

Doing the dirty washing

Women as the scapegoats of the New Right

ANNE ELSE

DOING THE WASHING is an untidy business. So untidy, in fact, that US city councillor James Fragoli wants to impose fines of US\$1000 on anyone hanging washing in their front yard. But someone asked Councillor Fragoli a very smart question: what happens to *his* washing? His reply: "I come home, my wife has it done. I don't know what she does to it." (*Dominion*, 1997)

As *False Economy* (Else, 1996) demonstrates, women are held responsible – and for the most part, hold themselves responsible – for cleaning up most of society's everyday dirty washing. But they are also responsible for keeping this messy business out of sight and out of mind, so that it does not intrude on the real business of the world. If they fail in either task, they risk severe penalties.

Yet dealing with dirty washing, including the messy business of bearing and raising children and caring for the elderly, gets paid little or nothing. So how are women to survive financially, in a society where survival depends absolutely on access to money income, and unpaid work is just that – unpaid?

Since the Industrial Revolution, the glib answer has come back: by finding, and keeping, a male breadwinner, so that he can keep her, and his children. Women's financial dependence on men has been the linchpin of industrialised society. The ideal of complementary marriage has served as a convenient mechanism for keeping the dirty washing of everyday caring work largely off the public agenda, let alone the public purse.

All other possible family forms were until recently literally outlawed. Apart from widows' pensions, only in the last 25 years has there been any statutory state subsidy for those caring for children without a male partner. Even then, the model has been one of replacing the missing share of a male wage with a meagre state substitute. Unlike the unemployment benefit, the domestic purposes benefit has been based on the premise that caring for

children is a full-time job in itself; yet like other mean-tested benefits, it does not recognise that few two-parent non-beneficiary families can now rely solely on one male wage for more than a short time.

The old division of labour now operates to the full only in a minority of households, and generally only for relatively short periods. Fewer women of almost any age are living in partnership with men. Not surprisingly, fewer

women are having children, and women are having fewer children. Pakeha women are delaying having children, and Maori women may be starting to do so too. Most women now spend most of their adult lives in paid work, or looking for it. Yet rapidly increasing numbers of women, and men too, are having to turn to the state for the

money they need to support themselves and their children.

As Brian Easton has recently pointed out, New Zealand's welfare state, like Australia's, was based strongly on full employment (or rather, full male employment), which earned enough to trickle down to women and children. Ironically, the consequence of current high unemployment is that although the welfare state "is presented as a means of protecting the individual against adverse circumstances ... when the economy persistently experiences adverse circumstances, the welfare state is unable to function properly." (Easton, 1996:23)

In 1976 the state was paying out around 19,000 domestic purposes benefits (DPB); by 1996, the number was close to 109,000. But this rise is dwarfed by the rise in unemployment benefits. They jumped from around 3,000 in 1977 to over 134,000 in 1996. Sickiness and invalid benefits have also reached an all-time high. By mid 1996, around 350,000 income tested benefits were operative; they were supporting over 45,000 people as dependent spouses, together with over 263,000 children under 16 – about 28% of all dependent children. (DSW, 1996b; MWA, 1997)

These statistics are of course merely snapshots of one point in time. For all its ability to match up files with other departments in order to track down benefit fraud,



the Department of Social Welfare cannot accurately track how often particular people access various benefits. However, it seems clear that inability to find any form of long-term employment is growing; that the average time spent on the DPB is steadily rising, along with the age profile of recipients; and that the older you are when you become unemployed, the longer you are likely to be out of a job.

Now here is the \$64,000 question, or rather set of questions. Is the rising level of "welfare dependency" a problem? If so, why, and for whom? What is causing this problem? And what is the solution? In other words, what does welfare dependency mean?

Even when it is out of the question for a beneficiary to get a job that pays a living wage, income tested benefits have never been generous. Since the 1991 benefit cuts and rent increases, they have sunk well below any realistic poverty line. For this reason alone, having large numbers of people, especially children, on benefits for longer than a very short time is indeed a major problem. Unless beneficiaries can earn a large amount illegally, they and their children will almost inevitably be living in poverty. That is bad for them, bad for the local and national community, bad for the economy, and bad for the future.

