Political Responses to the Family

Under the rubric of "Political Responses to the Family" in this issue ALR publishes an abridged version of an American discussion paper on the family and politics. Given in July 1981 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, at the annual convention of the New American Movement (NAM), a marxist-based organisation of US socialists, the paper provoked a vigorous debate on the issues raised by its authors, one of whom (Michael Lerner) is the co-ordinator of the Workers Occupational Health Centre, Oakland, California. Australians present at the NAM convention brought the paper back to Australia and here it has likewise had an impact, apparently arousing strong feelings both for and against.

Bringing It All Back Home

by Michael Lerner, Laurie Zoloth and Hon. Wilson Riles, Jnr.

The rightwing ideology that has gained national prominence and credibility in the past few years may soon be consolidated as the dominant world view in American life. The shooting of Ronald Reagan further intensifies the basic fears that are held by a majority of the American public: that personal life is in crisis, that life is no longer safe, that the few bastions of protection from the dangers of the larger world are themselves under attack. Because progressives and liberals have been reluctant to look seriously at these underlying feelings that are the bedrock upon which conservative ideas are allowed to flourish, they have consistently missed the point, and are now in danger of becoming relegated to a permanent minority status.

The reaction to the first half-year of the Reagan Presidency on the part of liberals and progressives has reflected this basic misunderstanding of what is really happening. At first, we hear a chorus of denial: the right wing had only won a minority of the total electorate, and only a minority of those who voted for Reagan did so because they agreed with specific rightwing programs. What this missed was the reality that, faced with the choices as they understood them, more people felt comfortable with a rightwing candidacy than with any other choice except not voting. Moreover, the current dominance of the media and institutions that shape public opinion by ideas that the right wing has been pushing for decades gives them an unprecedented opportunity to consolidate and grow, while alternative positions are virtually unheard of from any quarter.

We should understand that the ideas being put forward are not new: they have received considerable backing before by corporate America, but they were always counter-balanced by an ideology of liberalism that had access to the media through its control of the
government. The collapse of the alternative is accelerated also by the reality that those remaining liberals have thought that their best survival strategy is to talk increasingly as though they were really conservatives all along.

A second reaction has been to put forward shocked outrage as budget cuts for social welfare programs have been coupled with increases in defence spending. The liberals have talked of putting together coalitions to protest the cuts, uniting all sectors affected. But these coalitions only unite the very sectors who were opposed to Reagan in the first place, and despite serious coalition attempts involving organised labor, feminist organisations, third world groups and environmentalists, they were defeated in the last election.

Coalitions of the 1960s and '70s

The coalition-building strategy, perhaps culminating in mass marches and demonstrations to dramatise how badly the cuts will affect some sectors of the population, comes from a different historical age: the 1960s and early '70s, when millions of people took to the streets. But the difference is this: both Presidents Johnson and Nixon ran on programs of avoiding war and championing the oppressed. When they failed to do so, the movements in the streets could wear the mantle of moral outrage: the people were being lied to and betrayed by their elected officials. By uncovering public hypocrisy, we were, in fact, acting as the representatives of the majority of the population who had been tricked at the ballot box.

Reagan and the conservatives who were elected to the Congress did not lie to us: they were clear and forthright about their determination to cut social welfare programs, to dramatically cut the budget, to favor the needs of the corporations over the needs of the poor and to dramatically increase defence spending and take an aggressive and perhaps warlike position in the rest of the world. They won, they perceive themselves to have a mandate, and even demonstrations the size of the 1960s would not undermine that perception.

A third reaction has been for progressives to reassure themselves that everything will work out because Reagan's economic policies won't work. Consoled by the prospect of rising unemployment and continued or perhaps even increased inflation, they see the discrediting of rightwing ideology as an inevitable development if we can just weather the next few years. There are several objections to this. First, rising human misery does not necessarily lead to rising radicalism: it can just as readily lead to increasing despair, passivity, or willingness to support military adventurism to restore US economic supremacy around the world. Second, Reagan's economic doctrines were not what won the election, but rather his ability to speak to the fears and insecurities of daily life.

If the right can consolidate their hold over mass consciousness in the period ahead, no set of economic difficulties will be in itself sufficient to dislodge their political strength. On the contrary, they may then be in a position to identify new scapegoats, new enemies whose programs and positions have thwarted the effectiveness of their economic policies. Whether it be a focus on the ways that liberals blocked some of the cuts that they had argued for, or whether it be through pointing the blame at Arab oil, or at the international communist conspiracy or the Soviet Union, the right wing will have sufficient arguments for deflecting the criticism.

