

Addressing Problems of Marriage: Are Governments Part of the Solution?

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In nations such as Australia and the United Kingdom, there have been recent shifts in political responses to the problem of marriage breakdowns. Responding to the challenge of preventing divorce, governments have developed new policies and provided funding to help couples sustain long term relationships. Marriage support features strongly in policy documents as a way of attempting to tackle the problems of marriage breakdowns. This paper examines public policies encouraging couples to participate in government-sponsored relationship and marriage education services. While private organisations such as non-profit and community groups as well as the churches often deliver the programs, this strategy indicates that governments are developing political measures and policy ideas in a highly sensitive area.

The paper presents a comparative study of marriage support. It traces developments initiated by governments in Britain and Australia encouraging couples intending marriage to prepare with the necessary knowledge or skills. Political strategies recognizing public values of the social and economic benefits of stable marriages, as well as private values of personal responsibility, indicate how governments are mobilising around issues of family and sexual politics. While remaining at arm's length, I suggest that government policies are considering people's most intimate relationships. The aim is to reduce the costs of relationship breakdowns for governments and society, but this is a challenging policy area for governments.

In nations such as Australia and the UK, governments are becoming increasingly involved in the personal sphere as they deal with a rapidly changing social environment. There have been recent shifts in political responses to the social problem of marriage breakdowns. Because approximately fifty per cent of marriages end in divorce, governments are reshaping existing policies to preserve and support marriage. Responding to the challenge of preventing marriage breakdowns, governments have developed policies and established programs in this usually private arena. This paper seeks to analyse the development of public policies and initiatives designed to strengthen marital relationships by intervention and prevention strategies. The paper examines the histories and political environment in each country and how this has influenced the different policies. The UK Labour Government has softened its prescription for marriage and expanded support to all couples, whereas the Liberal Coalition Government in Australia focuses more on strengthening families. The paper concludes by discussing some of the challenges for governments in implementing programs supporting marriage.

Governments are developing political measures and policy ideas for economic reasons - to save costs for the public purse. Closer regulation of heterosexual relations is designed to prevent the high rates of divorce. Divorce has huge economic, social and legal costs, for the government and society as a whole. For

example, in Australia, the approximate expense of marriage and family separation is more than \$3 billion per annum (House of Representatives Standing Committee, 1998). This includes social security benefits, social services, legal aid, health and other costs. The amount doubles with indirect costs, in addition to the personal and emotional suffering for parents and children. In the UK, it has been estimated that family breakdown and divorce directly cost the taxpayer approximately 10 billion pounds per year. This is approximately one per cent of gross national product, or 7.40 pounds per week from each income tax payer (One Plus One, 2002).

A comparison of public policies concerning marriage in the UK and Australia shows that governments in the two countries have similar goals - supporting healthy marriages to sustain a stable society. Governments have always been involved in the institution of marriage, because it is generally regarded as the basic unit and bedrock of society and therefore, a matter of public concern (see Ooms, 2001). The main reason for government involvement is to provide legal assistance with matters such as marriage licenses and divorce decrees. Nonetheless, in both the UK and Australia, policy makers are concerned about the effects of divorce and single parenthood not only on adults and children, but also on communities and the economy. The recent development of government intervention, therefore, is to rejuvenate and strengthen the institution of marriage through programs delivered by the community sector. This is not a comfortable area for public policy, because as Whitehead and Popenoe (2003) argue, many people view marriage as a private issue based on personal feelings and none of any government's concern. People who marry for romantic love do not see the need for marriage preparation: 'the conduct of intimate relationships is a private matter' (2003: 7). According to this view: 'a couple's intimate relationship is nobody's business but the two people involved, unless, of course, their relationship hurts, taxes, or impinges on another's liberties' (Whitehead and Popenoe 2003: 7).

Building healthy marriages is nonetheless recognised as a legitimate public policy. Many organisations that aim to encourage and strengthen marriage cite its benefits. There is consensus in the research that children tend to be better off, financially and emotionally when their parents are married to each other [assuming that there is no domestic violence, major conflicts or unhappiness]. For example, Waite and Gallagher (2000) argue that marriage is an important social good providing positive outcomes for both children and adults. Children in intact, two-parent families tend to earn more and learn more. They also tend to lead longer, healthier, happier lives, avoid alcohol and drug abuse and endure much less physical and psychological abuse. Because of this, they generally require fewer government-paid social services, such as remedial learning, criminal justice, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, depression counselling, and medical, income and housing-aid programs.

