up less than a third of all

households nationwide, compared to more than 75% of all households in the last century.

These trends manifestly constitute a major structural change in society. Many of them can not be undone; others could be modified, but we may not want to do that for other reasons. Such structural change constitutes a major obstacle to attempts to restore residential areas as important functioning communities in the lives of families.

With the deck so stacked, why is it nevertheless important to give serious consideration to such a restoration? Consider the social costs of the shift from residential to non-residential communities. First, it is fundamentally unfair to our less privileged citizens. The more privileged in life tend to have more voluntary social relationships and connections outside of local areas, while the poor, the infirm, the handicapped, the elderly, and especially children – with their limited means and accessibility – are left behind to fend for themselves locally. For these segments of the population, the local residential area is still their main community, and there is little they can do about that fact. Whereas for a well-heeled (especially male) adult there might be only a minimal negative impact from a home environment marked by unfriendliness, anonymity, and worse, for children and childrearing families the impact can be great. This form of inequality lies behind the recent 'civic liberalism' proposals of Mickey Kaus. Rather than being so concerned with income inequalities and income redistribution, he argues, liberals should concentrate their efforts on building a public sphere in which all Americans can share and be respected as equals (Kaus 1992).

Second, the shift to non-residential communities generates neighbourhood disorder, delinquency, and crime through a breakdown of informal social control (Horwitz 1990). One of the community changes today's parents most often note from the time they were growing up is neighbourhood insecurity. For security reasons, children and teenagers are not able to wander freely about the neighbourhood as they once were. Parents have deep concerns for their safety, and their whereabouts must now be known at all times. Juvenile delinquency has increased, and many teenage peer groups have become virulent. The social control of teenagers clearly depends not only on what is happening within the household, but also on what is happening within the community.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> One major empirical study concluded: 'Communities characterized by sparse friendship networks, unsupervised teenage peer groups, and low organizational participation had disproportionately high rates of crime and delinquency' (Sampson & Groves 1989:799).

The amount of disorder in residential areas is strongly related to neighbourhood upkeep and to the informal social control activities of residents, such as neighbourhood watch and bystander intervention (eg. being on the lookout for unruly behaviour in public places and taking responsibility for reporting it, when necessary, to the police). It is very important in this regard for neighbourhoods to be stable and cohesive, with citizens groups, block associations, and other neighbourhood organisations and activities. Yet the shift by local residents to non-residential sources of community severely weakens their neighbourhood attachment. Neighbourhood disorder, in turn, helps to generate neighbourhood decline and makes the neighbourhood a more likely target for outside criminals (Skogan 1990). In the face of growing neighbourhood decline and crime, residents tend to withdraw still further from the local community into their own private communities and private lives, setting off a spiral of neighbourhood decay that can be seen today all across America.

Third, going beyond the immediate needs of children and other local residents, the weakening of residential communities exacerbates in some ways the problems of diversity in American life. As neighbourhoods decline, caused either by market or government forces, those who are financially and temperamentally able move away, often leaving the old neighbourhoods and local areas to the needy, the weak, and the disturbed. Not just neighbourhoods but entire towns and cities are affected. The widespread geographic separation of rich and poor occurs, quite apart from considerations of common moral values. And America becomes differentiated into massive, isolated, lifestyle enclaves based mainly on wealth and privilege. Natural villages and towns of the past, by comparison, contained a broad mix of income groups, not within each neighbourhood but within the local area. For better or worse, the citizens of these areas had to struggle – face to face – to create a common life.

### **Developing a Natural Communities Policy**

To improve the conditions for childrearing in America today, nothing may be more important than trying to protect and cultivate those natural, tribal- or village-like communities that still remain – communities which have families as their basic building blocks, and in which a mix of people through free association and sets of relational networks maintain a common life. This could be called a 'natural communities' policy. It is a policy that, at minimum, enjoins both the market and the state from doing further damage to civil society. The wishes and concerns of local cultural groupings should be deeply

respected, and functioning local communities should in some cases be protected from the intrusion of outsiders. Natural communities, like natural environments, should never be taken for granted. Social environments should be thought of as every bit as fragile, and as worth preserving, as natural environments, with a similarly intricate and easily damaged ecological network. Just as we now require environmental and family impact statements for some pending national legislation, perhaps we should also be thinking in similar terms about the impact of public policies on functioning social communities.

Unmistakably, the development of a natural communities policy faces a legal and social mine field. Unfortunately, the issues can barely be introduced in the present paper. There are the obvious concerns about racial and ethnic discrimination, and about constitutionally guaranteed human rights. Many existing communities in America are far from being 'natural,' including those at the top that function more to preserve property values than to promote a common life, and those at the bottom, the urban and rural ghettos of the poor. This raises a serious problem of which existing communities, in fact, should be protected. Moreover, we must be concerned about community-supporting impulses running awry, as sometimes happened in the 'community action' programs of the 1960s when a handful of self-selected community leaders benefited far more than community residents (Glazer 1988).

Most importantly, the stability of American society rests precariously on a balance between local autonomy and national solidarity. From one perspective, the rise of strong, new 'tribal' groupings along racial and ethnic lines seems already to be pulling America apart at the seams. Utmost care is necessary, therefore, to avoid the furtherance of a 'moral exclusiveness' in local communities. Especially as children grow older, for example, they must be taught the necessity of nested and overlapping group loyalties that extend well beyond their local groupings (Oldenquist 1986: Ch.10).

Also, a natural communities policy would have to be counterbalanced by a national solidarity policy that fosters those common values and traditions that have held the nation together. This should involve, in my view, national and local service – the bringing together of people from different backgrounds and requiring them to work together to help build the nation as well as foster mutual respect and tolerance, a policy strongly promoted by the Communitarian movement (*Responsive Community* 1991-92; Etzioni 1993) And it should involve a strong, uniform national curriculum to be incorporated into our primary and secondary schools, along the lines suggested by

Chester Finn, which includes not only fundamental subjects such as math, science, and writing but also our national and Western history and traditions (Finn 1991). Similarly, institutions of higher education should do more to promote national solidarity through stressing our common Western values.

A natural communities policy would foster a certain kind of 'multiculturalism' in American life. I am not thinking here of the multiculturalism sometimes espoused on the nation's college campuses, which centres around an 'ideology of oppression' and involves a mostly individualistic power struggle to overturn the dominant society (Schlesinger 1992). I am thinking instead of the multiculturalism espoused by respectable and respected community leaders, persons whose goal in life is to raise their own families in a decent and orderly society. These are people who are working hard to achieve the American dream, but who at the same time cherish their own cultures and cultural identity.<sup>5</sup>

The following are some specific goals that a comprehensive natural communities policy might include:<sup>6</sup>

1. Reduce residential mobility. Many studies have shown that the length of time spent in a community is the best predictor of community attachments: the longer one lives in a community, the more publicly attached to it one becomes (Kasarda & Janowitz 1974; Sampson 1988). People usually move for two reasons: jobs and housing. Obviously, it is important for this reason to maintain high levels of employment. Less obviously, much needless mobility is created by large areas that are homogeneous in housing type. Simply to find more appropriate space – for example, when children are added to a family or when one retires—it is necessary to leave the community entirely. Every local area, therefore, should be encouraged to provide a broad mix of housing types.
2. Enforce community moral standards. As a nation, we have become utterly preoccupied with individual rights. To be strong, local residential communities must necessarily be moral communities, and the assumption that all rights rest with the individual, and that local government should be morally neutral, are antithetical to the continued existence of such communities. We do not need a new agenda of group rights, but we do need, as legal

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<sup>5</sup> This is similar to the important distinction between 'pluralistic' and 'particularistic' multiculturalism made by Diane Ravitch (Ravitch 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Several of these are developed further in Popenoe 1989.

scholar Mary Ann Glendon has pointed out, 'a fuller concept of human personhood and a more ecological way of thinking about social policy' (Glendon 1991). Without violating the Bill of Rights, local communities should have more autonomy in establishing and enforcing their own values and moral standards.

3. Provide more public facilities. The best communities are those with a rich measure of facilities and services available to all. This includes schools, hospitals, libraries, parks and playgrounds, youth centres, museums, and public transportation. The community with few public facilities and services need not wonder for long why its citizens are living in a myriad of diverse outside worlds, why they have scant local interest, and why they are quietly moving away.
4. Promote the development of smaller cities and towns. Studies have found that 'the larger the community a person lives in, the less likely he or she is to say that it is 'a good place to live'... and to be fully satisfied with their immediate neighborhood' (Campbell 1981:150). Most people say they would prefer to live in a place smaller than that in which they currently live, provided they had reasonable access to jobs and public services; it is the search for community that drives their preference. Small cities and towns, because they are closer to the 'human scale,' have measurable community-giving advantages over large urban agglomerations.
5. Promote local political autonomy. To the extent possible, political decision making should be decentralised so local communities have more autonomy. Political autonomy and cultural autonomy are linked; one enhances the other. The subsidiarity principle should be followed: No political function or social task should be assigned to a unit that is larger than necessary to do the job.
6. Promote functional balance. Metropolitan conditions have fostered a tremendous specialisation of local areas, with people living in one place, working at another, shopping at a third, and recreating at a fourth. There are obvious social advantages to bringing these functions into closer proximity with one another.
7. Protect homogeneous neighbourhoods. I am not thinking here necessarily of racial and ethnic enclaves, but of family-focused enclaves of people who share similar values and have a similar lifestyle (Newman 1980). American liberals have long looked

askance at homogeneous neighbourhoods as undemocratic. But people strongly prefer to live next door to others with whom they feel comfortable and can form close friendships (Clark 1992), and there is no reason they should not be allowed to – especially families with children. Providing they are functioning communities, homogeneous neighbourhoods, possibly up to the size necessary to support neighbourhood schools, should be protected and encouraged.

What should not be protected or encouraged are artificially homogeneous towns and cities. Most towns of the past in this country were quite heterogeneous, at least in terms of social class. Their children grew up among their own kind in their own neighbourhoods, under a network of local social control, but as they grew older and extended their activities beyond the neighbourhood, they came into contact with unlike people. Thus, as children matured, increasing diversity was introduced to them, especially at the high school and college levels. Because these towns contained a range of income groups and sometimes ethnic groups as well, the conflicting political interests arising from this diversity were dealt with largely at the local level.

All things considered, the best possible American residential community would be a moderately sized, functionally balanced, politically bounded town that represented a microcosm of our society with a mixture of income, ethnic, racial, and religious groups. Within the town, each group would tend to live in its own separate neighbourhoods, but all the groups would intermix in the public and political spheres. Unfortunately, we are drifting ever further from this community ideal.

## **Conclusion**

The seedbed of social virtue is childhood. Social virtue is in decline in the United States for two main reasons – a decline in family functioning and a decline in community functioning. The two are closely linked. To help them to have the knowledge, ability, time, and will to raise socially responsible children, parents must be attached to strong moral communities. Yet such communities, under a withering assault from state, market, and cultural influences, have fallen on hard times. When moral communities fail, families fail.

There is no evidence that realistic social alternatives exist for the traditional 'tribal' structures of family and community. Whatever their condition, these primordial social structures remain powerful determinants of people's lives. To help restore social virtue, we as a nation

should seek to protect and cultivate natural communities, preferably along residential lines. As individuals, we should seek to stay married, stay accessible to our children, stay active in our local communities, and stay put.

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*Chapter 2*

**Reviewing Australia:  
The Modes and Morals of Australia in the '90s**

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# Reviewing Australia: The Modes and Morals of Australia in the '90s

ANDREW NORTON

Today traditional morality is shaken and no other has been brought forward to replace it. The old duties have lost their power without our being able to see clearly and with assurance where our new duties lie. Different minds hold opposed ideas and we are passing through a period of crisis. It is not then surprising that we do not feel the pressure of moral rules as they were felt in the past.

**T**his could be the voice of many a contemporary social commentator. It is in fact that of the sociologist Émile Durkheim, writing in 1906 (Pahl 1991:345). Periodic 'moral crises' afflict many societies. Much of the world, according to an article in the influential journal *Foreign Affairs*, is experiencing a moral crisis characterised by a sudden sense of historical dislocation, a disaffection with the political leadership of all parties, and a scepticism about doctrines of social progress (Maier 1994:54). David Popenoe's essay on declining social virtue fits in with this mood of moral crisis. In his opening paragraph, Popenoe remarks that every society must have a large proportion of adults who act as good citizens and uphold high moral standards, but in this respect America appears to be in a 'social recession' (Popenoe 1994:7).

Australia, too, shows signs of feeling itself to be in a social recession. During the economic recession of the early 1990s there was

a feeling about that Australian society as a whole, and not just the Australian economy, was in trouble. An international opinion barometer found Australians to be 'compulsive worriers'. Of the twelve surveyed nations, Australians worried most about unemployment, drugs, corruption and the environment; and were the second most worried about violence, inflation, social security, AIDS, racism and social inequality (Cribb 1993). Hugh Mackay's *Reinventing Australia: The Mind and Mood of Australia in the 90s* described contemporary Australia as 'fraught with the peculiar stresses created by a confused and diffused sense of identity, the lack of a consistent or coherent sense of purpose, and a growing feeling of isolation and even alienation among young Australians – especially young Australians' (Mackay 1993:19). Mackay's book struck a chord and became a bestseller.

Undoubtedly there is discontent at the state of Australian society. I want to consider to what extent this discontent is justified by current social conditions. The issue is an important one, because 'social recessions' or 'moral crises' become part of the prevailing social situation, with real consequences. Political movements attempt to use perceived crises as catalysts for often radical change. In the last decade, perceptions of economic and environmental crisis were the political foundation for a series of major reforms. Similarly, a sense that we are suffering from a social recession or moral crisis drives debates about law and order, school curriculum, family policy, censorship, and in Popenoe's case such matters as town planning. All these areas of policy significantly affect the way we live, and it is important that changes are a reasoned and proportionate response to the problem at hand, and not the ill-considered result of a moral panic.

Trying to assess claims of a social recession or moral crisis is no easy matter. Unlike for economic recessions, there is no neat technical definition. The detail of what constitutes 'morality' is not agreed on, and there are sometimes several criteria by which adherence to a moral standard could be assessed. The common idea that moral standards are declining involves an unfavourable comparison with the past. This raises new questions. How far back should we go? Were those times as good as memory suggests? Shouldn't we set standards according to what is right now and for the future, using the past only as a guide to what might be possible?

Any conclusions about whether we have fallen into a social recession must, in the end, be partly personal. My understanding of moral standards and how well they are being met is inevitably shaped by my own upbringing, beliefs and experience. Age differences affect

assessments of whether or not morality is in decline, since not only do moral views often differ between the generations, but also the generations have different points of comparison. The 1950s and 1960s are often seen as particularly good periods in Australia, but people whose memory begins after those decades are less likely to use them as a natural point of comparison with the present.

That we cannot say with absolute certainty whether or not we are in a social recession does not mean, however, that we should be satisfied with impressionistic assertions. Particular claims about the state of modern Australia – such as levels of crime – are open to direct empirical assessment. Less well-defined issues, such as how well Australians adhere to particular virtues, can be assessed by use of proxy measures. The level of fraud gives us some idea about the virtue of honesty; levels of volunteering are one indicator of our propensity toward kindness and cooperation. I think that a look at the available evidence often pushes us toward a less pessimistic view of the present, and for that reason is worth doing.

What follows is divided into two parts. In the first part, I look at some of the social phenomena Popenoe advances as indicating a social recession, and report on what we know about them in Australia. I then move on to the crux of Popenoe's argument about the 'social virtues', trying to work out the state of these virtues in 1990s Australia. In the second part, I look at four of the institutional contexts in which virtue formation might be enhanced or discouraged – the family, the labour market, welfare provision, and Popenoe's 'natural communities'. I consider these because of widespread perceptions that changes in these areas are behind the social problems I detail below.

## **Part One: Are We in a Social Recession?**

### **Signs of Social Pathology**

At the beginning of his argument, Popenoe notes that the current social environment seems to be generating alarming rates of various 'personal pathologies'. He does not elaborate with American evidence, but the list contains items Australians would recognise as problems in their own society: suicide, substance abuse, stress, anxiety and depression. Since the latter three forms of psychological distress are likely to be related to levels of suicide and substance abuse, it makes sense to begin with them.

