

FAMILY EDUCATION TRUST

Response to the European Commission Green Paper

Confronting Demographic Change: a new solidarity between the generations

The consultation paper will be found at:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/social_situation/green_paper_en.html

- Do you take the view that the discussion of demographic trends and managing their impact should take place at European level?

No. Fertility rates vary widely between the various member states of the European Union and there may be a range of differing contributory factors at the root of the decline in different countries.

Dr Catherine Hakim of the London School of Economics notes that:

‘Despite the substantial investment in [demography] and an even greater investment in the population censuses and demographic statistical databases they analyse, demographers regularly fail completely to predict birthrates correctly, even in the short term. The baby boom of the 1950s came as a nearly total surprise to demographers and they also failed to predict the severity and duration of the downturn in fertility from the 1960s onwards. There is an expanding academic literature on the causes and correlates of fertility declines in the industrialised countries of the western world... yet few demographers are sufficiently confident of their causal analyses and theories to be prepared to attempt even short-term forecasts of future patterns of fertility and population growth’ (C Hakim, *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century: Preference Theory*, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp23,24).

Given the failure of demographers to predict demographic trends on even a national basis, the margin of error would be far greater if the exercise were undertaken at European level.

In order to consider appropriate solutions to the decline in fertility, it is necessary in the first instance to identify the root causes. Any discussion of demographic trends must take account of the following factors:

- The contraceptive revolution
- Abortion
- Growing rates of sexually transmitted infections, giving rise to infertility
- Contraceptive-based sex education with its emphasis on avoiding pregnancy, rather than on welcoming children in the context of a committed marriage
- Economic pressures, with property price inflation being fuelled by the rise in two-income couples
- The suppression of traditional roles within the family
- The expansion of higher education
- The rise of cohabitation
- The later age of marriage

- An emphasis on preparing girls for careers outside the home, leading to a lowering of the status of motherhood
- Financial support for lone mothers and legislation permitting fertility treatment to single women, lowering the status of fatherhood
- The fragmentation of the family (rising divorce rates etc).

Over many years, the Union has been making considerable efforts to achieve equality between men and women and has coordinated national social protection policies.

- How can a better work/life balance help to tackle the problems associated with demographic ageing?

The solution to the problems of demographic ageing does not lie in achieving a better work-life balance, but a sober assessment of the impact of the social and cultural changes listed above. It is also necessary to recognise that motherhood generally leads to a radical reappraisal of the priorities of most women.

Research undertaken by Dr Catherine Hakim of the London School of Economics concluded that women fall into three categories in terms of their choices relating to work and family. There are (i) 'work-centred' women who gave first priority to their careers (15-20 per cent of the population); (ii) 'family-centred' women who devote their lives to their home and family (also 15-20 per cent of the population); and (iii) 'adaptive' women whose lives encompass both work and family (60-70 per cent of the population). Those in this third category tend to reduce their hours of employment or leave the workplace completely when their children are young or when they face other family demands (C Hakim, op. cit.).

In the UK, the Treasury's ten year childcare strategy document notes the findings of a survey showing that 63 per cent of mothers currently in employment wanted to work fewer hours, and 44 per cent of working mothers would prefer to give up work and stay at home with their children if they could afford to do so.

The majority of mothers do not wish to give priority to their careers while their children are young. This has nothing to do with the availability of childcare; it is simply a choice that most women wish to make: they positively *want* to be at home with their children. While the UK government, in common with the governments of a number of other European states, has placed a strong emphasis on supporting women who wish to return to work and have flexible working arrangements, there has been far less support available to women who would like to give priority to the needs of their children.

- How can a more balanced distribution of household and family tasks between men and women be encouraged?

This is not an issue for the European Union, nor for national governments. It should be left to individual couples and families to determine areas of responsibility within the home.

- **Should the award of certain benefits or advantages (leave, etc.) be linked to an equal distribution of tasks between the sexes? How best to ensure an adequate income for both parents on parental leave?**

It is not the role of national governments to concern themselves with how tasks are distributed between the sexes either within the home or in the workplace. Such matters can be negotiated and agreed on a case-by-case basis by the individuals concerned, rather than by means of the imposition of a particular view of 'equality'.

Rather than formulating policies aimed at ensuring an adequate income for both parents on parental leave, national governments would do better to introduce measures to make it more viable for mothers to stay at home to care for their children if they wish to do so.

We are concerned that the pursuit of policies with the objective that motherhood makes no difference to female labour market participation would be both cutting against the grain of the natural maternal instincts of most women, and denying the fundamental needs of young children.

- **How can parents, in particular young parents, be encouraged to enter the labour market, have the career that they want and the number of children they want?**

It is simply not possible to 'have it all' in the way suggested by this question. The pursuit of policies aimed at encouraging mothers to pursue careers and leave their children in daycare will militate against the natural desire of many to have more children. The prospect of bearing a child without being in a position to provide him/her with full-time care during the early years will serve as a disincentive to many women to have the number of children they might otherwise have chosen. In the minds of most women bearing and caring belong together.

The Thessaloniki European Council in June 2003 declared that an EU integration policy [for immigrants] should help to meet the new demographic and economic challenges currently facing the EU. This is the debate initiated by the Green Paper adopted last January.

- **To what extent can immigration mitigate certain negative effects of demographic ageing?**

We are not persuaded that immigration should be looked to as the solution. The problems of demographic ageing cannot be properly considered in isolation from the factors listed earlier in this response.

European objectives have been laid down for the prevention of long-term youth unemployment, combating school drop-out and raising the level of initial training. The structural funds help to attain them at grass roots level.

- **How can Community policies contribute more to combating child poverty and poverty among single-parent families and to reducing the risk of poverty and exclusion among young people?**

We are not convinced that this is the right question to ask, because it is addressing the symptoms of the problem rather than getting at the root. A more fruitful line of enquiry would be to ask what policies would contribute to restoring respect for marriage and stable family life.

- **What forms of solidarity can be fostered between young people and elderly people?**

The family is the best institution for encouraging and promoting solidarity across the generations. Governments should therefore make it their priority to pursue policies that promote committed marriages and stable family life.

- **How do we arrive at a balanced distribution of care for the very old between families, social services and institutions? What can be done to help families? What can be done to support local care networks?**

The Green Paper notes that in many countries appropriate care is provided to elderly people 'by families and particularly by women. Yet these women are increasingly in employment.' This highlights a further problem that has arisen as a result of policies aimed at encouraging mothers to pursue careers outside the home. The pursuit of an equality agenda that fails to recognise the complementarity of the sexes has created a need for further public services and destroyed the informal networks of solidarity and care that were previously available within the family and local communities.

Both children and the elderly would benefit from the restoration of informal support networks within the community that would flow from the pursuit of truly family-friendly policies that aimed to ensure that women could have a genuine choice to care for their own children and to be available to provide appropriate care for the elderly.