Are Australian Families Like Others?

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ABSTRACT

Trends and patterns of some major dimensions of family change in Australia are briefly compared to those of six other countries — Canada, U.S., U.K., France, Italy, and Sweden — for the period since 1950. Australia’s families lie squarely in the mainstream. On none of the dimensions considered is Australia an outlier — in contrast to the U.S. (a very high divorce rate), Italy (low divorce, low unmarried cohabitation, low extramarital births), and Sweden (high cohabitation, high extramarital births, high proportion of one-person households). The economic, cultural and public policy forces that make for broad cross-national similarities in family patterns are discussed. Past family trends appear to give little basis for predictions of the medium-term future. Most observers expect there to be a “convergence to diversity”, with perhaps a rise in the present variety of acceptable family structures but with stabilized low fertility. Entirely possible, however, would be a reemergence of 1950s-style familism, with an associated rebound in fertility; or, at the other extreme (with Sweden often seen as a forerunner), a further unbundling of the nuclear family’s joint roles in companionship, sexual activity, and parenting.

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ARE AUSTRALIAN FAMILIES LIKE OTHERS?

Geoffrey McNicoll*

Australian families, we are told and have come to believe, are in trouble. The signs are to be seen in rising divorce rates and numbers of one-parent families, in people choosing cohabitation over marriage, in greater voluntary childlessness, and more people living alone — the stuff of innumerable magazine articles and op-ed pieces and the staples of campaign politics. The trends, for the most part, are indisputable; their interpretation and implications are not. Looking at the ways in which Australia’s experience of family change is distinctive and the ways it mirrors or even lags the experience of other countries can deepen our understanding of the Australian situation and provide a sounder basis for debate on an important part of social policy. That international comparison is the subject of this essay.

What other countries? The big differences among families, or family systems, in the world — to do with matters such as lineage and conjugality — are among very broad cultural regions: Europe (and its overseas offshoots such as ourselves) compared to, say, East Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa. Clearly, Australian family patterns would be incidental in any such comparison. We must seek a narrower universe. For some purposes — say, assessing comparative economic competitiveness — Australia’s geographical region would supply apt international contrasts. For the family, indeed for questions of social organization in general, however, our peer group is better defined by cultural than geographical nearness. The

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countries chiefly relevant for viewing our society in comparative perspective are the industrialized English-speaking nations, notably the United Kingdom (for statistical convenience often truncated to England and Wales), Canada, and the United States; and a number of continental European countries. France, Italy and Sweden are the three of the latter chosen here.

A number of problems bedevil the present exercise. First, within any given society, families are of all sorts. When variance is so large, mean values don’t have much interest. In particular, conventional international comparison of means in which variances are used simply to gauge the statistical significance of differences is a peculiarly arid practice. Second, demographically speaking, families are "cohort" phenomena: they form, age, and dissolve along the lifelines of their members. The cross-sectional distribution of families in a population at a single time tells us rather little about those processes. Yet cross-sectional data are much easier to assemble than cohort data — a significant advantage for a subject that is statistically intricate. Third, the distribution of family forms is changing over time: what are apparently substantial differences in structure revealed in international comparisons may represent only a few years’ lag along the time dimension. And fourth, the "legal" family — legitimate, registered and recorded — is increasingly being challenged by more fluid and statistically less accessible, but unquestionably "familial", forms. Taking the analogy of family with firm, there is a family counterpart to the growth of the black economy — and for some of the same reasons. This is not just a measurement difficulty: it is a part of what is or might be happening to the family — a statistical withering away that leaves actual relationships, the warp and woof of societies outside working hours, more or less intact but no longer operating under state conferral of legitimacy.

MARRIAGE

Marriage is later, less frequent and less permanent than it was a generation ago, both in Australia and in each of the comparison countries. Although the comparison with the marriage patterns of the "baby boom" years of the 1950s and 1960s — a period that saw a temporary resurgence of marriage — exaggerates the differences, the present patterns appear to be moving on to genuinely new ground.