That Australians – long characterised as afflicted with a ‘she’ll be right’ or ‘no worries’ mentality – should have turned up as leading international worriers is surprising. How we actually think seems to be at odds with our traditional self-perception. Hugh Mackay’s book, based on qualitative social research, also picks up on these signs of widespread psychological distress. He describes Australia as experiencing ‘The Big Angst’, of lives dominated by stress. Mackay remarks that ‘all over Australia, people feel themselves to be operating on a short fuse. Little things which might, in previous generations, have been quite easily tolerated and absorbed as part of the ups and downs of daily life, now seem to assume bigger proportions. The general level of anxiety in the community is such that it only requires a small spark to ignite feelings of irritation, helplessness, frustration, anger or violence’ (Mackay 1993:11). That Australians feel more anxious now than in the past may well be true. The important question, though, is the extent to which this anxiety is creating real problems.

Overall, there is not much evidence of large scale general problems. In the 1989-90 National Health Survey only 4.7 per cent of the population reported suffering from nerves, tension, emotional problems or depression (ABS 1994a:5). If more people were suffering from nerves or depression we would expect the suicide rate to increase. In fact, the death rate from suicide has remained fairly stable over the last decade (ABS 1993a:5). If more people felt a need to escape the harsh realities of the world, we would expect consumption of alcohol and drugs to be on the rise. However, this has not been the case. From 1980-81 to 1988-89, alcohol consumption declined by nearly 20% (ABS 1992:83). The number of people involved in ‘substance abuse’ remains small. The percentage of the population that had tried cocaine was static at 3 per cent between 1985 and 1991, and heroin usage was static at 2 per cent over the same period (Makkai & McAllister 1993:46). In 1993 26 per cent of men and 43 per cent of women reported ever having used tranquillisers, but only 3 per cent of each sex have ever used them for non-medical purposes. Marijuana is the one illicit drug in widespread use. 41 per cent of men and 28 per cent of women have tried it, with 16 per cent of men and 9 per cent of women having used it in the last year (Jones 1993:4).

Overall figures, though, can conceal wide variations between social groups. Here, average results conceal very concerning behaviour by the young, and particularly young males. Between 1975 and 1990 the number of males aged 15-24 who committed suicide increased from 14.8 per 100,000 to 26.5 per 100,000, though the number of females killing themselves remained at just under 5 per

100,000 over the same period (ABS 1994d:55).<sup>1</sup> By international standards, these are high figures. Of the 24 countries surveyed by the World Health Organisation, Australia ranked fourth – well below Iceland at 61 deaths per 100,000, but significantly above Greece and Italy, both reporting just over 5 deaths per 100,000 (p.56). Breaking down the figures further shows that youth suicide is especially high in rural areas. For 15-24 year old males, the suicide rate in 1987-91 was 36.6 per 100,000 (by contrast, there was no difference in urban / rural suicide rates for females) (p.59). In the decade to 1992, suicides in the 1-24 year old age group resulted in the loss of more than 230,000 years of potential life (p.56).

Younger males are also over represented among those using alcohol and drugs. Males aged 14-34 years (and especially those over 19) are significantly more likely than older males and considerably more likely than females of their own age to engage in drinking classified as 'hazardous' or 'binge' (Jones 1993:18). Similarly, adolescent males are more likely than their female peers and adults to have tried marijuana (Makkai & McAllister 1993:37).

That these figures are worse for the young and male is partly to be expected. There has probably not been a time or place in which these two characteristics have not been associated with a relatively high degree of 'irresponsible' behaviour. Nevertheless, the increase in suicides since the 1970s stands out as signalling some serious underlying problems. In the second part, I consider some of the possible causes of more young men committing suicide.

### The Social Virtues in Australia

For a society to function properly, most of its members must, most of the time, observe the 'social virtues'. 'Virtue' sounds old-fashioned and religious, but the characteristics Popenoe means by the term 'social virtues' are fully relevant to a modern, secular world.<sup>2</sup> According to

<sup>1</sup> The difference in male / female statistics is partly explained by higher 'success' rates among males. In South Australia and Queensland, the only states for which records are kept, the numbers of males and females hospitalised as a result of attempted suicide are roughly similar (ABS 1994d: 58). It is in the methods of suicide that we can see significant differences. Favoured male methods such as firearms are more effective than favoured female methods such as overdoses. The availability of guns to rural males appears to be especially significant. More than 50 per cent of 15-24 year old rural males who kill themselves do so with firearms, as compared to 23 per cent in urban areas (p.59).

<sup>2</sup> It is sometimes argued that religion's decline undermines the motivation for observing the virtues. I believe the disposition to observe the virtues has non-religious sources. See Wilson 1993 & 1994 for a discussion of how natural sociability lays the foundation for much 'virtuous' behaviour. However, it is

Popenoe, social virtue is based on the following character traits: being kind and considerate, trusting and trustworthy, responsible and hardworking, honest and cooperative, and respectful of rules and authority. These characteristics can be clustered according to the major social functions which they serve. Being responsible and hardworking makes people self-reliant and less of a burden on their community. Honesty and trust go together, since without these virtues many useful relationships and transactions would become too risky. The virtues of being kind, considerate and cooperative are necessary to facilitate mutual assistance, and to ease the tensions that exist when interests conflict and lifestyles differ. Respect for rules and authority is necessary to ensure that social life is reasonably predictable and that at least minimum standards of behaviour are maintained.

In assessing the state of the social virtues in contemporary Australia heavy use must be made of proxy measures. The virtues are observable only via attitudes and behaviour. None of the proxy measures on their own can be used to make broad generalisations about the state of social virtue in Australia. Cumulatively, though, they can give us a good impression, especially where we can compare changing attitudes and behaviour over time. There are a couple of caveats which must be attached to the findings I report below. The first is that cross-situational consistency in behaviour can be weak (Elster 1993:6). For example, people who are selfish in one setting can be altruistic in another. The second is that there can be very important regional and social group differences in attitudes and behaviour. This we have already seen in the case of suicide. Depending on the nature of these differences, it may not be appropriate to describe even very poor results as a 'social recession', but rather as an isolated (though still serious) problem.

### ***Self-Reliance and Hard Work***

Hugh Mackay reports that the 'traditional work ethic appears to be on the wane in Australia' (Mackay 1993:103). He traces the source of this change to seemingly permanent high levels of unemployment. If work is not going to be a stable feature of a person's life, it makes sense for them to look to other aspects of their lives for meaning and activity. Mackay describes the development of an 'unemployment mentality', based on the proposition that the welfare net will support those who cannot find work; 'that work may be something you *choose* to do rather than having to do' (p.102; emphasis in original).

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certainly plausible to argue that certain religious beliefs encourage observance of particular virtues.

We can find several proxy measures to back up Mackay's claim. The proportion of the Australian population receiving Commonwealth income support has increased dramatically over the last generation. In 1970 13.5% of the civilian population over the age of 15 years was receiving income support. By 1993 this had more than doubled to 30.7%. The biggest growth was among the unemployed, moving from a tiny 0.1% of the civilian population in 1970 to 6.6% in 1993. Between 1970 and 1993 the proportion of the population receiving welfare grew by more than 100% in five of the nine major categories of income support (Warby 1994:48).

Psychologists' surveys of attitudes toward work show Australia as a middle-ranking country for the work ethic. In a survey covering 43 nations, Australia's work ethic was very marginally above average – though, interestingly, this was only possible because of an above average work ethic among Australian women (Lynn 1991:50). Another survey ranked Australia eighth out of thirteen surveyed countries. However, Australia's work ethic was not radically different from the countries with which it normally compares itself; a bit below that of the United States, but marginally above Britain and New Zealand (Furnham et al. 1993:192).

A fading work ethic would be consistent with other large scale trends in society. Political scientists have identified groups of voters as 'postmaterialist', as being more concerned with broad 'quality of life' issues than with traditional economic concerns. Australia has one of the world's highest ratios of postmaterialist to materialist voters (Gow 1990:58). 'Postmaterialists' could be expected to place less emphasis on work as centrally important to their lives, and have a weaker work ethic.

However, we should be slow to condemn ourselves for a fading work ethic. Other statistics we have available do not suggest that the work ethic is especially weak. The proportion of the population wishing to participate in the workforce has risen substantially since 1970. The participation rate then was 39.6 per cent; in 1993 it was 51.2 per cent. The bulk of this increase has come from more people wanting part time work, but there has also been a slight increase in those wanting full time employment (CEO 1993a:146). Over a shorter time frame, the average number of hours worked has also increased. Men in the full time work force on average now work 43.6 hours per week as against 40.9 hours in 1982. Average working hours for women rose from 37.4 hours a week in 1982 to 39.5 a week in 1994 (ABS 1994b:23; ABS 1993b:119).

While a work ethic is a good thing, like most of the other virtues

Popenoe would, I expect, want it in moderation. As his emphasis on the family makes clear, other things in life are also very important (and indeed surveys of the life priorities of Australians rank work below family, friends, and spare time activities (Headey 1988:168)). And too much work clearly conflicts with Popenoe's concern about the 'time famine' facing families, a subject considered below. So it would be difficult to conclude, overall, that the Australian work ethic is on a dangerous slide. However, there may be important trends worth studying. While rising workforce participation suggests levels of dependency are not rising (since more people are seeking some form of financial independence), the number of people on Commonwealth income support suggests that *patterns* of dependency are undergoing significant change. People who might once have been dependent on family, friends, and charity are now dependent on the state. What long term effect this might have on the virtues I will consider in Part Two.

### ***Honesty and Trustworthiness***

Australians do not display overwhelming confidence in each other's honesty and trustworthiness. Overall, only 57 per cent think that others can always or usually be trusted to tell the truth, with a further 8 per cent believing that others rarely or never tell the truth. White collar workers are more trusting; 64 per cent of them think people can always or usually be trusted to tell the truth, compared to 53 per cent of blue collar workers (Irving Saulwick 1991). A survey of Victorian Year 12 students found that around 95% thought people often or sometimes lied at work, and about three-quarters thought cheating was common at their school (Norbury 1993). Despite these apparently high levels of doubt about each other's integrity, Australia may be working off a relatively high base of mutual trust. A 1983 values study compared Australia with ten western European countries. It found that the number of people who believed that 'most people can be trusted' was more than 50% higher in Australia than in Europe (Jones 1989:114).

Irrespective of whether or not these beliefs have an adequate basis in reality (of which more below) assessments of others' honesty are important in themselves. As I argued earlier, trust is essential to a wide variety of relationships and transactions. A belief that others are dishonest closes off opportunities for cooperation. Worse, a lack of honesty and the consequent lack of trust feeds on itself – if people believe that others are not playing by the rules of the game, they are less inclined to do so themselves. Who wants to be taken for a ride? The greater number of people being dishonest because they think

others are reinforces general expectations of dishonesty, so making it rational for still others not to be honest 'mugs'. Societies can become locked into vicious cycles of dishonesty (see Putnam 1993:177).

If Australians are more honest and trustworthy than the above figures suggest, it is worth saying so – as one step toward stalling a decline into such a vicious cycle. One proxy measure can be found in crime statistics for offences involving an element of dishonesty. At first glance these statistics provide gloomy reading, especially if we take into account that only fear of penalties, and not a propensity to be honest, stops even more people from committing such crimes. Reported robberies per 100,000 of population rose from 23 in 1973-74 to 67 in 1991-92, and fraud from 234 to 714. However, victim surveys – that is, asking a sample of the population whether or not they have been a victim of crime, rather than relying on reports to police – paint a somewhat different picture. Generally, they show an increase in crimes involving dishonesty, though by lesser margins than police reports (Walker 1993; ABS 1994c:1). Nevertheless, the trend is bad. While it is not a comparative figure, a national survey commissioned by the Insurance Council of Australia suggests high absolute levels of dishonesty. More than 20 per cent of people said they had padded out their insurance claims, believing insurance companies intended to reduce their payouts (Morris 1994). Among the Victorian Year 12 students, 28% of males admit to having taken something from a shop in the last year without paying, nearly 40% would keep a wallet if they found it, and 20% think it is OK to cheat in exams (Norbury 1993).<sup>3</sup>

There is a problem with dishonesty, but I would guess that Australia will escape descent into a vicious cycle of dishonesty. My reason for this claim is that I suspect that, at this stage at least, while people claim to see dishonesty in others, they do not necessarily hold this view strongly or let it greatly affect their behaviour. For this to happen, the view that others are dishonest would have to be more than just loose-floating conventional wisdom; it would have to be grounded deeply in social experience. Direct, significant and regular experience of dishonesty is not a feature of Australian society. For example, even though the proportion of people who had, in the last twelve months, been victims of some kind of robbery doubled between 1983 and 1993, it still constituted only 1.2 per cent of the population (ABS 1994c:1).

<sup>3</sup> An interesting feature of this survey is that across most of the questions asked students at private schools reported poorer standards of behaviour than students at government schools. More pressure to perform at private schools can perhaps explain higher levels of cheating, but not more shoplifting or wallet keeping.

Another reason why Australia can probably avoid a vicious cycle of dishonesty is that assessments of others' honesty tend to be highly contextual. People distinguish between different situations and types of people. This is apparent in ratings done for many years by the Morgan Poll on the ethics and honesty of various professions. While the absolute numbers vary, professions like medicine consistently rate well, while union leaders and car salesmen rate poorly. Between 1976 and 1993, it is not possible to discern any clear trend in general views about the honesty and ethics of others. Over that period bank managers, lawyers, business executives and politicians have all suffered a decline in the number of people rating them well. However, doctors, dentists, school teachers, engineers, and police have all maintained or improved their positions (Morgan Poll 1993). Because people know when they must be on their guard, they are less likely to take the view that others in general cannot be trusted.

Then there is the curious case of cynicism about politics. This is one of the themes of recent times. Hugh Mackay remarked that the 'level of cynicism in the community is now so high that it may well stimulate demand for some redefinition of our political institutions' (Mackay 1993:168). People *say* they are more cynical about politics, but unambiguous evidence that they are *actually* more cynical is surprisingly hard to find. Surveys of attitudes toward the political system conducted over more than a decade just do not show signs of this cynicism. Trust in government was stable between 1979 and 1988, and feelings of political efficacy – the belief that the citizen can influence the political process – actually increased (McAllister 1992:47). Using a slightly different question, the Australian Election Study showed no significant changes in political trust between 1987 and 1993. Asking respondents 'How much of the time do you think you can trust the federal government to do what is right?', the answers were, with 1993 figures in brackets, 'just about always' 3 per cent (2.9 per cent); 'most of the time' 37 per cent (35 per cent); 'only some of the time' 53 per cent (56.3 per cent) (McAllister 1992: 50; Jones et al. 1993:90). The only real sign of disaffection with politics has been a rise in support for minor parties and independents. However, even this support declined dramatically between the 1990 and 1993 elections. In 1990, candidates not standing for one of the major parties received 17.2 per cent of first preference votes in the House of Representatives, and 19.7 per cent of first preference votes in the Senate. In 1993, the figures were 10.9 per cent and 13.5 per cent respectively (Mackerras 1994:182-83).

Finally, there is the unsurprising fact that Australians still believe

themselves to be personally honest. On scales of truth-telling, only 1 per cent of Australians claim to rarely tell the truth (and, of course, they may be lying about that as well). 27 per cent say they always do. Sixty-three per cent say they usually tell the truth (Irving Saulwick 1991). Overall, then 90 per cent of the population rates itself as at least fairly honest – taking into account that many lies told may be due to wanting to observe one of the other characteristics of social virtue, such as kindness or considerateness. Of course we can question the reliability of any favourable self-assessment reported on by a survey. The sceptic's natural response is to point out that people say what is expected of them, irrespective of whether or not it is true. But in this case that response misses the point. That people believe there is a moral consensus on truth telling to which they must appear to adhere is significant in itself. Just as widespread dishonesty creates vicious cycles of dishonesty, a moral consensus on truth telling is the foundation of a 'virtuous circle' in which the virtues of truth telling are internalised, and those breaching the consensus are subject to social sanctions.

### ***Kindness, Consideration and Cooperation***

Kindness, consideration and cooperation are all important virtues. Much of the quality of life depends on the capacity of these virtues to smooth relations between people. Where these virtues are strong, strangers can at minimum expect not to be harmed by each other, and at best expect some assistance to be rendered, if they need it. Those who know each other better can expect more extensive forms of support.

Violent crime eats away at these virtues. Not only is it in itself a serious failure to observe the virtues, but it also creates a climate of fear. An expectation of violence produces mutual mistrust. Certainly, the current public perception is that crime is a major problem. In opinion polls it is consistently one of the top issues of concern. In Australia, those rating it as of 'real concern' increased from 51 per cent to 73 per cent between 1986 and 1994 (AGB McNair 1994). 27 per cent of Australians do not feel safe walking around at night, though there are significant regional variations – 39 per cent of those living in Brisbane feel unsafe, compared to 13 per cent of those living in Tasmania (Irving Saulwick 1994a).

