The Family Under Pressure[1]

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Rousseau, the eighteenth century philosopher, is known to many as the 'father' of the French Revolution. One dictionary says of him:

> The chief importance of his works lies perhaps in the fact that they contain the germ of the doctrines which were carried out with such ruthless consistency in the French Revolution.[2]

It comes as a surprise to discover in his seminal educational treatise *Emile*, published in 1762, that he writes: 'There is no more delightful spectacle than the family'.[3] In all probability Rousseau refers to the *nuclear* family as opposed to the *extended* family or the *family of mankind.* But it is important to note that the great political philosophers of eighteenth century France—men like Montesquieu and Rousseau—began what the late Raymond Johnston called 'the relentless march towards moral relativism, and towards what we now know as sociology'.[4]

We shall return to the influence of politicians on the family later. For the time-being I want to underline that the concept of moral relativism is a key that helps explain the rapid decline in personal and corporate moral values in our society during the twentieth century. It is this evil that has contributed to and compounded the many pressures which beset family life today.

Before we proceed any further we must define some terms. First, the term 'family' as used in this paper refers primarily to what is known as the *nuclear* family. It is this unit that is under pressure today. To quote Johnston again: 'Our most natural definition of the family in Britain today is "mum" [or as they say in the north-east "mam"] dad, and kids. This the anthropologist calls the *nuclear* family, the basic biological unit . . . the nuclear family is sensed as the basic building block'.[5] Secondly, I want to remind you that hitherto in the western world, fashioned and moulded as it has been to a great extent by the Judaeo-Christian ethic, the basic function of the family unit has been seen as the bearing and rearing of children. But what does that entail? Johnston mentions six things. He informs us that anthropologists and sociologists have discovered that in traditional pre-industrialized societies the family is the place where:

1. sexual expression and satisfaction is satisfied.
2. the production of children is regulated.
3. children are socialized—*i.e.* made ready for adult life.

4. children are protected.
5. simple tasks are divided out, and,
6. resources are shared.[6]

Today some of these activities are no longer the sole or primary concern of the traditional family unit. Nonetheless, generally speaking, many people of our culture believe that the proper context for the carrying out of most if not all of these functions is the nuclear family. That is why teachers are still seen as being *in loco parentis*. They exist to help parents, not to replace them.

The Problem

Thus far we have been setting the scene. The time has come to highlight certain features of the picture that we see about us today. The latter part of the twentieth century has seen dramatic changes. The statistics reveal a fundamental shift in moral values both in individuals and society at large. Let me remind you of some of them.

1. Some 25% of new-born babies are now conceived by and born to parents who are not married.
2. The number of single-parent families is multiplying.
3. 1991 saw a 2% annual increase in the number of divorces. And this in a nation that already sees more than one in three of all marriages break-up. It is reckoned that in the next few years this figure will rise to be as many as four in ten.
4. 24% of divorces concern couples who have been married for less than five years.
5. 1991 saw a 4.5% annual decline in the number of marriages taking place.
6. The incidence of juvenile indiscipline in schools is rising. And the problems are beginning and becoming more serious in the earlier school years. Moreover the number of children referred to educational psychologists has increased and in some areas so has the number of youngsters experiencing home-tuition.
7. The rate of incidence of juvenile crime has increased, with more youths committing offences of a serious nature. Some have little or no respect for anyone in authority as is evidenced by the rising number of offences committed by youngsters whilst on police or court bail.[7]

The list is not exhaustive. But it is instructive. At the simplest level it tells us that something is happening. Our society, and the individuals who make it up, are changing. Marriages are not lasting, Increasing numbers of children are being nurtured and reared by a single parent. And the lawless behaviour of some is becoming increasingly evident. There is an increasing lack of respect for people or property.

Hardly any of us are unaffected by this sea-change. Some of these things are happening, as they say, very close to home. The statistics, for example, for my own profession do not make happy reading. The number

of clergy marriage breakdowns has shot up in recent years and now matches the national average. In other words some of those who are meant to set a good example succumb to the pressure to take the so-called easy option when problems arise in their own relationships. And most of us have a relative or close friend who is behaving or has had problems either with their marriage or with their children. In some instances the problems faced with children may have nothing whatsoever to do with crime or indiscipline. They may relate to the adoption of a new life-style. Our nearest and dearest, instead of taking the traditional route to the creation of a new family unit [engagement, marriage, children], opt to cohabit. Perhaps some of us are doing this ourselves. It would be interesting to discover just how many divorced people now plump for cohabitation instead of re-marriage.