Delayed marriage can be seen in the rising proportions single among women in the age group 20-24 years — around 40 percent in the 1960s, 60 percent in the 1980s (in Sweden). 60 percent and 90 percent). Trends in the proportion never marrying at all must be gauged from much older women. The fraction was quite high for women born at the turn of the century (above 20 percent in the European countries and 10-15 percent in Australia, Canada and the U.S.), falling to 4-7 percent among women born in the 1940s. This level, however, will likely be a trough, the non-marrying share rising again in the subsequent birth cohorts (the term demographers use for a group of people born in the same year or years) as the patterns seen at young ages start to show up. Peter McDonald (1984a) projects that 11 percent of women in the Australian birth cohort of 1951-56, and, more speculatively but in line with some predictions for the U.S., 20-25 percent of both men and women now at young adulthood, will never marry.

Rising divorce rates operate in complementary fashion to reduce the proportions married in the population. Figure 1 charts the trends in terms of one simple index, annual divorces per 1000 population. (The dramatic Australian peak corresponds to passage of the Family Law Act 1975; similar liberalizations elsewhere tended to be more gradual.) Under the demographic conditions of these countries, a rough estimate of the proportion of marriages ending in divorce if the current rate were to persist is given by multiplying this index by 10 (see Preston, 1987:34). With the fairly constant divorce rates that have been experienced in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and Sweden in the 1980s, around 25-30 percent of marriages will end in divorce.
France is edging up to this range. The U.S. and Italy, however, are outliers: the U.S. consistently much higher (now nearly one in two marriages ending in divorce), Italy with essentially no divorce prior to the 1970s and very low rates since.

Cohabitation, or de facto marriage, offsets some of the recent shifts in de jure marital patterns. Official data on this are somewhat dubious, with results sensitive to the (fast-rising) normative acceptability of the practice and to the precise wording of survey questions. As Dirk van de Kaa (1987:37) remarks, "Once cohabitation has shed its deviacy, cohabitation without marriage becomes a social institution." Sweden (together with other Scandinavian countries) is famously in the forefront here: in 1981, two-fifths of Swedish couples under 35 years of age were reported to be cohabiting (Boume, 1988:216). Comparative estimates are assembled in Figure 2, the erratic coverage reflecting the data situation. While far less extreme than Sweden in disavowal of marriage, the other countries in the group, with the apparent exception of Italy (for which, however, we have only a single data point), all show a strong upward trend.

In hindsight, explanations for these changes are not hard to find. Greater desire for independence among the young, combined with freer sexuality and the economies offered by joint residence, promote cohabitation. Readier divorce, by making marriage less of a commitment, paradoxically may remove one reason for marriage in the first place. New patterns of behavior, once they are common enough, generate new norms and a new array of informal sanctions. The role of housewife, for example, becomes inadmissible. Reforms in legislation, typically lagging behavioral change, do the same with formal sanctions.

In what sense are cohabiters a family? The answer hinges on definitions and little hinges on the answer. Clearly, though, if there are children of one or both partners present we have something comparable to a marital family. Increasingly, children are present. The proportion of children born outside formal marriage has risen steadily (Figure 3). Sweden reached 50 percent in 1987. The U.S., U.K. and France are over 20 percent, and Canada and Australia not much lower. (Italy again stands out — its births still overwhelmingly occurring within marriage.) Beyond some level, long achieved in Sweden, the state bows to the inevitable and starts to remove the legal and administrative distinctions between marriage and cohabitation. "Illegitimacy" as both term and concept disappears.