Are these perceptions justified by the evidence? In Australia over the last twenty years there has been a large increase in reported crime. For example, in Australia in 1973-74 there were 21 serious assaults per 100,000 of population. In 1991-92 there were 115. Reported rapes

went from 6 to 30 per 100,000. The murder rate, though, declined slightly (Walker 1993). On these figures, Australia is a lot more dangerous a place now than it was in the early 1970s. The fear displayed by those who do not feel safe at night appears justified. Of all the indicators so far considered, these represent the strongest sign that Australia is suffering some of the effects of a 'social recession'.

There is no avoiding the fact that crime is a serious problem, but it is not the problem either the above figures or popular opinion suggests. Victim surveys (as opposed to reported crime) suggest that the level of violent crime has been fairly static over the last twenty years (Walker 1993). Over the last ten years the proportion of people suffering a personal assault has actually declined. In 1993 2.5 per cent of Australians aged 15 and over were assaulted, down from 3.4 per cent in 1983. Sexual assault of women over 18 increased in the same time period, but only marginally – from 0.5 per cent to 0.6 per cent (ABS 1994c:1).

Some groups of people have much more reason to fear crime than others. One parent family households are more than twice as likely to be the victims of crime as couple only households. Despite reports of high levels of fear of crime amongst the elderly, someone in the 15-24 year old age group is eleven times as likely to be a victim of crime as someone aged over 65. Despite reports of women being particularly fearful, men suffer almost 50 per cent more crime. For those concerned about crime, there are certain things best avoided. Regular use of public transport after 6 p.m. more than triples the likelihood that you will be a victim of crime, as does frequently attending a place of entertainment in the same time (ABS 1994c:6-8). And if all else fails, people should (if they can afford it) move – in 1992, for example, the rate of recorded assaults was 15 per 1,000 people in inner Sydney, compared with between 2 and 4 per 1,000 in the city's northern and eastern suburbs (Gittins 1994a). As is often the case, problems which appear to be general are in fact concentrated on particular groups and areas.

The slightly better crime figures of recent years can be expected to continue, but for reasons unrelated to either virtue or crime prevention strategies. This is because of the large amount of crime committed by the young. The peak ages of arrest for violent crimes are 18-20. A baby boom will cause a rise in violent crime 18 to 20 years later, as happened during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Walker 1993). As is often the case, the young and especially young males show themselves to be a troubled and troublesome group.

In addition to rising fear of crime, there is a perception that

relations with strangers are worse now than in the past. A *Sydney Morning Herald* Saulwick Poll found that those polled believed people gave worse assistance to others than would have been the case ten years ago. When shopping, 47 per cent believed assistance would be worse, while 28 per cent thought it would be better. When asking for directions, 32 per cent believed assistance would be worse, and only 17 per cent thought it would be better. For seeking help in an emergency, 41 per cent thought assistance would be worse, while again 17 per cent thought it would be better (Irving Saulwick 1994b). As is usual with surveys of this kind, though, it is likely people would give different responses if they had been asked what they would themselves do in such circumstances. The National Social Science Survey showed that Australians were willing to take serious risks in defence of family, friends and human life. In response to a question asking whether or not that person felt an obligation to defend their family, even at some risk to their own life, Australians on average score 96, with 100 being a 'definitely yes' answer. For friends, the average score was 86 (Evans & Frentzel-Zagorska 1991:5).

Relations between strangers are a particularly important matter in culturally diverse countries like Australia. When regularly confronted with 'different' people there is a greater need for the virtues of kindness, consideration and cooperation to control what otherwise might be an inclination toward indifference or hostility.

Ethnic relations in Australia are not trouble-free. Clear majorities of Australians think that having lots of different cultural groups in Australia causes problems, and that people who come to Australia should change their behaviour to be more like other Australians (Goot 1993:231). 1994 saw inter-ethnic conflict over disputes in the Balkans. A 1991 inquiry catalogued a long list of racial incidents (HEROC 1991). Certain groups are viewed much less favourably than others by Australians. 'Social distance' scores measure feelings about members of other groups. A zero rating indicates that a member of that group would be welcomed as a member of the family, and there are a range of other categories up to 'keep out of Australia', which receives a social distance score of 100. The group with whom other Australians feel the greatest social distance is Muslims, with a score of 54. Vietnamese, Lebanese and Turks all have social distance scores above 50 per cent. Greeks, Italians and Jews have scores in the 30s (McAllister 1989:7-8).

Religious and racial ill-feeling is likely to be part of Australian life for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, this is one aspect of social relations that is reasonably good now, and we can expect to get better.

In other words, there is no sign of a social recession. For once, the young outperform their elders. Among the over-55 year olds, only 26 per cent believe in respecting different ways of living. Among 18-24 year olds, 44 per cent respect different ways of living. There is a consistent pattern: the younger the person, the more likely they are to respect different ways of living (Irving Saulwick 1994c).

This is as we would expect, given that the social experience of the young is more likely to have included contact with different religious and racial groups. Survey evidence confirms in general terms that 'exposure to diversity legitimises differences' (Gibson 1992:345). The likely explanation for this is that 'contact with a member of a negatively stigmatised group tends to shift people from thinking about the typical member as an abstraction to having in mind a specific person' (Werth & Lord 1992:363). This exposure to diversity is occurring in Australian society at much deeper levels than just casual interaction. There are fairly high levels of intermarriage. In 1988 about 37% of the population was ethnically mixed. The Australian-born children of migrants, with the exception of some southern European groups, usually marry people with parents of a different country of origin (Price 1993:7-8). Religious intermarriage is also quite high, with about a third of people from the major religious groups having partners from a different religion (ABS 1994d:188).

Even high social distance scores do not necessarily mean the social virtues are absent. One reason the virtues are important is that they weaken the link between belief and behaviour. A person may believe other groups to be undesirable, but if the social virtues restrain him from acting on that belief society as a whole will be better off. There is evidence that, despite the distance they feel from some groups, most Australians are willing to behave in a virtuous way. For example, in a 1988 survey 88 per cent of respondents agreed with the proposition that 'so long as a person is committed to Australia it doesn't matter what ethnic background they have.' Ninety-five per cent agreed with the view that people should have equal opportunities irrespective of whether or not they were born in Australia (Goot 1993:231). Another survey has shown that while some Australian employers say they would discriminate in hiring, there is in fact little or no discrimination against immigrants in jobs and pay (Evans & Kelley 1991). Perhaps because of the social virtues, Australian behaviour is likely to be better than Australian attitudes. The late Eugene Kamenka, who came to Australia in 1937 as a Jewish immigrant from Nazi Germany, captured the flavour of Australian attitudes even in the less tolerant time of his boyhood: 'Jews and refugees were not, in all

circles, considered the most desirable and admirable migrants. Yet Australians disliked making a fuss or being nasty to people more than they disliked Jews or foreigners ...' (Kamenka 1993:26).

In line with other writers inspired with visions of community, Popenoe believes that in 'individualistic and competitive societies such as the United States' (or, presumably, Australia) 'everyday life is not so marked by cooperation and helping among kin and neighbours' (Popenoe 1994:13). I am not aware of any international comparisons involving Australia. However, the Australian Institute of Family Studies has done extensive survey work on the role of neighbours. Like most large scale surveys, the AIFS work shows significant regional variations. Interestingly, the AIFS surveys showed that neighbourliness was stronger in the outer suburbs – the reverse of the general perception that social isolation was a much larger problem in outer than in inner suburbs. In the outer Melbourne suburb of Berwick and in the middle suburb of Box Hill the vast majority of people felt they knew a neighbour well enough to perform the relatively undemanding task of keeping an eye on the house while they were away – 88 per cent and 90 per cent respectively. More than half in each area thought they could borrow a small sum of money from a neighbour, 64 per cent thought they could talk to a neighbour if they were feeling down, around 70 per cent thought that if they were ill neighbours would do a small amount of shopping for them, and 42 per cent thought a neighbour would perform the relatively demanding task of minding a child regularly (Brownlee 1993:35). These assessments of what neighbours would do are broadly consistent with earlier surveys of support provided by informal networks, including kin, friends and neighbours. A survey conducted in the Victorian city of Geelong found that 81 per cent of respondents had received some kind of service support in the previous twelve months, and 88 per cent reported having provided it. The major areas of support were houseminding, transport, and caring for sick persons (d'Abbs 1991:96-97). The composition of help for the task of houseminding was a little different – about a third each for neighbours, kin and friends (p.100), though this is not inconsistent with the view that neighbours would perform the task, if asked.

There is much evidence that families remain strong providers for individuals in need of assistance. Of the 12 per cent of the population aged 15 or over receiving free accommodation, 92 per cent of the providers are family members. Of the 6 per cent of the population requiring care due to long-term illness, old age or disability, 60 per cent received their main assistance from a family member (ABS

1993c:11). Forty three per cent of families with children aged under 11 use informal child care only, with family sources constituting 74 per cent of all main care providers (p.19). This assistance is provided because there are strong networks of family and extended family. The AIFS surveys showed that 'contact with extended family members is alive and well in about two-thirds of families' (Millward 1992:19). Australian intergenerational contact appears to be high by international standards. While more older citizens in nations such as Italy and Greece see their families daily (probably due to shorter distances in those countries), overall Australia's older citizens report much higher levels of dealing with younger people. Fifty-two per cent of Australia's older citizens say they have a lot of dealing with younger people, compared to 38 per cent in Italy and 28 per cent in Greece (Shanahan 1994:16).

Another proxy measure we can use in assessing the social virtues of kindness, cooperation and consideration is involvement in volunteer work. This is not to say that the virtues are not on display in other areas of activity; or that people do not have self-interested reasons for volunteering. Rather, it is just that in commercial or compulsory activities it is more difficult to isolate the virtues as a motivating factor. According to research by the Households Research Unit at the University of Melbourne, 39.8 million hours are spent on voluntary community work each week. If this is compared to the Australian Bureau of Statistics ten categories of paid employment, there are only three industry sectors in which a greater number of hours are worked (Ironmonger 1994:48). A 1986 survey in New South Wales showed that a quarter of the population aged 15 years or over undertook some form of voluntary work in the local community. A 1988 South Australian survey showed a 28 per cent involvement, with an average of 4.5 hours per week per volunteer (ABS 1992:356-357). Aggregating data from a number of surveys, Mark Lyons has estimated that in 1992 1.3 million Australians worked 95 million hours for charitable organisations as volunteers (Lyons 1994:29). A study of cultural and leisure activities found that 1.6 million Australians make a work contribution, with a million of them doing so on a voluntary basis. The single most popular activity was the organisation of fetes and festivals, in which there were 411,000 volunteers and another 17,000 who combine paid and unpaid work (Date 1994). Large numbers of Australians appear to display the virtues of kindness, consideration and cooperation in being prepared to contribute to community activities.

While it is not possible to state it conclusively, the level of charitable activity may be increasing. As well as giving of their time,

Australians make financial contributions to charitable organisations. A nationwide survey of 5,000 people found that 81 per cent of households gave to charity. The estimated level of giving has increased markedly since 1981, from \$101 million then to about \$1.1 billion in 1993. However, this is down from a high of \$1.3 billion in 1991 (Signy 1994). New charitable organisations have proliferated in recent years. A survey involving 1,728 charitable organisations found that 41 per cent were founded between 1960 and 1979, and 43 per cent in the 1980s (Lyons 1994:84). Time use surveys show modest increases in the amount of time spent on voluntary work by the average person. A 1987 time use survey showed that on average 1 per cent of the day of person aged 15 or above was spent on volunteer activities (ABS 1992:350). The 1992 figures were higher – on average, 26 minutes per day or 1.8 per cent (ABS 1993d:40).

### ***A Social Recession?***

If Australia were to receive a report card on its recent performance, the comment would probably be 'room for improvement'. But I do not think there the information cited above could give us cause to talk of a 'social recession'. Overall, the various social pathologies Popenoe takes as symptomatic of a social recession are nowhere near crisis levels. There is much virtuous behaviour on display; though of course it would be better if there were more. Significantly, there are few signs of marked deterioration, though unfortunately in many areas it is not possible to make comparisons over long periods of time. The most notable characteristic of the statistics cited is not so much shifts over time or average results, but patchiness. There are big variations from place to place and from social group to social group. As I noted, young males in particular seem to do badly according to many of the indicators, and if suicide rates are a guide rural young males do worst of all. If these poor results are the signs of longer term problems, and not just the normal troubles of youth, then Australia may yet show more serious symptoms of a social recession. To get a sense of where Australia might be heading, I am going to examine the state of three institutions of Australian society which have a major effect on socialisation. These are the family, the labour market, and the welfare system. I then consider whether David Popenoe's 'natural communities' policy would be likely to have much impact on the social problems that concern him.

## Part Two: Institutions

### The Australian Family

It is the problems of the family which Popenoe regards as central to the American 'social recession'. The family is a vitally important institution in which children learn the social virtues. If the family is in trouble, then we can expect that sooner or later that trouble will start appearing in other areas of society. In America, Popenoe says, the break-up rate of families has skyrocketed, as has the rate of births to unwed mothers, and adults – especially men – are less connected to family life than ever before. What is the situation in Australia?

There is no doubt that the divorce rate has increased significantly in Australia since the passing of the Family Law Act 1975. In 1971, the divorce rate per 1,000 of population was 1.2. In 1991, it was 2.2 (ABS 1993e:4). This is well below the US figure of 4.7 per 1,000 population, but well above the 0.5 rate in Brazil and Italy. It is similar to rates in the UK and New Zealand (p.1). After twenty years, it is estimated that about 30% of marriages will have ended in divorce (ABS 1994e:12). The overall number of married people is, not surprisingly, declining. Combine this with slightly higher numbers of never-married persons, and we have a situation in which the number of married persons is at a historically low level (ABS 1993f:7).

Nevertheless, marriage remains a popular institution. By the age of 65 only 7 per cent of men and 6.2 per cent of women have never married (ABS 1993f:8). An initial lack of marital success is not a deterrent for many: just under 25 per cent of all marriages are remarriages (ABS 1994e:9). Further, marriage rates underestimate the proportion of the population in marriage-like relationships. In 1992, it was estimated that 8 per cent of couples were de facto couples (ABS 1993c:4). Since 1975 the proportion of couples living together before starting a registered marriage relationship has increased from 15 per cent to almost 60 per cent (p.2). For many de facto couples the relationship is not just a brief experiment before marriage. Of those marrying in 1992, 40 per cent of those formalising a de facto relationship had been living together for two years or more (ABS 1994e:11).

More concerning than the divorce rates themselves, perhaps, are the number of children experiencing some part of their growing up with only one parent. As Popenoe documents, this has adverse consequences for child development. There is reason to think that

these consequences are not so bad in Australia as in the US – among other factors, more serious problems of race and poverty make life worse for American children in single parent households (Glover 1993). Nevertheless, it can be argued that divorce sets in train a series of events responsible for later difficulties in the lives of family members. Parental separation can result in reduced material resources, depriving the child of educational and social opportunities. The lack of these opportunities can result in children being less competent and having lower self-esteem. Children may leave homes with few resources. Leaving home early is associated with early childbearing, which in turn is linked with lower attainment in adult life (Funder & Kinsella 1991:21). There is a statistical association between family breakdown and some of the problems of youth discussed above. In a Western Australian study of juvenile offenders, less than 20% were living with both parents, as compared to around three-quarters in the population as a whole. Almost a quarter of the offenders were found to be clinically depressed, quite a few had suicidal tendencies, and many had high levels of drug abuse (Tapper 1993: 47). Only more research can discover whether this statistical association amounts to a causal relationship.

Each year, divorces in Australia affect about 45,000 children. By the time they are 16, 16.5 per cent of children will have experienced the divorce of their parents (AIFS 1993). For some, the divorce means losing contact with one parent.<sup>4</sup> Rising rates of divorce and separation have driven large increases in the number of single parents. By 1992 there were 433,700 family units with dependent children but only one parent (ABS 1993c:1). The trend is upwards. In 1976 6.5 per cent of families consisted of one parent with dependants; by 1991 the figure was 8.8 per cent (ABS 1994d: 36). Divorces and separations are the major cause of the rise in single parents, with only 21.6 per cent of lone mothers never having been married and 10.5 per cent being widows (ABS 1991:9). However, there has also been an increase in ex-nuptial births. Of the total number of births, in 1971 10.8 per cent were ex-nuptial, but by 1991 the figure had risen to 23 per cent (statistics: ABS 1993g:8).