The Causes

Having asserted that there is a problem, that the family is under pressure, we must now proceed to the more difficult task of trying to explain it. I say more difficult because I recognize that one person's explanation is another's poison. In other words, not everyone will agree with the analysis I offer. For some it will go too far in certain particulars. For others the whole concoction will be completely unpalatable. It depends, to use the jargon of the day, 'where you are coming from'. We all have a 'world-view' of some kind or another. By 'world-view' I mean a way of looking at life. For some of us it is a well worked out and thought through political philosophy—be it Marxist, socialist or free-market capitalism. Others come with religious convictions. These may be the fruit of a religious or conversion experience. Or they may be the trappings of a tradition inculcated in the home or school. Others opt for a more pragmatic approach and work things out 'on the hoof' as they go along.

To enter into the detail: what are the adverse influences that put the family under pressure today? I offer you six. There is no special significance in the order in which they are presented.

1. The Media[8]

Perhaps the best analysis of the media in print today is Neil Postman's book, *Amusing Ourselves To Death.*[9] In it the author, a professor at New York University, argues convincingly that:

> television is transforming our culture into one vast arena for show business in which all public affairs—politics, religion, news, education, journalism, commerce—have been turned into a form of entertainment.[10]

We have shifted, he argues—and you can see this in a chapter entitled 'The Peek-a-Boo World'[11]—from the *Age of Exposition to the Age of Show Business.* In other words the emphasis is no longer on analysis. It is on entertainment. This shift has had a profound effect. One result is that information is now put in a 'context-free' environment. We are informed

of what is happening in the world both near and far, but precisely why and the significance of it is not explained.

Two criticisms can be levelled at the media. One concerns the 'holier than thou' attitude that frequently comes to the fore. The most obvious example of this in recent months relates to the coverage of the alleged marital troubles of certain members of the Royal Family. One paper, usually a tabloid, claims an exclusive. Then the rest, broadsheets included, along with television and radio, weigh-in with comments and, whenever possible, yet more photographs. But, and this is the important point, their coverage is presented in such a way as to give the impression that they are doing us, the consumer, a favour by informing us of what is going on. On the surface this sounds reasonable. But when one digs deeper one begins to realize that those who say they are only providing information for the public are in fact helping to mould public opinion. Their professed innocence is not all it seems.

Take another example, namely the recent coverage of Madonna's book, *Sex*. Until I read *The Newcastle Journal*[12] I had no idea that this pop-idol had any plans to bring out a book bearing that title. But that was not the only information given. *The Journal* saw fit to induct us into the contents of this pornographic filth. We were told what type of sex can be seen portrayed and that it all represents the fantasies of this mega-star who delights in shocking the world. Now, where does information stop and influence begin? It may be a fine line. But it is one that needs to be drawn. The influence of the media is far greater than many think. At the beginning of September the results of a survey commissioned by *Wedding and Home* magazine were widely reported.[13] In particular this survey of some two thousand couples about to marry reveals that only 2% of brides are virgins on their wedding day. Of course this was not the only fact revealed. Some 51% of the sample admitted that getting engaged improved their sex-life, whilst 26% of the girls confessed that they had had intercourse by the age of 16. Why am I telling you these things? Because I want to ask you to consider an important question. What effect does this information have? Are these neutral facts that we can note or ignore as we please? Or do these statistics influence behaviour? No doubt some will argue strongly for the former of these two options. But I think we ignore the latter at our peril. Everything we do and say affects someone. In particular the young, the innocent, the vulnerable and the impressionable are affected. That is why the Obscene Publications Act and other pieces of legislation exist.

What I am saying is this. The fact that 98% of girls have had sexual intercourse before they marry; the fact that a great pop-star engages in unnatural sex; the fact that divorce is increasingly prevalent; and the fact that certain public figures have had affairs or are experiencing problems in their marriages, affects the behaviour and perceptions of some. It is sheer humbug to pretend that all information is morally neutral. A second criticism of the media follows on from what has just been said. It is this. The

media are the main vehicle through which the prevailing moral relativism of our age is perpetuated. At the outset we saw that the moral relativism of today has its origins in the *Enlightenment* of the eighteenth century. We now live in what many call 'a global-village'. Modern communications mean that we know what is happening on the other side of the globe as well as at home. But people do things differently over there. They have different customs, habits and values. Who is to say which are right and which are wrong? The modern trend is to say that all are right. And so we quickly reach the point that we are all free to do exactly what we please. I refer to the 'if-it-turns-you-on-do-it' syndrome.

