Conservative voices in the Australian fertility debate

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Abstract:
In academic circles, the dominant explanation for sustained low fertility in Australia has been provided by gender equity theory. The Howard Government has adopted a rhetoric about ‘work and family balance’ which has its origins in the gender equity perspective, but has stopped short of adopting many of the ‘family friendly’ policy implications — such as a system of paid maternity leave — which flow from this approach. Instead, the Government’s pronatalism has been expressed in the introduction of cash payments such as the failed First Child Tax Refund, and its replacement, the Maternity Payment. In an attempt to explain the policy direction pursued, this paper examines the role of conservative influences in the Australian fertility debate.

Introduction
In academic circles, the dominant explanation for sustained low fertility in Australia has been provided by gender equity theory. This theory holds that fertility is low because the opportunities gained by modern women in education and market employment are still severely compromised by having children. As a result, women are having fewer children than they would like — or so the survey evidence suggests (McDonald 2000a).

The policy direction encouraged by gender equity theory is toward greater support for women in their attempts to both pursue a career and achieve their desired family size. To this end, proponents of the gender equity perspective (primarily, in Australia, demographer Peter McDonald (2000b; 2000a; 2001; 2003)) advocate ‘family friendly policies’ such as flexible working hours, improved access to child care, paid maternity leave and the removal of taxation disincentives to working mothers.
I have argued in a recent paper (Heard 2006) that the take-up of the fertility issue in Australia has been greatly facilitated by the language of gender equity theory. The Howard Government in particular has adopted a rhetoric about ‘work and family balance’ which has its origins in this theoretical approach. However, the Coalition has stopped short of adopting many of the ‘family friendly’ policy implications which flow from the gender equity perspective. Instead, the Government’s pronatalism has been expressed in the introduction of cash payments such as the failed First Child Tax Refund, and its replacement, the Maternity Payment. In an attempt to explain the policy direction pursued, this paper examines the role of conservative influences in the Australian fertility debate.¹

Conservatism is perhaps best defined in terms of opposition to radical change and attachment to what is familiar (Bealey 1999:81). However, it is possible to be conservative on some counts and radical on others. This paper relates to people and groups who may be considered conservative on a social or moral, rather than economic, dimension — those concerned with the preservation and renewal of values, traditions and social structures. I consider faith-based lobby groups such as the Australian Family Association (AFA)² and women’s groups such as the Endeavour Forum.³ The analysis also includes right-leaning policy ‘think tanks’ such as the National Civic Council (NCC)⁴ and the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS).⁵

Conservatives and pronatalism
Fertility in Australia, as in most other developed countries, fell steadily in the last quarter of the 20ᵗʰ century, reaching a record low of 1.7 babies per woman by the turn of the century. The implications of this phenomenon for the age structure of the population and the prospect of labour force shortages are now widely acknowledged and have caused considerable concern among demographers and politicians.

Conservatives generally agree that low fertility is problematic and are supportive of pronatalism. This is perhaps best typified in statements from the AFA, which claims to be Australia’s ‘leading family advocacy group’ (AFA 2002-2004b) and which constitutes perhaps the loudest conservative voice in the fertility debate. David Perrin, national president of the AFA, has labelled the fertility issue ‘the most critical issue in Australia today’ and has claimed that any fertility rate below replacement level (2.1 babies per woman; a rate not recorded since 1976) is ‘cause for concern’ (Perrin 2005). In fact, conservatives claim that on the issue of low fertility, they have led the
debate: ‘Pro-family forces have long warned about declining fertility rates and the erosion of parenthood’ (Muehlenberg 2000).

