

RESUMÉ

The family thrives in countries in which the government doesn't interfere with it, according to a new international comparison of family policy published by the independent think-tank Civitas.

Three models: Sweden, Italy and Britain

Family Policy, Family Changes by Patricia Morgan compares the state of the family in secular Sweden, Catholic Italy and Britain. One of the most striking points of comparison is the extent to which the state interferes in family life, especially the rearing of children, in each of the countries.

Sweden

Sweden is famous for its comprehensive, top-down, social engineering, which makes it difficult for people to live in any other way than that prescribed by the state. Initially in response to concerns about falling population:

'the state took on, and socialised, many family responsibilities to a degree unseen outside of the Soviet bloc, not least the rearing of children in crèches (p.29)... This has involved the comprehensive political control of family life, where Sweden has made just about the most concerted attempt in history to engineer the freedom of women from child-rearing responsibilities and the demise of the traditional family through economic manipulation, social pressures, and massive public re-education' (p.19).

Supposedly to get women to have more children, the state undertook a massive programme to ensure that all women would be able to work, regardless of whether they had children or not, and would be treated exactly the same as men. There was no recognition of marriage, so single parents would theoretically suffer no disadvantage as a result of their status, nor was there any recognition of the division of labour and responsibilities within the home. Women and men, whether married or not, were treated as individuals by the state. This meant that a combination of high taxes and benefits linked to workforce participation made it almost impossible for mothers to stay at home while fathers went out to work to support their families.

Italy

The Italian situation is almost the complete opposite. Under Fascism, women were used to breed soldiers, with marriage and baby bonuses, and a prohibition on women in the workforce. As a result, pro-family public policies are more strongly linked to extreme militarism in Italy than almost anywhere in the world. People neither want nor expect the state to do anything to support families, and this is compounded by the Catholic church's traditional view that the family should be outside the state's sphere of influence - and that includes financial support for the family (p.81). As a result, Italy is one of only three EU countries (the other two are Greece and Spain) that have no universal child or family allowances. Family allowances in Italy are means-tested and are extremely low by European standards (pp.84-5).

Britain

The British situation is different again, although it is much closer to Sweden than Italy under Gordon Browne's regime that treats people as units of production rather than unique individuals. Theoretically the state supports the family by supporting individuals in whatever choices they make, without discriminating in favour of any one family type. In fact, as Patricia Morgan shows, the system is so heavily skewed in favour of lone-parent and two-earner families that life is made difficult for single-earner, two-parent families, as in Sweden. 'The lone parent is the family form preferred by the tax/benefit system' (p.113).

'There is also a tacit anti-marriage agenda. The abolitionists [of marriage] now dominate or control the organisations, not least the university departments and the government-sponsored quangos or front organisations, dealing with research, advice and policy making in the area of family matters.' (p.112).

Patricia Morgan suggests that the promotion of policies to undermine the traditional family, like the scrapping of the Marriage Allowance and the transfer of rights and obligations which used to pertain to marriage to all relationships, is part of New Labour's programme of increased state control of our private lives:

'This is why totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century found themselves on a collision course with families and often preferred promiscuity and lone parenthood, since there are no boundaries and barriers here to state intervention. Anarchy and despotism are two sides of the same coin, and collectivism exists alongside a permissive, hedonistic and solipsistic private morality... A Children's Minister (Margaret Hodge) insists that "it is not a question of whether we should intrude in family life, but how and when-and we have to constantly remain focused on our purpose: to strengthen and support families so that they can enjoy their opportunities and help provide opportunities for their children". The "support" is to ensure that people conform to the government's norms. It is not to help parents achieve what they think is right' (p.118).

What are the outcomes?

Patricia Morgan compares the outcomes of these different approaches. Britain is well known for its family problems. It tops the league tables in several of the most worrying indicators of breakdown, such as divorce and teenage pregnancy. Sweden has even higher rates of out-of-wedlock births (55%) and cohabitation (15% of couples) than Britain. Italy, however, with no government programme of intervention on behalf of the family, is still the home of the traditional family. Divorce rates and out-of-wedlock births, including teenage pregnancies, are extremely low. Cohabitation is so rare as to be difficult to measure. Young people live with their parents until they get married, and, for most women, marriage will represent their first living-together relationship. (Table 2, pp.8-10.)

The Swedish surprise: a thick glass ceiling

Some of Patricia Morgan's most surprising findings relate to Sweden, which is not the paradise of open relationships and free love that some advocates claim. Despite its massive programme of social engineering over several decades, Sweden has not managed to eliminate the problems that are associated with non-marriage and out-of-wedlock childbearing. In Sweden, as everywhere else in the world, lone parents and their children are more likely to experience poverty and ill health. Marriage is good for men and women and divorce has negative consequences, including higher suicide rates - and Sweden has the highest suicide rate in the EU after Finland. Perhaps the most surprising finding, given that Sweden's population-boosting policies were gift-wrapped as measures to promote

gender equality, is that women are not only failing to achieve equality in the workforce, they are experiencing more inequality than in most other countries:

'Compared with the USA, UK and Germany, Sweden has the most gender-segregated workforce. Indeed, it is more gender-segregated than Asian countries like China, Hong Kong and India. Only the Islamic Middle East and Africa, and certain developing countries, have similar or higher levels of occupational segregation... Sweden has a larger glass-ceiling problem than the USA, where family-friendly policies are almost non-existent' (p.55).

The measures introduced by the state to get women into the workforce may actually be keeping them out of it, or preventing them from achieving equal outcomes with men. Generous maternity leave of two-and-a-half years per child, topped up with lavish sick-leave provisions once mothers return to work, make employers wary of taking on women, or of giving them responsible jobs. The female workforce in Sweden has been described as a 'Potemkin workforce' because on any given day 20 per cent of all female workers are off on some kind of paid leave. In the public sector it is 30 per cent, and for mothers of children under three, the proportion is 48 per cent (p.57).

In spite of all the social engineering, women do not regard work as the most important thing in their lives. 'Women continue to perform the larger part of unpaid household domestic duties (p.59)... Three-quarters of fathers and two-thirds of mothers still believed in the 1980s that men should be the principal breadwinners' (p.60). Patricia Morgan criticises the feminist activists who see every woman's life in terms of her 'career':

'Most people have jobs, not careers, and such statements are made by professional elites who want to recast the world in their own image; one where every woman is a Patricia Hewitt doppelganger' (p.89).

'Family Policy, Family Changes: Sweden, Italy and Britain Compared' by Patricia Morgan is published by Civitas, 77 Great Peter Street, London SW1P 2EZ, tel 020 7799 6677, www.civitas.org.uk, at £14.00 plus £2.50 p&p.

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