But for those in charge of policy, the poverty of beneficiaries is not the central issue. The brochure for the 1997 Beyond Dependency conference uses the word "poverty" only once – in a biography of an overseas speaker. The Department of Social Welfare's briefing papers to the incoming government do not use it at all. They refer to "low income", "loss of income", "families at risk", and "cycles of disadvantage", but not to poverty. They do not mention the 1991 benefit cuts and rent increases, let alone the Employment Contracts Act. They do refer, albeit rarely, to the growth of unemployment, as a major factor putting families "at risk"; but they stress that employment is now growing.

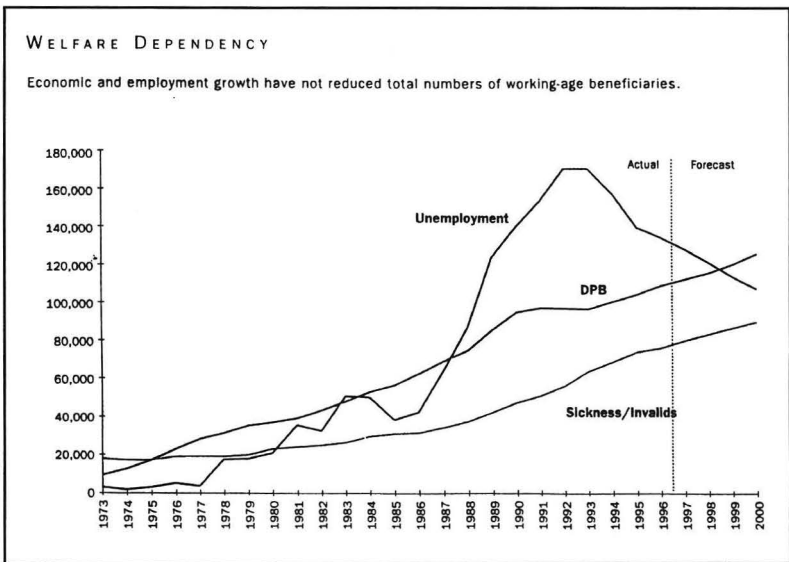
It is easy to overlook just how fast and extensive the collapse of full employment and of male wage support for women and children has been. The graph on the right, from the DSW Briefing Papers for the 1996 incoming government, shows the overall picture; but note the directive caption. (DSW, 1996a:7)

The graph is followed by a scary set of statistics about the growth of dependency. The central message is that welfare dependency itself is the

problem, and it brings a whole raft of other problems. The dependency figures are set alongside and implicitly linked with figures on a range of major social problems, or as the briefing papers put it, "Crises in Families", such as youth suicide and crime, school suspensions, teenage ex-nuptial births, child abuse, and male family violence. In other words, the benefit-dependent family is a dysfunctional family. What we are not told, however, is the fact that in any one year, fewer than 6% of the children of beneficiaries are the subject of notifications to the Children, Young Persons and their Families Service. (Rochford and Walker, 1996)

How has the increase in dependency come about? The briefing papers refer vaguely to "social and economic changes". They speak of unemployment, and growth in sole parent families, as if these were natural phenomena. They have much more to say about the role of the benefit system itself. The central problem is that so far it has "not required the beneficiary to take active steps to reduce their chances of needing a benefit in the future." (DSW, 1996: 24) Nor has it encouraged beneficiaries to contribute to society. "Contributing" means "directing time and energy into enhancing the lives of others, in contrast to simply being in passive receipt of benefits." (DSW, 1996:7) But at no point is there any reference to any research showing exactly what beneficiaries do all day, or how much they are already contributing through working in their homes and communities. Nor is there any discussion of how all paid work depends on unpaid work – including the unpaid work of beneficiaries.

