

"Charter Families:" Hope for the Children of Illegitimacy?

On November 27, 1995, Professor James Q. Wilson delivered the keynote address at a dinner to honor the winners of Pioneer Institute's fifth annual Better Government Competition. In his address, Professor Wilson discussed the problems of illegitimacy and proposed that young, pregnant, unmarried girls who wish to establish an independent household at public expense be given this support only on the condition that they live in a family shelter or group home managed under private auspices, including religious groups. This would provide the social structure and adult supervision that young single mothers and their children currently lack. In 1996, Pioneer Institute and the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture at Boston University will jointly release a book by Joe Loconte that will focus on the role of private organizations in the provision of social services. In the following pages, Pioneer Institute has reproduced an edited transcript of Professor Wilson's remarks.

Three key words are associated with Pioneer Institute's work: community, choice, and competition. Now I would like to add a fourth "c" -- character.

The American political regime as envisioned by its founders was not supposed to have anything to do with character. It was supposed to enable people living in villages and towns to compose their differences at the national level sufficient to secure a more perfect union and ensure domestic tranquillity and justice. It was assumed, as Tocqueville remarked a few decades later, that it was in private associations (family, neighborhood, and peer groups) and small political institutions (village and town governments) that character could be formed, so the national government could take character for granted. "Men," Madison wrote, "are presumed to have sufficient virtue to constitute and maintain a free republic."

Today, by contrast, we are properly concerned with the issue of character and it has been placed on the national agenda by both political parties. Why is it that the assumptions that influenced the men who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 are no longer the assumptions we bring to contemplating the true purpose of our national polity?

One reason is that government has gotten bigger. As government gets bigger, it touches all aspects of our lives. As it touches all aspects of our lives, we increasingly put our concerns back on the government. The price of big government is an ever-expanding agenda.

Forty years ago, when I began studying politics, it was inconceivable that the federal government would ever be held responsible for crime, drug abuse, illegitimacy, welfare, civil rights, clean air, or clean water. Today it is responsible for all those things.

Not only have our aspirations and the size of the federal government changed, but so has our culture. In many spheres of our lives we are no longer confident that local private institutions like families, churches, and neighborhoods are sufficient to form a culture that will sustain and enrich a free society.

One of the areas in which this concern has become most sharply focused is illegitimacy. An illegitimacy crisis that affects both black and white has been growing without let-up since the early 1960s. It has shaped the profound debate now unfolding in Washington about the relationship between federal welfare programs and the very formation and maintenance of families.

When Title IV, which created the program now known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), was added to the Social Security Act of 1935, it was the least controversial part of that landmark legislation. For years after its enactment, it caused scarcely a national political ripple. The reason was that it gave federal support to a few state programs designed to provide short-term compensation to women who had been widowed due to the First World War, coal mining disasters, or had been divorced or deserted by husbands. It nationalized these programs by extending them to the other states.

No one expected it would become a way of life and no one ever expected teenagers would apply for it. All that has changed. Today, the average new AFDC enrollee spends only two or three years on welfare and then moves on. It acts as a stop-gap measure to provide for the needs of women and children during a particularly difficult time in their lives. This is the group for whom AFDC was originally intended.

But if you look at the total number of welfare recipients, as opposed to those who enter the roles in any given year, you notice that the typical recipient has been on welfare for ten years. Increasingly, this has extended into second and third generations. Many come and leave quickly, but a few remain. And the number who remain now constitute the largest share of the whole.

There is a spirited debate about why this should be so. I think it is fair to say that no one can confidently claim to know the answer to this question. It is difficult to sustain the argument that the existence of welfare causes dependency if it did not do so during the first 30 years of its history. Evidence about the effect of state differences in welfare payments on rates of welfare participation is inconclusive.

There has probably been a profound cultural shift that has de-stigmatized illegitimacy and removed barriers that once inhibited people from remaining on AFDC for long periods of time. Even if we assume that the system of public payments did not cause this phenomenon, it certainly makes it possible. If the system did not exist, the current degree of dependency would not exist.

Even if you disagree with that assertion, the system has surely not cured its own defects. Rates of illegitimacy and single parenthood among black and white Americans have risen steadily since the early 1960s and that trend shows little sign of tapering off.

The harms associated with single parenthood and illegitimacy are now so well documented that the evidence need not be reviewed. But let me give you one example gathered by the government itself. A few years ago, the Department of Health and Human Services selected over 30,000 households across the country, designed to represent a statistical cross section. They interviewed the mother, father, or both about the welfare of their children. Except for the very highest income level, children raised in single parent households are materially worse off, irrespective of race. They are worse off in terms of educational achievement, social well-being, aggressiveness, and difficulty with the law.

It should not take massive studies to establish this phenomenon. It is evident to many who confront life in hospital emergency rooms, police stations, juvenile courts, or welfare offices on a daily basis. The problem has crystallized in the form of our concern about the unmarried teenage mother.

If you survey the history of families around the world, every culture has had teenage mothers. Indeed, what is striking today is how long many women wait before having children. But what was different in the past is that those girls gave birth as part of an embedded structure; with a husband, grandmothers, aunts, uncles, and siblings. They were part of an extended family or a village in which there were many people who not only helped take care of the child, but taught the mother to be a mother and required that the father be a father. The debate I hear in Washington about reforming the current system is remarkably inattentive to the core fact that young girls living apart from other adults cannot expect much success at raising children alone.