Marriage and government policies in the United Kingdom

The UK has supported what was then termed marriage guidance since the 1940s. After 1945, the government was concerned about the increasing number of marriage breakdowns and established an inquiry. Consequently, the Denning Report recommended that public funds should be provided for marriage education and training programs for marriage counsellors. In 1949 the Home Office provided some funding to the National Marriage Guidance Council, the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council and the Family Welfare Association (Marshall, 1996: 11). Many marriage

guidance/counsellors were women who had given up their jobs as social workers and doctors, working part-time as non-paid volunteers. The stereotype of a marriage counsellor was a 'twin set and pearls lady' doing 'good works' (cited in Blaisure, 2003, 14). Because of these stereotypes and a lack of thorough training programs, marriage guidance was not taken seriously in social service provision.

Since 1995, the Lord Chancellor's Department (LCD) has had responsibility for policy development and funding for supporting adult couples. Marriage was put on the public agenda as a policy issue with the development of the Family Law Act 1996 (FLA). At the time, there was much debate about the failure of the divorce system which did not help to 'save saveable marriages' (Blaisure, 2003, 11). Part II of the FLA included the most controversial elements of removing fault-based facts as evidence for divorce and public funding for marriage support services. The new Labour government in 1997 however, never enacted part II. Roberts (1997) argues that the new Labour administration made no clear policy statements about marriage though its leadership and manifesto was less equivocal about the importance of the family. She argued that there were indications of potential policy tensions, for example from welfare to work for lone parents – but little understanding of the financial or economic basis of committed or married relationships. Little would happen to bolster marriage through Government action in the short term. While the Churches, especially the Catholics are pro-marriage, a weak political constituency was not wide enough to move the issue of marriage support to centre stage (1997: 105). The government advanced a policy that attempted 'to demonstrate its commitment to marriage while also acknowledging the reality that many in the UK are in nonmarital relationships' (Blaisure, 2003, 17).

Government commitment to encouraging lasting relationships is evident in three policy documents. First, in 1998, the government's report *Supporting Families* argued that marriage provided the foundation for stable relationships. Marriage preparation was strongly recommended in this document. Second, in 1999, *Marriage Support Funding: A Review* by Hart recommended that the LCD should establish strategies for developing marriage support services in partnership with the voluntary sector, professional bodies, statutory services and other Government departments. The Hart Review argued that it is necessary to help couples reduce conflict and avoid divorce and that marriage support can be effective in saving marriages and assisting couples to improve their relationships. This not only assisted individual couples, but saved the government large amounts of money (1999, 12). The cost of family breakdown and divorce was estimated to be approximately 5 billion pounds in 1999. The government accepted the recommendations of the Hart Review. Funding for marriage programs increased from 3.2 million pounds in 1999-2000, to 4 million pounds in 2002-01 to 5million pounds in 2002-03. Funds provided core funding for national organisations and funding for research and development projects.

Third, it was agreed that the LCD should play a more active role in policy and establish an Advisory Group on Marriage and Relationship Support (AGMARS). The AGMARS first met in 2000 to develop policy and assess funding for marriage and relationship support. The Lord Chancellor's AGMARS published *Moving Forward Together: A Proposed Strategy for Marriage and Relationship Support for 2002 and Beyond* in 2002. The report stated that 'the Government has no desire to tell people how to live their lives. But if couples' lives can be improved – and those of their

children – then that is something worth doing’ (2002, 3). The report recommends an inclusive approach to adult couple relationships, stating that it is ‘vital that Government funding can be directed to offer support for all adult relationships, whether or not these are marital, or familial’ (2002, 12). The role of the government, the report said, was to ‘give a lead in developing policy and strategy to deliver the agreed outcomes’ while the statutory sector should provide education and training, services to clientele with health problems and referrals to specialist services and couples support services. The voluntary sector is ‘best placed’ to develop and provide services, good practice, innovative ideas, training, education and information (2002, 29).