This latter figure, however, needs to be taken with a lot of caution. There is good reason to believe that many of these births are to women in de facto relationships, and that therefore the child is

<sup>4</sup> A relationships survey found that 23 per cent of 14 to 24 year olds do not have a relationship with their father, and 15 per cent do not have a relationship with their mother: Smith 1994. Of course not all break downs in parent-child relations are due to divorce, but it is reasonable to presume that divorce is a significant factor.

entering a two parent household. A number of statistics point us to this conclusion. As I have already noted, most people now live together in a de facto relationship before marriage, and many of these relationships are long-standing. In 1992, 81 per cent of ex-nuptial births were acknowledged by the father, compared to 26 per cent in 1975 (Bagnall 1994:29). The age of unmarried mothers is increasing. In 1971 39.2 per cent of births outside marriage were to teenagers; by 1991 that figure had dropped to 20.6 per cent. The big increases in births outside marriage are to women in the 25-29 age group (up from 14.5 per cent of births outside marriage to 23.6 per cent) and in the 30-34 age group (up from 7.5 per cent to 14.1 per cent) (ABS 1994e:13). As a result, it is unlikely that Australia will suffer American-style illegitimacy problems, with large numbers of ex-nuptial children born to mothers ill-prepared to take care of them: the kind of problem that led Charles Murray to say that 'illegitimacy is the single most important social problem of our time – more important than crime, drugs, poverty, illiteracy, welfare, or homelessness because it drives everything else' (Murray 1993).

That more children than in the past are growing up without two parents is impossible to dispute. What is far more difficult to assess is the overall quality of family life now compared to that experienced by previous generations. Even with high divorce rates, the vast majority of children grow up in families where there are two parents – the bulk of these natural parents, but family blending provides about 7 per cent of children with a two parent family environment (ABS 1993c:5). We do know that (on average) families are smaller, have a higher material standard of living, less subject to a range of illnesses that once caused much debility and premature death, and receive education that is at least longer in duration. All these things might be expected, on average, to improve family functioning. However, there may be other trends working in the opposite direction. Popenoe identifies one such trend, what he calls the 'time famine'.

According to Popenoe, the 'time famine' that currently faces so many American families is a 'national calamity'. This is because the 'warm-restrictive disciplinary style' Popenoe finds to be characteristic of strong families takes up much time. These concerns are reflected in Australia in the worries of 'working mothers'. Hugh Mackay comments that it is 'a common source of anxiety among working mothers to reflect on the possibility that their own mothers did a better job of mothering than they are doing with their own children' (Mackay 1993:32). 62 per cent of men and 69 per cent of women think it is more difficult to raise children successfully when both parents work full

time (Vanderheuevel 1991:10). People certainly think there is a time problem in Australian families. It is difficult, however, to get a clear picture of how serious a problem the 'time famine' might be in Australia. If it was a major difficulty, we would expect that children from homes in which both parents work would be experiencing problems, but an Australian Institute of Family Studies survey on adolescent well-being showed that this group does best in terms of overall well-being (Weston 1993:28). Possibly the AIFS survey is measuring the wrong things, or is not picking up on longer term problems.

If there is a 'time famine', the major cause is the rise of the 'working mother'. While the average number of hours worked by men full time in the labour force has increased, the participation rate has declined. In 1973 the participation rate for males in the two main child-rearing age groups of 25-34 and 35-44 (the median age for married men to have children in 1992 was 31.8 [ABS 1993g:4]) was around 97 per cent. It is now 93 per cent (CEO 1993a:126,129). In the same period, the labour force participation rate for married women increased significantly. The labour force participation rate for women in or seeking full time work in the 25-34 age group (with the median age for childbirth being 28.7 in 1992 [ABS 1993g :4]) has increased from 24.3 per cent in 1973 to 34.1 per cent in 1991 and for the 35-44 age group from 43.2 per cent to 69.3 per cent (CEO 1993a:127,130). However, balanced against this is a decline in the proportion of married women in the labour force who were working full time, from 63 per cent to 53 per cent (CEO 1993a:86).

The Australian Time Use survey gives us some idea of the amount of any given day given over to child care. If we focus only on child care as an exclusive activity and average the time spent over the whole population then the figures are low. So, if child minding is taken as a separate activity we find that, on average, people spend less than 10 minutes per day minding children (ABS 1993d:13). However, the picture changes dramatically when we combine activities and look at people with young children, rather than the population as a whole. For example, when child care is classed as a person's main activity, it absorbs 48.8 million hours per week. But when child care is combined with other activities it rises to 203.4 million hours per week. So people are spending a lot more time with children than might, on first appearances, look to be the case. Unsurprisingly, women in their mid-20s to mid-30s spend much more time with children than do others – about triple the amount of time as men of the same age (Ironmonger 1994:50).

Many parents would like to be able to spend more time with their children. The rise in female labour force participation means that women are able to devote less time to their children (though time lost is not equal to the rise in female hours in paid labour – much of the time is during school hours, and reductions in numbers of children per mother and increases in domestic labour saving devices mean parents need spend less time on household chores.)<sup>5</sup> However, there is not the evidence we would need to show that there is anything so dramatic as a 'time famine'. Parents and children have to juggle commitments, as presumably they always have and always will.

There is cause for concern at the state of the Australian family. Many families suffer financial strains, parents would like to be able to spend more time with their children, and family break-up both reflects past troubles and often leads to new difficulties. Nevertheless, I believe that the mood of crisis that sometimes surrounds discussion of the Australian family is misplaced. Quality of life surveys indicate high levels of satisfaction with children, marriage, and family (Headey & Wearing 1992: 89). The divorce rate is stable (ABS 1993c: 4), and it is plausible to believe that comparisons with pre-Family Law Act 1975 divorce rates are unreasonable, because those rates were artificially low. Marriages persisted not because they were successful unions, but because one or both parties were unable to leave. If some of the statistics we have now are a guide, family break-up may in many cases be a good thing. For example, 44 per cent of custodial parents claim to have suffered violence at the hands of their former partner, and 67 per cent say they were subject to mental or emotional cruelty (CSEAG 1992:134). Of the more than 16,000 substantiated cases of child abuse and more than 5,000 cases of child neglect in 1991-92 parents were identified as the maltreater in 47 per cent of cases (Angus et al. 1994:13,17).

Apart from the artificiality of the pre-1975 divorce rates, higher separation rates are likely to be sustained by largely irreversible social trends. Perhaps reflecting rising individualism (about which Popenoe is very much in two minds) more than 90 per cent of people think no marriage is better than a bad marriage, and faced with an unhappy

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<sup>5</sup> For reductions over time in household size see Snooks 1994: 66; and for increased investment in household equipment see Snooks 1994:59. American figures show a huge reduction in the amount of time spent on housework over this century: Lebergott 1993:51. Between 1974 and 1987 the amount of time women spent on unpaid work dropped from an average 39.9 hours to an average 36.0 hours; Blifman 1991: 28. Between 1987 and 1992 the amount of time spent on food preparation continued to drop, but time spent on laundry and other domestic work remained about the same (Blifman 1991:112; ABS 1993d:11).

marriage most people think it is better to end the relationship, even if there are children involved – though men (51 per cent) are less likely than women (67 per cent) to say this (Vandenheuvel 1991:9). Women's aspirations in life have changed markedly. In 1971, 78 per cent of married women agreed with the statement that a woman's most important role in life is becoming a mother. By 1982 only 46 per cent agreed (Edgar 1989:21). The effect of attitudinal shifts is that there is much less social stigma attached to divorce than there was in the past, a change also noted by Hugh Mackay (Mackay 1993:59).

Increased labour force participation by women means they have financial independence not available to earlier generations. As I noted above, labour force participation rate for women in the 35-44 age group is now nearly 70 per cent. In the early 1960s it was just below 30 per cent. Before World War II it was between 15 per cent and 20 per cent (Withers et al. 1985:117). The financial independence of women has also been enhanced by the availability of welfare support. In 1993, 298, 444 people were receiving a sole parent pension, up from 57, 872 in 1973 (ABS 1994d:147). Those without children can sometimes claim unemployment benefits. The effect of this is that leaving a failed marriage is an option for women today in a way that it was not in the past.

Despite these vastly increased opportunities for exit, two parent families with dependent children still outnumber one parent families with dependent children by five to one (ABS 1993c:1). Ex-nuptial births are rising, but the proportion of births to teenage mothers – those least well-equipped to raise a child – has declined. While the number of people on the sole parent pension has risen dramatically since the early 1970s, what the figures conceal is a high turnover in who is receiving it – nearly half receive the pension for less than a year, and 80 per cent stop receiving it within three years (Gittins 1994b). When sole mothers are employed, their children do fairly well according to most measures of well-being (Weston 1993:28). There is no cause for complacency, but nor is there reason for panic.

### **The Labour Market**

The changes in Australian society over the last generation cannot be explained without reference to the labour market. As I argued above, increased workforce participation by women has greatly affected the family. The type of work being done has also changed markedly, with job growth being concentrated in service industries. In this section, I concentrate on the effects of unemployment. Unemployment has been high in Australia since the mid-1970s, and the proportion of

unemployed persons who are long-term unemployed, defined as being without work for a year or more, has increased dramatically. In 1975 there were 12,400 individuals who were long-term unemployed; in August 1993 there were nearly 340,000 (CEO 1993a:11-12).

The Australian Institute of Family Studies survey of the well-being of adolescents, referred to above, found that it was children in families afflicted by unemployment who fared worst. The two family types with the poorest adolescent well-being were couple families in which the father was not in paid work or neither parent was employed. Where neither parent had a job, their children ranked relatively lowly on 17 of the 20 measures of well-being. Where mothers only had jobs, their children ranked lowly on 13 of the 20 measures (Weston 1993: 28-29). Further, unemployment compounds other problems. It puts extra strains on marriages, and makes people less likely to marry in the first place. Researchers at the ANU found this relationship to exist by examining the association between unemployment, marriage and divorce rates between 1921 and 1989. For 1989, they estimated that unemployment could be attributed as the cause of about 3 per cent of all divorces and the reduction and/or postponement of over 5 per cent of marriages (Junanakar & Kapuscinski 1992:58). A move to cheaper accommodation caused by reduced income can mean a loss of social networks and support systems (CEO 1993a:68). Children with long-term unemployed parents often miss a great deal of school due to ill-health, experience learning difficulties, and have high levels of truancy (p.74). Inadequate education, in turn, makes these children much more vulnerable to unemployment themselves. Unemployment rates are significantly higher for the less educated. Those who did not complete their high school education are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as those with a degree, and to be have been unemployed for a year or more (p.17).

Unemployment is one possible explanation for the rise in suicide by young men. A review of 150 studies on suicide and unemployment found that we can 'confidently state that there is an association between unemployment and suicide', though they could not specify with the same degree of confidence the nature of the association (cited in Ruzicka & Choi 1993:115). For males, unemployment in the 20-24 year old age group has tripled since the mid-1970s, and for 15-19 year olds it has nearly tripled (CEO 1993a:100). To put this in more concrete terms: in 1975 66,500 males in these age groups were looking for work; in 1992 there were 207,000 (pp.120,123). To add to the problems of these groups, the average duration of unemployment has increased significantly (p. 101). Without research into the actual social

characteristics of those who commit suicide unemployment is only a speculative cause. It is plausible, though, to believe that the prospect of long term unemployment makes some young people believe that the future holds nothing for them. This is especially so in countries such as Australia, in which work plays an important role in giving people status and identity. At least for those in work, a 1986 survey found that occupation was the single most important sense of identity, slightly more so than family membership and well above gender, religion, ethnic background or class (Emmison & Western 1991: 290).

Unemployment is an important factor explaining the levels of crime discussed above. The NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research has done some work on the relationship between economic adversity and crime. They identified the home addresses of 186,304 proven offenders in 1987 and 1988, coded them into local government areas, and calculated the proven offender rate per head of population for each area. Not surprisingly, there was a strong correlation between the number of proven offenders in each area and the number of crimes committed. The next correlation is not surprising either – these are also areas of higher than usual unemployment and lower than usual levels of income. Further, 'an exhaustive analysis of the possible impact of a very large range of offender factors (including ethnicity, family type, family size, age and social mobility) reveals socioeconomic variables account for nearly all of the regional variation in proportions of proven offenders' (Weatherburn 1992:2).

The anti-social attitudes on display by the unemployed who commit crime suggests unemployment can have an effect on character, and hence on the social virtues. The experience of employment probably fosters the social virtues. It provides rewards for those who prepared to work hard and to cooperate with others. Aside from the direct benefits these attributes provide in the workplace, if these attributes are carried across into other parts of people's lives the benefits of employment are more than just economic. It would be a mistake to argue that these attributes can only be learnt in paid employment. However, for certain groups of people they may be best learnt in the workplace. Young males, for example, may be more likely to respond to financial incentives than to the emotional rewards or sense of obligation experienced by those who work in the home or in the community. Unemployment deprives these people of an important socialising experience.

## The Welfare State

The potentially corrupting effects of the welfare state are a common theme in liberal and conservative writing. The federal Coalition's *Fightback!* document claimed that the welfare state breeds a 'culture of dependency', and notes that in the last two decades suicide, divorce and crime have risen exponentially – suggesting, at least implicitly, that the welfare state may be a causal factor (Liberal/National 1991: 19). The work ethic is said to be undermined by the easy availability of welfare benefits (Swan & Bernstam 1989:231-232). At a conference on the family, put on by the Australian Family Association in July 1994, speakers argued that the welfare state undermined the family unit (*News Weekly* 16 July 1994:5). It has been hypothesised that there is a link between crime and welfare dependency (Tapper 1993:48). Government welfare risks 'crowding out' private welfare provision (Goodman & Nicholas 1990:38-42); and in so doing discourages the ethos of individuals taking responsibility for their own welfare and that of others (James 1994:35).

Overall, though, it is very difficult to say whether or not welfare can be blamed for the range of ills with which it is linked in *Fightback!* International comparisons do not suggest that this is a promising line of investigation. Measuring social security transfers as a percentage of GDP, the United States has one of the smallest welfare states (Warby 1994:45), yet it has some of the worst social problems. If the welfare state is a problem, it is no more than a contributing factor.

At a theoretical level, the argument that welfare weakens the work ethic is clear enough. By offering a financial alternative to paid work, welfare encourages people not to be employed. In practice though, welfare appears to offer only weak incentives to withdraw from the labour market. Studies in Australia and overseas have not found a relationship between the level of unemployment benefits and the number of people becoming unemployed, though there is a link between the level of unemployment benefits and the length of unemployment (Whitlock 1994:32-36). So long as the welfare on offer is significantly below what can be earned through work, the incentive to take welfare is weak. Studies by the Department of Social Security (DSS) found that nearly 95 per cent of all families with an employed person would experience a decline in their after tax incomes of at least 20 per cent if they relied on welfare rather than their current job for income. For more than 70% of families, their income would decline by at least a half (CEO 1993b:167). For married couples, the value of income support as a proportion of median weekly earnings stood at 46.3 per cent in 1992 (p.174). Further, there are non-financial incen-

tives drawing people into the labour market. A survey of sole parent pensioners and unemployment beneficiaries done by the DSS in Brisbane found that a desire for independence was cited as a reason for working by almost the same number as cited monetary advantage. Other important dimensions of work mentioned by those surveyed included self-esteem, social contact, and satisfaction from work (Puniard & Harrington 1993:11).<sup>6</sup>

However, there is a small proportion of people for whom welfare does provide an financial incentive to stay out of the labour market. Around 2.5 per cent of families receive no financial gain from working. In particular, married couples with only one labour market participant are better off receiving social security payments than entry-level low wages (CEO 1993b:167-68).<sup>7</sup> Once the value of government benefits and services is included, sole parents may also often be better off staying out of the workforce (Tapper 1994:25). Indeed, female sole parents are a particular problem in their propensity to stay out of the workforce. Relative to their male counterparts, they are more than twice as likely to be on welfare and spend longer average times in receipt of income support (Lambert 1994:79). Like the unemployed who want work for reasons other than monetary advantage, female sole parents respond to non-financial incentives. Of the reasons surveyed sole parents gave for not doing paid work, children or child care reasons were cited by 58 per cent (CSEAG 1992:68). Nevertheless, there is a problem with the financial incentives. According to one report, 40 per cent of female sole parent pensioners who moved from pensions to paid employment experienced a drop in income (Vellekoop Baldock 1994:110). This closely matches the survey in which 38 per cent of custodial parents said they did not return to work because it would affect their pension (CSEAG 1992:68).