The point is that the right wing did not win by having a better set of economic arguments than liberals, but rather because they spoke to the basic needs of the population for a different quality of life. People are willing to endure economic hardships, wars and domestic unrest if they believe that it is part of a larger plan that will eventually lead to a world that they really want. The right wing has been able to harness moral righteousness and idealism as well as the fear and insecurity people face, and to address those needs in a way that has given them a political mandate.
Our point comes into focus most clearly if we see how the right has used the issues of family life and crime. For two decades the right has hammered away at these issues, while liberals dismissed them as merely the prattling of reactionaries. Carter's creation of an Office of the Family inside the Administration for Children, Youth and Families, without any serious funding for it, had about as much impact as his White House Conference on the Family: both were window dressing that were transparent attempts to avoid these issues rather than deal with them.

The family issue and the growth of the right

Equally important, the right had the popular impression going for it that progressives, liberals and the women's movement were all indifferent at best or hostile at worst to the family lives of most Americans. It is the progressives who have come to be identified in mass consciousness with the position that individual liberty is the supreme value, that "do your own thing" must take precedence over long-term commitments, and that individual pursuit of pleasure is the goal of life. To some extent, this was a misunderstanding based on the fact that the progressives had greatest access to media in the late 1960s and early '70s when the conjuncture of counter-cultural individualism and the early anti-nuclear family statements of some elements of the feminist movement were given dramatic public play. But to some extent it reflects a continued failure to understand and publicly legitimate the values that people seek to achieve in their family life. For many progressives there is a lingering suspicion of "family life", a suspicion based on their correct perception that many families are oppressive to the women and children within them.

The critics of the family suspect that many of the rightwing leaders who speak of supporting the family really have in mind a return to a patriarchal family with women subordinated and abandoning their work outside the home. That may be true of many of these leaders. But it is not for that reason that so many people are responding. Rather, it is the vision of a family as the place where one is supposed to get nurturing and love, regardless of one's actual achievements in the world, that moves people to desire a defence of the family and a return to family values.

It is not to the point to argue that such a picture of family belies the reality that exists in many families, or that ever existed. That women have often been oppressed in families is certain. But that does not lead to a conclusion that families or family life should be downplayed, but rather that necessary changes are needed with regard to this aspect of family life. But when most people respond to the calls for a defence of family life, it is not because they yearn for a place to oppress women, but rather for a place where human love and intimacy can be treated as the highest value.

It is in recognising this yearning as valid and noble that the right wing can validate itself and its political and social message. The core feelings of despair over the demise of family life are then taken by the right, and attached to a specific social and political and economic program that has little to do with actually achieving the kind of vision that most people strive for. But they will be supported as long as no one else can speak to those same needs and desires. For example, the right can argue that it is gays, the women's movement, or even "government intervention in private life" that are undermining family life, and though its analysis of exactly how these connections work may seem implausible or difficult to follow, it is nevertheless accepted by people and mouthed as a litany of truth. Why? Because most people have never heard any other explanation of the collapse of families. And because liberals and progressives are identified with cultural themes like "If this relationship doesn't feel good, don't hassle with it — just go on to another one" or "Sexuality should be divorced from emotions — it's just another kind of fun. Enjoy it like good food", they seem* to be undervaluing the importance of building lasting relationships.
It is time for progressives to consciously and publicly reverse these misconceptions by loudly and clearly identifying with the defence of the family, while insisting that the definition of family now be expanded to include single-parent families, extended families, gay families and kinship networks.

**What really undermines family life?**

The moment we take up the challenge of the family, identify with it, and really commit ourselves to building a program for support of the family, we are in a dramatic position to fundamentally challenge the analysis and policies of the right. Once we ask ourselves, "How do we create a society within which long-term commitments to love, intimacy and emotional nurturing are really possible?" we see that it is precisely a progressive program that makes most sense.

The right is in an impossible contradiction: because, in fact, the destruction of the possibility of loving, creative family life has been a product of the economic market which the right is committed to defending. People feel that they are losing control of what is happening in their personal life, that they are being manipulated by outside forces, and that their basic support structures — families — are in danger of falling apart. Their feelings are correct. But the right identifies this with gays, or the women’s movement, or "government intervention". In fact, these problems grow out of the way the economy and the workplace are organised.