Paralleling the rise in cohabitation, and perhaps resulting from some of the same cultural and economic changes, is an expansion in numbers of people living alone. In Australia, the 1986 census recorded almost a million such people: single-person households made up one-fifth of all non-institutional households. The comparative situation is seen in Figure 4. The trends and the inter-country differences are of course in part a reflection of the aging of population: 40 percent of Australians living alone in 1986 were 65 or over, most of them women (ABS, 1989:14). But there are increasing numbers of single-person households at younger ages too. Some will be little different from cohabiting relationships — a partner temporarily absent or who chooses for one or other reason not to be reported to officialdom; others represent welcomed independence in living arrangements, where once that would have meant eccentricity; and still others contribute a net rise in the quantum of loneliness. David Poppenoe (1988:195), writing of the thus-far extreme case (in 1985 36 percent of Swedish households were single-person; one in five Swedes aged 16-64 lived alone), asks some relevant questions: "What is the ultimate psychological impact of many years of living alone and not having to adapt to a regular basis to at least one other person? What sort of residential environment results, in terms of its social atmosphere and communal nature, when the majority of residents are unattached? What are the consequences for public social services when so many people have no one immediately available to them for care and sustenance?"
CHILDREN

Families are about children. The family may be statistically elusive but children are entirely tangible, documented in elaborate detail by governments that explicitly expose protection of the innocent and little less under those that pursue a hardheaded distancing of their affairs from the business of parenting.

For more than a century virtually all Western countries have been experiencing fertility decline, from total fertility rates (roughly, the average number of children ever born per woman over her life) of around 6 in the mid-19th century to a little below 2 today. The story has an interruption in the 1950s, when post-World War II young adults married and bore children at much higher rates than had their parents — a combination of a bunching of deferred events, people's responses to newfound prosperity and optimism after the stringency of the Depression and war years, and a resurgence and spread of middle-class family values. The "baby boom" was especially pronounced in Australia, Canada and the United States, with total fertility rising from prewar levels well below 3 children per woman to above 3.5 (and in New Zealand, where it rose above 4.0). In the 1960s the decline returned, until mostly levelling out in the 1980s. Currently, total fertility is 1.8 in Australia (1988), and virtually the same in each of the comparison countries except Italy and Sweden. In Italy, remarkably (given its very "traditional" patterns of marriage and divorce), fertility continued to drop in the 1980s — to 1.3 in 1986-88, equaling the lowest national level of any country. (West Germany has hovered in the range 1.3-1.5 since the 1970s; Denmark and the Netherlands are nearly as low.) Sweden's total fertility, after being at 1.6 in the early 1980s, has recently shown an upturn to near 2.0. (See Figure 5.) The fluctuations in this index to some extent are effects of variations in the timing of births rather than in ultimate numbers of children borne: fertility rates calculated for birth cohorts would trace a smoother path. Short-term trends, even reversals, should be interpreted with caution.

In Australia, and in each of the other countries, childbearing continues to be spread fairly widely over the reproductive ages. Substantial contributions to total fertility are made by women in their 30s — both those having larger-than-average families and those who have deferred their first births. Fertility at very young ages differs more: in the U.S., around 15 percent of births are to women below age 20 — around twice the proportions for Australia, Canada, and the U.K., which in turn are twice those of France, Italy and Sweden. (The U.S. is also exceptional in not showing a strong downward trend for this age group.) For individual women, however, childbearing has become more bunched, reflecting lower family size intentions, better contraception, and high opportunity costs of absence from the labour market.

A simple comparison of family size outcomes among countries can be made in terms of the distribution of women of a given birth cohort by the number of children they have borne. Table 1 presents such distributions for women born in the 1940s — who had therefore essentially completed their childbearing years when surveyed in the mid-1980s. In each of the countries considered, between half and two-thirds of these women had either two or three children. The remainder were roughly evenly split (10-15 percent each) among zero, one, and four-or-more children.

What of the time trends in these distributions? The two most evident changes, comparing women born in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, have been a drop in proportions of those having four or more children and a concentration on the two-child family. Together, these have left the proportions of three-child families rising slightly and then falling slightly. One-child families and childlessness declined over the earlier birth cohorts (the parents of the baby-boom generation) and began to rise again in the 1940s cohorts.

The countries we are comparing show remarkable similarities in these patterns and time trends. One might well have expected them to display more distinctive distributions of family sizes, reflecting their specific economic conditions, institutional configurations, and cultural traditions. At least for this group that has not
been the case. Sweden shows somewhat greater concentration at two children than the other countries and correspondingly fewer families of three and above, but the difference read as a time lag is less than a decade. (The Australian childlessness data needs treating with some caution since some 6-7 percent of women in most cohorts in the 1986 census were recorded as “not stated” on the question of number of children. In Table 1 these women are distributed proportionately among family sizes; it is possible they were disproportionately childless.)

