

Church of England Board for Social Responsibility

Response to

Work and Parents: competitiveness and choice

A DTI green paper

Introduction

1. The terms of reference of the Church of England Board for Social Responsibility require it 'to co-ordinate the thought and action of the Church in matters affecting the life of all in society'. The Board reports to the Archbishops' Council and, through it, to the General Synod. The Board warmly welcomes the Government's decision to issue a Consultation Document on ways of supporting parents and employers and fully recognises the complexity of the issues involved.
2. The Board's interest in the implications of socio-economic change for family life led it to offer strong support to the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (now Churches Together in Britain and Ireland) when it commissioned an Enquiry for the Churches, chaired by the Rt. Rev David Sheppard (then Chair of the Board for Social Responsibility). into the profound changes taking place in the labour market. The Enquiry looked at the effect of these changes on people in all kinds of situations, but especially those who are disadvantaged or poor. The report of the Enquiry, *Unemployment and the Future of Work* touched on the relationship between work and family life:

*Unemployment and poverty undermine marriage and family life. Moreover the relationship between employment and family life is one of the most serious issues facing society today. How can the participation of both parents in the labour force be best reconciled with the stability of marriage and the upbringing of children?...we have not been able to resolve the many very difficult dilemmas that we have identified in this area.*¹
3. It has been clear to the Board that the serious questions left unresolved by the 1997 document require much fuller discussion. We therefore looked forward to the new Government's contribution to the discussion of these important issues. The proposals presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in December 2000 have come as a disappointment. The foreword to the paper confirms that the Government wants to make it easier for parents who choose to work to do so. It also recognises that businesses need to minimise extra costs. The Government wishes to find ways of helping parents and businesses at the same time and the Green Paper sets out a variety of priorities which might enable this to be

¹ Unemployment and the Future of work CCBI 1997 p.20

done. This follows the discussion of the work-life balance in *Changing patterns in a changing world* issued by the Department for Education and Employment in March 2000.

4. While we recognise that no Government could pursue all of the options set out in the Green Paper, we believe that the debate would have been enhanced by a clearer acknowledgement of all options and their full costs (to individuals, families and the wider society, as well as to business). Rather than selecting three priorities that have been arbitrarily grouped, we wish to comment on the principles underlying the paper. We believe that the process outlined in the report, of setting out options from which respondents are expected to choose, is unhelpful. We wonder, too, how responses to such a process of consultation will be evaluated. Will the Government consider responses through a purely statistical analysis? We believe that such a process might obscure helpful insights from respondents. We hope that our response will encourage further consideration of the principles that must be established before sound policies – and their costs – can be produced.

Principles

5. We acknowledge the importance of having a skilled work force. There are many people capable of working in this country who are unable to do so because they do not have the skills suitable for the jobs available and are therefore excluded from the opportunity. However we are unhappy about using the competitiveness of a nation as a criterion by which we decide public policy in relation to families. If policy is made purely on the grounds of competitiveness then people (and families) who do not have the necessary skills will not benefit. This has already been seen in jobs, which do not require a high skill level, where pregnant women or women on maternity leave have lost their jobs. Arguments about competitiveness are most compelling for parents with highly desirable skills, whose withdrawal from the labour market will result in loss of competitiveness for a business. Policy concerning work/life balance have to be seen in a wider context than just competitiveness. Work/life balance is as important for the well being of individuals, families and communities as for the competitiveness of the nation.
6. *Poverty and unemployment have a corrosive effect on family life. They make people unable or unwilling to take on the commitment of any stable relationship, in particular, marriage. They can damage self-esteem and mutual respect. In communities where young men have little hope of finding work they cannot take on the responsibilities traditionally associated with fatherhood. Unemployment has been identified as a cause of divorce and family breakdown. Relations between parents and children are often made much more difficult if either or both are out of work*² It is important when discussing choice, to consider the real choices that people have. A female home-worker living on little money is unlikely to be able to

² Unemployment and the Future of work CCBI 1997 p.165

make a real choice about whether to take time off, when her income is all that keeps the family from living in poverty. For her, choice is not a good idea. A man, who is in an unstable position at work in an area of unemployment, is unlikely to ask for time off to look after a new child in case his job is threatened. Too often the notion of ‘choice’ presented in the Green Paper implies a straight choice between work and looking after children. We suggest that choice should mean a more flexible approach and a greater emphasis on considering the real choices available to people. The choices that are going to make most difference are those that favour families with the lowest incomes. Families have become increasingly polarised between those where all adults in the household work (either both parents or the lone parent) – the work-rich family and those families where none of the adults work (either both parents or the lone parent) – the work-poor family.