Consider the world of work. Most workers face jobs that are increasingly stressful, as human satisfactions decrease and opportunities for real human interactions are diminished. The fragmentation of work, the deskilling of the work force, the difficulty of maintaining working class solidarity and the overt attacks on trade unions — all combine to create conditions in which the individual worker experiences stress — and typically interprets this as a personal problem instead of a collective dilemma for all workers to solve. Because stress manifests differently for different workers (for some as headaches, for others as neck or back tensions, for others as high blood pressure, for others as colitis, insomnia, depression, withdrawal, alcoholism, drug abuse or frantic activity), most people rarely understand that they are facing a common work-related problem. Instead, they feel bad about themselves for having stress symptoms.

Male workers often compound these sources of self-blaming with a feeling that they should be tougher, and that the fact that they experience stress is an indication of personal lack of strength and manliness. In addition, because most workers believe that this is a meritocracy in which individual worth will be rewarded in the marketplace, when they experience their jobs as stressful they feel bad about themselves, sure that the stress is a reminder of their own failures as an individual to have achieved a better job. So a typical way that stress is handled is not by collective struggle to change the situation, but by individual denial, coupled with an internalisation of the stress. But that stress is then brought home, manifesting itself in tensions and irritations that grow out of hand.

When progressives have addressed these issues at all, it has usually been in a way that suggested that the individuals involved needed government help to deal with their “personal” problems. Whether it be in sponsoring alcohol programs for rehabilitating the alcoholics, or community mental health clinics and individual therapy for “the troubled individual” or more recently “employee assistance” programs at the workplace, the liberal position has always reinforced the basic view that the worker has a personal problem. On the other hand, the right wing insists that this is a reflection of a common social problem labelled as “the breakdown of the family”. This is insidious because of where it lays the blame, but it has actually been empowering to many working people because it tends to undermine self-blame.

* This is often an unfair conclusion based on serious and important questions being raised about family. But this is the perception we must deal with.
The obvious move now is for progressives to join the right in defining these problems as common and social ones, but to correctly identify the source for this family breakdown in the current organisation of the workplace. This analysis leads us to say that the number one priority for supporting the family is to humanise the workplace in such a way that people come out of it strengthened in their ability to participate in loving and intimate relationships rather than emotionally wrecked. And this, in turn, raises the issue of democratic control of work as a necessary part of family support, the issue of health and safety at work, and even consideration of the 30-hour work week and strict prohibitions on forced overtime.

It is not just the workplace, but the economic structure as a whole that creates individuals who are unable to participate in long-term loving relationships. The central economic program of the New Right is a return to the competitive marketplace. It does not take too much argument to help show people that it is this very spirit of competition that creates people who are unable to fully love and trust each other. Schooled from earliest times in the message that everyone around us is a potential adversary, and reconfirmed in this by the constant struggle to get ahead in the world of work, most people enter into relationships scared and distrusting. The continual need to keep one’s distance from other people, to be on constant alert for the ways that they will take advantage of you, the constant injunction of the “common sense” of capitalism to “Look out for Number 1” and, in the words of the theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, to “Suspect Your Neighbour as Yourself”, creates a personality type that finds it hard to abandon the emotional armour and connect in deep and intimate ways.

A first priority in strengthening the family, as we have already seen, is to humanise the workplace and to undermine the competitive dynamics of the economy that create character structures in all of us that make loving more difficult.

But there are a host of other specific institutional supports that can be created for family life. One obvious example is an adequate system of child care. In the past, communities and extended families provided the necessary support systems for the raising of children. This is much less true today, and we need to take community responsibility for supporting those people who are raising children. Child care must be available both through community-controlled centres (funded both by the community and the large corporations who employ us outside the home), and through neighborhood associations developed on a voluntary basis and aimed at assisting parents and paying attention to the children of the neighborhood and their needs.