What eventual distributions of family size will be generated by the birth cohorts of the 1960s, still in or near their peak reproductive years? Expectations as recorded in surveys have proven generally unrealistic, reflecting social norms and individual hopes rather than hard reality. Charles Westoff (1987:165), commenting on survey data for the U.S. in the early 1980s that show over 60 percent of childless women aged 25-29 still expecting two or more births in their lifetimes, remarks that “childlessness — and perhaps to a lesser extent having an only child — is a status that women tend to back into as the ‘costs’ (age, job considerations, lifestyle) of making the actual decision to have a child loom larger.” The consensus among American demographers seems to be that U.S. childlessness will reach or even somewhat exceed 20 percent in the 1960s cohorts. Similar figures are quoted for the U.K. and Australia. (Of British women born in 1952, 19 percent were still childless in 1987 — that is, at age 35.) While this fraction would not be unprecedented — it was the typical outcome for birth cohorts prior to the 1920s — it probably reflects deliberate choice of lifestyle to a much greater extent than before.

With 20 percent childless, and the remaining distribution of completed family size unchanged from that of Australian women born in 1946-51 (Table 1), average children per woman would drop to just below 2 — which is the likely outcome for the birth cohorts of the 1960s. Radically lower fertility, for example levels like the 1.3 children per woman implied by present rates of childbearing in Italy, would most likely see both higher proportions childless and lower proportions of “large” families.

A distribution derived from recent German urban populations by Le Bras and Tapinos (1979), yielding total fertility of 1.4, is illustrative:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of children</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4+</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent of women</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of women here have at most one child.

PARENTS

Demographers, like most other people, depict families from the standpoint of adults — the ones who choose living arrangements, sexual partners, and numbers of children. The distributions of women by completed family size, discussed above, exemplify that perspective. In assessing the implications of particular family patterns, however, just as important is the perspective of the child.

There is an essential asymmetry here: everyone comes from a family but not everyone goes back to one. Most children, moreover, necessarily are born into families that are larger than average: the number of children in the family from which the average child comes is substantially higher than the number of children that the average woman has. How much higher depends on the variance of the distribution of children among families. In the case of the Le Bras-Tapinos distribution just mentioned, 80 percent of children are born to mothers who have families of two or more children, but those mothers make up only 43 percent of the cohort of women.

Such differences are not just a statistical curiosity. Disproportionately, children come from poorer and less educated parents — in some part, from parents made poorer or hindered from gaining education by having children. Blau and Duncan (1967:328-330), in their classic study of intergenerational mobility, argued that a large family dilutes the resources available for investment in each child, limiting the child’s educational attainment and chances of occupational success. Thomas Sowell (1983:255) traces the transmission of disadvantage also through the differential
quality of the home environment, with economic pressures tending to push fertility below replacement among the very groups best able to instil the values and patterns of life that make for economic success.

The potential effect of family size distribution on intergenerational economic mobility is probably roughly similar across low-fertility countries — except, arguably, for the U.S., whose "underclass" seems to present a self-perpetuating situation without close parallel elsewhere in the industrialised world. Responses to the problem, and thus actual outcomes, are more variable. Policies to promote upward economic mobility between generations by removing social barriers and by encouraging human capital investment in children from disadvantaged families have sharply differing priorities among governments. Assessment of mobility outcomes is an important research topic. (See Broom et al., 1980, for estimates of family size effects in the Australian case — significant though not large — and Rowland, 1989, for Australian data on the economic and educational distribution of parents weighted by numbers of children.) Fuller comparative analysis would require the replication in Australia and other countries of such expensive and intricate U.S. studies as the Occupational Change in a Generation survey or the Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics.

