

We are pleased to publish readers' views in this inaugural letters column. Three topics in particular seemed to interest readers: the debate between Richard Eckersley and Institute Research Manager Peter Saunders about what constitutes 'progress', published in the Opinion column in the last issue of *Family Matters*; the article by David Thomson in the same edition on how the restructured economies of the past 25 years are shaping the environments of the younger generations; and the release this year of the Institute's new three-year research plan.

## ■ Overstating our social problems?

Richard Eckersley's response to Peter Saunders' article 'In Defence of Progress' in the last issue of *Family Matters* (no. 52, pp. 42-46) is typical of those who perceive that economic progress is responsible for innumerable problems and that this requires extensive government intervention to solve them. But their analysis is deficient on many counts.

First, the increase in social problems has arisen during a period of unprecedented government intervention through the welfare state. There is now a growing recognition that the increase in welfare dependency, and the associated undermining of individual responsibility that has resulted, is an important contributor to social problems. The United States in particular has started to address this through the mutual obligation approach, and early signs are that it is producing good results.

Second, this period has witnessed a considerable departure from institutions and rules by which individuals have traditionally been held responsible for their behaviour. Economic progress has certainly facilitated this but the cause has been the emergence of 'modern' beliefs that those institutions and rules served little purpose. However, while these institutions and beliefs were in many cases unduly constraining individual freedom, the need for individuals to accept responsibility for their actions was too often forgotten. One example is the acceptance of no fault divorce.

Third, the doom and gloomers often overstate the social problems. For example, the measurement of poverty by the Henderson poverty line clearly vastly exaggerates its extent. As the ABS Social Trends for 1998 makes clear, using the European measure of 50 per cent of median income reduces Australian poverty by half compared with the generous Henderson line.

Eckersley is right in saying that material wealth is not the only thing in life. But he produces no

substantive evidence that we would be better off by slowing economic progress.

**Des Moore**  
Director, Institute for Private Enterprise  
South Yarra, Vic.

## ■ 'Progress' and societal functioning

Let me congratulate you on the coverage in your Autumn issue of *Family Matters* (no. 52). The debate on 'progress' in your Opinion column (pp. 42-46) is particularly relevant to today's Australia – however, there are three points I would like to make about the arguments made by Richard Eckersley and Peter Saunders.

One, it is not quite clear whether Eckersley is suggesting a return to the days of the Welfare State, which is now recognised as far too costly, or whether he is proposing a 'Third Way' – à la Blair etc.

Two, both writers seem to have no appreciation of the role of religion in societal functioning. Religion affects individuals as well as governments.

Three, while the impact of the media is noted, there is insufficient analysis of the negative impact of sex and violence on television and radio.

**John R. Barich and Associates**  
Government and Political Consultants, Ardross, WA

## ■ Inequality and justice

Before he hails capitalism, Peter Saunders (*Family Matters*, no. 52, pp. 42-46) should remember that

it has so far only delivered a good standard of living to a fraction of the world's population for a short period of time. Some form of democratic market socialism (see *Against Capitalism* by David Schweickart, and *Socialism Revised and Modernized* by James Yunker) may well be the optimum economic system for the future.

Does Professor Saunders believe eight or more billion people can live at or above current first world standards indefinitely? With a structurally more egalitarian economic order, lower poverty – both absolute and relative – can be achieved with less aggregate output, and with less environmental damage, assuming comparable technology.

Reduced intranational and international inequality is needed to promote justice. According to Ed Diener ('Subjective wellbeing', *Psychological Bulletin*, 1984: 553): 'There is an overwhelming amount of evidence that shows a positive relationship between income and SWB [subjective wellbeing] within countries.' Abundant evidence of 'objective' harm done by inequality can be found in Richard Wilkinson's *Unhealthy Societies*. Inequality kills. Nations overall, not only their disadvantaged, are often adversely affected.