Although "contribution" is discussed, the major solution to benefit dependency is nothing less than "self-reliance". Self-reliance means "being independent of the benefit system for most working age people." (DSW, 1996:7) Self-reliance is important, because "A healthy society and economy is



based on cycles of nurturing families and capable self-reliant adults.” (DSW, 1996:16)

In fact the two are not “cycles”, they take place simultaneously. Exactly how they are to be combined is not clear. It is not possible for caregivers to be in two places at once. Yet the new policy approach, based on the fact of women’s increasing labour force participation, is to expect sole mothers and the wives of unemployed men to combine nurturing with wage-earning. This may require offering some state help with “removing barriers to work”, such as “childcare and home management skills”, or “referral to appropriate agencies to obtain relevant training”. (DSW, 1996:26) The briefing papers cite lack of acceptable and affordable childcare as one of the main barriers to “greater self-reliance”. After all, as they note elsewhere, two out of three DPB recipients have a youngest child under seven. (In other words, the group of unpartnered mothers most prone to be heavily, if not exclusively, reliant on a benefit for income closely parallels the group of partnered mothers most likely to be heavily reliant on another’s wage.)

But they do not comment on the implications of the fact that most sole parents are in fact *women*, as are almost all the “spouses” of those getting the married rate of benefit. Nowhere do they mention the large and widening gap between men’s and women’s earnings in this country, the much greater typical disparity in lifetime earnings, or the fact that the Employment Contracts Act has made the equal pay legislation literally unworkable. The second graph, below, gives the overall picture: it shows that despite greater participation in the paid workforce, half of all women earned under \$15,000 in 1991, and that the only age groups for which the male and

female medians converge are under 20 and over 70.

The DSW briefing paper section on sole parents compares the high rate of workforce participation by Swedish sole parents with the low rate. It notes that a high proportion of Swedish sole mothers work part-time only, and 73% of their children have a place in public child care. But in a recent paper, Professor Maureen Baker of McGill University, Montreal, points out that the high rate of employment has come about through far more than “an extensive system of public child care services”. The Swedish government has “established public sector jobs with statutory protections, developed lengthy paid family leave policies [for all parents, sole or partnered] ... ensured pay equity, and actively promoted gender equality”. (Baker, 1997:14)

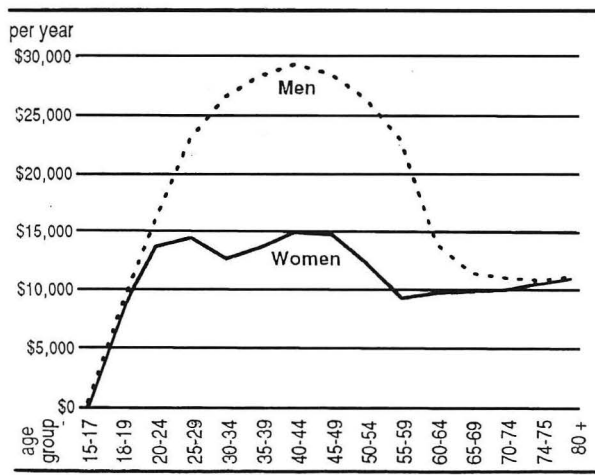
By contrast, in Canada, as in New Zealand, work incentives and “employability” for sole parents are being promoted “within a context of high unemployment, low minimum wages, little emphasis on job creation, a lack of full-time jobs [especially secure ones] with high wages and statutory protections, and a shortage of child care services.” (Baker, 1997:14) Professor Baker concludes that under these circumstances, “neither paying mothers to raise their children at home nor encouraging them to find paid work has resolved” – or is likely to resolve – “the problem of poverty among sole mothers”. (Baker, 1997:15) But this conclusion may be irrelevant to current discussions of welfare policy which focus not on how to resolve poverty but on how to get people off benefits.

Considerable unease about the prospect of getting large numbers of beneficiaries into self-reliant jobs comes through repeatedly in the DSW briefing papers. The writers do not highlight the fact that unemployment levels are still extremely high, particularly for Maori and Pacific Islands people, and that what could be called “living wage unemployment” is higher still. However, they do note that 29% of all jobs are now part-time, that local conditions vary, and that there is research showing that welfare dependency “has more to do with lack of opportunity than inappropriate attitudes”. (DSW, 1996:26)

As for what are called active assistance programmes, the briefing papers note simply that customised service, the “delivery platform for benefit administration”, has a staff to customer ratio of 1:250. The “more intensive” programmes have ratios of 1:125 and 1:60. (DSW, 1996:27)

