The Family Policy Debate: Where Are We Now?
John Duncan Anderson

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We can all agree that the traditional family model is under threat and that this unfortunate development will have profound consequences for our society, economy, and quality of life in the future.

The “uncomfortable truth” which underpins the discussions that we will have over the course of this conference is that the traditional family unit is in decline. The numbers tell their own sorry tale. The rate of marriages has halved in the last 50 years, and nearly 30% of Australians now never marry; divorce rates have more than doubled with 50% of marriages now ending in divorce; 35% of children are now born outside marriage, and 25% grow up in a house without a father.

You have a powerful team of experts and commentators at this conference who will unpack the consequences of that breakdown as the conference goes on.

I feel sure that we will be left in little doubt that family breakdown increases risks of educational failure, financial stress and indebtedness, mental health disorders, addiction to drugs and alcohol, criminal activity, and welfare dependency. All these things are cause for real and deep concern, and of course have huge economic implications.

As I reflect on how best to serve you all today, as something of a
veteran of politics and public office, it is perhaps by turning to the difficult issue of consequence:

If the research is correct, why is it not gaining more traction, and what can we do to make a difference—each one of us, that is, as we leave this venue today?

To progress this issue we need to look at the source code which generates the problem in the first place and the way in which this impacts debate and makes it so difficult to effect change.

Family breakdown is actually symptomatic of a much wider problem. One fundamental aspect of that problem is the breakdown of truth and absolutes in our society. We have come to place so much emphasis on our own selfish freedoms that we no longer accept the constraints of any consistent workable code of social conduct or indeed of any real sense of commitment to each other or to future generations.

Personally I am staggered by the lack of commitment to our children and grandchildren that is being evidenced in so many Western societies today. The fact is that self-obsession has resulted in the most monstrous intergenerational theft imaginable as, in the name of equality, we have funded unsustainable entitlements by borrowing against our children’s future.

The debate has become too often about the ME and the NOW—from this flows dire and destructive consequences. Let us look more closely at each of the pieces of the puzzle.

Lack of Truth and Absolutes
Although we often forget it or even deny it, Western society was founded on the Christian principle that we were all created equal under God, that no man should be the slave master of another, and that we should all be respected and given freedom to vote, freedom to speak, freedom of belief, and freedom of self-determination.

Ironically, with the rising dominance of free-market capitalism over recent decades and the misappropriation of those capitalist values, that foundational principle has undergone a subtle metamorphosis. Don’t get me wrong—I am a capitalist—but increasingly “personal freedom” has
become the highest ideal in personal and public life.

In this headlong pursuit of personal freedom and self-expression, I fear that we have lost the sense of the very values and beliefs on which our society was founded. We have lost the sense of what we traditionally understood to be true or false, right or wrong.

There was a study recently conducted in the U.S. by a man ironically named Christian Smith, who interviewed 230 students on the issue of their moral lives. And as he said, at the end of this study, the results were somewhat depressing.

He tells us that “It’s not so much that these young Americans are living lives of sin and debauchery, at least no more than you’d expect from 18- to 23-year-olds. What’s disheartening is how bad they are at thinking and talking about moral issues. They just don’t have the categories or vocabulary to do so . . . ”

The young people interviewed could generally agree that things like rape and murder were wrong. But when asked to consider even slightly more nuanced things like “drunk driving” or “cheating in school” or “cheating on a partner,” their responses were far less assuring.

When asked if those things were right or wrong one student said, “Well, it’s personal. Who am I to say?”

Another said, “I would do what I thought made me happy. I follow how I feel. I have no other way of knowing what to do, but how I feel internally.”

One student said, “I don’t really deal with right and wrong that often.”

And I think if we are honest, we will admit that their comments are pretty reflective of the state of our wider social conscience.

And so it is no wonder the issue of family breakdown struggles to gain traction: we’re living in a society that no longer accepts any overriding norms as to what is the best way to live or structure one’s family life.

But there are other difficult consequences to this predicament. Not only do we not know in any absolute sense where we are, but as a result of the same condition we are rapidly losing our ability to reason our way out of it.

Lack of Sound Debate

We are losing the ability to engage in meaningful public debates.
To even have a debate about what the “best” way forward is, what the “right” policy is, or what policies are “wrong,” to even begin to do that, you must believe in truth. You must believe that one outcome can be objectively better than another.

Related to the same syndrome is a lack of respect for fact and detail in debate. Hard facts and sequential logic no longer resonate with the largest parts of the voting population.

We have fallen out of the habit of sequential fact-based debate in the face of stirring emotional attacks which say that supporting the nuclear family means demonizing single mothers and same-sex couples, or which tell moving personal stories of unconventional families, oppressed by archaic social conventions, struggling to express themselves.

Sadly the new debating style of sound bite, anecdote, and emotion is now understandably the required feedstock of a media system that can no longer sell “news,” which is universally and instantly available from other sources, but must now instead sell “commentary” in a world where colorful and extreme commentary unsurprisingly sells best.

The result is almost universally divisive and emotional debate—bad debate that must lead to bad policy.

So we’ve broadly stopped believing in objective absolute truth, and in doing so we have undermined our ability to debate and discuss, but there is one more symptom of this predicament.

**Extreme Focus on Self and the Short Term**

In the absence of clearly defined values and goaded into anxious concern by the angry debates around us, the inevitable temptation is to place our own short-term needs first.

