



Gerhard Schroeder: The Family: A New Challenge for Progressive Politics

Today's idea of the family must recognise and work with the grain of a changing society

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We live in a time of rapid, drastic and dramatic change. That makes one of our most important challenges - guaranteeing security and stability for families - ever more difficult. To meet it, we need to keep two guiding principles at the forefront of policy: partnership and subsidiarity. In this article, I want to examine what that means in practical terms.

Finding and defining a "centre-left" approach to family policy has been and continues to be one of the most important topics in the debate on progressive governance in the twenty first century. But while we have made a fair amount of progress in recognising the virtues of "civil society" - and the need for an "active state" to empower it - most of us have been reluctant to extend this idea to the most important of all the components of civil society: the family.

In part this has been because the idea of promoting the family has always been regarded as the sole domain of conservatives. In this respect, the family is still too often confused with the notion of the "traditional" family and the "traditional" division of gender roles. Nothing could be more wrong.

Most of the problems we have to tackle today have in one way or another to do with family. Take education and the need for constant, ever improving qualifications. Families remain the place where most educational opportunities and choices are made possible; but we have still not fully overcome the notion of a father's purse determining his children's career opportunities.

The family is equally pivotal in relation to any restructuring of the welfare state. All of Europe faces the same problem of an ageing society: the need for some measure of inter-generational justice that will guarantee security for the elderly without necessitating crippling payments from younger workers. In this context especially, what could be more relevant than the family?

Perhaps the most important task of any society is raising its children. By forcing parents to choose between succeeding at home and succeeding at work, we ensure that they cannot but lose.

We certainly do not want to return to the old days when marriage was above all about procreation and so women had no choice but housework and mothering. What we need instead is a new approach to the idea of family which recognises and works with the grain of a changing society.

Individualism is well rewarded in today's world. We should not be afraid of this. It means, after all, that individual talents and opportunities are fulfilled. But individualisation is not the same thing as isolation. Individualism does not mean the end of society, or of partnership; if we ever forget that, we run the risk of individualism destroying social cohesion.

The death of the family has been heralded for more than a hundred years. And yet, as the ultimate 'network' - one of related individuals from different generations - it still has tremendous vitality and versatility and a key role to play. Families will still be with us in thirty or forty years' time; but they will be so diverse that it will not be possible to speak of "the" family, at least not in the sense of the 'nuclear family' of old. One must not forget that what we call the "traditional family" was nothing more than a transitional phase in family development during a period in post-war Europe when few women had full-time jobs, when divorce was still stigmatised, when it was particularly difficult for

single-mothers to bring up children and when extra-marital children were still not granted full rights. Even then, however, the family had ceased to function as an economic unit for most of society - and men and women enjoyed more rights than, say, fifty years before.

But whatever form they take, families will retain the core function of providing children with a social network in which to grow up. Despite laments about the "collapse" of the family, it still fulfils this purpose relatively well. 85% of all children and young people under 16 in Germany grow up today with two parents - a heartening statistic which seems almost unbelievable in view of the well known divorce statistics.

The challenge for politics is to support and strengthen this vitality and versatility. That does not mean using politics to alter demographic trends; state benefits, however high, will not reverse the declining birth rate. Indeed, the traditional benefits model of social planning actively fosters the outdated role of women as just mothers and housewives.

Nor would a return to the female "three-phase-biography" be of much help: get qualifications; get children and bring them up; get back to work. The rapid pace of technological change in most jobs would not allow for simple "return" schemes; a sensible family policy today must provide for lifelong learning and far more flexibility in working hours - and that should equally apply to fathers as to mothers.

The collapse of traditional social relationships and environments, which provided people with the necessary security and reliability, has unleashed a longing which social policy has not yet come close to meeting. Far from an individualised society removing the need for partnership and security, it makes them still more necessary. More than ever, people look to their immediate surroundings: in the community, amongst friends or colleagues and, above all, within the family. And politics has to respond to this. It is a key task for politicians to promote and stabilise these social networks which lie at core of peoples' lives.

Today, men and women have concrete expectations. Women want to work and be mothers. This makes equal employment opportunities and workplace structures which permit this combination key priorities. Measures in the education and training of girls and young women have significantly improved the access of women to the labour market and their subsequent career prospects. As for the compatibility of work and family life, the right to a kindergarden place, full-day private and state childcare, crèches and after-school centres have opened up new opportunities for women - and also for men.

However, when it comes to childcare, we still have a long way to go in *Germany*. True, we have raised the child allowance more than any government before us; we have broadened the opportunities for education leave (for both parents) and part-time work. But especially, as far as full day schools are concerned, we are still behind the European standard, particularly in Western Germany. To change this, the federal, regional and local levels have to work together.

We are committed to further raising the child allowance but we need to do more. Family policy benefits all of society. That is why the Red-Green coalition is pursuing a more comprehensive family policy than any of its predecessors. We want to put people at the heart of politics. We want people to live well and achieve their potential in all aspects of their life. Politics begins with people - not with ideologies but with the realities of life. Or, as Bertold Brecht would have had it: only by making the best of your lives do you have good dreams and improve your conditions.

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