There is also a slightly acerbic comment on evaluation of active assistance programmes in Wisconsin (that’s the state which requires mothers of 12-week-old babies to be available for work). The evaluators found that “raising the

MEDIAN TOTAL INCOME OF MEN & WOMEN, BY AGE GROUP, 1991



SOURCE: CENSUS OF POPULATION AND DWELLINGS, 1991

number of staff to a level where there was enough staff to actually monitor all clients raised participation rates significantly".^(DSW, 1996:30) But taking on more staff means spending more money, at least in the short term. Providing childcare and training also costs money. So does topping up the now large pool of wages which are even lower than benefits. All these additional costs could quickly add up to the same as, or even more than, the DPB itself.

The DSW briefing papers do not attempt to put forward strategies aimed at reducing either unemployment or the sole parent population, as a way of reducing welfare dependency. But others do.

Current New Right analysis focuses strongly on high and growing welfare dependency. It is seen as a major problem – but not as *the* problem. It is only the worst symptom of the real problem, which is category-based, unlimited duration, as-of-right, uncapped state social provision.

This is presented as by far the biggest blot on an otherwise radically transformed policy landscape. Two main strategies are being brought to bear on it. Both involve taking charge of the questions, as well as the answers. In other words, they offer explanations which in turn determine policy directions.

The first strategy deals with poverty itself. The New Right is genuinely concerned about poverty. Not only does it result in the redistribution of great wadges of public money which could be much better spent by corporate heads; it also gives the lie, very publicly, to the much vaunted success of economic restructuring.

That's why so much energy is currently being devoted to explaining poverty away. (See, for example, Barker, 1996 and Bates, 1996.) The explanations begin by asserting that there is no "real", that is, absolute, poverty in New Zealand (or the USA, or Britain), compared with, say, Calcutta, or the Depression of the 1930s. (As Toni Allwood (1997) of WIN on Poverty has recently pointed out, this is like saying that there is no "real" child abuse in New Zealand, compared with, say, the child brothels of Thailand, or Victorian London – and therefore we need do nothing about it.)

It is admitted that relative poverty may indeed exist, and may even have spread and worsened over recent years; but the claim is that this does not matter, either because it does not last long (people move out of it), or because inequality itself does not matter. Those who believe it does, so we are told, have been captured by the politics of envy. What really matters is increasing the size of the national cake. Any attempt at redistribution from richer to poorer is said to shrink the cake, because it interferes with market freedom.

The second strategy centres on welfare. (See, for example, Morgan, 1995; Green, 1996; Bennett, 1996.) The argument is that welfare dependency is a problem not because it leads to poverty, but because it signifies moral decay. The cited proof of moral decay is the rise in the

number of sole parents. And the major cause of this rise is presented as welfare.

The conclusion is that the state must therefore institute drastic reforms of its welfare programmes, such as time limits on benefits, workfare, capped funds, and, wherever possible, the removal of the right to assistance itself. Within the limits of New Right economic principles, the state should do all it can to reinforce legal marriage and encourage men to support their wives and children financially, for example, through tax breaks for married male breadwinners with dependent wives. There should be no assistance for sole parents which does not also go to married ones. The small amount of welfare assistance which proves to be absolutely necessary should come not from the public sector, but from the private, because that is morally and socially better for both donors and recipients.

This strategy, say New Right theorists, will all but eliminate the problem of welfare dependency. It will also restore the self-reliance and social and moral patterns of the 1950s. If there is no unemployment benefit, men will get jobs, then wives, and stay with both. If there is no DPB, few men will abandon their wives and children, and few women will get pregnant to men who are not their husbands. If they do, they must take the consequences.

It is claimed that mothers who have to get jobs – widows, for example, or victims of domestic violence – will be able to, because contrary to feminist propaganda, there is now no such thing as discrimination in the workplace, there is only choice. If women choose to have children, and then choose to stay at home and look after them, or need to take constant time off, of course they will earn less, just as they will if they choose to be nurses instead of doctors, or teachers instead of lawyers.^(Post and Lynch, 1995) Whether they are married or single, women who can't afford to keep a child should not choose to have one.