In the main, conservative interest in the fertility debate seems to be motivated by two concerns. The first concern, expressed by relatively few, is a fear of the outsider; the old argument that we should ‘populate or perish’, and particularly that the white birth rate in Australia and elsewhere must be sustained in the face of ‘Islamic inundation’ and ‘philoprogenitive illegals’ (Stove 2001). The second and more common concern is a desire to preserve traditional gender roles. The national vice president of the AFA exemplified these twin concerns in her defence of then Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett when he made some pronatalist comments (Woods in Shaw 1999) early in the Australian fertility debate:

… we live in a rich, large, almost empty land and …ultimately, we won’t be able to keep it. It would be better if we populate it ourselves …. [Kennett] wants to see that [the schoolgirls] don’t get so successful in other areas, which women are now doing, that they put aside childbearing.

These have long been conservative arguments, to which, in light of the current debate, the problem of population ageing has simply been added.

Our Association believes that Australia’s fertility decline will continue and will greatly impact on our aging population, standard of living and our ability to defend our country …. (AFA 2002-2004a)

Again, blending concern over population ageing with the more traditional concerns about the moral influence of the family and the strength of the nation, Perrin (2005) has summarized the conservative perspective on low fertility as follows:

Australia needs children to stimulate our economy. We also need children to protect us from perils from within and without our country. We need children to assist us in our old age and to provide the services. We need children to build and develop our infrastructure. An aged Australia will weaken us physically[,] morally [and] spiritually.

Given this view, conservatives are generally in favour of government action to address low fertility. The AFA’s statement on the matter asserts that ‘Australia MUST increase its fertility level’ (AFA 2002-2004a, emphasis in the original). Even those who stand for ‘limited government’ (CIS 2006) agree. CIS Senior Research Fellow Barry Maley (2001c) writes that ‘we can never replace the missing children, but it is possible to start taking measures now that will halt the slide.’
Female workforce participation: problem, not solution

Evidently, conservatives share an interest in low fertility with many demographers, including proponents of gender equity theory. However, the common ground ends there. The fertility issue is framed by conservatives in terms very different from those used by their ideological opponents, and by feminists in particular. Conservative support for pronatalism rests on the assumption that it is best for society if women prioritize a childbearing role. Like proponents of gender equity theory, conservatives endorse ‘family friendly’ policy, but understand this differently — to mean supporting mothers to stay at home (Westmore 2002a).

In fact, for conservatives, the feminist emphasis on female workforce participation is the root cause of the low fertility problem. Peter Westmore (2002b), president of the NCC, claims (in somewhat tautological fashion) that ‘the evidence’ shows that ‘higher participation of married women in the workforce reduces the birth rate, family size and national fertility levels’. In what is perhaps the most academic of the articles about low fertility linked to the AFA web site, Dr. Kerrie Allen (2002–4) complains that individualism and feminism ‘have led women to think they can make it alone in life without a man and without children; family is subordinated to acquisition of wealth and attainment of autonomy’ and bemoans the fact that ‘so many Australian women, like their international sisters, have sought careers, financial security and independence to the detriment of their fertility.’

The more charitable conservative commentators, whilst agreeing that women work at the expense of childbearing, refrain from blaming the selfish ambition of modern women. Rather, for these commentators, female workforce participation may be explained away by financial necessity or by the damaging influence of feminism. Muehlenberg (2001a) claims that ‘many [women] feel they are conscripted into the paid workforce against their wishes, but tough economic times often compel them to do so [sic]’. According to News Weekly (2003), feminism has ‘shackled women into jobs they’d prefer not to be in while denying them the joy of having children.’

Whether or not women’s workforce participation is perceived to be chosen or forced, greater recognition of ‘the value of motherhood’ (by which is meant the role of stay-at-home mothers) is presented as the solution to the fertility ‘crisis’. Westmore (2001) effuses that:
If we wish to address the crisis of fertility, the lack of respect for marriage and the family, we must proclaim from the rooftops that families are good, and large families are better, and that mothers who, as homemakers, hold together their families, are the true heroines of our civilisation.

To this end, many conservatives support the notion of a ‘Homemaker’s Allowance’ (Westmore 2001, 2002b; Muehlenberg 2001a). The CIS has lobbied for a similar payment of around $4,000 per child per year (Maley 2001c, 2002, 2000), an idea which has been adopted by conservative politician and former head of the Liberal party policy think tank the Menzies Research Centre Malcolm Turnbull.