The media perpetuates this myth. Nowhere is this more apparent than in feature articles and comment columns. At the risk of being tiresome I refer again to *The Journal*'s coverage of Madonna's book. Just before it was published we found Jennifer Wilson, its Women's Affairs Correspondent, saying as long as no one is physically hurt, we shouldn't be too shocked.[14] That, I submit, is moral relativism. Although, to be fair to Miss Wilson once the book had been published her tune changed somewhat.[15]

In case you think I am being too selective in the material cited I draw your attention to the third leader published in *The Times* on Friday 30 October 1992.[16] There we come across a piece of partisan journalism unworthy of *The Thunderer*. The article in question concerns the vexed topic of the ordination of women to the priesthood within the Church of England. We are informed that the arguments in favour are now irresistible. Reference is made to two objections to this innovation but at no point is the crucial issue raised, namely what the Bible has to say about it. This is not the time to debate this question but the article in question illustrates that much journalism perpetuates the myth that there are no absolutes and that everything is relative.[17]

Before we leave our consideration of the media and their influence on family life we must say a word about advertising. In recent weeks we have been greeted, if that is the right word, by posters advertising a new form of contraception. I refer to the female condom or 'Femidom'. It is not the product but the way it is advertised that raises cause for concern. The words used on the posters are at the least suggestive[18] and at the worst conducive to encouraging promiscuity. If the latter is the result then family life may well suffer yet another knock.

2. Homosexual Activists

Since the passing of the *Sexual Offences Act 1987* our nation has witnessed changes of enormous proportions. The word 'gay' has been hijacked. Some homosexuals have declared themselves and become militant. And much energy has been expended by homosexual activists in promoting homosexuality as a 'normal' expression of sexual behaviour. As Stephen Green, the Chairman of the Conservative Family Campaign, shows in his recently published book, *The Sexual Dead-End*, there are

people in high places—academics, media personalities, churchmen, civil servants and politicians—who are actively encouraging the on-going campaign for homosexual rights.[19]

Possibly the greatest success that this lobby has had is to deceive the public into thinking that, as the actor Simon Callow stated on BBC2's *Newsnight* programme on 1st February 1988, homosexuality is legal except in certain circumstances.[20] Stephen Green puts the record straight when he says that this assertion: 'is the exact opposite of the truth. Homosexual acts are *illegal* except in certain circumstances' (his italics).[21] One consequence of this deception is that people are encouraged to think that homosexual activity is an acceptable expression of one's sexuality. This in turn leads to other things, such as the fostering and adoption of infants by lesbians. It comes as little surprise therefore to find youngsters confused today as to what is legitimate from both the legal and moral points of view. Some, as a result, have difficulty working out which rôle model, if any, to follow. The concept of the traditional nuclear family is under attack.

3. Progressive Theorists

It is fascinating to note how widespread is the influence of 'social determinism'. By this we mean the theory that says that our environment determines our behaviour. There is hardly an individual, let alone a discipline, that has not accepted at least a little of this theory. This should not surprise us for in an age when God has been marginalized it is inevitable that people will latch on to materialistic explanations of our existence and behaviour.

It is also fascinating to see just how widespread child-centredness has become during the twentieth century. As Professor Anthony O'Hear shows in his devastating critique of the American philosopher, John Dewey, it is Dewey who is the father of child-centredness.[22] He, more than others, advocates that teachers should be seen as no more than leaders of group activities. Moreover, says O'Hear, he 'insisted that the primary focus of study should be the social context,'[23] [the social life of the child].

What effect have these two schools of thought had? Social determinism quickly leads to a lack of responsibility. We blame our failings and wrongdoings on our social and economic conditions instead of on ourselves. Some of us saw this happen at the time of the Newcastle upon Tyne riots in September 1991. Certain politicians and others explained these riots in terms of social deprivation. Youngsters when challenged about their criminal and anti-social behaviour put it down to the fact that they were socially deprived. Child-centredness so easily leads to a lack of respect for those in authority. O'Hear states in his study of Dewey that 'the most insidious aspect of his educational legacy' is 'his hostility to accepted authority, methods and learning'.[24] The father of child-centredness has begotten children in his own image. Do we not have here two theories that have

seriously affected family life in the twentieth century? It seems to be that the irresponsibility of some and the general lack of respect for authority that exists are in part the product of progressive theorists.

4. The Church

It is generally accepted today that the church is an irrelevance. Evidence for this can be gleaned from the statistics of church attendance and membership. In 1989 Erroll Hulse, the editor of the magazine *Reformation Today*, produced some charts that illustrate the rapid decline of the main denominations in England.[25] If present trends continue most will not exist by the year 2050! The Church of England is now half the size she was some thirty years ago. Why has this happened?