7. The increasing participation of women in the workplace is here to stay. The enforced return to a familial model where the man worked and the woman stayed at home with the children is neither desirable nor practicable. We welcome the change in societal values that have begun to recognise the importance of a father’s involvement in the caring of members of his family and welcome the proposals for fathers to be given parental leave. Neither a woman’s nor a man’s vocation in the workplace should be incompatible with child rearing. We support the proposals for giving parents time together around the time of the birth of a child, however we are concerned that any legislation in this area should help parents make real choices throughout their child’s upbringing. It should be possible for individuals to discharge their responsibilities as parents and as workers without having recourse to arguments about enhancing ‘competitiveness’. *The modern view of the family is sometimes dominated by economic concerns, according to which the home is either an escape from work or a base from which people do other work or go out to work. The Christian understanding is different. The role of the family is not, in the first instance, to produce workers. Rather the role of the family is to produce healthy, mature and creative human beings.*³ Any proposals should nurture the positive qualities of relationships within the family. We therefore support models of good practice, which include both or either parents working fewer hours in order to give space to the family and there should be much greater recognition of those who choose to stay at home to look after family members. The long-hours culture, which values those who work long hours and leaves others completely out of work, has not benefited families. We challenge the underlying assumption of the Green Paper that it is better for people to work. We regret that it will subject those parents who are unable to work (such as those with disabled children) or who choose not to work (such as those coping with family breakdown or death) to unacceptable social and economic pressures.
8. *As Work and Parents: Competitiveness and Choice* acknowledges, we all benefit from the contribution working parents make to our prosperity. We all have a stake in the development of their children who will provide the next generation. We

³ ‘Something to Celebrate’ A report on the family commissioned by the BSR, 1995 p.79

would also argue that society has a stake in the well-being of all family members, including the caring of elderly members. The proposals suggested are for parents and children only and we would welcome further proposals to help families care for other members. Competitive pressures may make employers resistant even to these modest proposals unless society as a whole recognises its responsibilities and is prepared to bear the cost of their implementation. It is a justifiable use of public money to allow parents the space to return to work later after the birth of a child. Universal benefits will help all and contribute towards general family health.

9. We fully recognise the importance of supporting businesses and employers because they can provide the jobs and choice that people need. However, as we have noted above, it is not always possible to argue the case for a family member to have choice on narrowly economic grounds. Negotiation on an individual level can put employees in vulnerable positions, as recent cases, when pregnant employees have lost their jobs have illustrated. There is a need for organisations such as Trades Unions to negotiate sensible arrangements on behalf of vulnerable employees.

Conclusion

10. In conclusion, although we welcome the Government's stated commitment to families and, in particular, to those caring for family members, we would draw attention again to the following shortcomings. We believe that society as a whole shares with families a responsibility for parents, carers, children and other dependent members. The justification for sound social policy in such a critical area should not be dependent on the contribution it may make to enhanced business competitiveness. In our view, further consideration should be given to a more flexible approach to the choices open to parents and a greater emphasis on considering the choices that are actually available to families with the lowest income. Policies should nurture the positive qualities of relationships within the family rather than focusing on the narrow point of training workers. It is a justifiable use of public money to allow parents realistic choices. There is a need for organisations such as Trades Unions to negotiate sensible arrangements on behalf of vulnerable employees. However we welcome the contribution *Work and Parents: competitiveness and choice* has made to the discussion of these important questions and look forward to revised proposals from the Government which, we hope, will reflect the fundamental principles we have set out in this response.

+RICHARD OXON:
Chairman

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