

Happy Families?

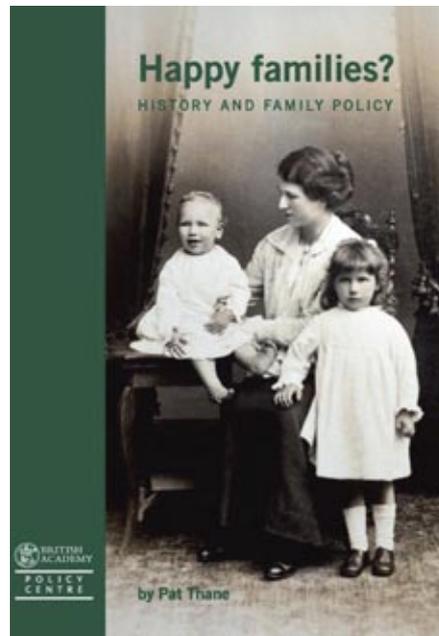
Dr Simon Griffiths and Emma McKay of the British Academy's Policy Centre discuss Professor Pat Thane FBA's new overview of changing family patterns.

IN A RECENT speech Mr Justice Coleridge argued that 'The general collapse of ordinary family life, because of the breakdown of families, in this country is on a scale, depth and breadth which few of us could have imagined even a decade ago.'¹ Similarly, journalists and researchers in think tanks are often heard to bemoan the 'tide of family breakdown' blighting our society.² At their worst, these claims lead to policy responses based on false assumptions about the ways in which families and family structures have changed in recent years. A new report from the British Academy's Policy Centre – *Happy Families? History and Family Policy*, written by historian and Fellow of the British Academy, Professor Pat Thane – sheds light on the main trends in this area. Her overview provides a much more complicated picture than that rendered in many contemporary accounts.

Marriage and divorce

Many commentators cite the rising levels of divorce as a sign of the collapse of family life. It's certainly true that divorce rates have increased with changes in the law.³ Until the Divorce Reform Act in 1969, which established irretrievable breakdown as valid grounds for divorce, it was hard to escape from a non-functioning and sometimes violent marriage. For most people, lawyers were prohibitively expensive. The Royal Commission on Divorce and Matrimonial Causes reported in 1912 that divorce was 'beyond the reach of the poor', but recommendations to rectify this were largely ignored.

The matter was even more complicated for women with children. From 1839 to 1925 legal custody was by right the husband's once the children were over the age of seven. After that date, women were allowed to apply for custody of their children over all ages, provided they were married, and in 1959 this was extended to parents of 'illegitimate' children. Finally, in 1973, women were given equal, unconditional guardianship rights. Domestic violence was also a common occurrence, especially against women and children. It wasn't until 1978 that men were legally fully restrained from beating their wives.



Once the Divorce Reform Act was passed, numbers of divorces increased steeply, peaking at 165,000 in 1993. After this they began to decline, until in 2007 there were 128,500.

Perhaps the greatest threat to family life between the 18th and early 20th centuries was caused not by divorce, but death. In the late 1730s, 24 per cent of marriages were ended by the death of a partner within 10 years and 56 per cent within 25 years. Gradually, as health and life expectancy improved, so did a marriage's chances; and in contrast, by the late 1930s, just 5 per cent of marriages were ended by mortality. It was only after this that divorce began to take over as the primary reason for the ending of marriages.

Cohabitation

Many contemporary accounts of family disintegration focus on the rise in cohabitation. While it is the case that the number of families registering as 'cohabiting without marriage' was at an all-time high in 2007 (14 per cent), cohabitation is not solely a contemporary practice. A survey of working class Londoners in the 1890s found that couples who met when they were older tended to live in non-legalised unions; there

is also evidence that throughout the 19th century many young couples lived together before marrying. This state of affairs was often accepted by the clergy, and the law was increasingly pragmatic, making provision for 'illegitimate' family units in the Workman's Compensation Act 1906 and in regard to payments for servicemen's partners during the World Wars. Recognising the impact of tough divorce laws in forcing couples into 'illegal' couplings was, in fact, an instrumental part of the moral argument for divorce reform.

Births outside marriage

One of the most cited modern changes to families is the increase of births outside marriage – 43.3 per cent in 2008. However, again, this is not entirely new. In the early 19th century an estimated 20 per cent of first births were illegitimate and over half of all first births were probably conceived outside marriage. The main development appears to be one of social acceptability: couples no longer need to marry to uphold reputations. The figures suggest that premarital sex has been part of relationships for some time, but in contemporary Britain it is easier to be open about such matters.