This is not the place to attempt a full analysis of this problem. But I offer one suggestion which many believe goes a long way to explaining this unhappy phenomenon. There is a crisis of belief within the Church, or at least within the hearts of certain Churchmen. Doubts are paraded, but what is worse, and what is germane to the topic before us, some Churchmen advocate new ways. The traditional wisdom concerning the rôles of men and women, of fathers and mothers, has been replaced in the minds of some by ideas that are more akin to feminism and secular humanism. Moreover, some clergy see nothing wrong with co-habitation or sex before marriage. And some even advocate blessing homosexual relationships in church.

With so much confusion about it is not surprising that many have ditched the Church as irrelevant. Nor is it surprising that the concept of the family as the basic building block of society is questioned by so many today. We live in a sea of moral relativism. The Church appears to have made no concerted effort to push its tide back. There is a sense then in which she has compounded the problems that have put the family under pressure.

5. Politicians

Politicians must also bear some of the blame. A little earlier I referred to Stephen Green's book, *The Sexual Dead-End*. It is somewhat alarming to see in that book just how many politicians of all parties expressed concern about the now notorious clause 28 of the Local Government Act 1988.[26] Clearly, there is a significant number in the Houses of Parliament who are prepared to support further liberalization of the present homosexuality laws. But it is not just the liberalization of these existing laws that should concern us. There are a number of issues of a moral nature that either have had or will have a deleterious effect on family life. I refer in particular to the current abortion and obscene publications laws, the proposed introduction of a national lottery, the reform of Sunday trading, and the lowering of the age of consent for homosexual activity between males from the age of 21 to 18 or 16[27].

I find it profoundly disturbing to hear politicians speak about these issues as if they are not of major importance. I was born in 1951 and was therefore a teenager in the 1960s. During that decade four major pieces of legislation were enacted, relating to homosexual behaviour, divorce, capital punishment and abortion. These are all moral issues. And the passing of them has undoubtedly had a detrimental effect upon the moral tone and fibre of our society. Let me give a personal illustration.

My wife is a doctor. She detects that those doctors opposed to abortion on conscience grounds are no longer seen as caring individuals in some quarters. They are regarded as awkward, the ones who stand in the way of a patient getting what she wants. They are accused of not caring for the woman who wants an abortion. I am sure that this result was not intended by David Steel and his supporters back in 1967. But this is what is happening on the ground.

Similarly the consequences of other pieces of 1960s legislation has not been exactly what was expected. Did the drafters of the more liberal divorce laws really imagine that by the end of the century some 40% of marriages would end in divorce? Did the supporters of the Sexual Offences Act 1967 realize that the legalization of homosexual acts in private would lead to homosexuals joining in pride marches and homosexual and lesbian literature being put on display in Lambeth playgroups?[28] And did the politicians who voted out capital punishment foresee the huge rise in the number of homicides and that some prisons would be bulging with prisoners serving life sentences? What we do has consequences. Often some consequences surprise us. This being so we must urge caution on those who are eager to amend or introduce new legislation, be it to do with euthanasia, Sunday trading or a national lottery. Each of these issues is moral in character. And each will, if introduced, have a profound effect upon the moral tone, character and future of our nation. Families will be affected.

6. Individuals

Margaret Thatcher, somewhat controversially yet helpfully, was quoted in *Woman's Own*, as saying 'There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families'.[29] One of the greatest legacies of the Thatcher years is the valiant attempt she made to see individual responsibility restored to its rightful place. She wanted to see people less dependent upon 'nanny state'. We have already seen that one fruit of the Enlightenment was the rise of sociology. Along with that came an emphasis on the corporate. We must discover what people as a whole think and feel. We must go along with the crowd. I am parodying the situation a little but I do so to stress that in some quarters any talk of individual identity is frowned upon. This to a certain extent still applies despite the fact that from time to time protest movements have arisen.