Overall, I am sceptical of claims that the welfare state is significantly undermining the work ethic and discouraging people from accepting jobs they would otherwise have taken. Overwhelmingly, a shortage of jobs rather than the moral hazards of the welfare state is the problem. Surveying the literature on sole parents, Suzanne Lambert found that while income support does reduce the labour supply of female sole parents; for both males and females the unemployment rate was consistently the most important variable in

<sup>6</sup> There are also negative incentives associated with being on welfare, such as the highly intrusive monitoring used to cut down on social security fraud: Vellekoop Baldock 1994: 105, 112-113.

<sup>7</sup> In the *Working Nation* white paper the federal government announced measures to reduce this problem: Keating 1994: 145-155.

the analysis; and that this finding held regardless of the statistical model used or other variables included (Lambert 1994:91). Nor is their much evidence that the welfare state is creating a large scale *culture* of dependency, to use *Fightback!*'s term. If that were the case, we would not be seeing the high turnover of people receiving welfare assistance. As I noted earlier, nearly half of sole parent pensioners receive assistance for less than a year, and 80 per cent stop receiving it within three years. Even in the depth of the recession, in the period June 1991 to March 1992, 45.8 per cent of those who had been receiving unemployment benefits stopped doing so for some period (Jordan 1993:27). And while it is only suggestive, the Brisbane survey of those receiving unemployment and sole parent benefits found no significant age differences in attitudes to work, contrary to what we might expect if the expansion in welfare over the last two decades was having deep cultural effects (Puniard & Harrington 1993:11).

Nevertheless, as I have pointed out several times, a claim about conditions overall can miss problems afflicting a relatively small group. Here I believe there is a worrying problem with parents (both sole and married) who, even if unemployment were reduced significantly, would not be able to find well paid jobs. These people have the strongest financial incentives to remain out of the workforce. The non-financial incentives for workforce participation are weaker for them as well, since the jobs they might get are likely to be low status and dull. Yet their not being part of the workforce is likely to have negative long-term repercussions. The more time they spend out of the workforce the less employable they become, condemning their household to poverty and all the problems that entails for more than one generation. They are divorced from the social networks derived from employment. Children do not have the opportunity to learn work habits from their parents. *Working Nation* took steps to lessen these problems for married couples, but the hazards of the sole parent pension have yet to be addressed.

If the welfare state is contributing to family break up, it is the sole parent pension that is likely to be responsible. Alan Tapper's studies of the government benefits available to sole parents suggest that 'working married or de facto parents contemplating separation and life for one on the pension stand to gain from government a 'social wage' of ... about \$18,500 in today's dollars' (Tapper 1994:26). The extent of the financial incentive to end a relationship would vary between families. It is not necessary to argue that relationships are ended simply to make money to acknowledge that the availability of welfare support makes leaving relationships much easier. If a partner

has poor employment prospects or wishes to stay out of the workforce (because they must care for children), then the sole parent pension makes ending the relationship financially viable. Partners who hold jobs are also encouraged by the sole parent pension to leave the relationship. This is because they know that the consequence of their doing so is not destitution for their children or former partner.

However, this is a very difficult area of welfare policy. A rationale for having a sole parent pension is precisely that it does facilitate the ending of bad family relationships. The violence and cruelty within families discussed above should make us reluctant to cut off this route of escape. A key question in evaluating the effect of the sole parent pension on families is how many salvageable relationships were lost because of the pension's availability.<sup>8</sup> This number we just do not have. Possibly eligibility could be changed to exclude people in relationships they currently regard as unsatisfactory, but not seriously threatening the mental or physical well-being of family members. However, this could create perverse incentives to fabricate acts of violence or cruelty, to provoke them, or even to perform them.

Alan Tapper has also put forward the hypothesis that there is a link between welfare dependency and juvenile crime. If welfare breaks up couples into 'non-working males and struggling sole mothers' with 'children who are loosely controlled and poorly socialised' (Tapper 1993:48) it is not difficult to also blame welfare for the criminal behaviour of these children. Tapper says that we lack some of the direct evidence we need to substantiate his hypothesis. There is not much doubt that a poor family background is an important factor in juvenile crime. The question is to what extent that poor background is due to the availability of welfare. Apart from the recently controversial Young Homeless Allowance, which allegedly encourages young people to leave home, this turns us back to the effects of the unemployment benefit and the sole parent pension on families. To the extent that these benefits are causing problems in some families – and on the evidence presented above this is likely to be so in at least some cases – then Tapper's hypothesis is likely to be correct.

In his contribution to this volume, Barry Maley discusses the ways in which voluntary associations nurture the social virtues (Maley 1994:96-98). When the state became a large scale provider of welfare, voluntary associations such as the friendly societies which at the turn

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<sup>8</sup> Another problem is that a pension-induced separation is not necessarily permanent. It may in some cases provide a 'cooling off' separation that allows a later reconciliation.

of the century were serving well over 30 per cent of the population (Green & Cromwell 1984: xiv) lost important functions. Deprived of part of their rationale for existence, those friendly societies that survive today play little role in promoting the social virtues. This is a leading example of the state 'crowding out' the civil society, and unintentionally damaging or destroying institutions which had important social roles beyond their more obvious functions.

I support this emphasis on the importance of the civil society. 'Crowding out' is a real danger, and should as much as the direct impact on taxpayers' funds be counted as a cost of government activity. Nevertheless, changes in the way governments seek to implement their policy goals suggests that 'crowding out' is not the problem it once was.<sup>9</sup> While government has expanded the areas in which it assumes ultimate welfare responsibility, it is not always delivering welfare services itself. Rather, it is providing financial assistance to charitable organisations which then provide the service. Starting in the late 1960s, government funding to charitable organisations has increased rapidly. In the six years to 1974/75 funding increased 229 per cent in real terms, in the next six years 92 per cent, and in the following six years to 1986/87 by 106 per cent. As a proportion of government outlays in the relevant fields of welfare activity, funding of charitable organisations has increased in this time period from 5 per cent to 18 per cent (Lyons 1994:43). This rise in funding may well explain the proliferation of charitable organisations over the last twenty years. While there is a qualitative difference between many of these organisations and the friendly societies (since many of them are likely to be based on provider-client relationships rather than mutual aid) we may now have a situation in which the welfare state is facilitating voluntary associations, and thereby opening up opportunities for involvement.

Balanced against arguments critical of the welfare state must be those saying that the welfare state is an integrative force. By guaranteeing all a minimal standard of living, it gives them a connection to their society and avoids the extreme deprivation that might trigger social unrest.<sup>10</sup> While there is little empirical work substantiating these arguments, they are intuitively plausible. For example, secure welfare lessens the need some might otherwise feel to commit crimes

<sup>9</sup> I am not here considering a different form of crowding out, in which it is argued that the high taxes necessary to fund government activity reduces the amount of money available for voluntary contributions.

<sup>10</sup> The arguments from citizenship and community are currently common amongst defenders of the welfare state. See Joyasuriya 1993; Travers & Richardson 1993: Ch.6; Carney & Hanks 1994: Ch.5.

in order to support themselves. If, as is sometimes claimed, high taxes are straining the family unit, then it would be difficult to deny that withdrawing the principal source of many families' income would also create enormous strains.

It is possible that all parties to this welfare debate are correct. It is not contradictory to argue that the welfare state is responsible for some disintegrative mechanisms (such as increased unemployment and family break up) and some integrative mechanisms (such as easing burdens that might otherwise trigger anti-social behaviour). Welfare programs need to be carefully designed so as to minimise perverse incentives for families to split up or individuals to become unemployed.

### **'Natural Communities'**

The aim of Popenoe's natural communities policy is to improve the conditions for childrearing. In doing this, he suggests that 'nothing may be more important than trying to protect and cultivate those natural, tribal or village like communities that still remain – communities which have families as their basic building blocks, and in which a mix of people through free association and sets of relational networks maintain a common life' (Popenoe 1994:27) Popenoe sets out seven specific goals that a natural communities policy might include. These are: a reduction in residential mobility, the enforcement of community moral standards, the provision of more public facilities, the development of smaller cities and towns, the promotion of local political autonomy, the promotion of functional balance, and the protection of homogenous neighbourhoods.

Several times in discussing Australian social conditions I noted regional variations in social conditions. Crime, for example, is much worse in some areas than others. However, it not clear that these regional variations are due to characteristics of the local area that could be altered by a natural communities policy. High levels of youth suicide, I suggested, probably have much to do with high levels of youth unemployment. The rural areas in which youth suicide is highest already display some of the characteristics Popenoe finds desirable in a community – enforcement of community moral standards, smaller towns, and homogeneity – but insofar as these factors are conducive to communal well-being, they do not seem to be sufficient to outweigh the effects of unemployment, and the greater access rural youths have to effective means of committing suicide, such as guns.

There are characteristics of local areas that might increase the crime rate. Popenoe criticises the specialisation of metropolitan

conditions, with people living in one place, working at another, shopping at a third, and recreating in a fourth. Criminologists point out that leaving residential suburbs deserted for much of the day creates a 'vast range of 'job opportunities' for burglars' (Wilson n.d:3). In the medium term, of course, there is not much that can be done about the physical structure of cities. However, crime reduction is one reason for adopting less restrictive zoning policies. Neighbourhood Watch schemes have attempted to make better use of the capacity local communities do have for surveillance of each other's property.<sup>11</sup> A lack of public facilities can also contribute to crime, where it means that teenagers (who are the most likely to commit crime) are left without things to do (Wilson n.d:6). However, this factor too is probably closely related to unemployment: not only do those with jobs have much of their time occupied, but their income enables them to entertain themselves more easily during their free time.

A natural communities policy could, over time, have some effect on crime rates. However, its major test must be – given the emphasis Popenoe places on the family – its impact on families. It is very difficult to assess the likely impact of a natural communities policy on the level of family breakdown and divorce. We must be pessimistic as to its likely effects. The huge social changes driving the increasing divorce rate – principally an unwillingness to put up with bad marriages and increasing female financial independence – cannot easily be challenged by protecting local communities. If people want to leave a marriage, there has never been an easier time to do it. If a natural communities policy were to reduce the marriage failure rate it would have to address the problem of the unhappy marriage – no easy task, but not a completely impossible one. One likely advantage of the natural communities policy is that it may provide more extensive networks of local support to families. It is plausible that the longer people have lived in an area, and the more similar they are to their neighbours, the more likely it is that they will be part of a functioning geographic community and be prepared to render each other assistance.<sup>12</sup> Well-functioning geographic communities create environments in which it is easier for children and adults to receive consistent

<sup>11</sup> Members of Neighbourhood Watch are slightly less likely to be victims of crime: ABS 1994c:6.

<sup>12</sup> Australians, like Americans, are highly mobile. In the five years between 1986 and 1991, 43.3 per cent of the population moved (ABS 1993f:9). However, Popenoe's pessimism about declining geographic community may not be fully justified. In the US, neighbourhoods are now more class homogenous and the long term trend is toward residential stability (Fischer 1991:81,83). In Australia, studies of voter mobility show increased residential stability. In 1971 a third of electoral

messages on appropriate attitudes and behaviour, and in which behaviour can more easily be monitored.

The kinds of concerns raised by Popenoe's natural communities policy are worth considering as part of overall social policy. But to say that nothing is more important than this kind of policy is, at least in the Australian context, a great exaggeration. The sense of geographic community is probably less than it once was, since developments in transport and communications bring people into communities of choice rather than communities of residence. Creating additional incentives to geographic community (or removing artificial disincentives) may bring about modest changes. However, the major sources of social change lie elsewhere, as do the major solutions to the problems we face.

### Conclusion

To avert Australia falling into a social recession, the policy focus should fall on unemployment. This is not to dismiss the worth of carefully examining family policy, the welfare state, or the issues raised by Popenoe in his natural communities policy. However, the effects of policy changes in these areas are likely to be at the margins and in the long term. Medium term reductions in unemployment, which are plausible given the right combination of labour market reform and economic growth, would by contrast deliver substantial benefits to those most vulnerable to a social recession – the young and the poor. Furthermore, problems in the family and the welfare state are exacerbated by unemployment. Where policies to fix unemployment conflict with other policies, employment policies should probably be given priority. For example, one of the goals of Popenoe's natural communities policy – to reduce residential mobility – conflicts with controlling unemployment. Unemployment varies widely by region in Australia, from a few per cent to over twenty per cent (CEO 1993a:60-61). If jobs are available in some regions but not others, it makes sense to encourage people to move – even at the cost of some disruption to their social networks.

I remain optimistic about the prospects for Australian society. I believe we are working from a stronger base than some of the more alarmist analysis of Australian society would lead us to believe. While

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divisions has more than half their population move in the previous five years. In 1991 under a tenth of divisions recorded a mobility of above 50 per cent (Hughes 1994:110-111). Movement does not necessarily mean people lose existing social networks. Indeed, in the period 1987-92 22.4 per cent of people moved to be closer to their families (ABS 1994e:21)

there are problems in major institutions, there is also an awareness of those problems and serious attempts to do something about them. My 'good news' approach invites charges of complacency. These charges are unfounded. While I think Australia is in better shape than those who share David Popenoe's perception of a social recession, and whose mood has been detected by many opinion polls, the information I present gives us no reason to rest on our laurels. My point is that an effective response to Australia's problems is most likely to come from a sober assessment of where we are now and the practical alternatives. A climate of moral panic is not conducive to good policy making.

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*Chapter 3*

# **Morals and Modernity**

BARRY MALEY

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# Morals and Modernity

BARRY MALEY

**I**n this essay I do not want to address at length whether or not we are in a social recession in this country. If, by that term, one means civil disorder and social crisis, I would agree with Andrew Norton that this is not the case here, although it may be so in America. But if it is taken to mean that some central institutions in Australia – such as the family, education, industrial employment, and voluntary associations – are showing signs of failure that may lead to real dangers for the social or civic virtues and our way of life, I would share such a view.

There are direct links between the strength of the social virtues in a society and the vigour and character of its institutions and associations. We are not born as reliable, trustworthy, honest, dutiful, responsible, self-reliant, considerate, decent citizens. As Popenoc argues, whatever innate dispositions we might possess that are the foundations of good citizenship, they have nevertheless to be worked on. They have to be shaped into daily habits of thought and action by our social and cultural experiences in living social groups and institutions that are close to us and which can act directly upon us. This collection of diverse groups, organisations and institutions, if we exclude the apparatus of the state, is sometimes referred to as 'civil society' or 'civil association'. It is, overwhelmingly, the associations of civil society that are the source of such morals and virtues as we might

possess. We have to *learn* virtue and we can only learn it in close and sustained association with others in social and economic activities that are important to us. Other things being equal, when social bonds between individuals and groups are strong, observance of social obligations and responsibilities is more likely.

Forms of moral behaviour arise from the relations of people performing various social and cultural functions together in order to serve their interests; whether it be rearing children together, running a tennis club, a hospital, a political party, a factory, or whatever. Successful performance of such functions over time and continuously requires the substantial observance of a variety of moral or associational rules by those carrying out the function. Mutual dependence and cooperation, and hence performance of the function, would collapse if the rules serving such things as cooperation, kinds of duties and harmonious relations, ceased to be observed. So we learn how to be virtuous under the discipline of activities carried on in a traditional mode; which is to say, in a mode that has been found to be successful (where success is defined as adaptable continuity) in the past. Such learning and such virtues as we might acquire are generalisable and transferable from one form of activity to another as we grow older and move from one institutional or organisational setting to another. So what we learn in the family, or in the school, for example, may serve us well or badly in other social relations and settings, depending upon the merit and transferability of the instruction or informal learning we have received there.

There is an intimate linkage between the successful performance of associational functions, the appropriateness of the moral rules at work within the association, and the degree of independence or autonomy of the association concerned. Where the association has to depend for its continued existence upon its members performing their duties in a reliable way, and where the personal interests of the individuals in turn depend directly upon the success of the organisation, there needs to be a direct connection between all of this and the acquisition and disposal of the resources the association needs to sustain itself. If the association need not depend upon the functional quality of its own efforts to acquire what it needs; or if it can make poor decisions in using its resources and not suffer the consequences, a wedge is driven between maintaining itself and the integrity of its internal moral order. Instead, the moral focus of the members is turned outwards towards cajoling, appealing to, depending upon, or exploiting, the external provider or rescuer. Or, alternatively, the association itself becomes irrelevant to its members' interests and collapses. No

association or institution can be wholly independent or autonomous either of other institutions or of the law and government. The moral problem, which is also the political problem, is to find the right overarching social rules and laws to achieve that balance.

