Community, Family, Children

"In the older forms of social organisation, it was just this inescapable fact of close interdependence that held the family and the community together. In village or town, the lives of the inhabitants were dominated by local events. Narrow though their lives might appear by our standards they had, young and old, their place in the natural order of things, a settled relationship to one another guided by a network of custom and mutual obligation. Inevitably then, they were all of them part of the prior and absorbing concern of the community they dwelt in."

E. J. Mishan, "Growth: The Price We Pay", Staples Press 1969.

The simple fact is that in our quest for economic security we have paid too much attention to satisfying our material needs and not enough to creating a healthy social environment to meet our deeper, non-material needs.

Two important changes in social organisation took place as a result of the striving for affluence which grew out of the depression. Firstly people came together to service technology and the result was the creation of large, badly-planned urban areas. Secondly, the family unit was reduced to the bare minimum as it struck out on its own to find the "good life".

The result is that communities have become too big and families too small.

A natural characteristic of mass societies in a technological age is that they tend towards shallowness and artificiality in human relations.

Because of the sprawling nature of cities and towns, the formation of small areas with a community of interest is a rare phenomenon. Sociologists say that once we pass the level of the village we reach a point of social organisation that has not often been achieved by the human species.

If a society grows too large the bonds holding it together become progressively weaker and eventually disintegrate. It is significant that a recent study in America has revealed that the crime rate appears to be proportionate to the size of a city. Violent crime per capita increases with size.

It is difficult to create sound societies when people are constantly moving from place to place. In such conditions the towns are not made up of people who have grown up together and among whom bonds have had time to develop, but simply of people who have been thrown together for various random reasons.

The fact that people's places of work are generally situated outside their communities also tends to impair the growth of a close community of interest.

Fostering Community

What New Zealand badly needs is a set of clearly defined national goals with which the whole community can identify and which address themselves to improving and using the non-economic capacities of the population.

Increasingly, as economic security becomes routinely obtainable, the attention of the community should be focussed on more challenging and uplifting goals such as the regeneration and enrichment of community involvement and human relationships. Debate should be encouraged by the government at all levels to get the community involved in the formulation of national goals. This would be indicative planning of a revolutionary nature.

Decentralised government is also valuable because it helps to foster a sense of community. This feeling of kinship and interdependence, whether at the suburb level, the neighbourhood level, or the person-to-person level, has great possibilities for modifying the impersonal natures of societies like ours which are urbanised, competitive, materialistic and filled with technology which tends to separate people.

Before the drift to the cities began in New Zealand, and before the three bedroom house, the quarter acre section and the other symbols of guaranteed happiness became the dominant goal of the average New Zealander, households tended to be quite large.

In rural areas or low-density towns and cities, grandparents, unmarried brothers and sisters, and sometimes even an aunt or an uncle were part of the family circle. Then, within a short space of time, complex social and economic forces stripped the family to its basic number - parents and children - and caused a reduction in the number of desired offspring.

The result was the "nuclear family" - the unit of father and mother and children (average about 2.5). This unit is a handy size for consumerism and its mobility is an asset to employers. However, many social observers now say that the nuclear family, living in a self-contained and isolated house in the suburbs, may not be the healthiest environment for parents and children. Technological society draws the members of the modern family outward and disrupts the stability that both children and adults need. Jobs, careers, school, friends, differing values and morals, and all kinds of social institutions and technologies impinge on the fragile family unit. The suburban household becomes little more than a place to sleep.

The distorted quality of the family environment cannot be the subject of very penetrating political or governmental action. Governments can endeavour to provide families with good housing and good education and welfare services, but they cannot and should not tinker with the family unit.

Only through natural evolution and individual experimentation will the modern family adapt itself to

the conditions of a technological society. If it becomes widely accepted that larger families are more desirable, it is to be hoped that the nuclear family will be extended by the addition of grandparents and relatives, rather than through an increase in the number of offspring. As has been pointed out, the ecological arguments in favour of slowing and even halting population growth are very powerful.

Communal living experiments which draw together two or three families under one large roof are much in evidence in our larger cities, especially among the younger generation, and seem to be very successful. They may be a guide for future social change.

Child-rearing

Family living and parenthood classes should be introduced into the education system. With the increasing trend of parents to have only two or three children - usually in quick succession - many young adults have their first experience of child care only when they have their first child. The view of many child-care experts is that this situation can be a dangerous one - mainly for the baby.

The causes of crime are frequently traceable to poor family environments and broken marriages. One reason for poor family environments is that families in New Zealand are an economically disadvantaged minority. They are a minority because 75 percent of the new generation are being raised in only a third of the country's households.

The cost of bringing up children takes 75-80 per cent of the wage-packet, placing a huge burden on the worker parent, with welfare benefits in no way reflecting the cost of providing for a child. The introduction of equal pay has created pressure on the family with a single breadwinner and we can expect a widening in the gap in living standards between a one and two income family.

What is required is a re-deployment of labour and economic resources back into our most important social enterprise - the bearing and rearing of children. This does not conflict with our party's policy of population control provided that our society implements the measures we advocate with regard to family planning and responsible parenthood. (See chapter on individual freedom.)