Opposition to the gender equity perspective
Given the conservative understanding of the fertility issue that I have outlined, it is not surprising that conservatives oppose the gender equity interpretation that women want to work and have children and should be supported in pursuing both these goals.

Some conservative commentators have been explicit in their engagement with academic theory and in their rejection of the gender equity perspective. Barry Maley (2000) of the CIS writes that ‘the issue in fertility is not sex equity but child equity and family stability’. The observation on which gender equity theory is founded — that fertility is often higher where female workforce participation is greater — is considered ‘a nonsensical proposition’ by NCC president Peter Westmore (2002a).

More often, the conservative position has been expressed in opposition to the policy implications of the gender equity perspective, particularly increased formal child care and paid maternity leave. Many conservatives oppose formal child care in principle. Conservative commentators have warned that ‘hundreds of thousands of preschool infants’ (Maley 2001b) or ‘a generation of children’ (Muehlenberg in Papadakis 2004) are being ‘institutionalised’ in child care facilities (Westmore 2001), to be raised by ‘strangers’ (Muehlenberg in Papadakis 2004; Maley 2001b). Predictably, then, conservatives oppose policies to improve the availability of child care as a means of addressing low fertility. Allen (2002–4) complains that ‘funding [is] given to child-care agencies rather [than] to encourage mothers to stay at home and have more babies’. For Westmore (2002a), subsidised day care is an example of ‘how stay-at-home mums are discriminated against.’

Discrimination against home-based mothers is also the objection used by conservatives to oppose paid maternity leave. Westmore (2002b) argues that ‘the
weakness of the current debate about paid maternity leave is that the voice of full-time mothers is not being heard.’ In fact, submissions to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) inquiry into paid maternity leave in 2002 suggest that this ‘voice’ made itself loudly heard. The introduction to the final report (HREOC 2002:5) lists as the first among three ‘most contentious issues’ in the submissions ‘whether the payment should be limited to women in the paid workforce or made available to all women.’ A more detailed examination of the report reveals that conservative lobby groups were heavily represented among those who argued that the proposal would discriminate against stay-at-home mothers (HREOC 2002:154). The Australian Family Association, the Catholic Women’s League,8 the Endeavour Forum, the Festival of Light9 and the Women’s Action Alliance10 all adopted this line. The AFA (HREOC 2002:155) implied that paid maternity leave would reward the least deserving of mothers — those who work:

Not only do babies cost a lot of money for all women, whether working or not, but the stay at home mum chooses to forgo the income for the sake of the baby and its well being. Thus the woman in the paid work force is getting a double set of financial benefits, while the stay at home mum receives none.

Despite such submissions, HREOC (2002:158) maintained the position that paid maternity leave should be a workforce entitlement that relates specifically to the need of employed women for income replacement and/or a period out of the workforce after childbirth.

The influence of conservative voices

There is no question that conservative voices have been party to the elevation of the fertility issue in Australia. Indeed, conservative groups have made it clear that the approval of the constituency they represent is contingent on policy responses to this issue. Early on in the debate, News Weekly (1999) commended the ALP for raising the issue of low fertility and chided the Coalition for neglecting the same. Praise for engaging with the issue has been meted out to individual politicians Jeff Kennett, Kim Beazley, Wayne Swan and Malcolm Turnbull by the AFA (Woods in Shaw 1999), the Endeavour Forum (Francis 2000) and the NCC (News Weekly 1999, 2002). Conversely, the NCC in particular has been vehement in its criticism of politicians (Amanda Vanstone, Peter Costello) when they have, in the past, rejected the idea of
government intervention to address low fertility (Westmore 2002a; News Weekly 2002).