Diverse patterns, and policy

Families may have changed, but it is inaccurate to portray this as a shift from one extreme, of secure and happy marriages, to another of divorce, cohabitation and unmarried parenthood. Families have always been diverse, and while many stable family units and long-lasting marriages may have existed – especially in the 1950s and 60s – Pat Thane's review suggests that the high volume of divorces, and the shift towards cohabitation which followed 1969, are an indication that these marriages were often not as harmonious as was believed.

What also emerges from the review is that poorer families have greater difficulty sustaining stability and harmony, which may suggest that socio-economic inequality is a more important challenge than change in the family itself. It has also emerged that there is no systematic historical evidence of a

relationship between families and wider social problems – such as violence and poor educational performance. Although it does note that in recent decades, increased cohabitation, divorce and unmarried parenthood have occurred at a time of stable or falling levels of crime and greatly improved educational performance overall, especially among girls (although least among the poorest boys and girls).

Overall *Happy Families?* shows how history can shed light on current claims about changing family life.

Happy Families? History and Family Policy will be published by the British Academy in October 2010. Copies will be available via www.britac.ac.uk/policy

Notes

- 1 www.resolution.org.uk/editorial.asp?page_id=228&n_id=14
- 2 www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/default.asp?pageRef=312
- 3 All quotations and figures can be found in Pat Thane *Happy Families? History and Family Policy*. Statistics largely relate to England and Wales.

Simon Griffiths and Emma McKay report on other work coming out of the British Academy Policy Centre

New Paradigms in Public Policy

There are new economic, social and political demands in British society today, which will have impacts on the way that public policy is made, what issues are tackled and how.

The *New Paradigms in Public Policy* project, chaired by Professor Peter Taylor-Gooby FBA, will cover a spectrum of the areas in which change is expected, including new approaches to the economy, environmental issues, multiculturalism, social policy and democratic change.

To mark the launch of the research, the British Academy Policy Centre invited Professor James Fishkin of Stanford University to give a lecture on 30 June 2010 on one of the themes of the project: the roles and responsibilities of citizens in policymaking. Professor Fishkin has pioneered the concept of deliberative polling, which allows groups of citizens to be informed about all aspects of an issue before giving an opinion.

Deliberative polling, Professor Fishkin argued, offers an opportunity to bring the public into decisions about how we use public resources. One of the key parts of the process is selecting a sample that is representative of the population in question, in terms of both demographics and attitudes to the issue being examined. This sample is then fully informed of the issue, often by an advisory group and/or a briefing document that covers all arguments for and against it. The participants have small group discussions with a trained moderator and are given the opportunity to question experts as a group.

In his lecture, Professor Fishkin discussed the success of this process, as well as its potential downfalls. He gave numerous examples of deliberative polling, from making energy choices in Texas to deciding infrastructure projects in China. Professor Fishkin's lecture offered a refreshingly positive account of how the people really can be trusted to make sensible decisions for themselves when given correct and balanced information. It also publicised an excellent, democratic alternative to public opinion polling and focus groups, which may prove to play a vital role in the future of public policymaking.

A transcript of his lecture 'How to Make Deliberative Democracy Practical: Consulting the Public Thoughtfully' is available via www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary/

Drawing a New Constituency Map for the United Kingdom

While the Liberal Democrats have traditionally been in favour of electoral reform, the Conservative Party is also making a surprising push for change, proposing the equalisation of constituency boundaries.

The *Parliamentary Voting Systems and Constituencies Bill 2010*, as well as discussing a Referendum to change the UK electoral system to the Alternative Vote system, proposes massive changes to the constituency system. These include setting the number of MPs at 600; roughly equalising the number of registered voters in each constituency; and changing the method of public consultation by the Boundary Commissions.

With the current electoral rules, there is no minimum or maximum number for the total of MPs and while the UK should not have 'substantially' more or less than 613 MPs, there are presently 650. Also, population growth has not occurred equally across all four territories of the UK, which means that the average size of a constituency electorate in 2010 ranges from 71,882 in England to 56,545 in Wales.

The complexity of redistributing and equalising constituencies lies in the number of factors to be taken into account – for instance attachments to traditional area boundaries and local authorities, as well as the potential for future population change.

Following on from *Choosing an Electoral System*, a guide to the pros and cons of the various electoral systems (reported on in the last issue of the *British Academy Review*), Professor Ron Johnston FBA and Professor Iain McLean FBA were joined by Professors Michel Balinski and Peyton Young to provide an invaluable guide for parliamentarians, policy-makers and other interested parties to the problems presented by this Bill and the best routes around them.

Drawing a New Constituency Map for the United Kingdom is available to download at www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Constituencies-bill.cfm