There is no reliable data on the number of couples attending marriage preparation, as the programs are so varied and not co-ordinated by any central agency. There are however, records of who receives funding. Particular marriage and relationship support organisations receive core funding for developing infrastructure such as salaries, utilities and rent from LCD. Relate is the UK’s main counselling agency for couples. Its aim is ‘to enhance the quality of couple and thereby marriage, parental and family relationships and thus help avoid marriage and relationship breakdown’ (Relate, 2003). Most of its support is provided through counselling. It is consistently the major recipient of MARS funding, receiving 45 per cent of grants for the year 2002-2003. The Tavistock Marital Studies Institute is based on psychoanalysis and practice. It supports and develops services to couples and families. Marriage Care, formerly the Catholic Marriage Advisory Service, provides support in three ways – preparation, enrichment and counselling. The marriage preparation component addresses the needs of adolescents, engaged couples and Catholic or Christian couples. One Plus One, formerly the Marriage Research Council, identifies and examines the causes, effects and prevention of marital breakdown. The Director of One Plus One praised the LCD’s initiatives as ‘highly constructive and based on a recognition that much of the help currently available is too little, too late’. She also said that the LCD’s commitment ‘is not yet matched with appropriate investment. ... Innovative preventive projects will not get off the ground if funding is not increased. The LCD’s vision is enlightened but will be constrained if the voluntary sector cannot afford to invest in development work’ (cited in One Plus One, 2002). Many working in the field (also in Australia) support this view. As Blaisure notes, service providers ‘are perplexed that the government seems unaware of the connection between the quality of adult relationships and the well-being of children, at least when allocating funds and the lack of ‘joined up thinking’ among government departments (2003, 24). They argue that while funding goes to parenting and children’s services, there is minimal financial support for services to couples.

There are also criticisms about who is receiving funding. Martin (2003) argues the government ‘finds itself supporting and promoting marriage on the one hand and chipping away at the institution of marriage on the other’ (3). She argues that too many groups with alternative agendas to marriage are receiving MARS funding while more appropriately pro-marriage organisations and initiatives are being disadvantaged. She argues that the LDC must re-evaluate its funding process because groups that have agendas outside the objectives of MARS are receiving grants. This includes the following organisations. Aquila Care Trust which helps people to deal with the problems of separation, divorce and broken relationships. The Lesbian and Gay Foundation offers a variety of services for homosexuals such

as self-help groups for transsexuals, and support for those coming out. The Project for Advocacy, Counselling and Education (PACE) provides services for lesbians and gay men, including counselling and therapy, mental health advocacy, HIV prevention, employment and training. Martin also criticises the LDC for not supporting initiatives such as Futureway Trust which organises National Marriage Week. It has received government funding in the past, but their last successful application for the year 2000-2001. She contends that it is not clear why its application failed.

Marriage and government policies in Australia

In comparison to the UK, the Australian government seems more concerned with what happens when marriages break down than with what happens when people prepare for marriage. Issues such as shared parenting, child support and the role of the Family Court are on the political agenda. Despite concerns about the decline of marriage and the family, marriage support receives minimal funding and is relatively dormant as a policy concern. There is very little pro-active lobbying in promoting marriage education. This may be explained by the political weakness of interest groups and service providers, but also because politicians are reluctant to be perceived as interfering in people's personal affairs.

Nonetheless, there is a history of government support for marriage to counteract the need for regulating marital breakdown. Political strategies have focused on the prevention of marriage breakdowns for decades. In the 1940s the Young Christian Workers – a Catholic youth organisation concerned with social development - handled pre-marriage programs. Harris et al. (1992) argue that the catalyst was the changing nature of society at the time: war had shattered family ties, making it difficult for mothers and fathers to pass on the knowledge and skills required to be a good husband or wife. These church sponsored conferences promoted Christian values as a solution to the increasing incidence of marital breakdown. Concurrently, government sponsored marriage guidance and counselling services were expanding. Due to public recognition and financial assistance, organisations began using professionally trained staff for counselling and tutoring couples considering marriage (Harris et al., 1992, 11). During the 1950s, Churches conducted conferences of one day for engaged couples.