While children in larger families may on the whole be worse off, their parents have a ready-made support network in their old age. That at least is the idealised picture, and one that appeals also to governments faced with steeply mounting social security costs. The pace of population ageing (set out in Table 2) is slower than often supposed for the countries we are concerned with. But as the relative size of the old age population increases, so does the proportion of those elderly who have no children or only one child — that, after all, is the principal reason for population ageing. Designing an equitable and politically feasible social security system is difficult in a notionally family-free population; recognizing the distribution of family structures and the differential incidence of childrearing costs and benefits adds greatly to the complications.

ECONOMICS

Whatever one's theory of the family, undeniably families are responsive to their economic environment. Decisions on seeking employment, on how many children to have and who is to care for them in their early years, and on expenditures on education and health are altered in predictable directions by shifts in disposable income and relative prices. This is the family as miniature firm. And as with the firm there is a level of analysis that discards the fiction of single economic entity, and looks at the interests and strategic behaviours of individual members — at the games people play. (One such game is that played in the market for partners, prior to the family being set up.)

The feature of the economic environment that has most to do with family behaviour is the labour market, particularly the opportunities it presents for women. The middle-class values that spread along with industrialisation included the idea that women should find full-time occupations as childraisers and household managers, an aspiration achieved and rationalised as families came to be left more to themselves, shorn of the help of live-in or nearby kin and servants. With less time needed for childrearing as fertility fell, and diminishing economic security offered by marriage as divorce rates rose, women again entered the labour market. The causal link worked the other way as well: marriage and fertility patterns responded to greater labour market commitment by women — resulting, for example, from their better education and growing awareness of forgone earnings — and to wider employment opportunities as gender discrimination abated.

For the Western industrialised countries over recent decades, there is a fairly consistent time-trend in patterns of female labour force participation (see OECD,
1988). Initially, the schedule of age-specific participation rates (the proportion of each age-group that is in the labour force) shows a single peak at ages 20-24 and a decline at later ages as women leave the labour force on marriage or childbirth. Subsequently a second, broader peak develops in the age range 35-55 years, reflecting re-entry of women to the labour force as their children grow up. Finally, the saddle between the peaks disappears, yielding an inverted U-shape schedule that roughly parallels the schedule for males — resulting from very low fertility rates and policies that seek to make market work and childrearing more compatible. All the countries we are considering had passed the first stage by the 1960s; Canada, France, Italy, Sweden and the U.S. have essentially reached stage 3, though with variations in the height of the schedule (part-time work is a complication) and in the steepness of the fall-off at later labour force ages. Australia and the U.K. still indicate significant withdrawal of women from the labour force during the peak childbearing ages.

Other major economic influences on the family where international differentials might be expected would be taxes and transfer payments and housing. Countries have not deliberately sought to make children unaffordable — quite the opposite in some cases — but many widely pursued policy directions tend to have that consequence and attempted remedies through the tax system tend to be trivial or have been eroded away by inflation. The tax exemption per family member in the U.S. was doubled by President Reagan, to a level of $2000 in 1989. As Senator Moynihan (1986:167) has pointed out, however, to offset the same proportion of average personal income in 1984 as in 1948 (when income-splitting was introduced), the exemption would have had to be raised to more than $5000. Over the same period, family allowances in Australia, never as generous, have declined to virtual inconsequence except for those at the bottom of the income distribution (see Young, 1989:46-49).

Housing costs are a popular explanation for deferring marriage or childbearing: the large increases in housing demand that came with the entry of the baby boom cohorts into adulthood could have generated various responses, but resulted most often in price rationing and unprecedented calls on disposable income. (In Australia, vigorous immigration has maintained the scarcity.) Once the family is ensconced, however, albeit greatly in debt, other effects may come into play. The style of the housing stock may influence behavioural patterns (low-density suburbia sustaining traditional familism in North America and Australia; high-density apartment living undermining it in Europe — see Popenoe, 1988, for speculations along these lines); and home ownership itself may reestablish a yeoman-like conservatism — a tenet, for example, of Mrs Thatcher.