Sadly, Professor Saunders seems more interested in preserving the privileges of the privileged than in assisting the less fortunate in a sustainable way. He is eager to hold individuals responsible for their plight, downplaying

## TWO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?



Things have got a bit confusing since Peter Saunders arrived to take up the position as Research Manager at the Australian Institute of Family Studies in January, for the Director of the Sydney-based Social Policy Research Centre is also Peter Saunders! To make matters worse, both are English by origin, and both have 'Professor' in front of their name. In case you're feeling confused, there really are two Peter Saunders! The Institute's Peter Saunders is the one on the right.

the huge influence of genetic and social factors. His remarks that redistribution-down may pander to the supposed 'greed and avarice' of the less well-off are particularly objectionable.

A society, disproportionately influenced by a profit-hungry capitalist class, intent upon expanding national income with little thought given to what makes people healthy and happy (see John McMurtry's *Unequal Freedoms* for where this can lead) is quite different from the underprivileged seeking a fair share of what already exists.

**Brent Howard**  
Rydalmer, NSW.

### ■ 'Progress' and young people's quality of life

The central themes of the debate between Peter Saunders and Richard Eckersley in your last issue (*Family Matters* no. 52, pp. 42-46) are whether, despite unprecedented rises in indices of economic growth over the post-war period, the quality of life for our young people is getting worse, and if it is, what are the reasons for this.

Eckersley has drawn attention to the problems of measuring progress with indicators such as the GDP, which give weight to circumstances that are clearly adverse for our wellbeing – for example, pollution increases GDP even though it is harmful.

Saunders questions the validity of data that show a high prevalence of psychological malaise

in young people, but there are several other key references which suggest that psychosocial outcomes are getting worse for young people in most western industrialised countries, but the period over which they have been getting worse differs for various outcome measures. This suggests either that different environmental factors are operating for each, or that the lead time between environmental change and their emergence is different.

For example, reported rates of juvenile offences rose most sharply in the immediate post-war era, while male youth suicide rates began to rise more sharply from the late 70s onwards. In children, there are also worrying trends suggesting an increase in some environmentally-related conditions, such as child abuse, disruptive behaviour disorders and asthma, but these trends have been present for varying times too. While one can discount the escalation in notifications of child abuse as being due to increased reporting rather than a true rise, it is not possible to discount the sharp rise in non-accidentally acquired post-natal head injury (most were survivors of the 'shaken baby syndrome') resulting in cerebral palsy noted by the WA cerebral palsy register from three cases over the period 1968-84 to 17 cases in the period 1985-92 (Stanley and Bowes, in press).

Why are these indicators deteriorating? Rutter and colleagues conclude that increasing

affluence could not be held solely responsible because living standards also rose sharply in the first half of the century and were not accompanied by major changes in prevalence of these disorders.

Rutter asserts that the sharpest increase in their prevalence coincided with the 'golden age' between 1950 and 1973.

Rutter identifies the following factors as contributing to the rise in the prevalence of psychosocial disorders: a decline in job prospects for young people since the 1970s; rising levels of material needs induced by advertising goods that young people without jobs cannot afford, prompting some to turn to illegal activity; urbanisation of society and increasing social segregation; changing family structures which are likely to have had an adverse impact on the quality of parenting; a decline in the age of puberty with a lengthening of the period of adolescence and ambiguities in our expectations of young people; changes in moral concepts and priorities, such as the growth in respect for individual beliefs; and the role of the media and television in exposing individuals to violence as well as the extent to which it has influenced social interactions within families, especially around meal-times.

In many senses our young people are akin to the miner's canary of society. Evidence of a deterioration in their socially-related health status abounds. They have

not been able to adapt to the depth and pace of change. Lessons from other areas of public health (for example, motorised transport) suggest it usually takes a generation or two – sometimes longer – before we learn to manage new risks adequately. The worry is that with the accelerating pace of change, that won't be fast enough.

**Graham Vimpani**

*Head of Paediatrics and Child Health, University of Newcastle.  
Director, Child Adolescent and Family Health Service, Newcastle.*

### ■ Marriage, families and family research

I was most interested in the Institute's Australian Family Briefing No. 5, (February 1999), 'What Future for Family Research?' by AIFS Research Manager Peter Saunders. I wholeheartedly endorse the Institute's aim to research 'what family arrangements best produce well-adjusted and happy children who can fulfil their potential and grow into socially responsible and well adjusted adults'.