As Jane Kelsey has noted (1997), the language of the New Right in New Zealand has generally been that of neutral logic and technology. But the moral dimension has been there all along and it gathered force when Ruth Richardson came to power. In February, for example, the *National Business Review* featured a reprint of an article in the *Wall Street Journal* by Irving Kristol of the extreme right-wing Enterprise Institute. It was headed "Forget the money, welfare state's crisis is spiritual".

According to the New Right rhetoric the family is being destroyed by the welfare state, because it is welfare itself which has brought about a "poisonous flowering" of "crime, illegitimacy, drugs, divorce, sexual promiscuity". We know this is so, because "in times past, when economic inequality and lack of opportunity were certainly no less evident than today (and for most people were probably much greater), such social pathologies were far less widespread." But now the welfare state has induced once sturdily self-reliant citizens to yield up "the right of self-government in return for cradle-to-grave security". The

resulting lack of financial responsibility and commitment, combined with a "bland, permissive toleration of moral irresponsibility", leads to "national decadence". (Kristol, 1997)

In other words, a new moral panic is now being generated. The victims of New Right policies are being made the scapegoats for the failure of those policies to deliver the general prosperity they promised. The central focus is on the delinquent women who have failed to cope with society's dirty washing, and are now blamed for creating it.

We have been here before. In the 19th and early 20th century, it was careless, ignorant women neglecting children. In the first world war, it was sinful women spreading venereal disease. In the Depression, it was selfish women resorting to abortion (there have been frequent re-runs of this one). And in the 1950s, it was morally defective, promiscuous teenage temptresses luring innocent boys into carnal knowledge.

But the perennial favourite has been women who give birth to and/or bring up children outside marriage – and so give the lie to the whole system of financial dependence on men. Panics over this group occurred in the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s, and now again in the 1990s.

It is hard to see how restigmatising illegitimacy can work. (That term, of course, no longer has any legal status in New Zealand with regard to children.) Just over 40%, or two out of every five births, now take place outside marriage – though not, of course, necessarily outside partnership or the extended family. In 1996 there were 23,499 births outside marriage, and 34,292 births inside it. With numbers like these, it seems almost pointless to go on counting who is in and who is out. What was once the unmentionably dirty washing of illegitimacy has been transformed into the clean washing of parenthood.

But now the New Right is doing its utmost to dirty it again.

Illegitimacy looms so large not because it is seen as sexually immoral, but because it is seen as economically immoral. This is now the only kind of immorality which matters. New Right discussions typically slide seamlessly from "illegitimacy" to "sole parents" to "sole mothers" to "single mothers" to "single teenage mothers". And single teenage mothers are obviously economically immoral – particularly when both abortion and adoption are available.

Sole mothers in general present problems. By shut-

ting men off from the civilising influence of marriage and fatherhood, they are fostering the growth of a rootless, aggressive "warrior class". As for their children, a raft of studies can be cited to prove that children who are "illegitimate" and/or have a "sole parent" fare worse than children in "two-parent families", "intact families", or even just "families". What is not made clear is that very few of these studies control fully for other major variables, especially income. And most of them concern children born to and/or kept

by sole mothers in an era when illegitimacy and sole parenting were stigmatised and punished in precisely the ways the New Right now wants to restore.

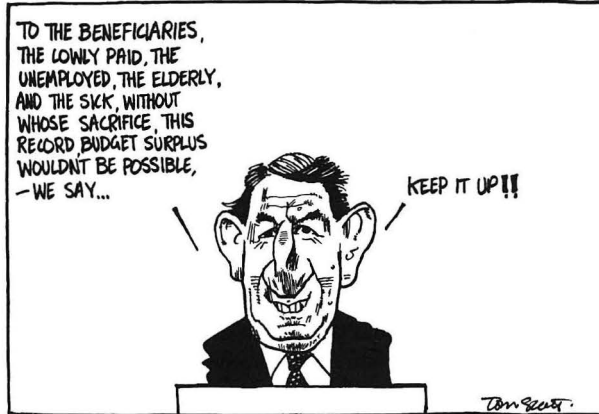
It is far too soon to know how today's so called "illegitimate" children are faring. What we do know is that teenage women make up only 4% of all female sole parents; that the vast majority

of sole parents were once partnered; that most have only one or two children; that between 30 and 38% already have some paid work (though they are not classified as "employed"); and that sole parent families continue to cluster heavily at the bottom end of the income scale.