Instead, the debate is posing questions like how do we save money on the welfare budget? How soon can we require recipients to work? How can we use modern technology to go after deadbeat dads? These may all be worthwhile concerns, but they should be viewed as subordinate to the central goal of saving the children whose lives are being destroyed as a consequence of growing up in this environment.

To solve this problem, we must ask all levels of government and the private sector to do something American government has never had to do before: constitute and support a viable alternative to the traditional family for the children and young women most at risk. One trembles even to utter this phrase because in the Anglo-Saxon legal tradition, the king with all his legions stops at the threshold of the hut of the very poorest peasant.

We all understand that government cannot raise children. But there is something out there that is not working and government must change its allocation of incentives to give us a fighting chance to solve the problem. Let me suggest a strategy and then indicate how I think Pioneer Institute and all of you can help implement it.

We must get young, unmarried, pregnant girls embedded in a social structure under adult supervision. This not only provides an opportunity to give their children a good start in life, but teaches them how to be a parent and protect themselves from the desperate conditions of gangs, drugs, and crime that often exist around them.

I therefore propose that if young, pregnant, unmarried women wish to establish an independent household at public expense, they should be given this support only on the condition that they live in some kind of family shelter or group home managed under private auspices, including religious groups. Part of the welfare reform debate currently raging in Washington focuses on the so-called Ashcroft Amendment, sponsored by Senator John Ashcroft of Missouri. The amendment states that nothing in the proposed welfare reform bill shall prevent religious groups from providing social services to welfare recipients on an equal basis with secular groups.

It is not clear what is meant by "services," or how funds would be transferred to these groups. But it is sending the message to young women that the character of the children they are raising is so important to this society that we insist they raise them in a truly adult setting provided by one of a variety of private organizations. And we will reinforce this by saying your check cannot be cashed unless it is co-signed by the person who manages the program. You are free to choose the program -- secular or religious -- you

wish to join. But we will not fund you to set up an independent household, given what we know about the harm it does to the children.

Up to this point I have said nothing about the other half of the equation -- the men involved. I have learned from talking to audiences across the country that the riskiest policy for a male speaker is to act as if this were a problem created by women that could be solved by placing more constraints on women. But let me clarify a few points from the perspective of someone who has been researching the history of families and fatherhood around the world. Men and women differ in their willingness to make a commitment to the welfare of a child. This can be established by the simple fact that in any culture where there are single parent families, more than 90 percent of them are headed by women. This cannot happen by accident. If it were simply a matter of cultural convention, you would find places where half or more of single parent families were headed by men. But you do not.

Men and women differ due to evolution, biology, and a variety of other factors. But since women care for children when men will not, much of civilization has been devoted to the problem of disciplining males. Society in all cultures has invented a few techniques to get males to play their role. When I was growing up, young unmarried women who got pregnant had a couple of choices. They either went away to live with relatives, had the child, then returned while the relatives raised the child, or they told their fathers and brothers who the father of the child was. The father and brothers then told the boy, "either you marry the girl or we will beat you to death." The other option for the boy was to run away and join the navy. None of those options seems to work anymore. The force of custom and shame is no longer as powerful as it once was. The law once played a role in forcing men to take responsibility by requiring that paternity be clarified. Women once played a role by denying sexual access to men unwilling to make a commitment. If you want to summarize in hyperbolic and exaggerated terms what the core problem of character formation is today, it is that the only one of these forces that still operates is the woman's willingness to say "no." In place of law, we have no-fault divorce. In place of custom and shame, we have created a sense that everyone should "do his own thing." And fathers and brothers, far from beating up someone who has impregnated a daughter without marrying her, are themselves busy with other people's daughters.

Unfortunately, this leaves the burden with women. But women should not bear the burden alone; the state should be on their side. To the extent it can, it is desirable for the state to enforce the obligations of paternity.

This has proven to be extremely difficult. For several years, particularly since Congress passed the Family Support Act in 1988, programs have been in place to get states to devise ways of collecting child support payments from absent fathers. Many states have vigorously pursued the fathers, but have not collected much money.

But again we are moving away from the core problem. The key is not to supply dollars, but to supply the father. It is his presence, not just his money, that has been lost. The average child raised by a mother only sees his father a few times a year.

The problem of re-constituting this character forming institution cannot be solved by government. But I would suggest that just as we have formed and are encouraging charter schools, we should form and encourage charter families. Groups from the private sector who are willing to accept government money to provide long-term shelters for young girls who cannot or will not live with their own parents and who have children with no fathers to take care of them.

I have no idea whether this will work. It is the task of Pioneer Institute and organizations like it to encourage this type of experimentation.

Money is going to flow from Washington to the states in the form of block grants. With some degree of restriction, states will have the opportunity to design and implement their own welfare programs. Most states will reproduce less expensive forms of the current system.

But I hope Massachusetts will be among the states that use this opportunity to tear up the old script. Leave the existing system intact for women who need it as a bridge to get through death, desertion, or divorce, and will leave welfare in two or three years. But provide a radically different option, privately-run and with a built-in social structure, for those young girls who are now raising the next generation of our children.

Good luck fulfilling this task. Thank you.

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