**IDEOLOGIES**

The broad similarities in the patterns of change in technology and economic institutions among the countries under discussion are no doubt part of the reason for the striking parallels in family trends revealed in the tables and charts presented above. Another part, however, lies in the similar cultural and ideological changes they have experienced. The domains are of course connected: we do not have to choose between being economic determinists and cultural determinists — to the extent we are determinists at all.

The palpability of cognitive bounds on family behaviour is readily illustrated. For the great majority of couples in the industrialised countries today the domain of the contemplatable in family size extends from zero children (still conveying, where voluntary, a tinge of yuppie selfishness) to three (verging upon irresponsible excess). One can imagine shifts over time among those choices, perhaps like fashions or fads in other kinds of consumption behaviour, but hardly a breakout to higher numbers. In fact, a further closing in of the upper boundary — towards making the three-child option seem somewhat eccentric rather than merely excessive — is quite possible.
Among the cultural forces that plausibly make for the convergence of family behaviours across countries the most obvious would be the images of family life (and, perhaps more important, of competing alternatives) surveyed by television (soap operas particularly — see Taylor, 1989), popular magazines, best-selling novels, and so on. We need not expect to find innovative models here: merely the highlighting of instances, perhaps idiosyncratically selected, from within the existing range of practice. The effect of continual and virtually subliminal exposure to these messages seems likely to generate or reinforce the patterns and boundaries of socially legitimate behaviours, just as the sanction of kin and neighbour within the local community once did. Unlike the gossip-based coercion of the distant past, however, the media pressures of today are increasingly transnational: crossing the English-speaking world and, only slightly less readily, extending well beyond it.

But this may be too literal and confined a route of cultural influence. Familial values, as Lesthaeghe and Sarkyn (1988) have convincingly shown using data from the European Values Studies, are closely associated with the broader moral and political orientations of individuals: strength of religious belief, degree of "postmaterialism", and place on the political spectrum. Moreover, successive birth cohorts acquire and maintain distinctive orientations — suggesting lateral transmission of values rather than parental influence. Movements such as feminism and environmentalism take root in country after country, profoundly altering people's perceptions of society and the values brought to it. Distinctive national profiles in beliefs about the division between the public and private realms, the limits of individual autonomy, the scope of government, the work ethic, and so on, are attenuated. Incidental side-effects of such changes systematically impinge on the behaviour that governs the nature of the family and its demographic outcomes.

The resulting shifts in how the family is construed recall David Riesman's (1950) powerful vision of the modern transition in social character. The "inner-directed" family is nuclear and autonomous, with parental (paternal) authority unchallenged. That image increasingly appears anachronistic, conflicting with the modern value placed on individualism and self-fulfillment and the modern fact of cohort-specific acculturation of children — the informal age-grading of contemporary upbringing. The family that supplants it may still be the locus of needed psychological intimacy for children but in other respects is an aspect of the parents' lifestyle and consumption. Under those circumstances, the decision to have a single child, or none, is easily arrived at.

Whatever the gross family similarities among countries, there will hardly be a total convergence. Cultural traditions have great inertia — witness the north-south divide in family patterns in modern France described by Le Bras (1986), tracing back deep into the Ancien Régime. Social institutions acquire staying power from the interest groups or the tangible infrastructure they have given rise to. And the processes of local cultural innovation will continue, as at least a modest countervailing force for distinctiveness.

POLICIES

Is Australian family policy like others? A cynic might rule the question irrelevant to the topic of this essay on the grounds of inconsequence. The political rhetoric does not vary much from Canberra to Ottawa, or Stockholm to Rome: families are good things; governments should support them. (On the politics of family policy in Australia see Marian Sawer, 1989.) The policy substance, however, does vary, although with effects that have more to do with welfare than with behaviour.

Although all political parties are pro-family, family policy has acquired a somewhat rightist tinge. This may be in part because of the anti-feminist line of "getting women back to the kitchen" taken by carmudgeonly proponents, or because fiscal incentives, to be effective across the income distribution, have to be "regressive". As governments change in the predominantly two-party states we are
discussing, there are small course corrections affecting family policy. When large budget items or tax expenditures are at issue — serious support for day care of children, for instance — governments of all stripes (even Sweden's incipiently?) can agree on their inaffordability.