Further, it seems conservative arguments, whether from within or without the Coalition Government, have had some effect in determining the direction of policy on this issue. Most notably, the HREOC campaign for a national system of paid maternity leave — described by Westmore (2002a) as ‘a test of the Government’s policy towards the family’ — has been steadfastly resisted. In the midst of the 2002 debate, then Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and moral conservative Tony Abbott famously claimed that a compulsory system would be adopted ‘over this government’s dead body’ (Hudson 2002). Sure enough, though the Government made a show of welcoming HREOC’s recommendations, it has become clear that there is no intention of implementation. The direct lobbying on the part of the aforementioned conservative groups may have played a part in this.

The conservative influence is also evident in the Government’s attachment to the Family Tax Benefit Part B (or FTBB). In keeping with the conservative emphasis on the breadwinner/homemaker family model, this Benefit is paid to families with only one main income (Family Assistance Office 2004), with the income of the parent earning the lesser amount subject to an income test. As such the Benefit is criticized on the grounds that it discriminates against women who choose to return to work following the birth of a child. McDonald (forthcoming) has been particularly vocal in opposing the perpetuation of this Benefit at the expense of policies which are neutral in relation to the women’s work choices, claiming such a payment is ‘anti-feminist, wasteful of the nation’s human capital and poor work-family policy…. It can only be justified, as it has been, on the basis of a conservative view of women’s role.’ Despite these objections, FTBB has endured, and was reinforced in the 2006 Budget, though the secondary earner’s income test was eased.

**Conservative support for Preference Theory**

Howard may have ignored the implications of the gender equity perspective when those implications have jarred with conservative values, but he has not proceeded in a theoretical vacuum. Rather, he has adopted Catherine Hakim’s preference theory in order to justify his response to the issue of low fertility. Briefly, Hakim (2003) identifies three types of women (‘work-centred,’ ‘home-centred’ and ‘adaptive’) and argues for policy neutrality with regard to these preferences. She also suggests that
pronatalist policies directed at the ‘work-centred’ group are somewhat futile, and that efforts should instead be made to encourage ‘home-centred’ and ‘adaptive’ women to have more children.

In adopting Hakim’s work, Howard has followed the lead of conservative lobbyists, who have enthusiastically endorsed preference theory (Muehlenberg 2001a, 2001b; News Weekly 2001). Muehlenberg (2001b), for example, praises Hakim’s work and makes a direct leap from her research to his own ideological agenda:

One of the major conclusions of [Hakim’s] research is that women clearly do not have one view on the issue of work and home, but many…. Thus, if some women want to stay at home, and eschew the paid workplace, then government policies should recognise and accept those preferences….

The importance of Hakim’s thesis cannot be underestimated. The “one-size-fits-all” approach of most governments to questions of women and work are simply unworkable, restrictive and coercive… And given that the one size pushed is usually an uncompromising feminist version, the sooner we jettison such an approach, the better.

In reality, Hakim claims neutrality in the ‘war’ between conservatives and feminists, and is scathing about attempts on both sides to impose ‘ideologically driven notions of the ideal family’ (Manne 2002). Journalist Emma-Kate Symons (2004) notes that ‘Talking to Dr. Hakim you get the impression she has been wrongly claimed by Australia’s conservative anti-feminist commentariat as one of theirs.’ What is it, then, about preference theory that so appeals to Howard and to the conservative cause?

Firstly, preference theory fits nicely with rhetoric about valuing motherhood and women’s choices (which became so prominent in the oratory at the time of the 2004–5 Budget). Again and again, Howard has repeated the mantra that ‘our key policy goal in this area is to facilitate choice for families, not to mandate behaviour’ (Howard 2002b:11; also 2001:6). This philosophy was endorsed by Hakim (in Symons 2004).