You perhaps remember the ancient Greek legend of Narcissus. Narcissus was the character who one day knelt down by a pool where he saw his own reflection and fell in love with the most beautiful person he had ever encountered in the world: himself.

I fear that we have become like him. This is a point well made by Daniel Altman in an article in *Newsweek* in 2011 called “The United States of Narcissism.” Here he traces many of the difficulties in America today to these issues of selfish self-absorption and short termism.
We live in an age of radical individualism where it is hard to focus on the interests of the common good or on the best policies for the long term.

All of that is to say that we live in a society that has so forsaken absolute truth that we are dismantling the very fabric on which it is built. Perhaps more worryingly, we struggle to have a reasoned and sequential debate about these issues, and we struggle to act in a way that takes the long term into account. These are the seeds of wrath which are shaping our future.

And so the operative question is: What can we do together about this?

There are at least three things we must do:

**A. The first thing we must do is recommit, and model our own commitment to some degree of absolute truth and value.**

There was an interesting letter published in the *New York Times* in response to that U.S. study I mentioned earlier on young people's moral attitudes. It read:

Regarding Christian Smith's disconsolate survey chronicling the failures of young people's moral reasoning, I would challenge him to list examples of sterling moral behavior modeled for the young (and I will settle for simple truth-telling, not moral heroism) in either house of Congress, the presidency, or the financial and banking sectors of the United States.

When those with the highest social status routinely lie, cheat, exploit their office for personal gain, profit from outrageous conflicts of interest, when they are rewarded for their turpitude with wealth and acclaim, repeating the conservative party line about moral laxity and self-indulgence is disingenuous.

In fact, I think Mr. Smith is correct about a moral decline, but he is targeting the wrong people.
These are challenging words indeed; and it is a fair challenge when considering the issue of family breakdown. How can we expect our children to engage in deep, committed marriage relationships if they have not seen that modeled by their parents? I recently read one study published by Cambridge University Press which suggested that children whose parents were divorced were 40% more likely to get divorced than if they weren’t. If their parents remarried and divorced a second time, their children were 91% more likely to get divorced.

It begins with us. We must model a commitment to our families, to truth, to values, and to others in a way that our children find inspiring.

B. Secondly, we must endeavor to engage in reasoned, evidenced-based debate.

This will be hard. It will require diligent effort and focus in an area where the data is often complex and difficult to interpret. We must commit ourselves to the highest standard of analysis and debate.

We must never go beyond what we can say with certainty, never misrepresent and always respect the counter party, while remaining firm in our view. The stakes are too high not to engage.

C. Finally, we must remember who we’re fighting for: our kids.

We need to consider very carefully how we conduct the debate. If we know that we live in a society which no longer relates easily to hard “facts,” it becomes all the more important to engage others in a relevant manner.

If you look at the Nielsen Trust Survey, where one of the world’s largest market research companies investigates what forms of communication people trust, you’ll find that the things we trust most are (1) a recommendation from someone we know and (2) fellow consumer opinions posted online.

Traditional forms of media which we might normally associate with having more objective, credible ways of measuring things—like newspapers, radio, or, heaven forbid, governments—we trust far less.
These days, people trust people. People trust *personal* stories. They trust them most when told in person, and next best, when told online. They trust people they know.

In politics this has become an axiom. President Obama’s historic 2008 campaign was famous for mobilizing a huge population of grassroots volunteers who would share the message person to person—knocking on doors, making calls, or posting on Facebook.

And when a volunteer knocked on your door, they would not start quoting figures about how many Americans didn’t have health insurance; they were trained to tell you a personal story about how the President had affected them—“*my mum* had to sell her house to pay for a heart transplant,” “*I personally* live under the constant fear that I will get sick and have no way of paying for treatment.”

Progressive organizations have understood this truth. If you visit GetUp.org, there are chilling personal stories of people apparently getting sick due to coal seam gas extraction; there are uplifting videos about same-sex couples spending their lives together; there are moving videos about mental health patients. All these have a powerful impact on the public conscience.

It is only recently that conservative organizations are starting to catch on. You may have noticed the new ads from Mining Australia. They don’t focus on economic growth or try to reeducate people about whether coal seam gas is actually harmful. They show clips of young men and women talking to the camera about how their lives have been changed by having the opportunity to work and develop their skills in Australia. And they’ve been really effective.

So my last point is this: we should do our best to encourage society to have a reasonable, evidence-based debate about these issues. But we also need to seek to cut through and to make sure we don’t forget to tell the personal stories about people who are affected by family breakdown. We must be careful to never lose the human face of this issue in the data and analysis.

It is important to talk about children. Talk about the children who have experienced family breakdown, the unspeakable pain and anguish, the confusion that arises from a lack of leadership and no absolute truth.
It is interesting that Daniel Altman, who identifies narcissism as the root of the West’s economic woes, believes that the solution lies in encouraging our children to look beyond themselves. He has joined the dots up correctly and understood that families are the key to building strong economies. (Though I’m sure that you would all agree with me that good family life is a more worthy ideal than sheer material wealth.)

And so let us bend to this difficult task together lest we be swept away in an overwhelming flood of our own making and be remembered as the generation that squandered a hard-earned heritage of reason, of wealth, and of security.

Sadly, that process is increasingly well established and will take commitment, resolve, and clear heads to change. I believe that embedded in our nation is a great and silent majority who, once properly warned, can be energized to make a difference on this issue and many others.

It is in this context that I salute and encourage you all today. Thank you.

*The Honorable John Duncan Anderson, AO is the former Deputy Prime Minister of Australia.*