Strengthening families also requires a host of support institutions in the larger community. Health services must be freely available — and their use cannot be a function of anyone’s income. Nothing destroys families more dramatically than sickness or death — and often these can be prevented if we have a more rational health system. It is precisely in the name of family support that we must argue for eliminating the profit from health care, and developing a system that is based on the real needs of the community. Family counselling services should be publicly supported so that people who are facing tensions can get support before the tensions have gotten out of hand. Birth control counselling and adequate education about the care and rearing of children must be given a much higher priority for public funding. We want strong families — and those are families based on having made a real choice about when and under what circumstances to bring children into the world, and families that have the material and spiritual resources to raise their children in a loving and supportive way.

Nothing undermines family life more than economic insecurity. Unemployment or the fear of unemployment creates fears that often get expressed in alcoholism, drug abuse, family violence, or even crime. Even in the less extreme cases these fears manifest in a
decreased energy for dealing with family relationships, less openness to loving contacts with others, and more fears about the world; Unemployment affects the employed worker as well — s/he constantly knows that s/he is expendable, and that creates huge tensions that are too often brought home.

**Fragmentation**

A major contributing factor to the dissolution of family life is the fragmentation of communities that has been deeply accelerated by our economic structure. Families are isolated from each other and now have few natural support systems to help them through moments of crisis or strain. As people have been forced to move away from their communities of birth in order to find new jobs and to escape the decay of cities, older ties have broken and extended families fragmented. But little has replaced these older ties, and people often find that it is difficult to form ties to the people who live around them, sometimes difficult to even know their neighbours. They often communicate in superficial ways about their own family lives, and get their information about what is really happening in others’ families more from magazines and TV dramatisations than from honest communication with their neighbours. Because their own personal problems often seem more intractable than those that can be solved in the 27½ minute time span that is needed for TV people, some viewers come to feel that their own problems are worse (and they as people are worse) than others around them. This can lead to despair and defeatism as well as a desire to avoid honest discussion with their neighbours. The isolation increases, and with it the tendency to have no outside supports for dealing with family tensions. The usual pattern: long periods of covering up the tensions and unhappiness, followed by a sudden rupture that may lead to family violence, alcoholism, depression, separation, or divorce.

It is important to understand that the patriarchal family structure that worked in the 19th century does not function in the late twentieth-century society, and that attempts to recreate it inevitably backfire and undermine family life. Women will continue to leave family situations that are oppressive to them: this is a development that cannot and should not be stopped. So if we want to preserve two-parent families, we want to ensure that these families provide an equality of respect and an equality of power and an equality of financial opportunity and financial responsibility that are the only stable bases upon which long-term intimacy can be based.

In this way we must understand the movement for equality of power and respect for women represents a force for strengthening family life by creating women who will insist on the kinds of relationships that have real potential for genuine love and intimacy. The breakdowns of family life through much of the 20th century in the US has often been based on the following pattern: women who were forced into subordinate and unrespected roles in the family, slowly building up resentment and anger that were nowhere legitimated until the stress of this situation broke through, either in behaviours that were labelled “hysteria” or “depression” or “psychosis”, or in resentful actions that got them labelled as “bitchy” or “self-centred”, or in leaving the family and seeking divorce. It would be not only morally incorrect but practically unworkable to try to save the family by convincing women to accept this subordination and growing to like it. If two-parent families are to work, they will do so because this destructive dynamic has been removed, because women have gained real equality of power and respect, at work and home.

But it is important to emphasise that it is not in the name of unrestricted individual rights that we make this argument. Rather, it is because we share with many people of all shades of the political spectrum the fundamental belief that a truly human vision is one that is based on the mutual interconnectedness and mutual dependency and mutual love between people that we then proceed to argue for those changes that could make these kinds of relationships possible.
It is for the same reason that we insist that children be treated with respect in families. Not out of some commitment to "individual rights" as the highest value, but out of an understanding that truly loving relationships cannot be compelled and rarely emerge out of force or power plays. It is precisely when children feel most respected that they are most able to give the kind of energy and enthusiasm to their families that make families work best. We do not mean to imply here that equality of respect requires equal power in decisions for children. What it does require is that when limits and restrictions are placed on children, they are explained in ways that are appropriate to the development level of the child, with a full communication to the child of the respect and love that are ingredients in the placing of those limits. It also requires the opportunity for children to express their feelings, including negative feelings, about the situations they are facing in their family life.

Single-parent families

Support for family life does not mean only support for two-parent families. Single-parent families, extended families, gay families, and kinship systems are also an important focus of our support. Wherever people are making the kind of long-term emotional and financial commitment to each other to take care of each other and provide ongoing love and intimacy we have the development of a family arrangement. There can be no enshrining of the "nuclear family" as the only appropriate form — though it is a form that may still work for many people and should be respected as such.

