

**Family Matters:
Family Breakdown and its Consequences**

Patricia Morgan

**New Zealand Business Roundtable
Wellington, New Zealand**

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Author

Patricia Morgan, Senior Research Fellow at Civitas: Institute for the Study of Civil Society, is a sociologist specialising in criminology and family policy. Her books include *Delinquent Fantasies*, 1978; *Facing Up to Family Income*, 1989; *Families in Dreamland*, 1992; *Farewell to the Family?*, 1995; *Are Families Affordable?*, 1996; *Who Needs Parents?*, 1996; *Adoption and The Care of Children*, 1998; *Adoption: The Continuing Debate*, 1999; *Marriage Lite*, 2000 and *Children as Trophies*, 2002. She has contributed chapters to *Full Circle*, *Family Portraits*, *The Loss of Virtue*, *Tried But Untested*, *Liberating Women from Modern Feminism*, *Just a Piece of Paper?* and *The Fragmenting Family*, as well as articles for periodicals and national newspapers.

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Foreword

The New Zealand Business Roundtable takes an interest in social policy because it is important for the well-being of all New Zealanders. In 1996 it published *From Welfare State to Civil Society: Towards Welfare that Works in New Zealand* by David Green who was at that time director of the Health and Welfare Unit at the Institute of Economic Affairs in London.¹

Among other matters, David Green's book examined the rise in family breakdown, out-of-wedlock births and sole parenthood in New Zealand. It found that trends in New Zealand were similar to those of comparable countries and noted some of their origins and consequences:

Because our eyes have been fixed on 'the economy' we have not been alert to mistaken doctrines which have caused family breakdowns and turned voluntary associations—once sources of that strength of character which insulates nations from tyranny—directly or indirectly into instruments of the state.²

This follow-up study, *Family Matters: Family Breakdown and its Consequences*, was commissioned to investigate family issues in greater depth and to contribute to public debate on policies affecting the family in New Zealand. The decision by the government to establish a Families Commission reflects community concern about the state of the family and signals a heightened interest in family policy. On the other hand, the government's Working for Families package in the 2004 Budget, which was announced after this study was completed, was more focused on income levels than on the state of the family.

The author of the study, Patricia Morgan, is a Senior Research Fellow at Civitas: The Institute for the Study of Civil Society in London. She is a sociologist who has written extensively on family policy.

There is a substantial international literature on family breakdown and its social consequences which is drawn on to assess the state of the family in New Zealand. The findings of this investigation are worrying. Patricia Morgan reports that:

Using all of the standard indicators, the family is now in a worse state in New Zealand than almost anywhere else. The situation of Maori is a particular cause for concern. It is comparable to that of American blacks, amongst whom, in large areas, the family based on marriage has virtually disappeared (p. 3).

Some people have celebrated the decline of the traditional family and view marriage as an oppressive institution or an aberration. However, Patricia Morgan writes:

... the married couple and their dependent children living together in their own home ... has been the normative child-rearing institution in Western society, in terms of both prevalence and ideal (pp. 4-5).

She cites a large body of research that finds that the traditional family is generally best for children, parents and society.

This view was recently challenged by the Hon. Steve Maharey, minister of social development and employment, who was reported as stating: 'I know of no social science that says a nuclear family is more successful than other kinds'.³ No one who reads *Family Matters* will be able to make such a claim in future.

The point is not that children brought up in nuclear families always do better than, say, children brought up by sole parents. Many sole parents do a fine job. Rather, the point is that, on average, two-parent families fare better, and this is what matters for social policy. As a Nobel laureate in economics, George Stigler, pointed out: 'We must base public policy not upon signal triumphs or scandalous failures but upon the regular, average performance of the policy'.⁴ Not all smokers die of lung cancer, but most health policy practitioners now agree that smoking is typically bad for health. Similarly, in matters of family policy the evidence in favour of two-parent families suggests it is unwise to bet against the odds. This finding is not a criticism of sole parents.

Some may still contest the conclusions of researchers like Patricia Morgan on family outcomes. The 1992 comment by David Popenoe, Professor of Sociology at Rutgers University in the United States, in *Controversial Truth: Two Parents Are Better*, is relevant in evaluating any such criticisms:

Social science research is almost never conclusive. There are always methodological difficulties and stones left unturned. Yet in three decades of work as a social scientist, I know of few other bodies of data in which the weight of evidence is so decisively on one side of the issue: on the whole, for children, two-parent families are preferable ... If our prevailing views on family structure hinge solely on scholarly evidence, the current debate would never have arisen in the first place.⁵

More recently, Popenoe has written that, internationally, the tide has turned in response to the weight of evidence:

In the last decade, even once-hostile academics and media people have reached a consensus about the importance of strengthening married two-parent families; but the change didn't come easily.⁶

The rise in family breakdown in many countries, including New Zealand, since the 1960s didn't happen by accident. People's behaviour is influenced by incentives. Patricia Morgan attributes the New Zealand trends in large part to changed incentives arising from changes in such areas as welfare policies (especially the Domestic Purposes Benefit), taxation and family law, as well as to changes in social attitudes, particularly those influenced by some versions of

feminism. The good news, however, is that incentives can be reshaped by better policies and ideas. This is the challenge to social policy makers trying to go forward.

Family Matters: Family Breakdown and its Consequences documents family policy changes and their impact on the institution of the family in New Zealand, and calls for greater support for public policies which signal that family stability is important for children and society as a whole. While not necessarily endorsing all of its findings, the Business Roundtable believes the book is a thorough and thought-provoking study and is pleased to publish it as a contribution to debate on a vital topic.

Roger Kerr
Executive Director, New Zealand Business Roundtable

Section A

The Family in New Zealand From Boom to Bust

