

Marriage as public policy: The labor government takes an interest

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Marriage as a public issue has been growing in visibility in the U.S., but it has never moved to the center of public discourse. Policy wonks occasionally refer to the "m" word; this is their way of acknowledging that marriage should not be brought up in polite (or politically correct) discussions of public policy.

Bill Clinton got close to mentioning the "m" word in the 1996 presidential campaign, when he called for a decrease in teenage pregnancies, an increase in responsible fatherhood, and attention to the virtues of a two-parent family. But he never came out and said that marriage is generally the best context for parenting or that marriage contributes to the common good. Despite the growth of private groups that examine marriage as an issue of concern for public health and the common good--groups like the Council on Families in America, the Washington, D.C.-based Family Impact Seminar, and David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead's National Marriage Initiative--there has been little response by government, national or state, to their efforts.

Tony Blair and the New Labor Movement in England have broken the silence about marriage as a public policy issue. It is the only government in a leading industrial nation to address directly marriage as a public issue. In November the Labor government issued a Green paper titled "Supporting Families: A Consultation Document." It was not just about supporting families and children; it was about supporting marriage.

Children need stability. Many lone parents and unmarried couples raise their children every bit as successfully as married parents. But marriage is still the surest foundation for raising children and remains the choice of the majority of people in Britain. We want to strengthen the institution of

marriage to help more marriages to succeed.

Why is the Labor government promoting marriage? The answer is simple. England's statistics on divorce, out-of-wedlock births, cohabitation and nonmarriage are among the highest of any industrial country. Politicians are reading social science research that shows family disruption correlates with poverty for single mothers and children, poor health, poor employment records, and cycles of marital disruption for succeeding generations. Furthermore, politicians understand that these negative consequences are not simply private tragedies; they constitute huge public costs in social programs, health care, school disruption and work productivity.

The Labor government's Green paper contains a barrelful of public policy proposals. These proposals are aimed at making people better parents, but they view parenting as strengthened by marriage. The proposals include establishing a National Family and Parenting Institute for disseminating the best possible information on marriage and parenting, a national helpline sharing advice and information on helpful resources, universal child benefits, tax credits for poor working families with children, and awards for family-friendly employees.

The centerpiece of the Green paper, however, and by far its most controversial feature, is its proposals to support marriage itself. The Labor government proposes to turn all "marriage registrars" (civil servants who register marriages) into "secular vicars." These registrars would be given the additional responsibility of providing information on the rights and responsibilities of marriage. They would also be asked to perform more elaborate marriage ceremonies (the majority of British couples choose to tie the knot before civil authorities rather than the church).

The Green paper also calls for additional funding for voluntary organizations that offer premarital education (although such education would not be a requirement for gaining a marriage license). State social workers called "health visitors" will have expanded roles to advise parents on child care and parenting disputes. The divorce process will be slowed, with more emphasis given by government authorities to what divorce actually entails, how to minimize conflict and how to provide adequately for children.

None of these measures is earthshaking. Their likely effectiveness is questioned by many parts of British society. What is important, if not stunning, is that Labor, often referred to as New Labor, is the first government to emphasize explicitly the

contribution of stable marriage to the public good.

Reaction from the British press has been mixed. Liberal papers like the *Guardian* and the *Observer* quickly denounced the Green paper as moralistic drivel that fails to understand that times have changed, that marriage is disappearing, and that the task of government is to provide the children of poor families and single mothers with better housing and more money. Ferdinand Mount of the conservative *London Times* supports the initiative, but faults it for failing to remove the tax penalty that couples pay when they get married. The more liberal *Independent* claimed that the Green paper snatches family issues away from the opposing Conservative Party.

The religious community has been surprisingly silent. Commentators on British church-state relations point out that even if the Anglican Church liked the report, one of the surest ways of killing it would be for it to say so in public. The report is already being accused of being a religious document written by "Christian ministers"--Tony Blair, Jack Straw and other ministers of the New Labor government. The Catholic bishop of Glasgow welcomed the report and called it the beginning of an important conversation, but neglected to affirm any of its specific proposals. The new Anglican bishop of Liverpool, a Blair protégé, said much the same thing.

The fate of New Labor's marriage proposals remains to be debated; how many of them will likely be enacted into law is still unclear. But churches everywhere should be watching this discussion carefully. Religious groups should be concerned particularly that a language of economics and health could be replacing the classic religious languages of covenant and sacrament. In itself the state's interest in marriage is not worrisome. Since the Protestant Reformation, marriage has been seen as a social good, a secular institution of the earthly kingdom, sanctioned by public vows before the state. But churches even then were seen as having the important role of blessing marriage and providing a theological rationale for its religious importance.

The interest of the state in the health of marriage symbolized by Labor's Green paper should be seen as a challenge. For the first time, the state and secular institutions may take the lead in energizing society's interest in marriage and providing the dominant language by which marriage is understood. The new language of marriage built around health and economics may all the more challenge the relevance of the Christian faith to the ordering of ritual aspects of modern life. Rather than reacting with jealousy and fear, the churches should see such state initiatives as a challenge to reclaim and reconstruct the marriage theologies of their

own traditions.