In what follows, I attempt to illustrate these abstractly-stated issues by describing some of the critical changes within some central institutions which affect social bonds and the moral climate within them. In this, cultural movements and the role played by government are of supreme importance.

### **The Challenge to Family Autonomy**

I join the other two essayists in seeing the family as playing a pivotal role in laying the basis for the development of the social virtues in individuals. As Popenoe eloquently points out, the success of a family in achieving this depends upon the character of its internal life.

For the overwhelming majority of children, nobody cares more about their well-being than their parents. The sentiments of love and self-sacrifice that so powerfully move them are the prime guarantees that the resources the parents command, and their decision-making powers, will be directed to the best interests of the child. Any social, cultural or legal developments that come between those natural parental motives and the capacity to fulfil them in the socialisation and moralisation of their children puts both the welfare of the children and the social virtues (and hence public life) at risk. It is therefore disturbing that the recent history of the family has been a history of the steady draining away of family resources and decision-making power into other hands. Those with different kinds of motives now command resources formerly at the disposal of parents and now have powers of decision once the prerogative of parents. The shaping of the morals, knowledge, skills and civic character of children is much less in the hands of the parents of children than it used to be, and the non-parental controllers have their own agendas. But these trends are further complicated by changes affecting the relationships of parents to each other and of both to the state and the economy. This is altering the motives and incentives of parents as (putatively) cooperating partners and this inevitably has consequences for the internal climate of the family and all its members. What is happening to the family is part of a broad movement affecting the whole of Australian society. To place these events in context, we need to remind ourselves of the character of the family as it used to be and what has happened to it.

### ***From Household to Individualism***

As Popenoe and many others have made clear, the continuity and quality of the relationship between their parents is crucial for the welfare of children. It is not difficult to understand why men and women want to live with each other; but to understand the circumstances that encourage them to formalise their relationship in marriage, or to have children (and how many) either within wedlock or outside it, or to cooperate well in raising them, or to stay together or break up, or to interact with their own parents and other relatives, takes us into more difficult territory.

The history of the family, more particularly the Western family of the last 500 years or so, gives us some clues. Above all, it demonstrates how the nature of the adult heterosexual relationship changes in tandem with changes in the web of economic, social and cultural circumstances that surrounds it.

Jon Davies (1993) summarises that history as a progression from household to family to individualism; a progression marked by the steady shedding of powerful cultural and moral constraints on the heterosexual relationship and the family members implicated in it.

In medieval times, for example, the Church was the prime instrument of control and, through the parish system with its priest, confessional, communicant congregation and ecclesiastical courts, supplemented by magistrates and lords of the manor, a married couple was under constant direction, surveillance and reprimand for deviations from communal expectations. Added to this was the web of kinship support, and the importance of property in ensuring survival and well-being, that tied the married couple to a household system:

This process of carefully surrounding young people with adult support started early on with the institution of god-parents and continued to protect both young and old in various forms of semi-contractual arrangements covering such things as widowhood or 'retirement'. An old farmer would agree to vacate the farmhouse and land, and hand it on to his eldest son (who was then and therefore able to marry) as long as the son would contract to provide the old man and his wife with food and lodging for as long as they lived. In such a system it was possible to divorce neither one's spouse, nor one's parents, nor children, nor aunts, nor cousins; and household life was lived within a hierarchy of rationed ambition (Davies 1993:72).

But the march of history threw up solvents of that household system and its interlocking obligations and restraints. The Reformation destroyed the moral monopoly of the universal Church, encouraged

religious pluralism, and the emergence of freedom of conscience with the 'private' individual as its repository:

The only possible location, in a pluralist society, of a mechanism for internalising such a variety of forms of conscience was parental power exercised within a nuclear family, itself heavily bounded over and against the outside world. Only in such an institution, in which parents (i.e. the father) combined the powers of church and state, could effective socialisation of the new breeds of youngsters take place – and for a new purpose; i.e. the pursuit of individual betterment, in which the success of the new generation was to lie precisely in the extent to which it jettisoned rather than repeated the lessons and examples of the older generation (Davies 1993:75).

### ***The Moral Microcosm***

This private nuclear family is still with us, although now much more exposed to, and affected by, the growing ascendancy of the liberal individualism to which Davies refers and the many changes that began to gather force in the 1960s. But where such families continue to do their work – and they remain the majority – they constitute moral microcosms of great power and importance in establishing rules and habits of duty and obligation.

We are so familiar with the routine and quasi-automatic process of socialising and moralising children within the stable, two-parent family, and we have forgotten so much that we did not know we knew, that it comes as a shock to see the phenomenon analysed and laid bare, step by step, by skilled observers. In *Home Rules*, Denis Wood and Robert J. Beck (1994) provide a fascinating study of a particular family's life in their living room and the rules that the children are required to absorb by their parents in using the room and dealing with the objects in it. Despite (or because of?) the study's deliberately extreme limitation of focus, we are nevertheless led to a profound appreciation of the intensity, the detail and the richness of cultural meanings carried by the socialising encounter between parents and children:

What is a home for a child but a field of rules? From the moment he rouses into consciousness each morning, it is a consciousness of what he must and must not do. If during the night his pillows have fallen to the floor, he must pick these up, for *pillows do not belong on the floor, they belong on the bed*. If he thinks of turning on the radio, he must keep it low, for *we do not play the radio loud before everyone is up*. If he needs to urinate, he must go to the bathroom, for *we put our wee-wee in the toilet*. If he is old enough to stand, he

must lift the seat of the toilet, for otherwise he might splash and spatter, and *we do not do that in this house*. When he has finished he must flush the toilet – for *we always flush the toilet when we're done* – and lower the seat – *because that's how we do things around here*. He is not to sing gloriously in welcome of the day, nor dance a fandango back to his bed, nor wake his brother by eagerly whispering in his startled ear, 'Quick, Watson! The game is afoot!' *because we don't wake people up until they're ready* – unless they are kids and they've got to go to school. Then the rule is, *you've got to get up in plenty of time for school!* (1994: 1).

Within such a home – and 'Without the rules the home is not a home' (Wood and Beck 1994: 1-2) – 'values walk around the house' (Davies 1993:83) in the examples and embodiments of parents and the rules they pass on. The stable nuclear family of such a kind is a hothouse of moral cultivation. For the last two hundred years this family form has proved to be extraordinarily powerful and successful in reproducing itself and in producing the human character essential in maintaining the social virtues underpinning tolerant, orderly, liberal, capitalist societies. Until the advent of public schooling in the late nineteenth century, the family had no rival in determining the moralisation, education and socialisation of its children; and little competition from media of entertainment and information.

### **The Family in the Modern Era**

But the virtual universality of this seemingly robust family type has diminished over the last thirty years. Alarming so in some Western countries, such as the United States; less so in others, such as Italy and France; and moderately so in Australia, as shown by the facts and figures quoted in Andrew Norton's essay.

If we ask why this is so, the broad answer is that we are seeing the differential working out, according to the historical circumstances of particular countries, of some of the great cultural themes and the economic progress which have created the liberalism and wealth of the societies of the West. So far as the family is concerned, the icons of freedom, equality, wealth-creation, democracy, individualism and the private conscience, can be enlisted to serve centrifugal tendencies as well as centripetal ones, and the family developments of recent times have revealed to us its vulnerability to such forces.

### **Economic and Cultural Change**

One of the most powerful of the centrifugal forces has been, and still is, the revolution in economic production. Somewhat over 100 years

ago in Australia, primary production accounted for the greater part of all production for sale, and a large part of that was produced by household and family enterprises; to which must be added the very much larger part of gross domestic product attributable to household production of goods and services consumed by the household itself.

By the first quarter of this century, technological innovation, accelerating division of labour, and work away from the home had virtually demolished what remained of the substantial nexus between economic production and the household; it was no longer the single locus of the multiple functions of the family. By the middle of the century, families in the mature industrial civilisations of the West were characterised by growing prosperity, almost total dependence on wage employment by males and also, after World War II, by a rapidly increasing proportion of females and married women. Some of the consequences for family life have already been detailed by Andrew Norton.

Accompanying these profound economic changes affecting the family and the organisation of work, has been the steady unfolding of two sets of ideas in uneasy tension with each other. The commitment to personal liberation and individualism in the classical liberal tradition contends with the collectivism and welfarism that gathered strength throughout the West towards the end of the last century and which is still very strong. The outcome of their interaction has been the realisation of liberal ideas in social and personal life, mixed with a welfarist expansion of 'entitlements' of various kinds and state-mandated egalitarianism.

These two streams lead to two sorts of outcome, both of which loosen social bonds and attenuate moral relationships between individuals and groups; a process sometimes identified as 'alienation'.

### ***Liberalism, Status and Contract***

Within the Western liberal tradition, the claims to freedom, equality and rights made under the banner of individualism, are the sworn enemies of social bonds and arrangements premised on status and established roles. Such claims can be urged by husbands against wives, wives against husbands, and children against parents. When the legitimacy of the claims is widely acknowledged, and ratified by the state, transactions shaped by the obligations of traditional roles and statuses disappear, to be replaced by the only other means of securing cooperation and mutually satisfying engagements between pure individuals – contract and statute, and whatever remains of custom and habit.

Contractual relations, whether formal or informal, are the signs of equality of status and hence of liberation, freedom and independence. As social and personal interactions fall increasingly within the realm of contract, under terms more or less infinitely variable by mutual agreement, relationships tend towards rational construction and 'negotiation'. They depend less upon the supports formerly offered by 'understandings' and trust reflecting entrenched moral consensuses and the corresponding powers of exclusion and stigma that help sustain a moral order. The relative impersonality and independence of relationships so constructed, encourage contractual opportunism, or the search for formal flaws in the details of the contract that will allow a party to secure personal advantage or to escape obligations – an egoistic investment in the letter of the law rather than its spirit, with further attenuation of the spirit (generalised trust and understandings) as a result. Increasing litigation over formal contracts and the cynical exploitation of 'negligence' through claims for damages against private parties and public authorities are signs of this increasing social distance and the weakening of internalised restraints. This tendency gains greater impetus when, for the potential exploiter, the party exposed to exploitation lacks a constraining moral identity, as does the remote, de-personalised, entitlement state, dispensing money and privileges.

### ***Parental Status***

When the prerogatives and obligations of status are attacked and weakened on the grounds that they inhibit freedom and individualism, the forms of authority, the privileges and penalties, formerly tied to status are no longer seen as legitimate. This is happening at the present time with parental status and authority over children, which is under challenge from the 'children's rights' movement. This movement has two main grounds of argument. First, that children should have adult rights because they are human beings and there is continuity between childhood and adulthood; and, second, that adults regularly abuse their power over children.

The first argument is, in effect, a very harsh one because, if children's rights became indistinguishable from adult rights, presumably this should be matched by the assumption of adult responsibilities by children and therefore the liability of answering in full to the law if they failed those responsibilities by stealing, lighting fires, attacking other children, carelessness with poisons, damaging property, and so on. In practice, it is more likely that the rights would be granted without exacting the corresponding responsibilities.

The second argument is increasingly used nowadays to justify increasing surveillance of families by the state and the payment of state allowances to children who have left home because of alleged parental violence or neglect; allegations which, it seems, are rarely investigated (*The Sunday Telegraph* 1994:17).

Spanking of naughty children by parents looks likely to be outlawed before long, while in some quarters there are moves to punish parents for the crimes of their children. As Barbara Amiel has put it (1993) in commenting on English moves in this direction:

... our present policies lead to the lunacy of the state which hauls parents into court on Monday simply because they discipline their child and then ... will arrest them on Tuesday as criminally responsible for offences committed by their undisciplined children.

The net outcome of such tendencies is to distance parents and children from each other and to legitimise the transference of control over their lives to impersonal agencies. As Amiel implies, one suspects that, in fact, parents would still be held mainly *responsible* for their children but, because the prerogatives of parental status had been defined away, they would have lost most of the *authority* necessary to fulfil those responsibilities.

In general, the present situation is full of ambiguity. There is a silent struggle between parents and the state to *locate* legitimate authority over children. The former consensus, leaving it to the parents unless it could be unequivocally shown that they were seriously abusing or neglectful, is now under challenge. The definition of abuse and neglect is being widened and enlarged powers of interpretation and decision rest with state functionaries.

### ***Marital Status and the Bonds of Kinship***

It is the height of irony that the one voluntary status relationship outside contract which the law once made difficult to end – the marriage relationship establishing ‘wives’ and ‘husbands’ – is now the one made easy to end and also the one which the law *forbids* may be made more enduring or more difficult to end by private contract. At the same time, the one status of children entailed in the marriage of their parents – legitimacy – is being discarded socially (if not quite legally) as we implicitly legitimize unmarried motherhood and remove its former stigma.

The increased fragility of marriage, both as a legal entity and as an ideal of male-female *commitment* for life ranged against the trials and agonies that bedevil all intimate relationships, has both liberated

and impoverished human lives. It allows some forms of misery to be ended expeditiously, but sometimes to the detriment of those more resolute in their commitments, children who have no say, and the taxpayers who must support the economic and social casualties.

Andrew Norton notes in his essay the rapid increase in the numbers of children in sole parent families as a result of divorce, severed de facto relationships, or mothers who never married or sustained a de facto relationship. He also remarks on some of the material and emotional costs of separation of children from one or other of the parents, more frequently the father.

As he points out, many ex-nuptial births are to women in de facto relationships and four out of five of the fathers acknowledge paternity. This would be reassuring if it could be taken as a reliable indication that the father continues to live at the same address in a warm and enduring relationship with the mother and child. But there are reasons to believe that cohabitation is a much more uncertain relationship than marriage.

If the essence of marriage is the permanent and voluntary commitment of a man and woman to each other and to any children they might have, their subsequent life together is made in the shadow of that commitment in a way that cannot be mimicked by cohabitation without it. In an important sense, cohabitation is usually defined by the absence of commitment. It is not a 'trial' marriage because it lacks the essential ingredient of marriage. Marriage commitments may fail, of course, and end in divorce; but even such failed relationships seem to be more enduring and less turbulent than cohabitation.

The median length of Australian marriages that end in divorce is about 10 years (ABS 1993:9); and, of course, most marriages last for life. A recent international study of mother-headed families reports that unmarried couples in Australia are 10-times more likely to split up than married couples (*The Australian* 1994:1). Charles Murray (1994:8) reports a recent study of cohabiting mothers by the British Joseph Rowntree Foundation showing that half the cohabitations lasted less than 2 years, and that only 16 per cent of the cohabiting women had been living with the same man for more than five years. This relative instability of cohabiting couples compared to married couples is consistent with an Australian Institute of Family Studies survey indicating that 18 months after the birth of their child, 2 per cent of married couples were no longer married, while among de facto couples 19 per cent had parted (Bagnall 1994:32). In addition to the unstable character of the relationship of de facto parents, their children are further disadvantaged on socio-economic grounds, com-

pared to children of married parents:

In around 40 per cent of [de facto] couples surveyed [by the Australian Institute of Family Studies], both partners had fewer than 10 years' schooling in contrast with 9 per cent of married parents. One in five de facto couples with children had received unemployment benefits preceding the survey compared with only 3 per cent of married couples with children (Bagnall 1994:32).

There is some evidence that children of de facto couples are more likely to suffer sexual abuse than children of married couples. ABS figures for 1992 (1994) show 3,777,000 dependent children in registered married couple families and 216,270 dependent children in de facto couple families, or 5.4 per cent of the total children in both family types. Statistics on substantiated cases of sexual abuse of children collated by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare for 1990-91 (1994:20) indicate 682 cases of sexual abuse among natural/adoptive married parent families and 162 cases – or 17.7 per cent of the total cases – among de facto couple families, suggesting that sexual abuse of children is over 3 times more common in de facto couple families. These figures are small in absolute terms, but they may be symptomatic of more frequently disturbed relationships in such families.

### ***Children, Parents and Kin***

There are 433,700 dependent children living with only one parent, of whom 368,700 live with a lone mother and the rest with a lone father. There are a further 123,100 children in de facto couple families (ABS 1994:1-2). About 48,000 dependent children each year 'lose' a parent through divorce (ABS 1993:2), although contact may be maintained with the parent – usually the father – absent from the home. However, if British experience is a guide, this shows that nearly 40 per cent of fathers lose contact with their children after divorce (Wavell 1994:10.9).

The overall effect of these various trends is to place an unprecedented proportion of dependent children in situations where their connections to the adults most important to them have never been more risky and uncertain.

