

The “Family Meltdown” of Western Secular Society

PART 1:

The Reality of Family Meltdown in Western Secular States

In April 2008, Justice Paul Coleridge, the judge in charge of family courts across South West England, delivered a speech to family lawyers from the organisation “Resolution”, where he described family life in the UK in “meltdown” marked by an epidemic of family breakdown. He said, *“A large number of families now consist of children being brought up by mothers who have children by a number of different fathers, none of whom take any part in their lives or support or upbringing....These are not isolated, one-off cases. They are part of the stock-in-trade of the family courts.”* He continued, *“Almost all society's ills can be traced directly to the collapse of family life. We all know it. Examine the background of almost every child in the care system or the youth justice system and you will discover a broken family. Ditto the drug addict. Ditto the binge drinker. Ditto those children who are truanting or who cannot behave at school. Scratch the surface of these cases and you invariably find a miserable family, overseen by a dysfunctional and fractured parental relationship - or none at all.”*

This morbid description of family life in the UK came in the wake of other news stories, including the fall in marriage rates in England and Wales to the lowest level since records began in 1862 (Office for National Statistics (ONS)) and a rise in divorce rates to the highest since 1996. These views regarding the meltdown of the family structure in the UK were also echoed by various politicians, academics and teachers in the country. Robert Wheelan from the think-tank CIVITAS, (The Institute for the Study of Civil Society), which often advises the British government on civil issues, described family break-ups as too big a problem for state help to resolve. He said, *“The state might be able to pour in money and bombard children with help if there were a small proportion of broken families, but it can't cope with a problem on this scale.”* Karen Woodall from the Centre for Separated Families commented, *“Family separation is actually a fact of life in the UK across the whole of society. If you add in all the grandparents of children whose parents are separated and of adults partnering and other separated parents, it is likely that divorce and separation is an issue affecting half the population.”* And teachers at the 2008 annual conference of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers described a “toxic circle” of family breakdown affecting children's ability to learn as well as their mental health and well-being.

Over the last decade, the scale of the meltdown of the family unit in the UK has only intensified. In fact, it has been in freefall. Christian Guy, the Director of the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), an influential British think-tank that advises on social issues in Britain, warned in a report published in 2013, titled, “Fractured Families: Why Stability Matters”, of a *“‘tsunami’ of family breakdown battering the country”*. He stated that the human, social and financial costs were ‘devastating’ for children and adults alike but that regardless of being faced with this national ‘emergency’, the response from politicians of the Left and the Right had been ‘feeble’.

This tsunami of family breakdown is mirrored in states across the western world. In

the UK, the divorce rate stands at 42% (ONS). In 2012 there were 13 divorces every hour in England and Wales. In the US 53% of marriages end in divorce, in Sweden it's 64%, and in Belgium it's an eye-watering 70% (figures from Business Insider). According to Eurostat, between 1965 to 2013 the crude divorce rate doubled in the EU-28 countries.

This huge increase in divorce has been accompanied by a huge surge in lone parent households – households where a child is living only with their mother or father. In the UK, between 1996 and 2012 the number of lone parent households increased by 25% to around 2 million and now represent a quarter of all 'families' with dependent children (ONS). In fact, according to government figures, nearly half of all 15-year olds in the country are not living with both their natural parents. In poorest communities, this rises to 2/3 of all adolescents. The vast majority (92%) of lone-parent households with dependent children are headed by mothers; many struggling to bring up their children alone, while also being the sole-provider for their family. Every year, an additional 20,000 people, mainly women, join those raising children alone. The consequence is that huge numbers of children in the UK, 1 in 3 in fact, are growing up without a father at home, with an estimated 1-2 million of them being deprived of any meaningful contact with their fathers (ONS), and many having no contact at all. The official birth registration figure for 2015 showed that more than half of new teenage mothers do not live with the father or the name of the father is not registered. The Fatherhood Institute states that by the time they had reached 16 years of age, 1 in 6 of all children in the UK did not see their father at all. David Cameron, former British Prime Minister, stated in his speech at the 2015 Conservative Party Conference that, *"Today, a teenager sitting their GCSEs is more likely to own a smartphone than have a dad living with them."*

It is a similar story in other Western secular states. According to the U.S. 2010 Census, 1 in 3 children in America (15 million) live without their fathers and nearly 5 million live without a mother. And in some urban areas, only 1 in 10 children has a father present.

Alongside this epidemic in family breakdown within secular Western states, there has been the dramatic drop in marriage rates within these countries over the last few decades. According to Eurostat, between 1965 and 2013, the crude marriage rate in the EU-28 countries declined close to 50% in relative terms. In the UK, over the last 40 years, the proportion of the adult population that is married has decreased from around 70% of the population to less than half (CSJ). 2013 marked the lowest marriage rate on record. According to the Office for National Statistics, only a half of today's teens in the country will marry. In most of the Nordic countries such as Iceland, Denmark, and Norway, only about 30% of women are married, while that drops to fewer than 20% of those women who are aged between 25 and 29. (worldatlas.com)

In contrast to this drop in marital rates, co-habitation (couples living together outside of marriage) within Western states has sky rocketed as it became recognised within liberal societies as an accepted form of 'family structure', morally on par with the institution of marriage. So, in the UK, while fewer than 1 in 100 adults under the age of 50 co-habited in the 1960's, this has increased to 1 in 5 today (ONS), comprising 3.3 million households (ONS). In fact, cohabitation has been the fastest growing household type over the past 2 decades in the country. This is despite the fact that report after report, study after study revealed that marriage is the most stable way to bring up children, with households based on co-habitation more likely to break apart than those based on marriage. According to figures released by the Marriage Foundation organisation, British

children born to co-habiting parents are 94% more likely to see the break-up of their parents before the age of 12 compared to children born to married parents.

As a consequence of this liberal lifestyle in the West, it is therefore hardly surprising that extramarital births have soared within these states. Eurostat figures state that the proportion of live births outside marriage in the EU-28 countries in 2014 was 42%. In 2015, extramarital births outnumbered births inside marriage in several EU member states: France – 59%, Sweden – 55%, Denmark – 56%, Estonia and Slovenia (58%) (Eurostat). In the UK, nearly half (47%) of all babies are born outside marriage (ONS), while in the 1940's it was around 6%. According to a study by academics at the U.S.'s John Hopkins University, published in 2012, 57% of parents in America aged 26-31 were having children out of marriage.

In addition to the tsunami of family breakdown in the West, there are also other major problems affecting family life, such as the lack of time parents spend with children due to both the father and mother having demanding work expectations which is also straining marriages; the sufferings of the “Superwoman” struggling to balance the responsibilities of home life with a high-maintenance career or job; and the downsizing of the family unit with couples choosing to have fewer children or even no children at all which has caused a ‘baby’ gap in a number of countries including France, Germany and Spain, resulting in an ageing population and fewer young people to look after the elderly.

The declining worth of family life in Britain and in many other Western secular societies is evident to see, as are the consequences of broken or dysfunctional families which have devastated the lives of so many, especially children and sown a multitude of social problems for these states. Justice Paul Coleridge described the fall out of this high scale of family breakdown in Britain as, “...a *never-ending carnival of human misery. A ceaseless river of human distress*”.

Part 2 of this article will examine the root causes of the family meltdown in Western secular liberal states.

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