

Saving families

Published September 26, 2007
By David Warren

There are few areas of government policy, I have frequently claimed, where the government could not improve things for everyone by withdrawing most existing government programs.

This may sound like the raving of an extreme libertarian, but I also claim it is not. There are certain programs from which no responsible government can withdraw, and which all governments have always provided in some form, such as criminal law enforcement, and military power against foreign threats. A government must similarly act as an attentive gatekeeper for immigration, as we were forcefully reminded some six years ago. Moreover, the modern state is compelled to represent its citizen's interests, in trade and many other mundane endeavours. By long tradition, it provides some useful specialized services -- such as geological surveys, and gathering statistics. There was a time when the post office was necessary. Few have ever objected to such things. The state has certain decorative, ceremonial, and symbolic functions that are under-appreciated today, which serve to remind the citizen that there is order in the world, and secure his attachment to God, Queen, and country. And of course, money is necessary for all of these functions, and will have to be taxed somehow.

At the municipal level -- the level where the citizen can actually see how his taxes are spent, can know who represents him if not himself, and where democracy is thus made visible -- there are many additional civil functions. This is where, in the broadest sense, the "environmental" jurisdiction has principally resided: where we hash out, by imagination and compromise, our arrangements for everyday life. One of the greatest evils of the Nanny State is that it appropriates to itself the small municipal functions in vast, centralized, kafkaesque bureaucracies. Then, merges and "consolidates" the municipalities into huge urban and regional directorates, where the citizen is reduced to a cipher -- no longer a responsible agent, but one of numberless government "clients." Democracy is thereby made into a farce, and the vote reduced to mere opinion polling.

Below the municipal level there is the family, which meant, until the day before yesterday, a father, a mother, their children, and whatever extended arrangements they chose or could afford. There was a time, in Canada as throughout the West, when it was unthinkable for governments at any level to tamper with family life, except in the most extreme circumstances. Rather than try to "redefine" it, the state conceived its role as defending the existing, natural family against the depredations of its natural enemies, and securing it as the foundation of social order.

Those days are gone, and for several generations now, in its arrogance, the Nanny State has been presenting itself instead as everybody's ultimate mummy and daddy, though allowing the institution of marriage to continue. The adult citizen was treated more and more as a child, incapable of making decisions autonomously. Over time, the citizen in turn has responded to this by manifesting many child-like qualities, leaving the government to clean up after him.

In the last few years, we have gone beyond this, so that now the government presents itself as the champion of various "alternative" ways to raise children. In doing so, it has taken upon itself the function of what Josef Stalin called "the engineer of human souls," forging some post-modern variant of the "new socialist man" — albeit without any clear conception of what that man/woman should be.

Yet on several fronts, the pendulum is finally returning, and governments themselves are beginning to realize, with some alarm, the scale of the disaster they have caused. Quite apart from the evidence that meets one's eyes, we now have mountains of statistics, from around the world, unambiguously demonstrating, for instance, how poisonous loose co-habitation arrangements are for children; how they sabotage any subsequent marriage; the hugely disproportional contribution to crime from those raised in fatherless homes; the debilitating effects of farming young children into child-care facilities and so on. Demographic collapse is another of the unwanted effects of an abortion culture, and non-traditional family arrangements, that begins to threaten even the state, and policy-wonks across North America and Europe have begun to think again about everything from "progressive" social programs to the tax burdens that have contributed to moral and social decline.

It is against this background that an interesting international conference is taking place tomorrow in Ottawa, hosted by the Institute of Family and Marriage Canada, on "How can public policy address some of the most common family problems?" — with contributions from several prominent fresh-thinkers on family policy, including Patricia Morgan from Civitas in England, David Blankenhorn from the Institute for American Values in the U.S. and the economist, Dr. Jennifer Roback-Morse. For this is the area of public policy which will have the greatest influence, for good or ill, on the future of our civilization.