

**RESTRUCTURING FAMILY POLICIES:
CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES
BY MAUREEN BAKER**

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS, 2006

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Maureen Baker's latest volume on family policy is a solid and well-crafted book, both in content and presentation: over 250 pages of text, 30 pages of works cited and a comprehensive index. Unlike many modern publications, the reviewer's copy has a hard cover, a sober but stylish title design and secure bindings. The text is well set out and Baker provides good chapter summaries and frequent guides to what is ahead.

The qualities of the book capture what I suspect are the best qualities of Maureen Baker's scholarship. A Professor of Sociology at Auckland University, formerly from Canada, Baker has published extensively in the field of family policy, looking at the interactions between family behaviours and choices and government policies. Her recent publications include chapters in a long-standing series on family trends in Canada (which she edits); books on families, work and caring, and on choices and constraints in family life; and articles on aspects of women's experience as mothers. One gets the impression that she is one of those academics who is an indefatigable gatherer of information and knowledge in her field, which she then subjects to some analysis before applying an admirable ability to "knock things into shape" for publication.

Baker's analysis in this work draws on her feminist frame of reference, a good understanding of the operation of politics in liberal democracies (she worked as a researcher for the Canadian Parliament for several years), and what would seem to be a keen eye for national variations.

In *Restructuring Family Policies*, Baker compares the way in which OECD countries (with a focus on the liberal welfare states of the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) have restructured social programmes for families with dependent children. She argues that whatever "category" of welfare state a country might be placed in (à la Esping Anderson and other analysts of the welfare state) and despite some common pressures, what counts most in determining national policies is country-specific. She identifies each country's "welfare regime" as unique and important. It comprises the institutional structures, vested interests and prevailing ideologies about women,

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families and the role of the state in personal life, and forms the context for changes. And because change is usually incremental, the current regime is also the starting point.

The change process itself, Baker argues, involves negotiations among stakeholders, fiscal and budgetary choices by government, and the politics of justifying and selling reforms through what she calls “carefully constructed political discourse that portrays new family programmes as improvements over the status quo”. In short, politics matters. Baker writes later in a section on political action:

Feminists must join the mainstream debates and deal with the relations among social citizenship, social opportunity and various forms of social difference. I believe this is a worthwhile goal and have endeavored to follow this approach in this work. (p.54)

This conclusion will be of comfort to those who struggle for changes in family policies. Baker finds that the battles have their validity, and victory or defeat matters. The struggles are not just sideshows in an event driven by the external forces of the global economy, or hegemonic ideologies, or pressures from international organisations like the OECD. For one who has been at the bureaucratic end of some of the debates about family policy over the past 15 years, I find that Baker’s thesis has considerable validity. For example, the Working for Families restructuring of family support built on what already existed, was influenced by ideologies about work and incentive effects and was subject to political positions about tax cuts. It responded to interest group pressures to reduce the incidence of child poverty and it well demonstrates the imperative to sell the policy as a significant improvement to family circumstances.

In the first four chapters of the book Baker sets out her thesis (well summarised on p. 22) and considers the main contemporary pressures on governments to restructure family policy. She argues that these pressures are:

- changes in family demographics (the familiar list of rising incidence of cohabitation outside marriage, more same-sex relationships and declining fertility), and the influence of new patterns of work, new contraception technologies, and the greater emphasis given to personal choice
- political forces from within welfare regimes: a chapter where Baker is critical of many of the conceptualisations of “types” of welfare regime for ignoring policies in respect of women’s paid and unpaid caring work, and argues that national politics matters
- external pressures arising from international labour market trends and international organisations: she finds little evidence that international organisations have a great deal of influence on national policies and practices, citing, as an example, the variable and slow response of many members to the EU’s decrees about gender equity.

It is in these chapters that Baker presents the evidence for her main thesis. For example, she argues that the interpretation of demographics trends within countries is always done with political intentions. Governments may not be able to influence the trends, but they can powerfully influence the discourse about them and family policy responses. Thus a common pressure leads to country-specific responses, some of which converge and some of which diverge.

The next five chapters cover five domains of family policy:

- reproductive health and child birth
- work, gender and parenthood
- the care and welfare of children
- social housing and income support
- divorce, child support and international migration.

Much of the text in these chapters is descriptive, and Baker has to adopt a broad-brush approach, drawing heavily on secondary sources for any analysis. In the chapter on the care and welfare of children, for example, there is much that is useful. In respect of childcare and work, Baker finds two broad approaches: one in which a gendered division of labour within families is still seen as the norm and state support for childcare is limited (New Zealand is placed in that group); and one where both parents are expected to work but where childcare policies differ in levels and areas of support (the USA and Scandinavia are in this category). She finds some convergence in increased support for out-of-home childcare, and in expectations that women be in the paid workforce. But there are many divergences in levels and patterns of support .

There is not much that is new in the discussion, and Baker's focus on state responses means that families' responses to new labour market and social circumstances are ignored. For example, the importance of the varied preferences and choices of women is not really covered, though it has been an important component of policy settings in New Zealand. Nevertheless, the section provides a good summary of policy responses to issues of childcare.