Since the 1960s, government-supported schemes such as the Family Services Program have provided grants to Christian churches and secular organisations offering marriage counselling. Services increased in marriage education, family skills and parenting programs. The most important principle was promoting and preserving quality family relationships. By the 1980s there was a significant change in the content of the subject matter. Besides assisting couples to reflect on themselves and marriage, courses began teaching marital communication and conflict resolution. Pre-marital education has become an instructive practice in its own right responding to increasing community, church and government concern for couples, the marriages they enter and the families they create (Harris et al., 1992, 12-3). The Attorney-General's department provides funding in accordance with specifications found in the Family Law Act (Section 43 (a) and (b)) and in the Marriage Act (Section 9C).

A more commercial approach has developed since the mid 1980s because of the increase in user pay policies, emphasis on training standards accreditation, and

academic studies of counselling and education. In 1994-95, 28,173 people, three-quarters of whom were couples attended over 17,000 sessions in marriage education agencies (Andrews and Andrews, 1997, 113). In 1989-90, Commonwealth provided \$248,000 to 24 agencies, this increased to \$500,00 by 1991-92 (Andrews and Andrews, 1997, 111).

Various reviews of marriage education programs and services have taken place over the past decades, advocating the need for improvements in marriage preparation. For example, the 1992 Joint Select Committee on Certain Aspects of the Operation and Interpretation of the Family Law Act (para 4.97) recommended increased funding for community education about the rights and responsibilities of marriage and parenthood, communication, dispute resolution skills and anger management. The Committee stated that,

there is a compelling cost benefit argument in favour of more funding for preventative education, which might help reduce the number of marriages which reach the stage of breakdown. Successive governments have given this field far too low a priority for funding, and the Committee believes that immediate actions should be taken to rectify this situation.

Kevin Andrews was elected to Parliament in 1991; as a chief supporter of marriage preparation, this allowed him to influence the policy agenda. Impetus for government recognition has come largely from people like him who were convinced of the benefits of marriage education because of their personal involvement (Andrews and Andrews, 1997, 112).

The latest political reforms stem from *To Have and to Hold: Strategies to Strengthen Marriage and Relationships* (HRSC/LCA, 1998). This House of Representatives report, chaired by Andrews, recommended educational programs for couples intending to marry, suggesting that the government should increase financial support and provide more relationship advice and skills. It argued that marriage and relationship education and family skills training should be recognized as distinct from programs of therapy, counselling and mediation. The report acknowledged that people's values and expectations of marriage were misplaced. It argued that some couples 'often have unrealistic expectations of the challenge of marriage and the media images of blissful relationships contribute to high expectations without necessarily the concurrent skills' (1998, 58). Hence there is a need for developing pre-marriage programs.

Pilot schemes were introduced. Do-it-yourself kits were provided for couples who were unable to attend a pre-marriage education course (Newman, 2000, 1). Minister Newman stated that the programs helping to prevent family break-ups are a 'very effective *investment* in family well-being' (2000, 1). She articulates the political tension between marriage as a 'natural' and expected condition and the idea that, despite this, marriage is something for which people need training. Newman says, 'people tend to forget that it is the traditional institutions of family and community, not governments, that deliver the most effective social support' (2000, 2). This suggests that the government is careful not to be seen as too interfering in people's personal affairs. She goes on to say that 'attitudes are changing and there seems greater acceptance of the idea that we need to acquire the skills for marriage just as we need lessons for driving a car' (2000, 3). This supports the views in *To Have and to Hold* that challenges the perception

that couples invariably move from a state of romantic love to a struggle between them and, if successful to a state of intimacy. Common to the many programs of marriage education is the understanding that it is not compatible views, which are ultimately important in determining marital stability, but the manner in which couples work out their differences (HRSCCLCA, 1998, 142).

This position promotes personal responsibility, while at the same time encouraging people to participate in government-sponsored programs.

The Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) administers programs designed to help couples to explore their relationship and develop personal skills. This includes Premarital Personal and Relationship Evaluation (PREPARE) and Facilitating Open Couple Communication Understanding and Study (FOCCUS) programs which seek to help couples identify their strengths and areas for growth. Courses and activities cover issues such as communication, conflict, balancing work, home and relationships, sharing responsibility, intimacy and sexuality. The Family Relationships Branch, operating within the Department of (FaCS) funds the Marriage and Family Council. Standard topics cover family backgrounds; expectations of marriage; communication skills and conflict resolution strategies. The Department also sponsors the Men and Family Relationships initiative, aiming to break down barriers for men in accessing relationship services.