Economic injustice for child-rearers is not justifiable as a method of limiting population growth. Every society needs and wants some children and if it is civilised and wise, should make the best provision it can for their rearing. We therefore need to give homemakers the power to improve the conditions in which they work - economic power. If homemakers were paid an adequate rate for the job, they would have economic power to re-structure society to cater better for the needs of children and families. (See policy on wage for dependant-carers in chapter on the status of women.)

To make the life of the homemaker comparable to other workers more labour must be brought into the domestic sector to relieve the homemaker. The most desirable and most natural auxiliary labour force is the breadwinning parent.

Varying Work Patterns

It is customary in New Zealand for children under five to be reared almost entirely by their mothers. This is a very new child-rearing pattern and is not found in many other societies throughout history. Society needs to work at new attitudes and relationships between mothers and fathers in both family and working life. Variations in work patterns would give them the chance to share "home" and "breadwinning" so that both parents could spend time with their families.

The present work pattern is still geared to the needs of male employees in the role of breadwinners, reflecting values and attitudes which are incompatible with modern realities. Most employers have given little serious attention to adopting procedures geared to the typical life pattern of the career parent.

As long as this is so, women, unlike men, will often have to choose either a career or parenthood. Meanwhile men who would like to make use of new opportunities to share the responsibility for home and children with their wives find it very difficult to adapt their own work pattern.

One helpful innovation would be a change in the nature of part-time work. At present this is often poorly paid and rarely provides any fringe benefits such as lunch and tea breaks or sick and holiday leave.

The Values Party recommends that

- Employers consider making more use of part-time workers especially at peak hours or as an alternative to overtime.
- Employers experiment with such variations in normal work patterns as twilight shifts and glide-time [all employees work a core period and work the remaining time at the convenience of themselves and their employers]; outwork [for already trained persons who can work without supervision]; provision for dual-career families; and various kinds of split-work or job-sharing [for example, a student and a housespouse sharing the same job].

Child Care Support

In 1971 the Department of Labour estimated that there were 35 - 40,000 pre-school children of working mothers but day-care facilities for only 2,000. In June 1974 there were facilities for 2781. What is happening to the other 30,000 children?

Most social workers know the human cost of inadequate private arrangements for child-minding - "door-key" children, children locked out, neglect and over-crowding.

The Values Party does not see child-care centres merely as child-minding establishments. They can be important supplements for the education, experience and contact with other people which the home is able to provide young children, whether both parents work or not.

There is little to indicate that the isolation of pre-school children and mothers in suburbs is conducive to the mental health of either. Some parents may be well-fitted to cope with this pattern and some children may spend most of their waking hours for five years with the same parent and still thrive. Other parents do not cope, their children do not thrive, and society picks up the broken pieces.

Unremitting contact with very young children can cause almost anyone great stress. No parent who is unable or unwilling to care for a child should be forced to do so by the lack of an alternative - both child and parent suffer. Traditional alternatives in the form of relatives and neighbours who could give parents in the home a break from their children are rapidly becoming unavailable.

Photo, Sheena Gordon

Another function of child-care centres is to enable all parents to have more choices about personal fulfilment and community service. It is very narrow to consider that only parents who are forced to work because of financial need should use child-care centres. Other good reasons include further education and training, voluntary work, creative or sporting pursuits, or mental stress.

This is not to say that parents should be actively encouraged to place young children in communal care but simply that each family should decide what is best for all its members.

Child-care centres should share the same basic aim as all organisations and people who are concerned with pre-school children - to ensure that all children get the love, education and opportunities they need to grow up into healthy, happy, responsible adults.

The Values Party would

- Foster community support and social conditions that enabled both men and women to combine parenthood with employment if they chose to do this.
- Ensure that day-care and over-night facilities for parents and young children were available to all who required them, including rural families.
- Ensure that all child-care facilities were well-staffed and well-equipped and that incentives were provided to encourage professional staff to stay as long as possible at the same centre.
- Amend the Child Care Regulations 1960 along the lines suggested by the NZ Association of Child Care Centres some 18 months ago.
- Encourage community involvement in child-care centres [for example, by welcoming parents, school-children, and older people as helpers].
- Vest government responsibility for the provision and maintenance of child-care facilities with the Education Department rather than with Social Welfare as at present, in order to emphasise developmental rather than custodial considerations.
- Provide loans for the establishment of child-care centres on the same basis as other pre-school institutions, assist with providing approved equipment, and provide training at Teachers' College level for child-care centre staff.
- Pay salaries for trained staff in State-provided centres and subsidise the wages of staff in approved voluntary centres or approved centres provided by private firms.
- Assist voluntary or municipal organisations providing residential and recreational services for the care of children, especially holiday camps and after-school activities.
- Encourage the use of school buildings out of school hours for after-school child-care, the responsibility for such care being undertaken by the Council for Sport and Recreation under the supervision of the Department of Education.
- Require that all workers who are parents be entitled to use sick leave to care for sick children or sick spouses with dependants.
- Provide home help for hospitalised single parents and for parents who for reasons of work need help in the home when one or other of them is hospitalised.
- Encourage hospitals and health centres to provide child-care facilities and some overnight accommodation for staff and visitors.
- Encourage hospitals to provide rooming-in facilities for the parents of pre-school children.
- Expect employers to reduce demands made on senior employees which extend regularly or suddenly into private time so that children are unduly deprived of the executive parent.