It is unfortunate that current Australian research in this area looks at only three family types: (1) two natural parents; (2) single parent; (3) one natural parent and one step-parent. No one is asking whether marriage makes a difference in types (1) and (3).

I presented a paper at a conference in 1997, analysing Australian child abuse statistics supplied by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) in the three family types above. When I compared these rates with the incidence of those family types in the general population, I found that two natural parent families have the lowest incidence of child abuse, followed by single parent families. Child abuse was most common in stepfamilies.

A stepfather read my paper and was most upset. He told me UK research showed that married stepfamilies, while less safe than married two natural parent families, were nevertheless far safer for children than unmarried two natural parent families and single parent families. He said the most dangerous family type of all is where the natural mother lives with, but is not married to, a man who is not the father of her child.

## We invite your letters

We are interested in your views and we hope that our new regular letters page will provide a lively forum for ideas, argument and comment on topical issues concerning families.

To express your view, write to the Letters Editor on matters arising from articles published in this issue of *Family Matters*, or on other relevant family-related topics. We shall publish a selection of letters in the next issue.

Letters should be about 300 words, and may be edited.

Letters intended for the next (Spring/Summer) issue should be sent before 10 November 1999.

### How to make contact

All letters intended for publication should be clearly addressed to the Letters Editor, *Family Matters*. They can be posted, faxed or emailed.

**Post** letters to the Letters Editor, *Family Matters*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 300 Queen Street, Melbourne 3000, Victoria, Australia.

**Fax** letters to the Letters Editor, *Family Matters*, on (03) 9214 7838.

**Email** letters to the Letters Editor, *Family Matters*, at [Letters@aifs.org.au](mailto:Letters@aifs.org.au)

### Conditions

We prefer letters of about 300 words. Letters must include your full name and address, your professional affiliation (if any), and a daytime telephone number for verification. However, only your name and affiliation will be published with your letter. Letters may be edited. The Institute reserves the right not to publish letters, and on this matter the decision of the Institute's Publications Committee is final and correspondence will not be entered into.

I checked this research – by Robert Whelan, published by the Family Education Trust, 322 Woodstock Road, Oxford OX2 7NS, 1994 – and found it to be valid.

Similar Australian research is not possible because AIHW child abuse reports do not record the marital status of parents in the family type category. I thought that this may be because the Australian Bureau of Statistics does not ask a marital status question in the census any more, but was assured by the Minister (Peter Costello) that the question is still asked and the answers are available for those who want them.

Australian social scientists apparently do not want to know about the difference marriage makes to families. I am writing in the hope that the Australian Institute of Family Studies may take up the challenge!

**Mrs Roslyn Phillips, B.Sc, Dip Ed**  
Research Officer, Festival of Light,  
South Australia.

### ■ Idea of 'selfish generations' challenged

In the last issue of *Family Matters* (no. 52, pp. 12-18), Professor David Thomson argued that Australia and other OECD nations have been experiencing a shift in family policy priorities from the younger to the older generation and, in particular, that the age cohort born between 1920 and 1950 has benefited by this shift compared to all subsequent cohorts.

Professor Thomson's argument is familiar and deeply misleading. Errors and misinterpretations include the following.

- Thomson argues that there has been a decline in public spending on the young and an increase in spending on the old. The OECD Social Expenditure data set (SOCX) shows that between 1980 and 1992, Australian spending on family cash benefits and family services increased from 1.02 per cent of GDP to 2.05 per cent. In the same period, expenditure on pensions, survivors benefits and services to the old went from 3.96 per cent of GDP to 4.07 per cent. So in a period when the youthful proportion of the population was declining and the aged population was increasing, expenditure on the young doubled, while expenditure on the old remained almost stationary.

- Thomson concentrates on the relative wage losses and employment experience of young males. He does not

discuss the countervailing improvement in the economic independence of young women through enhanced female labour force participation (which the latest OECD figures show to be higher in Australia in the age group 15–24 than in any other OECD country). He does not mention the vastly increased investment in human capital in young adults through higher secondary and tertiary education enrolments. Nor does he notice the obvious implication that declining wage rates for those in the most youthful cohorts are substantially a function of the fact that today's young workers have relatively lower skill levels than comparable workers of earlier generations.