The federal government currently funds approximately 100 community organizations across all states in Australia to deliver relationship services, spending about \$3.5 million annually. Three Industry Representative Bodies – Family Services Australia, Catholic Welfare Australia and Relationships Australia – provide representational and advocacy services to the Family Relationships Service Program (FRSP), within the Department of FaCS. Clients pay for professional relationship services delivered by a range of groups such as Anglicare or the Catholic Society for Marriage Education (CSME). The CSME works towards lobbying and furthering marriage education, conducts an annual conference, producing *Threshold* a magazine about marriage education and uses Department of FaCS programs such as RELATE and FOCCUS. Think Tanks such as the Australian Institute of Family Studies carry out research on marriage education programs and collaborate with the Department of FaCS, the Office of the Status of Women and various universities.

The problem is that marriage relationship education is a small part of what these organisations do – they main functions include counselling, mediation, parenting, aged care, dispute resolution. Centacare, the wider Catholic Church organisation, has no time or resources necessary to specifically lobby for marriage education. It is up to the CSME to lobby specifically for marriage relationship education (see Kerin, 2003).

I attended a meeting with MAREA – the Marriage and Relationship Education Association Network - and FaCs in December 2003 in Melbourne. From MAREA's point of view, the issue was how to link government into the network on a grand scale; this was difficult enough at state level, let alone at the national level. Educators argued that networking should not just be occurring between people on the ground, and that the Government was not taking a leadership role. They were also critical that their core work was often not recognised due to current political focus on the well being of children. Another problem raised was that service

providers worked well together, but then had to compete via the competitive tendering process. This created tensions between community organisations which usually worked cooperatively. From FaCS's perspective, it was necessary for the organisations to report their work and provide stories to the Department. FaCS wanted the service providers to define the process, measure outputs and outcomes. The service providers suggested that there were plenty of stories, but that it would be difficult to measure outcomes in ways that bureaucrats wanted. The culture within FaCS had a narrow focus, regarding marriage as the 'fluffy stuff' which was therefore easy to sideline. Listening to the debate, it became clear that there was a dilemma for both sides. FaCS was relying on the organisations to push the agenda, but they were understaffed and under funded.

The recent reform to retrain marriage celebrants is also an attempt by the federal government to strengthen marriage. In 1973, the then Attorney-General, Senator Lionel Murphy established the Civil Marriage Celebrants Program to provide an alternative to Registry Office or church weddings. In 1974, civil celebrants conducted less than three per cent of marriages. By 1999, more than 46,000 people were married in civil ceremonies, accounting for more than half of all weddings (Williams, 2000b, 1). In 1996, Daryl Williams, the Attorney-General initiated a review of the Civil Marriage Celebrant program. His discussion paper argues that celebrants play an important role in the government's objective to foster quality family relationships, particularly in their capacity to raise couples' awareness about services which would help them develop stronger relationships and reduce the risk of future relationship breakdown and divorce (1997, 34). According to Williams' report *Reform of the Marriage Celebrants Program* (2000), 'the current system does not encourage celebrants to convey fully the intention of the *Marriage Act* that marriage should be understood and appreciated as a solemn and binding union for life' (2000b, 4). This is despite the production of two documents in 1999 noting the role of authorised marriage celebrants (Attorney-General's Department 1999b,c). This report argues that because of the lack of clarity about the role of the civil marriage celebrant, the government's objectives are to ensure that marriage celebrants are professional and responsive, providing high quality services and respecting and promoting the ideals of marriage (Williams, 2000b, 5). The proposed strategies reinforce the importance of sustaining long, robust marriages.

The changes contained in the *Marriage Amendment Act 2002* commenced in September 2003. The reforms aim to raise professional standards of celebrancy services and propose that marriage celebrants should guide couples through suitable education and information services. This includes 'the promotion of pre-marriage and other relationship services which will result in stronger and healthier family relationships' (Williams, 2000b, 6). Aspiring celebrants need to complete an approved competency-based training course, as well as meet the 'fit and proper person' test. However, celebrants can only suggest that clients participate in courses, and clients may remain indifferent.