The second and related advantage of preference theory is that it offers a way out of the more controversial and ‘extreme’ (to the conservative mind) policy options that accompany gender equity theory, such as paid maternity leave. The escape route comes via the argument that such policies favour only one type — the ‘work-centred’ type — of the three types of women identified by Hakim (2003), neglecting the
interests of ‘home-centred’ and ‘adaptive’ women who would prefer to care for their children at home.¹¹

The link between preference theory and policy avoidance is evident in Howard’s address at the Aston electorate dinner in Melbourne in July 2002. Almost in the same breath, Howard (2002a) mentioned Hakim’s ideas and the logic behind his transpiring rejection of a paid maternity leave scheme:

It’s important that we don’t make the mistake of thinking that there’s a one size fits all approach. The proposition that we should have some kind of maternity leave is a proposition that ought to be examined…. as part of an overall policy package.

I’ve been very impressed with some research I’ve read recently by an English researcher by the name of Catherine Hakim…. I think it’s important in this whole area that we don’t make the mistake of saying to the community well this is a particular prescription for a particular section of the community and we’re going to mandate it for all sections of the community.

**Conclusion**

Despite having embraced the rhetoric of ‘work and family balance’, the Government has failed to implement the policies implied by the gender equity perspective which with this language originates. In particular, the continuing existence of FTBB and the absence of a national paid maternity leave system show that the dominance of the gender equity perspective in academic circles has not been reflected in policy. The policies pursued have been more in keeping with Hakim’s preference theory, and/or with the view that low fertility is an issue of affordability, rather than one of gender equity.

There is little doubt that these policies are more palatable to the Government’s conservative constituents than are those which result from a gender equity perspective. In fact, I have argued, the policy direction pursued reflects the influence of social conservatives within and without government. In this paper I have looked at the way in which this influence has been exercised, and by whom. I think the players I have discussed would be happy with their efforts.
Footnotes

1 In other (as yet unpublished) work I have addressed the contributions of other groups with differing ideologies, including the feminist lobby and the business lobby, to this debate.

2 The AFA is an ecumenical Christian organisation ‘formed to provide a forum and a vehicle for those individuals and organisations in the community concerned with the strengthening and support of the family.’ The family type supported by the Association is described as ‘traditional’ or ‘natural’ (AFA 2002-2004b). It is affiliated with the NCC (NCC 2006).

3 The Endeavour Forum (formerly ‘Women Who Want to be Women’) was set up ‘to counter feminism, defend the unborn and the traditional family’. It claims ‘a need for women to defend the legitimate rights of traditional women in families and the rights of male breadwinners to get jobs’ (Endeavour Forum 2006).

4 The NCC, formerly the Catholic Social Studies Movement (Pell 1991), is a Melbourne-based organisation ‘which seeks to shape public policy on cultural, family, social, political, economic and international issues of concern to Australia.’ It publishes News Weekly.

5 The CIS is a Sydney-based independent public policy ‘think tank’, ‘engaged in support of a free enterprise economy and a free society under limited government’ (CIS 2006).

6 Of course, there are also people and groups on both sides of politics who oppose pronatalism, but their position is beyond the scope of this paper. Of interest here is the clash between two very different pronatalist positions.

7 Maley chooses not to use the term ‘gender equity’, arguing in another article (Maley 2001a) that ‘gender’ is a term used by feminists to deny the ‘real, innate differences between the sexes.’

8 The CWLA aims ‘to protect the interests and concerns of Australian Catholic women by conveying matters relevant to social justice, women and the family, to the Church, Government and community’ (CWLA 2006).

9 The Festival of Light is a multi-denominational Christian ministry which stands ‘for Christian values and the family — permanence of marriage, sanctity of life, primacy of parenthood and limited government’ (Festival of Light 2006).

10 The Women’s Action Alliance (WAA) is a volunteer organisation aiming ‘to strengthen Australian families as the basis of our society.’ One of the principles of the WAA is ‘that women should be free to choose the career of full-time homemaker without economic and social pressure.’

11 In fact, neutrality with regard to the working circumstances of parents is a principle also claimed by the gender equity perspective. Paid maternity leave is not, apparently, considered a violation of this principle.

References