Family policy has the connection with immigration policy that both are concerned with the recruitment and induction of new members of society, with the supply of human capital and cultural feedstock. In low-fertility situations, a balance between the two policy domains is usually struck. Some countries — Japan most prominently — put their policy emphasis almost wholly on the creation of native human capital. In others — and Australia is the exemplar — the balance is far towards the side of immigration. (U.N. estimates for average net immigration per 1000 population per year in the late 1980s are: U.K., -0.8; France, 0; Italy, 0.7; Sweden, 0.7; U.S., 1.8; Canada, 2.2; and Australia, 4.6. [U.N., 1989].) Since family policy, broadly construed, has no simple budget line or, in most countries, a single ministerial locus, and since it is so bound up with distributional issues, there is no ready way for the policy tradeoff to be made explicit in political debate.

Only France among the countries under discussion has seriously sought to increase its birth rate as a matter of public policy, and it has not too successfully. In Australia, Canada and the U.S. fertility has not been low enough for long enough to present imminent prospects of population decrease. In Europe, further economic integration and emerging East-West links are radically altering market size and are likely to defer worries about low fertility for the time being. In both regions, migration may seem anyway a simpler and probably cheaper way of governing population numbers if latent ethnic tensions can be contained.

FUTURES

From this discussion it appears that, to a good first approximation at least, Australian families are much like others. If the family is in danger, we are far from alone in that state. The conclusion is of course weakened by the "others" being chosen to be economically and culturally quite similar societies. In this company, Australia is not at the forefront of change but follows along, tracing a moving average that stops somewhat short of extremes and is sedately lagged by a few years. Of course, I have mentioned only fairly simple aspects of the family, principally demographic ones. More detailed exploration would no doubt unearth substantive and attitudinal factors in which Australia has a distinctive profile. Proof of that distinctiveness, however, would likely require more sophisticated comparisons than the sort I have presented or that would be appropriate in an essay such as this.

But if broadly alike today, will these countries remain alike? What does the comparative perspective suggest might be their medium-term future? In the best traditions of demography I will sketch out three scenarios, each supportable on the evidence.

(1) The most sanguine is the future that might be described as change but no change. It is the picture broadcast by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. McDonald (1984b:14) writes: "marriage and family are losing their significance in the public sphere but taking on a far greater relevance in the private." There is a wider spread of family forms, and more recourse to the options of not marrying or not having children, but no reason for alarm. Michael Bracher and Gigi Santow (1989:19), on the basis of early results of the Australian Family Project at the Australian National University, concur: "Thus, the picture for the 1990s is not radically different from that of the 1970s and 80s. Rather, it is one of increasing diversity, with a greater variety of familial and non-familial states, and with individuals more likely to experience this greater variety in their own lives." Katja Boh (1989), summarizing a comparative study of the European situation, writes of a "convergence to diversity".
An incidental consequence of such a future might well be greater differences among countries. The more rectangular a distribution the less stable the mean. With a series of acceptable family and non-family lifestyles, there need be no strong central tendency, no cross-national pressures for conformity.

(2) A different future would see a recovery to something closer to the mid-century familism, perhaps modified by freer sex roles. There are forces that may induce an upturn: children come from families, disproportionately from large ones, and may be predisposed to create their own; the society collectively may reassert its reproductive interests in the face of its ageing and its demographic marginalisation in a crowded world, and find subtler promotional routes than Stalin's "hero mothers"; a sociobiological residue of familism may be exposed. Some American demographers are predicting a fertility rebound in the 1990s as members of the small birth cohorts of the 1970s reap the economic benefits of being few. Migrants from Third World countries, an increasing presence in the low-fertility West, may bring familialistic values with them. Or fashions and values may simply change: as Paul Demeny (1987:352) writes, semi-seriously: "In a Herman Kahn-like exurbanized super-affluent future, the tedium of working at home at one's computer terminal may be relieved by rediscovery of the fun of having children around. Visiting farway places will no longer be appealing and distracting, since Bali will look much the same as Westchester County. Throw in a pro-family religious revival and rediscovery of 'traditional values,' and the Nixonian worry of where to put the next hundred million Americans may reassert itself."