The government now seems to be focusing more on children and families than couples per se. In what he called a 'down payment' on the National Agenda for Early Childhood, Prime Minister Howard announced \$10 million for early childhood intervention and prevention programs in 2003. Cameron, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Family and Community Services (2003) claimed that

the Government does have responsibilities and an important role to play in paying income support and funding family and children's services. and drive reforms to workplace arrangements so that they become flexible and family friendly... But we have to ensure we do not engage in social engineering. I do not agree with those who say the State should take on all the responsibility of individual and social progress. Indeed, I have argued in the past, that the agency of the state has sometimes had the reverse effect. ... At the same time, we have to recognise more, the diversity of families these days.

This acknowledges significant societal changes in the last 20 years, but it remains unclear how these programs can deal with changes to marriage and how government can implement them into public policy.

Public policy implications of marriage education programs

There are challenges for government intervention in the area of marriage. In Australia and the UK, governments have by and large embraced neo-liberal principles, stressing the values of freedom, the market and small government. Protecting the rights of the individual is imperative as they are recognized as the source from which society derives its moral standing. These governments see their role as establishing a framework in which a free society can thrive, while simultaneously championing a decrease in the role of the government. This reinforces the notion that the individual should be self-sufficient, taking personal responsibility for his or her actions. While primacy is given to individual choice, these governments also promote ideals of social harmony within the family. In spite of neo-liberal commitments, personal matters such as marriage are not beyond the scope of government intervention. Indeed, marriage and the family have been idealised, resulting in a paradoxical division between the public and the private. Encouraging independence and individual freedom, therefore, makes it difficult for governments to be part of the solution to personal problems, even at a distance.

In Australia, the government's rhetoric leads a retreat into past ideals about the family, while the changes in the community are not conservative at all, pointing instead to increasingly diverse lifestyles. The struggle between social changes in marriage and the government's objectives is overlain by a tension within the government's approach to this oldest of institutions. The Howard government has seemed unsure about the best way to organise marriage, or how much to intervene. It has adopted neo-liberal strategies, viewing marriage as a personal matter for the individual to manage. This stance is visible in changes made to family law. In spite of that, it has also actively intervened, providing assistance and endeavouring to inculcate its moral and political ideals on to people's relationship choices and decisions. It has done this through relationship education, but also through the opinions expressed by government leaders opposing issues such as IVF and gay marriages. The government has therefore appeared unsure about whether to take a social liberal or social conservative approach to relationships, and has come under attack for attempting to do both.

In the UK, the government supports strong families, rather than marriage per se and there is more public funding. Some argue that the policies privilege marriage, while those recognising non-marital relationships may also be criticised as abandoning

marriage. It also supports civil partnerships for same sex couples. In both cases, governments interfering with people's relationships may never overcome the problems entrenched within contemporary understandings of marriage itself. Indeed, both governments' political efforts to strengthen relationships highlight precisely the fact that people no longer live according to traditional values, norms and expectations. Marriage education and preparation are likely to confront considerable tests. Whether they succeed is not primarily related to whether they are relatively minor programs, nor even that they might not target the facets of relationships that are under the most strain. To be more precise, the choices people make and their expectations of relationships are often quite different to those that the government wants them to hold.

Increasing the number of participants in education programs before they marry is a difficult policy objective in both countries. People may resist government intervention into that most personal area of relationships, as it is *too* private. As the HRSCLCA report acknowledges,

Many consider marriage a natural, voluntary relationship based on the ideal of romantic love. Love is the cement that binds the couple together and is either present or it isn't. The notion that programs and policies might have anything to do with improving the quality of a couple's relationships or their decision to divorce is viewed with skepticism (1998, 67).

Preventive programs suffer by association with therapy and counselling. It is less likely that people will seek education programs if they regard them as relevant only for couples with "problems". Reforms encompassing pre-marital education deliberately emphasize prevention rather than therapy, attempting to challenge two powerful social taboos: relationships are entirely private and natural. Because many people regard their relationships as "private", a common perception is that there is no need to discuss them publicly or openly, except in a very general sense. Marriage, people maintain, is a natural state and people know automatically and innately how to "do it". Therefore, education is not required if it comes naturally (HRSCLCA, 1998, 155). This view is significant, given that one of the barriers to consumers' participation is this view that education programs invade their privacy.