The effective disappearance of a parent from a child's life, even a less than ideal mother or father, is a serious loss in itself. But it may also mean the substantial loss of other *kin* and wider family connections. Even where contact is maintained with the absent parent, the relationship is likely to be more tenuous, and even more so with that parent's kin; and virtually non-existent if the child loses all effective

contact with the absent parent, as is apparently so in a large percentage of cases. In the absence of those wider kin connections attached to the missing parent, the child, denied the full network of grandparents, uncles and aunts, etc., which may provide support and affiliation, is condemned to life in a half-unit weakened to that extent. David Murray (1994:15) puts the point strongly in talking about the consequences of illegitimacy, but it also applies more generally:

Committed patterns of kinship behaviour create in us moral feelings of attachment and integration. Feelings of attachment, in turn, structure our social networks of relationship. Concretely put, building a marriage will pattern positive behaviour. This patterned behaviour rebuilds in us moral commitments and shapes the personal capital of the future generation. Those with moral commitments are able to build social capital, through which they attain jobs and their own marriages.

Evidence of harm to children apparently disadvantaged in this way is inconclusive. Australian research (quoted by Norton) does not show significant differences in well-being between adolescents in sole parent families and those in two-parent families. It is undoubtedly the case that many children – perhaps the majority – reared in sole-parent homes suffer no disadvantage and may fare better than continuing in a violent or unhappy two-parent home. So much depends upon the individual parents and their varying circumstances. But, so far as *averages* are concerned, this is a key issue on which, unfortunately, the Australian evidence is limited. Differences between Australian society and Australian support arrangements compared to those in Britain and the United States may account for variations in the evidence.

Findings in Britain and the United States suggest that home life in sole parent households is often 'ragged' and casual, emotionally and culturally impoverished and disordered. Children are less effectively supervised, moralised and socialised and at greater risk of enacting a variety of personal and social pathologies – delinquency, crime, suicide, illiteracy, drug-taking, etc. For example, a major survey of 60,000 children by the U.S. Department of Health in 1988, studied children living in households throughout the country to identify problems of health, schoolwork and personal conduct. It tabulated the results according to the age, sex and ethnicity of the child and the income and marital status of the parents. As Wilson puts it (1993:26-27):

The results were striking. At every income level save the very highest (over \$50,000 per year), for both sexes and for whites, blacks and Hispanics alike, children living with a never-married or a divorced mother were substantially worse off than those living in two-parent families. Compared to children living with both biological parents, children in single-parent families were twice as likely to have been expelled or suspended from school, to display emotional or behavioural problems, and to have problems with their peers; they were much more likely to engage in antisocial behaviour.

In *Families Without Fatherhood* Norman Dennis and George Erdos analyse the connections in Britain between the well-being and behaviour of children and the absence of a 'committed' father in the home. They conclude (1992:58):

But it is pure obscurantism to deny that the *statistical chances* of children being physically smaller, stammering, being poor scorers in intelligence tests, or having a criminal record, depended greatly on their home background; and the quality of their home background, at the time of the Newcastle 1000 studies, depended greatly on the father.

A key test of the soundness of family life is the physical and emotional health of children and the effectiveness of their socialisation and moralisation. In this, the nature of their bonds with their parents and other extended family members are crucial. The Australian research so far on these very important issues is relatively small. It needs to be expanded and the reasons for the different findings in other countries explored further.

### **The Family and the State**

I referred earlier to two sets or streams of ideas which have had the effect of unsettling and attenuating social bonds and moral relationships. The first, increasing liberalism and individualism, and their effects on status relationships, have been discussed. The second, the more active role of the state, and its absorption of functions that used to be performed by private agencies, is too large a subject to be dealt with here other than in a highly selective way. Two aspects, in particular, I want to discuss: some further consequences of this activism for families; and the way in which the state is supplanting private social initiatives and responsibilities in ways that have consequences for the generation of the social virtues.

The outstanding feature of the development of Western societies in this century has been the increasing intervention of the state in areas of social and economic life formerly regarded as the province of

private and voluntary group action, or 'civil society'. On a number of measures – such as the proportion of the national wealth coming under the control of governments and the growth in regulation of wider areas of social and economic life – the intrusions of the state as a wealth-sponge and moral imperialist colonising private life and settled arrangements by the imposition of various forms of 'correctness' are not difficult to demonstrate (Walsh 1994).

A recent Parliamentary Research Service paper (1994:47-60), while warning that regulatory *activity* by government does not necessarily equate to regulatory *reach*, nevertheless notes that the recent growth in regulatory activity is 'very marked'. In 1950 the Commonwealth passed 80 Acts with 281 pages of statutes. In 1992 it passed 264 Acts and 6,137 pages of statutes. It further notes, as a possible proxy measure of regulatory impact, that in May 1978 there were 14,000 persons employed as law professionals, while 16 years later, by February 1994, there were 39,000 people so employed – a 280 per cent increase, whereas total employment over the same period grew by only 28 per cent.

While increasing regulation may have widely varying effects on private individuals and corporations, leaving some relatively untouched and some better off, the economic interventions of government and its expropriation of larger portions of private income affect every citizen directly. The most important instrument in transferring private resources from independent control to the state is, of course, taxation. At accelerating pace over the last generation, all democratic governments have taken an increasing proportion of spending power out of private hands and put it under the control of government instrumentalities and functionaries; a large part of it forcibly redistributed to citizens or groups deemed to be in need or deserving of extra income or services. At June 1970, 11.7 per cent of the population were receiving Department of Social Security pensions or benefits. By June 1992, the proportion had doubled to 23.7 per cent (Warby 1994:28).

The same Commonwealth Parliamentary Research Service paper (1994) referred to above reveals a number of trends in government taxation and spending for the developed countries, including Australia. For example, in the G7 countries (USA, Japan, Germany, France, Italy, United Kingdom, Canada), government spending grew from an average of 28.2 per cent of Gross Domestic Product in 1960 to 39.9 per cent in 1992. In Australia in the same period, government spending grew from 21.2 per cent of GDP to 37.9 per cent. Increased spending by government relies overwhelmingly on increases in taxation. Accordingly, the ratio of taxation to GDP in Australia increased from 21.2

per cent of GDP in 1959-69 to 29.4 per cent in 1992-93.

### ***Taxation, Cultural Change and Families***

This general increase in taxation is reflected in the extra tax taken from individual and family incomes.

In the thirty years between 1960 and 1990, tax payable by a single taxpayer receiving the male median income almost doubled from 9.6 per cent of income to 18.9 per cent.

In terms of inflation-adjusted dollars, this represents an increase in taxation from \$1,501 on a median income of \$15,681 in 1960, to \$4,329 on a median income of \$22,898 in 1990. Although the taxpayer was better off in net income by some 31 per cent, Gross Domestic Product in roughly the same period had increased by about 39 per cent, confirming the increased transfer of national income from individuals and families to governments over that period (Parliamentary Research Service 1994:35).

It is noteworthy that while before-tax median male income rose by 43 per cent between 1960 and 1990, female median income increased by 97 per cent, reflecting equal pay legislation and rising female labour force participation (Parliamentary Research Service 1994:30-31). One effect of this improved income position of women is to raise the costs for women of losing income while having children and looking after them. It also makes deferment of marriage, or non-marriage, more attractive.

It is not easy to compare the relative after-tax positions of families (especially single-income families) with dependent children thirty years ago and today. Calculations simply in terms of after-tax money incomes are misleading because they do not take account of the (changing) value of benefits such as education, child allowances, Medicare and child care subsidies. It is nevertheless hard to avoid the conclusion that such benefits do not compensate for the *relative* loss of income status of the single-income family of man, wife and two dependent children. Between 1960 and 1990, after including child and family allowances, the effective tax rate of individuals on average weekly earnings rose by 83 per cent, while for families it rose by 360 per cent (Tapper & Thomson 1993:22).

What needs to be emphasised here is the *relative* decline of family incomes compared to the rest of society. In *absolute* terms our single income family has a larger net income today than the same family thirty years ago. But it has fared relatively worse in failing to keep its former share of growing national affluence. When the family way of life becomes more impoverished compared to other ways of life, other

things being equal, those alternative lifestyles will grow in attractiveness.

The increased proportion of national income now going into government coffers is being redistributed, in the main, for a variety of welfare purposes other than family support. Principal among these are old age and veterans' pensions, sole parent pensions, disability pensions, unemployment benefits and special supplements for poor families. This movement gathered pace in the 1970s. Between 1976-77 and 1991-92 the proportion of the social welfare budget going to family support and allowances declined from 20 per cent to 8.7 per cent. In the same period, the average annual rate of growth of non-family social welfare expenditure was 4.8 per cent, while family welfare expenditure *declined* by an average of 2 per cent each year (Saunders 1994:30).

The balance between the claims of young couples compared with the treatment of old people and parents who break up, has changed markedly. Generous pensions for the aged and social support for couples who break up and leave one parent with a dependent child or children, is being paid for in large part by the taxes of couples who stay together. To this must be added the huge costs of unemployment benefits, a burden which is largely the consequence of government labour market policies.

I referred earlier to the possible effects on child-rearing and the character of family life of changes in the internal dynamics of the family and the relations between men and women. What the evidence above points to is the great changes that have taken place in a number of relativities, and their associated incentives and disincentives, which have important implications for family life.

The financial status of the married state has deteriorated, on average, compared to other states. The costs of having children have become relatively greater. As career opportunities and incomes of women improve, the status of the married woman at home with children declines and exit from marriage by women becomes less hazardous. As the legal status of marriage becomes less certain with much easier divorce, it becomes a much more risky investment for both men and women. If the state stands ready to pay a pension to a separated parent, separation of parents now costs them less than it used to and, to that extent, removes a disincentive to divorce or separation. If the monetary value of allowances or tax concessions for spouses and children declines, abandoning them is less costly. If the state pays more generous subsidies for child care expenses for working mothers than for stay-at-home mothers, the latter will incur a

financial penalty. So more mothers will be economically forced, or attracted, into the workforce against their preferred choices. Nor should we be surprised as the average age at marriages climbs, divorce becomes more frequent, national fertility declines below replacement rate, and the proportion of children born out of wedlock quadruples within a generation to one in four.

### **The 'Entitlement' State**

The welfarist and egalitarianist interventions of the state also have their own consequences for social bonds and moral relationships. Obviously, when the state takes over responsibility for millions of people in relation to sickness, disability, unemployment, poverty, sole parenthood, education, old age, etc., more often than not it displaces private and voluntary arrangements formerly in place in those matters. The justification is that state provision of entitlements is more certain and more equitable in looking after the interests concerned.

Granted that a civilised society must provide for those who need help but cannot confidently secure it from family or friends, the large scale and indifferently monitored dispensing of welfare entitlements nevertheless creates as many problems as it solves. By its effects on incentives, personal responsibility and moral relations generally, the welfare state, from the perspective of sustaining personal and civic virtue, has perverse consequences. These effects are important for families and voluntary associations and for the ways in which they change the values-engendering functions of those institutions or make them redundant.

### ***Welfarism and the Family***

The welfare state has erected a number of new incentives which it is reasonable to conjecture will progressively alter the patterns of behaviour within families and between parents and children. It cannot be claimed with certainty that they have, in fact, already changed actual behaviour, but there is a strong likelihood that they will tend to act in the ways suggested below.

When mutual dependence and mutual responsibilities between parents and children are eroded by a guarantee that the state will make provision if they break down, relationships are significantly altered. Welfare provision may thus break the nexus of mutual support and obligations that formerly characterised so much of family life. For example, parents guaranteed an old age pension will have less incentive to invest in forming human capital in their children because they will have less need of the additional earnings-potential that such

human capital provides; which means, also, that they will have less incentive to inculcate in their children those habits (of hard work and study) and values (consideration, loyalty, filial obligation, mutual trust) which help the observance of obligations. When the state educates and trains children, when it provides an allowance for children fed up with home life, and when it supports them in sickness and unemployment, they need take less heed of their parents and their injunctions and remonstrances. The outcome may be less diligence in moralising and socialising children and greater indifference by children themselves to whatever remains of a parental authority that may be easily and painlessly escaped.

Such effects are more likely to be in evidence in families already on the margins and already vulnerable to the incentives that the welfare state provides to further erode what remains of personal pride, responsibility and ambition. This will more likely be true of broken and sole parent families, poor or struggling families, and parents and children poorly trained and educated. It is in the multiplication of such circumstances through large-scale and persistent unemployment, and a failing educational system, that we begin to identify the sources of an 'underclass', weakly attached to the economy and to society, relatively impoverished in their access to the familial and associational sources of the civic virtues, and casual in their commitments.

### ***Voluntary Associations and the Social Virtues***

Voluntary associations are of the essence of what we mean by 'civil society'. They are centres of private power and initiatives independent of the state and usually serving functions not provided by the state. Whether it be clubs, credit unions, churches, friendly societies, sporting associations, charitable bodies, married couples, or whatever, such associations are centres of moral instruction and forms of discipline and authority divorced from the state and encouraging their own kinds of behaviour and characteristic virtues, such as service to others, duty, self-sacrifice and honesty. They are also the best safeguards of liberty, to the extent that their existence and flourishing protects against overwhelming concentrations of power. But our primary concern here is to comment upon their moral relevance vis-à-vis the welfare or entitlement state.

Among the best analyses of that moral relevance are David Green's studies of the English Friendly Societies that flourished in the 19th century and early 20th century (1993) and their vigorous counterparts in Australia (1984) in the same period. Many of these Friendly Societies have since languished or disappeared as the state

has assumed many of their functions. This may have brought us more certainty of help in times of trouble and release from dependence on private charity, but we cannot be sure. As Green's studies show, private and voluntary provision was advancing rapidly when the state began to displace it. Growing private affluence and other advances were making private provision more widespread and generous. And from what we are seeing of government health services, it is highly contestable whether that provision is now more reliable, more widespread and cheaper than it would otherwise have been if private arrangements, with perhaps a limited state safety net, had been allowed to prevail. But it is also the different sort of morality that comes with the state takeover that Green's work brings to our attention.

The largest of the friendly societies were self-governing contributory organisations concerned, in the main, with providing forms of help and insurance against sickness and unemployment, and with encouraging saving for old age and access to financial help when needed. As Green shows, they were not merely instrumental associations for mutual aid; they saw their effectiveness as depending importantly upon inculcating and reinforcing notions of duty and upright behaviour. So, for example, new members of the Ancient Order of Foresters were told:

We are united together not only for the wise purpose of making provision against those misfortunes which befall all men, and of assisting those who require our aid, but for the moderate enjoyment of friendly intercourse, and the temperate interchange of social feeling... We encourage no excess in our meetings, and enforcing no creed in religion or code in politics, we permit neither wrangling nor dissension to mar our harmony or interrupt our proceedings (Green 1993:48).

It was made clear to applicants for membership of the Grand United Order of Oddfellows that:

In your domestic relationship we look to find you, if a husband, affectionate and trustful; if a father, regardful of the moral and material well-being of your children and dependants; as a son, dutiful and exemplary, and as a friend, steadfast and true (Green 1993:48).

The closeness of the relationship between the members of friendly societies, their dependence upon each other's integrity, and the relative ease of monitoring the performance of obligations, helped to entrench honesty and dutiful observance of the kinds of moral

injunctions mentioned above. Such an association has a strong and immediate moral 'presence' and authority which, as I earlier suggested, is not to be found in the abstractness and impersonality of the welfare state. There can be no *social* bond between the individual and the state. Notions of trust, honesty and reciprocity do not emerge from that relationship. If, in fact, individuals behave honestly and uprightly in their dealings with the state and in performing civic duties, they do so for two reasons; fear of breaking the law, or because they have internalised and generalised notions of honesty and performance of duties learned in other genuinely social or interpersonal contexts. If the law is badly formed, or indifferently enforced and evasion of penalties easy, it is the latter sources of rectitude that society must depend upon. Families, schools, work, and civil associations play perhaps the largest parts here, and if they themselves become weaker as centres of moralisation, so would we expect to find the detached cheating of state welfare revealed in such things as welfare fraud, profligate use of free medical services, and exploitation of the availability of pensions by those who do not really need or deserve them (Rutherford 1993).

### ***Trust and the Renaissance***

Further support for the importance of civic associations in developing the civic virtues and thereby enriching the wider social and economic life of a society, comes from Robert D. Putnam's studies of civic associations in Italy. He notes that, for historical reasons, 'some regions were characterised by a dense network of civic associations and an active culture of civic engagement, whereas others were characterised by vertical patron-client relations of exploitation and dependence, not horizontal collaboration among equals' (1994:32).