(3) Or again, the family may indeed in some sense be withering away. The forces tending to restore a semblance of traditional family patterns may simply not be strong enough. Childbearing would of course continue, but childrearing would increasingly take place in containing nuclear or quasi-nuclear groupings. David Popore (1988), in one of the best recent books on the family, has seen the future and it is Sweden. "Sweden should...be viewed not as an exception but a pacesetter" (1988:254). There the "postnuclear family" is already virtually in place, the family's former triple functions — pair-bonding, sexual activity, and the recreation and socialisation of children — decisively unbundled. Children routinely experience a variety of parenting, with the state (no kibbutz) providing a safety net of sorts.

Sweden's fertility, now somewhat higher than the European average, has perhaps been sustained by generous public expenditures and transfer payments. Its government's share of GDP, at 56 percent in 1988, is well above Britain, France and Italy (37-44 percent) and far in excess of Australia, Canada and the U.S. (around 30).

Where the welfare state is less advanced, or has already retreated, or has lighted upon the environment as a worthier cause than the family, fertility may sputter at levels radically below replacement. Workers have greater discretionary income and discretion may advise against buying children. A vision of Europe as a population sink, reminiscent of the region's deficient natural increase in the Middle Ages, has been sketched by William McNeill (1984): today's North African and West Asian immigrants plug the same demographic deficit that the invaders from the Steppes once did, but the resulting ethnic diversity and economic stratification put increasing strain on the modern rhetoric of liberalism and multiculturalism. Australia, like Canada and the U.S., still with momentum left from the baby boom years, is probably a generation away from an actual excess of deaths over births.

To a considerable degree, which of these projections is favoured may depend, as has been remarked of the future of marriage, "on whether one subscribes to linear or to cyclical theories of social change" (Espenshade, cited by Westoff, 1987:161). The large inherent unpredictability in future societal trends beyond a relatively few years, even in a manner as rooted in solid demography as the family, argues for a close watching brief on developments both here and elsewhere. To the extent the past is a guide, the range of experience represented by the countries of Europe and North America is likely to continue to define the bounds within which Australian family trends will lie.
REFERENCES


McDonald, Peter (1984b) "Can the family survive?" Discussion Paper No. 11, Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.


SOURCES FOR TABLES AND CHARTS

Figure 1: ABS, Canada Year Book 1990, "La conjoncture démographique" (annual), UN Demographic Yearbook (annual).

Figure 2: ABS, Kho, Canada, Statistics Canada (1988, part 1, table 2); Statistical Abstract of the United States (annual), Brown and Kiernan (1981), Haskey and Kiernan (1989), Golini (1987,701), UN Demographic Yearbook 1982 (Table 41), Popenoe (1987, 175), Statistics Sweden (letter).


Figure 4: ABS, Canada Year Book 1990 (Table 2.21), Golini (1987,706), Le Bras (1979,191, 201, 212), Statistical Abstract of the United States (annual), UN Demographic Yearbook 1982 (Table 41) and 1987.

Figure 5: "La conjoncture démographique" (annual), UN Demographic Yearbook (annual).


ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics), annual series on births, divorce, and marriage.


"La conjoncture démographique: l'Europe et les pays développés d'Outre-Mer," Population 4-5 (July-October), annual.


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**TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF WOMEN AGED AROUND 40 BY NUMBER OF CHILDREN THEY HAVE BORNE AND AVERAGE NUMBER OF CHILDREN PER WOMAN, BIRTH COHORTS OF MID OR LATE 1940s**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country and year of birth</th>
<th>Age at survey</th>
<th>Children ever born</th>
<th>Children per woman</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australia 1946-51</td>
<td>35-40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canada* 1941-46</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>40-44</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.K.** 1947</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France 1947</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden 1947</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>12</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Assuming women reported as never married to be childless
** England and Wales

Sources: National statistical reports (see end-note). Data for Italy unavailable.

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<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
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