The long term consequence of this rise in the importance of society is moral relativism. Every generation must decide for itself how it should

live, what values it should espouse, and what direction it should take. In theory this sounds fine. But problems quickly arise. People pull in different directions. The end result is that no-one is seen as being wrong. We are all right. We all have a valid contribution to make. This is attractive to many but history demonstrates that a divided house will fall. Worse still, God is marginalized. Mankind is made the master of his destiny. Reason and experience are deified. And we are robbed of objective standards and absolutes. No wonder the family is under pressure. G.M. Trevelyan, in his *English Social History*, quotes the French historian Elie Halévy as saying of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England that 'the power of Evangelical religion was the chief influence that prevented our country from starting along the path of revolutionary violence during this period of economic chaos and social neglect'.[30] In other words the restraints and consolations of a powerful religion[31] helped keep our nation on an even keel and paved the way for economic, political and social greatness during the second half of the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth centuries. No such cohesive force is in place today. That is why our nation is lurching from one crisis to another. Our country and culture is in terminal decline. What Mr. Major needs to remember when the siren voices of the homosexual activists visit him again in Downing Street; when the free-marketeers demand the lifting of all restrictions on Sunday trade; and when he himself announces that his aim is to create a classless Britain that is at ease with itself; is that 'righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people'.[32] Right behaviour begins with the individual. Yes, people and laws can have a restraining influence but the motivation to uphold, protect and further wholesome family life must come from within. Such motivation will only come when we are convinced that there is an external objective moral code that has been given to all people of all generations.

If a report I heard on B.B.C. Radio 4 the other day is anything to go by then the Conservative Party should be concerned. Apparently a division between those who hold to the old traditional values of morality, on the one hand, and those who adopt a more progressive approach, on the other, is emerging. This, it seems, is a consequence of 'yuppie-ism'.[33] It is even predicted that internal feuding somewhat akin to that which used to be seen in the British Labour Party may emerge. If it does, then it does not take a prophet to predict that yet more pressure will be put on the traditional nuclear family.

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NOTES

1 The substance of this address was first delivered at the Annual Conference of the Northern Area Conservative Women's Committee, 6th November 1992.

2 *The Compact Encyclopaedia*, Gresham Publishing Co., London, 1929, Vol. 5, p. 369.
3 Raymond Johnston's translation in *Who Needs the Family?*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1979, p. 11.
4 *Loc. cit.*
5 *Ibid.*, pp. 14ff.
6 *Ibid.*, pp. 16ff.
7 Some of these statistics were released by the Office of Population, Censuses and Surveys in October 1992, others by police authorities and Local Education Authorities.
8 I include in this term, magazines, newspapers, television, cinema, posters and radio.
9 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves To Death*, Methuen, London, 1987.
10 *Ibid.*, back cover.
11 *Ibid.*, chap. 5.
12 A daily newspaper published in Newcastle upon Tyne.
13 See *The Journal*, 7 September, 1992.
14 *The Journal*, 9 September, 1992.
15 *The Journal*, 13 October 1992, p. 9.
16 *The Times*, 30 October 1992, third leader, 'The Priestly Vocation'.
17 For an interesting exception see George Austin, 'Why belief in the Scripture must lie at the heart of Christianity', *The Times*, 3 August, 1992.
18 For example, 'Erotica', 'Now let yourself go'.
19 Stephen Green, *The Sexual Dead-End*, Broadview, London, 1992,—see, for example, Appendix 1.
20 Quoted in Stephen Green, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
21 *Loc. cit.*
22 Anthony O'Hear, *Father of Child-Centredness*, Centre for Policy Studies, London, 1991.
23 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
24 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
25 Erroll Hulse, *Reformation Today*, 107, January–February, 1989, p. ii, 5–8.
26 Green, *op. cit.*, see chap. 5 and Appendix 1.
27 The House of Commons voted on 21 February 1994 by 427 to 162 to reduce the age of consent from 21 to 18. An earlier motion to reduce the age to 16 was defeated by 307 to 280. A Press Release was issued to Members of Parliament and the Press on 17 February 1994 by Church Society and read as follows:

Church Society condemns Government's pro-gay stance
Consent Debate undermines Tory 'party of the family' claim

The Director of the Society, the Revd David Streater said today
'A vote for 16 is a vote against God. We call on the Anglican Bishops to follow the clear lead, on this issue, set by Cardinal Hume.

The Government appear to have bent over backwards to give Parliamentary time to help gay lobby groups. They are legislating for immorality. Following the survey funded by the Wellcome Foundation we now know that over 70% of the population believe homosexuality is always or mostly wrong. Only 0.4% are exclusively homosexual, but according to the Public Health Laboratory 75% of all AIDS cases are male homosexuals. We know that the under 21s are at a greater AIDS risk than those over 21. *So lowering the age of consent could quite literally be passing a death sentence on vulnerable young boys.'*

28 *Ibid.*, p. 54.
29 Margaret Thatcher, *Woman's Own*, London, 31 October, 1987.
30 G.M. Trevelyan, *English Social History*, Penguin, London, 1986, p. 490.
31 *Loc. cit.*
32 Proverbs 14. 34.
33 An acronym for a young, upwardly mobile professional person, now commonly pejorative.