- Extraordinarily, for an historian, Thomson does not point out that the traditional award wages system in both Australia and New Zealand privileged young male workers to a very unusual degree compared with most other nations. It may be no bad thing if that bias is now somewhat diminished.

- Neither in his article here, nor in his earlier work on what he calls 'selfish generations', does Thomson deal sensibly with issues of intergenerational transfers. Ultimately, if the old acquire assets in housing and investments, these tend to be passed on to the next generation. The absurdity of Thomson's position is shown in his view that the abolition of inheritance taxes benefits only the old. In reality, the main beneficiaries are the young and middle aged who receive more from their parents' estates than they otherwise would.

- Finally, Thomson forgets that today's youthful cohorts become tomorrow's older ones. Even if there has been a once-off shift in advantage from youthful to older age groups, the young will eventually become older and benefit at a later stage in the life-cycle. Indeed, since each post-war generation has lived longer than the previous one, we must assume that the generations following those born between 1920 and 1950 will ultimately do better than their predecessors.

It is most important to correct the misleading implications of those who argue in a way which is likely to engender wholly unwarranted animosity between the generations.

**Francis G. Castles**  
Professor of Political Science  
Australian National University,  
Fellow of the Academy of  
the Social Sciences.

## Families in the news

Everybody is interested in families. When the Australian Institute of Family Studies publishes research on some aspect of family life, the media tend to pay attention, for family news has a high 'public interest' factor. What, then, has caught the eye of Australia's newspaper editors and television and radio producers over the last few months?

### ■ REASONS FOR DIVORCE

Without doubt, the research that attracted most comment in recent months was the Working Paper *Towards Understanding the Reasons for Divorce*. The findings were reported in newspaper articles in every capital city and received an enormous amount of radio coverage in the form of author interviews and talkback.

The prevalence of communication problems as the cause of marriage breakdown elicited headlines like "Lack of talk a divorce risk" (Herald Sun 5/7/99) and "The final breaking points" (Adelaide Advertiser 5/7/99).

"Most divorcees content with life after break-up" (SMH 5/7/99) took up the findings about the wellbeing of people after divorce.

Women were the instigators in most of the separations reported in the Institute study and this fact was widely reported – "Women take the divorce initiative" (Northern Territory News 5/7/99), and "Easier for women to make the break" (The Australian 5/7/99).

The publication of the Institute's divorce data coincided with the release of new research on the effectiveness of marriage education and counselling by Relationships Australia. A number of feature articles drew on both reports in a detailed analysis of divorce and relationship breakdown, and the Government's recently announced initiatives in relation to marriage education.

### ■ SUPERANNUATION AND DIVORCE

The Institute's April Briefing Paper, *Superannuation and Divorce in Australia*, was reported in most of the metropolitan daily newspapers. Journalists were interested in people's lack of understanding of their partner's superannuation entitlements, and the ramifications that this has in property settlements.

### ■ WORK AND FAMILY

The retirement from the front bench of the Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer, to spend more time with his young family, generated renewed media interest in the balance between work and family.

Discussion of the effects of work on family life ranged across the possible links between work and family stresses including marriage breakdown; declining fertility; access to reproductive technology for women delaying childbirth to establish careers; the pros and cons of older parents; quality time versus quantity time; and the costs of child care.

Attention focused on how fathers juggle their work and family responsibilities and how business has accommodated the changing role of fathers. Some commentators questioned the extent to which the work/family discussion is relevant to the majority of the working population, or whether flexible work arrangements are primarily available to professionals.

Institute research on the work preferences of women with children was cited in a number of articles, as was the article on reciprocal effects of work and family, published in the Autumn 1999 edition of *Family Matters*. The Institute also provided the media with much of the background material which informed the discussion.

### ■ FAMILY MATTERS

As usual, the media picked up on articles published in the Autumn edition of *Family Matters*. Institute research on the policy implications of declining home ownership, and the debate between Richard Eckersley and Institute Research Manager Peter Saunders about defining and measuring 'progress', each generated opinion pieces in daily newspapers.

A number of columnists also referred to the recently completed Institute Research Plan in feature and opinion articles about social policy and research in Australia.

– Catherine Rosenbrock  
AIFS Marketing Manager