Italy has a system of local government, of recent origin, which is universal in its basic structure throughout the whole country. But it works very well in some regions and badly in others. Putnam connects these variations with the relative strength or weakness, for historical reasons, of civic associations in those regions. In general, they are strong in the north and weak in the south.

In the city-states of the north, their history goes back to medieval times when, before long, 'a dense interlocking web of horizontal associations evolved...' (1994:33). In these city-states, impersonal credit (systems for lending money to people with whom one has no personal contact) was invented, and this became the foundation for a northern Italian financial empire and the most advanced economy in the world by the 14th and 15th centuries. The wealth that followed laid

the foundations for the Renaissance.

But all of this had an essential moral foundation – trust. Impersonal credit requires trust in order to emerge (the word ‘credit’ comes from the Italian verb ‘to believe’) and ‘Trust among northern Italians rests on the uniquely close-knit fabric of civic life...’ and ‘The root of trust was civic engagement’ (1994:33). Putnam goes on to discuss the importance of the ‘social capital’ represented in traditions and sentiments of trust within a community and to argue the importance of such social capital in underpinning economic growth. He conjectures that America’s present problems consist in a decline in social capital: ‘This decline in social capital helps explain the economic and political problems of our own democracy’ (1994:34).

For us, beyond the confirmation this gives to the significance of civic or voluntary associations in inculcating and nurturing social virtues, it points also to the moral costs of substituting hierarchical, centralised and distant arrangements for local, autonomous, more personal and more democratic ones.

### **Education**

The most far-reaching and systematic abridgment of the power of families to shape the moralisation and socialisation of their children followed the introduction of universal and compulsory free education in the last third of the nineteenth century. Before then, providing for the education of children, like the provision of the no less important essentials of food and clothing (which remain parental responsibilities unless it can be shown that they are neglecting them), was in the hands of the parents. They were assisted by subsidies, or what amounted to subsidies, from the churches and from the state. The state helped pay for education, but did not undertake to *provide* it itself. But, as the state steadily took over the provision of the free education received by the vast majority of children, they, and their parents, fell into the hands of a single supplier from whom escape into the private system became very costly.

Education is, unavoidably, a moral engagement. Some would argue that it can, and should, be ‘value free’; that the teaching of mathematics or chemistry, for example, raises no questions of values and that such subjects can be dealt with wholly in a dispassionate, objective way. Indeed, some would hold that the same can be true of other subjects; and that in history, economics or literature, students can be helped to ‘see things as they really are’. But even if this is true, it still points to a particular value position; namely, cherishing objectivity as a value and believing it can be achieved. But objectivity

is one value position among many that can arise in education and education necessarily becomes an arena in which various sets of values, or 'moralities', compete for supremacy. When parents have choice among schools, they can select that kind of education (and the values implicit in it) that they find acceptable. But when choice is denied or made very costly, that is a vanishing option. This is the position for most parents today.

Also, it is not easy for parents nowadays to know, except in the broadest terms, what their children are being taught in the public school curriculum. Beyond the names of the main subjects and what they might pick up from sighting textbooks, helping with homework, and comments by their children, the details are unlikely to be familiar to the majority of them.

Moreover, the social and interpersonal aspects of the teaching *process* constitute a moral engagement between teachers and students. The relationship depends upon a certain kind of ordering which is essentially moral. Respect, the legitimacy of authority and its exercise, obedience, discipline, cooperation, or their opposites, are all implicated in the teaching relationship. Schools, therefore, may vary widely in the character of the moral climate to be found in them. As in the home, 'values walk around the classroom' in the models and roles of teachers, in the substance of what they convey, in the manner of conveying it, and in the rules of the organisation itself.

For something like 10 to 12 of their most formative years, Australian children absorb the morality and values of the school for six hours a day, five days a week, forty weeks of the year. For nearly three quarters of them, the state systems are the sole suppliers over whose actions and character parents exercise no effective means of control. Governments are ostensibly the agents of parents' interests in respect of the school system. It is governments which are supposed, in theory, to protect the educational 'consumer interests' of parents and school children. But, in practice, government has a conflicting interest as the *producer* or provider of schooling. The history of public education shows that that conflict has usually been resolved in favour of producer interests to which the interests of parents and children have been sacrificed (Lieberman 1989; Harrison 1994:96). Teacher unions are the most powerful of these producer interests. Their interests are frequently inimical to child and parental interests.

### ***In the Classroom***

In addition, various ideological interests work through governments and the teacher unions to affect the character of education and the

curriculum. For example, the national curriculum profile completed in 1993, *Studies of Society and the Environment*, refers to the settlement of Australia as an 'invasion'. The same document concentrates on a study of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, excluding 'a systematic and balanced study of Australia's European tradition' (Donnelly 1994a:3). In the same article, commenting on a briefing paper entitled *Developing Cultural Understanding as a Key Competency* prepared by the Queensland Department of Education, Donnelly quotes the document as stating that the function of culture is 'to develop in students a socially critical understanding of the world in which we live, the ability to critically analyse the world in terms of equity, equality and social justice in our multicultural society, and the capacity to take social action when social injustice occurs.'

This is, of course, a highly value-laden view of 'culture'. It carries a number of presuppositions about the way in which culture should be studied and opens the way to particular interpretations of 'equity', 'equality', 'social justice', etc., which may be highly biased.

Even the teaching of English is becoming a vessel for ideological and social engineering cargo. Donnelly elsewhere reports (1994b:19) the delivery of a paper at the 1994 meeting of the Australian Association for the Teachers of English, in which the author argues that:

Using the English classroom as a site for resistance and interventionist strategies, this paper will illustrate how homophobia and AIDS-phobia can be addressed alongside and integrated within the overall thematic landscapes and narrative treatment, of prejudice and social injustices.

For some time now there has been widespread, but unorganised and unfocused, parental and community concern about what is happening in the public schools. A Herald-Saulwick poll in July 1994, found that twice as many parents believe that non-government schools did a better job than government schools in preparing young people to 'be a good citizen' and in 'developing potential' (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 1994a:2). The report says: 'This perception of the better performance of non-government schools occurs around Australia and suggests the crisis of confidence in government schools is not confined to States such as NSW and Victoria, which have seen educational upheavals in recent years'. The poll further showed that nearly 60 per cent of parents would send their children to non-government schools if money was no object.

There have been recurring complaints, from employers and universities as well as parents, that the public schools are not

educating well in the sense of enabling children to master core subjects – the three ‘Rs’, history, language and literature, geography, mathematics and science. Such charges are not easy to resolve because for many years teacher unions have opposed regular testing and reporting on childrens’ levels of achievement on standard tests. Not until 1989, in New South Wales, following a change of government, did regular testing of literacy in Years Three and Six begin. But this was a relatively small victory in the face of determined opposition to external public examinations which might enable parents and employers to compare the relative performance of schools and teachers. The one major external examination that remains in New South Wales, the Higher School Certificate, is now under attack, with calls for its abolition, by the NSW Teachers’ Federation (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 1994b:5).

A further complaint is that core subjects are being displaced by non-academic and ‘vegie’ subjects as the ideology of the ‘new education’ has displaced the academic emphasis of the traditional curriculum. Such subjects as ‘Personal Development’ and ‘Values Clarification’ have certainly assumed a major role in the curriculum in recent years and, within them, many non-academic issues are dealt with in ways over which parents have virtually no control and to which, if they were aware of what is happening, they might strenuously object.

From its origins in America, the ‘new’ education, now entrenched in Australia, emphasises that education has to be enjoyable, should encompass the ‘whole person’, bolster students’ self-esteem and stress ‘relevance’. Such slogans have opened the door to a variety of initiatives that expose students to forms of brainwashing and ideological indoctrination (Sowell 1993; Harrison 1994:98) For our purposes here, the relevant features are the way in which such developments have transferred to the state considerable influence over the development of the moral character of children beyond that normally involved in any teaching relationship. Non-academic matters, in the past overwhelmingly reserved to parental advice and instruction, have been taken over by the schools in ways which often pre-empt parental initiatives. Moreover, topics are sometimes dealt with in a manner that may show parents (especially fathers), and family circumstances in general, in an unfavourable light.

Classroom materials on ‘Child Protection’ within the curriculum in ‘Personal Development’ in New South Wales schools, targeted at 12-18 year olds, provide handouts detailing ‘hypothetical situations’ which then form the basis for classroom or group discussions under

the leadership of the teacher (NSW Department of Education, undated).

Handout 5.6.1 is headed 'One boy's legacy will last for life', and begins as follows:

Andrew's stepfather first climbed into bed with him when he was eight years old. The boy did not understand the strange ritual that followed – but accepted it on the understanding it was something all kids did with their dads.

The handout continues with 'Andrew's' description of what subsequently happened:

He climbed into my bed and started to sort of caress me. Then he had oral sex with me. I can still picture it in my mind, how he did it to me. And then anal intercourse, and then he masturbated until he had an orgasm.

And so the handout goes on for two or three pages of vivid description.

Handout 4.3.1 hypothesises some 'threatening situations' as discussion-starters:

1. Stefan is walking home from the shops when an older boy he has seen before stops him to show him some photos of people touching the private parts of each other's body (sic). The older boy then asks Stefan to go home with him to see some more photos.

2. Phillipa and her bigger brother, Jonathan, are alone at home after school watching television. Jonathan asks Phillipa if she will take off her clothes for his friend Mark who is coming around soon.

Handout 4.5.2 deals with 'Power in relationships' and item 2 asks children to consider the following:

2. Jennifer and John are married. They both work and Jennifer has just been offered a promotion in another state. John says he doesn't want to move. Discussion questions:

- (a) Discuss the power that Jennifer and John each have.
- (b) How could each person use/abuse that power?

Another handout concerns two girl-friends, 'Gerry' and 'Carolyn'. Carolyn is visiting Gerry who lives with her father, when:

At eight o'clock everyone is eating pizza while watching television. When the program finishes Dad suggests they watch one of the videos he's hired. After he turns the video on he walks over to the couch and sits between Gerry and Carolyn. What the girls see on the

television is a movie showing people touching the private parts of each other's body (sic). Gerry feels very uncomfortable and gets up to go but Dad pulls her back and says, 'Don't go now honey. I like this video and I've got it specially for you and Carolyn. If you sit and watch the whole movie with me, I'll get you a special present'.

It could be said that if materials such as these are good ways of helping children to protect themselves from abuse, then their classroom distribution and discussion is justified. If that were the consequence and the method the best, no doubt most parents might welcome it. But it might be asked whether explicit depictions *are* the best way and whether it is the way that most parents would approve, if they knew it was being used. Sullivan (1990) challenges these assumptions and the method, arguing that explicit verbal instruction for school age children is unnecessary, that parents know this, and that the real target in reducing child sexual abuse is not presumed childhood ignorance of what is unacceptable, but adult behaviour and the permissive sexual culture that adults promote and condone.

Within an already crowded curriculum in which academic rigour is at risk, the fundamental purpose of children's education is being lost. Frequently without their knowledge, parents are being challenged by the public schools as the primary source of non-academic values. Not only are the schools now playing a larger role in their inculcation, the content of what is being conveyed, one feels confident in conjecturing, is less and less in conformity with what parents would wish. Yet parents are in substantial ignorance of what is happening and their power to intervene is minimal. Isolated and unorganised parents are confronted by powerful unions and complicit governments. Even the power of exit from the system is not really exercisable except, for most parents, at great economic cost.

Whatever might be the purpose of 'personal development' and 'values clarification' activities of this kind, their actual moral consequences are by no means clear. Certainly, there is no comfort to be found in the revelation in the NSW Department of Education Annual Report for 1993 that theft, vandalism and fires in public schools have risen by 70 per cent since 1988 (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 1994c); or in a recent report on Victorian education indicating that cheating was rife and alleging that many teachers were implicated in abetting it (Bantick 1994:73-4); or in the fact that:

Violence in New South Wales schools is on the rise, figures from the State Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research show. The number of violent incidents recorded in schools increased by nearly 37 per cent between 1990 and 1992 (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 1994d).

This is not to say, however, that the imperfections of the state school systems are to be contrasted with the perfection of private schools. Some of what I have been describing reflects *general* cultural changes which may also be in evidence in private schools; along with administrative failures and pressures from teacher unions and other interest groups. But insofar as parents and their children have practicable choices in selecting and discarding schools, they can exercise an 'exit' discipline, or the threat of it, to keep some control over the educational, socialising and moralising performance of schools. The existence of the private system at least keeps this discipline alive, and as an example in the absence of more widely dispersed choice among parents.

### Conclusion

The sources of the social or civic virtues are those institutions which transform children into good citizens and well-equipped vehicles for sustaining and handing on the culture which made them. The course of that transforming process is determined by their early years in the family and at school and, later, by immersion in a variety of civil associations and the world of work.

What happens in the first few years of a child's life is especially important and the whole history of our culture affirms that the most reliable and best-motivated of all custodians are their parents. But the quality of their custodianship is itself conditioned by their own relationship, which is in turn shaped by a variety of cultural and economic forces. Those conditions have changed markedly in the modern world and this has had a number of consequences:

- The nuclear family has become less stable as a variety of economic and cultural circumstances, the status of women, and the definition of marriage have changed, significantly altering the internal dynamics of the family.
- Compared to only a generation ago, a much higher proportion of children is reared in family circumstances marked by the effective absence of one parent and wider kinship networks.
- The magnitude of any undesirable effects of these changes on the health, emotions and behaviour of children is difficult to assess. But if, as David Popenoe and others have emphasised, we are right in assigning great importance to child-parent bonding, and extended parental cooperation in rearing, it is reasonable to conjecture – and some evidence supports this – that they are potentially very significant.

The power of parents, as prime custodians, to choose the character of the education of their children is severely abridged for seven out of ten by the structure and economic circumstances attending the system of public education. Not only are there grave doubts about the academic quality of that education, there is much evidence to suggest that direct moral education, both in educational process, and in educational content, is contrary to what many, if not most, parents would wish. Yet they have no real means of exerting their influence, and exit and choice are very costly.

Beyond the family and the schools, the other great agencies of socialisation and moralisation are the 'civil associations' and the world of work.

As the range of functions of the state has expanded, particularly in relation to social welfare and economic life (but even, nowadays, in sport, recreation, entertainment, the arts and high culture), it displaces voluntary associations and private initiatives. This not only reduces civil enterprise in general, it also changes the incentives and moral conditions under which those functions are carried out. Principal among these is the loss of certain kinds of social/moral bonding – the sets of obligations and duties of a direct and interpersonal kind engendering the need for trust and honesty – that are typically encouraged by civil associations, but not by exchanges between citizens and a depersonalised state lacking moral identity. If the state does not displace private voluntary associations and charities, but instead subsidises them, the loss may not be so great. Yet even partial dependence on the favours of the state tends to dull enterprise and to stifle initiatives that might be thought unacceptable to the subsidising authority.

To the extent that such displacements occur within a society, to that extent are the resources and repositories of civic virtue, and exposure to education in them, reduced.

Finally, as Andrew Norton has stressed, when the world of work is closed to almost ten per cent of the labour force, nearly a million persons, including 100,000 or so 15-19 year olds (CEO1993:101) are not only denied productive and morally-charged cooperation with others, they are also denied the opportunity to affirm their self-supporting and independent personhood and made vulnerable to the demoralisations of dependency and idleness.

The main theme of my argument is that the social virtues arise from, and need constantly to be nourished by, the immersion of citizens in continuing and well-ordered social institutions and organisations of a voluntary kind substantially independent of state interfer-

ence or control, except as the state needs to ensure lawful relations within and between them. When the state intrudes too much and begins to deny citizen choice by regulation, or by expropriation of resources otherwise available to enact choices, personal responsibility of individuals and the autonomy and functional integrity of institutions are placed at risk. There is always a moral wound sustained whenever this happens because integrity of function and the moral order sustaining it are inseparable. This is, essentially, the moral hazard provoked by the interventionary state, especially when such interventions are driven by the appeasement of special interests. This is, by definition, divisive, and debilitating, because defence against special interest-driven attacks calls for the diversion of institutional or associational resources to acts of defence or amelioration which hinder normal activities.

Australian society is not in crisis, but when we look at the present state of such key institutions as the family, education, the world of work and the provision of welfare and health services, we see major discontinuities and important causes of concern which do not have their roots in the ebb and flow of ordinary vicissitudes, but which are more deeply based in major cultural shifts and long-standing policy directions by governments whose working out, unless there are changes, may well lead to such a crisis. Concern about the present state of the social virtues may well be an early intimation of such dangers.

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