On the other hand, we must avoid any tendency to suggest that people who are single are somehow to be blamed or put down for not being in a permanent primary relationship. The collapse of long-term relationships, as we argue throughout this article, is more often a function of the social and economic conditions in which we live than in any defect or moral fault of the individuals involved. One of the worst aspects of rightwing propaganda about the family has been the way that it has seemed to suggest that people were making evil choices if they did not remain in a family. On the contrary, we insist that women who leave oppressive marriages after unsuccessfully struggling to change them are making a valid and correct choice and that none of our support for the family is meant to suggest that they should rethink that choice.

On the other hand, we must also avoid the tendency to suggest that the current development of single-parent families represents a higher form of evolution or a very good alternative for most of the people involved. We hold that long-term loving relationships between adults are a more fulfilling way for human beings to be, and that the unavailability of non-oppressive and realisable options for this alternative is a tragic reality of this society.

Not surprisingly, the single-parent form is one that most completely fits the needs of the existing social arrangements. At a previous stage in development the patriarchal family seemed to play this function, not only reproducing labour power but also reproducing the authoritarian forms of social interaction that would mirror the world of work. But today, the single-parent family fits the needs of social control even better. On the most obvious level, single women find that the combination of stress at work and trying to keep a family together without even the minimal supports of another parent often depletes them of time and energy that might be potentially used for political activity or trade union participation. Without a second income to buffer against possible job loss or the incursions of inflation, it becomes all the more difficult to maintain the militancy of struggle at one's job. Moreover, without another parent to provide a ready source of emergency baby-sitting, single parents are all the more thrown into dependence upon the television as baby-sitter of last resort, with a corresponding increase of penetration by the larger economy into the consciousness and daily struggles of one's family. Nothing could fit better the needs of the larger economy.
There is a more subtle level in which this is true as well. While there are still some sectors of the work force that are kept in line by direct authoritarian control on the work floor, labour militancy is increasingly undermined by the workers themselves who are encouraged to internalise feelings about themselves that make them feel powerless.

The family, in all its many forms, is the key institution for passing on the accumulated heritage of our humanity, our wisdom, our loving, and our passions. Because it is critical to the lives of most of us (even those who do not see themselves as currently in a “family” often spend much of their psychic energy trying to resolve issues that were raised in their families of origin), we cannot simply abandon this terrain to the right and its cynical attempts to manipulate the issue for their own partisan gain.

Our concern about the family comes from an understanding that it is an important part of our humanity, and that the attachment that most people feel to it is based in part on their hopes for the future, their vision of what a good life could be, and their commitment to giving to their children the best that they can. Our interest in families is not merely instrumental in terms of dealing with the mass psychology of the right, but also flows from a deep understanding of the pivotal role that families play in the transmission of values and vision to the next generations. Because of this stewardship for the future, we have to fight for the best and most liberatory vision of what family life can be, and to fight for those changes in the society that could make that vision actual.

Within the ambit of the general discussion on the topic, Margo Moore, Judy Mundey and Joyce Stevens in "Changing the Family, Changing our Politics" present a somewhat different point of view to that expressed in "Bringing It All Back Home".

Changing the Family, Changing our Politics

by Margo Moore, Judy Mundey and Joyce Stevens

Australia is in the process of an economic restructuring which is throwing up tremendous problems and dislocations in people’s lives. The present rate of unemployment, homelessness, high rents and interest rates, and the threat of a severe depression, the lack of amenities and social services in the new boom towns are just some of these problems. Politically, government is supporting the new capitalist development and withdrawing what little social support there is. Ideologically, the withdrawal of social support systems is being justified by blaming the breakdown of the traditional family for such problems as violence, homelessness, inability to get work and emotional instability.

Since the breakdown of the family is said to be the cause of such problems, obviously the capitalist solution must lie in reconstituting and strengthening family structures so that private profit can be maximised and social responsibility in such areas as education, health, child care, care of the aged and disabled, transport, etc., can be shifted back into the family at the expense, mainly, of women.

While the economy is not the final determinant of changes in personal and family relationships, these two structures intersect and help to shape one another. Powerful vested interests in the hierarchies of churches and the political right have long been the moral guardians and defendants of