Governments may be criticised as promoting a 'nanny state' in which people are told what they can and cannot do. To avoid this perception, government emphasise that participation is purely voluntary. Couples have a choice of community and church agencies and the agencies advertise their programs via religious and civil marriage celebrants. Up to a quarter of couples participate in a program, although the attendance is much higher for couples marrying in a Church and very low for those being married civilly (1997, 120). It is compulsory for those marrying in the Catholic Church to complete a course, but not for other marrying couples. There is no advertising campaign highlighting the benefits of the programs. Typically, as many educators pointed out to me, couples maintain that they are too busy planning their weddings to attend classes or regard them as just another expense. Consequently, only about one third of marrying couples attend some form of marriage education. Those who do not participate tend to be from non-English speaking backgrounds, indigenous people, people with less formal education, living in rural or remote areas, couples married in civil rather than religious ceremonies, couples living together, and young people (Halford, 2000, vii). Providing relationship education that recognizes

diversity and is culturally appropriate, and is available at different times for married couples will be challenging for any government. Therefore, governments will need to consider how best to promote the benefits that can accrue to adults and children (in terms of enhanced educational, mental and physical health outcomes) through promotion of and support for satisfying and stable marriage and family life.

Another challenge for governments is to evaluate the effects of marriage and relationship education. The findings from Harris et al. (1992) indicate that participating couples view Australian programs favourably, and as a 'valuable event' (1992, p. 114). However, while premarital training has positive effects at the time of the classes, the effects on longer-term marital stability and quality are less known. according to Parker (1999), a number of broad questions remain unanswered. For instance, do couples in premarriage education have better quality relationships than non-participants? How is effectiveness defined? Why is premarriage education ineffective for some couples? What is the best combination of program and format for particular types of couples? How long do any positive effects last? How do couples, as distinct from individuals, learn and how do they apply their skills in daily life? The Final Report into the Pre-Marriage Education Pilot Project by Donovan Research (2001) evaluated the marriage and relationship education (MRE) services introduced in 2000. The consultants' survey found that 25 per cent of marrying couples would not have attended MRE services without using a voucher. Fifty three per cent of the couples said that their relationship did not change as a result of attending an MRE activity, although 63 per cent said it had improved their communication skills. Two thirds of the total sample of kit recipients had used one or more parts of the kit. Twenty eight per cent thought the kit was very useful (Donovan Research, 2001, pp. 5-6). While the report contains many comprehensive statistics, it does little to answer Parker's questions. The Australian Department of FaCS commissioned a report into the availability of relationship education services in 2003. This provided quantitative data on location, client characteristics, cost, duration and content of courses, rather than the effects. In the UK, continued core funding is dependent on MARS organisations demonstrating effectiveness of services, although there seems to be minimal guidance from government (see Blaisure, 2003, 25).

Other concerns about marriage education policies are that they ignore structural causes that underlie social problems such as unemployment, poverty, lack of child care and poor health. This includes the need to think about providing better education, access to decent paying jobs and family friendly employment policies. Supporting marriage programs may actually be an inexpensive "vote-winner", as governments are seen to be doing something without addressing deeper social problems such as unemployment or low living standards. Moreover, marriage per se is too simplistic a solution to the complex problems of the poor. Marrying those on low incomes will not magically raise the family out of poverty when the parents have no skills, no jobs, poor housing, and may be struggling with depression, substance abuse, or domestic violence. Ooms (2002) suggests that funds spent on untested marriage promotion activities may be taken away from programs that provide desperately needed services for single parents such as child care.

Conclusion

Many people view marriage as an intimate relationship between freely consenting adults that does not merit the development of public policies. Intruding into the private domain of marriage may be offensive to some, but so are the courts when settling divorce and child support agencies when attempting to resolve payment problems. This paper has considered the policy approaches of governments to marriage preparation. In both countries, the governments are interested in strengthening marriages, as they regard families as central to the regeneration of a healthy and prosperous society. In Australia, governments are providing small amounts of funding for marriage preparation but other issues such as shared parenting (when marriages fail) receive more attention. It strongly resists any move towards recognising gay marriages, while the UK government is working towards this with the Civil Partnership reforms. Challenges for both governments are finding ways to encourage people to participate in marriage education, evaluating the programs, and dealing with the structural problems surrounding marriage and the family.

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