The 1991 census was taken before the benefit cuts and state rent increases. It showed that 57% of Pakeha sole parents, 75% of Pacific Islands sole parents and 78% of Maori sole parents reported annual incomes of less than \$15,000. We also know that the only way most women manage to get off the domestic purposes benefit is not by finding a job which pays enough to live on, but by finding a new male partner. In view of the large disparities between women and men across the main earning years age groups, this is hardly surprising.

The New Right are right about one thing. Welfare dependency is only a symptom – but not of moral decay. It is a symptom of how successfully policies undermining wages, working conditions and social services have combined with rapid post-industrial economic shifts to destabilise unpaid caring work.

The core problem is how to support parents in ways which enable them to combine earning a living and taking adequate care of their children, when reliable, high-quality childcare is still beyond the reach of many families, when secure jobs featuring adequate wages and manageable hours are becoming the exception rather than the norm, and when high unemployment or quasi-unemployment shows every sign of being here to stay.



There is some heartening evidence of radically new approaches. The DSW briefing papers, for example, include two remarkable short sections. The one on "Individual Units of Entitlement" points out that lumping a couple's income together in assessing entitlement to benefit often keeps them both out of the workforce – hence the rising numbers of children with "neither parent in paid work". It notes that Australia has recently moved to a system of abating benefits only against the income of the individual concerned. (DSW 1996a:21)

The second section is on "Basic Income Models", or universal basic income schemes. It says they can reduce high abatement rates and accommodate casual or part-time employment. However, it also states (contrary to the available evidence) that such schemes "can discourage people from working or earning more". Still, it suggests that variants of this model are worth exploring. (DSW 1996a:22)

Against these tentative signs of realistic analysis, the New Right is mounting an enormous, well co-ordinated effort to convince enough people that what is needed is a return to the workhouse approach to welfare. But for most poor families, in or out of paid work, the problem is not welfare dependency and moral decay. It is poverty and stress. Forcing thousands more into the workforce cannot revive 1950s marriage patterns, any more than it can bring back the 1950s labour market, soaring rates of teenage pregnancy, or silence about domestic violence. US family sociology professor Frank Furstenberg points out that "We are no more likely to restore the conjugal family rooted in the ideal [but not the practice!] of premarital sexual chastity, early and lifelong monogamy, and a sharply drawn division of labour between men and women than we are to bring back the family farm." (Furstenberg, 1997:18)

Caring work is lasting longer and demanding more resources. But viable employment seems set to go on eroding away, as technology gets cheaper and staff get dearer. In March 1997, the official unemployment rate was 1 in 16 people, but the jobless rate was 1 in 9 people. The official unemployment rate for Maori rose by 1% to 16.2%, and for Pacific Islands people it rose by 2% to 16.9%. For the first time in recent years, the official female rate of 6.7% was higher than the official male rate of 6.2%.

According to the Labour Market Bulletin^(1, 1996:83), real weekly and hourly earnings of wage and salary earners declined between 1984 and 1994, but the median hourly rate for men fell more steeply (by 10.3%) than the median hourly rate for women (which fell by 2.2%). For women in full-time employment there was a rise of 1.0%, but for women in part-time employment (37% of employed females) there was a fall of 6.5%. Because men's wages declined more, the ratio of women's to men's hourly earnings narrowed, from 0.79 in 1984 to 0.89 in 1992. Thereafter, however (ie, in the period following the introduction of the Employment Contracts Act, which effectively rendered the Equal Pay Act inoperative), the ratio fell back to

0.86. So the gap is now widening again.

Perhaps we should just stop pretending that we live in a society which values anything beyond the market. We could put up for sale at birth all babies whose parents can't support them till they are old enough to work. Then we could humanely dispose of all the disabled and frail elderly who can't fund their own care. That would leave the rest free to scratch a living from the market as best they can.

Or else we can find new, effective, sustainable ways to support caring work in the real world, even if that means higher taxes on business profits and capital gains. A social responsibility act would be a good place to start. Unless we solve this problem – unless we work out how to get the dirty washing done – we and our society are history.

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