Other sections in the same chapter are less useful. The piece on adoption fails to set policies and practices in the last 40 years in the context of longer-term trends in the care of children. The incidence of stranger adoption in post-war years was a time- and place-specific response to extra-marital births. It changed as birth control became easier, women gained more power in abortion processes, and income support was provided for single parents. In New Zealand, adoption policy – in regard to its legislative manifestation – has stood still while the incidence of stranger adoption has reduced dramatically and practices have been transformed. There are similar trends in other liberal welfare states. The extent of these changes is rather lost in Baker's description of open and closed adoptions, legitimacy and inter-country adoption complexities.

The rising incidence of kinship care is covered primarily through a description of trends over time. Baker notes that it is attractive to governments because it is cheaper and could therefore be seen as a neo-liberal restructuring of government services, though she does not take this further. And there is no discussion of the issue of how much kinship care should be supported in family policy as a private family arrangement, or how much it should be treated as an alternative to state care.

The discussion on the rights of children is good to see, because it is neglected in some discussions of family policy, but it is unhelpfully linked with child abuse and neglect. Baker does not consider the wider implications of children's rights as part of what Giddens has called, in a stimulating Reith Lecture, the democratisation of family life.² And the discussion of policy responses to child abuse and neglect focuses on increased government attention rather than the problems in liberal welfare states of how best to respond to the abuse and reduce its incidence.

These problems are common across New Zealand, Australia and North American state and provincial jurisdictions, and have been well set out by Dorothy Scott in a recent conference paper. She started with the assertion that "Our current child protection systems are unsustainable and harmful to children and their families".³ Baker's treatment of the topic, which does not focus on her liberal welfare states, gives no sense of what many have described as a crisis.

The conclusion to the chapter on the care and welfare of children is typical of the middle section of the book: more descriptive than analytic and a sound account of recent history rather than stimulating treatment of some common issues. The middle section of the book also suffers from that bane of studies that are based on comparisons of policies across countries – always being out of date in some aspects as soon as they are published. For example, increased subsidies for childcare in New Zealand and increases in family allowances are not taken into account.

In the final chapter Baker summarises all of this material. She follows the practices common in comparative studies of categorising, aggregating and scaling national policies to look for patterns – in this case, convergences and divergences. Readers can look at the conclusions she reaches themselves to get the details, but generally Baker finds some "convergence" in strengthening provisions for parental leave, subsidised childcare, targeted tax-based family assistance, responses to concerns about child welfare and family violence, recognition of diverse relationships, and support for part-time work. On the other hand, other programmes have been

2 Antony Giddens, Reith Lecture 4, 1999.

3 See *Proceedings of 30th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect*, 14–16 February 2006.

“eroded”: income support generally, reproductive services, access to social services and employment protections.

Baker attempts to summarise the changes in a table, but is rather defeated, as she acknowledges in a footnote, by inter-country variations. This could be seen as a validation of her own thesis. She goes on to consider which governments best protect pro-family policies, and after many caveats concludes that “social conservative” or “centre right” governments respond differently (and, by implication, often in a less supportive way of contemporary families) from those that are “progressive”, “social democratic” or “left of centre”. However, the attempt to categorise family policies by type of government raises as many questions as it answers, and the argument verges on the circular when the type of government starts to be defined by its social policies.

Baker is on sounder ground when she comes back to the importance of often implicit assumptions and ideologies about family, parental responsibilities and the role of the state: it is fundamental in setting the parameters for different welfare regimes. Baker concludes by reiterating the argument that forces for convergence will always be mitigated by national contexts and national politics.

This is not the most exciting or engrossing of books. Perhaps that is the nature of comparative studies of this scale. The brush is always too broad for policy wonks to get into the policy details (where God or the Devil often resides). Families tend to be sold short by being treated as reactive recipients of policy rather than actors in their own right. And the framework means there is a considerable amount of descriptive material that does not seem to take the argument forward much. On the other hand, Baker’s prose suits her material well, the reader is well guided through the argument, and from time to time, in a nice human touch, the reader gets a very direct expression of Baker’s own personal views.

The strengths of this book are considerable. It covers a range of countries and family policy domains. Baker’s analysis of social policy from a feminist political economy brings an important perspective to the study of family policy. And most important of all, in this reviewer’s opinion, she brings a real understanding of policy work in liberal democratic welfare states to her analysis – be those states led by social democratic or liberal conservative governments. Her description of policy making and its context in these countries rings very true. It is a world of multiple actors, opaque sets of assumptions and beliefs, and negotiated outcomes. There is a focus on the discourse and who controls it, and a tendency to market incremental changes as bold moves forward. The weight Baker gives to these processes gives her admirable book a very real grounding and makes it an important contribution to the literature on family policy in countries such as New Zealand.

**BEING ACCOUNTABLE: VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS,
GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND CONTRACTED
SOCIAL SERVICES IN NEW ZEALAND
BY JO CRIBB**

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Being Accountable focuses on the accountability of service providers in the not-for-profit sector in New Zealand. It is based on the research Jo Cribb undertook for her doctoral thesis at Victoria University of Wellington. The book is an exploration and analysis of voluntary sector managers' and board members' views of accountability, and it suggests useful ways to improve the relationship between government agencies and not-for-profit service providers.

The not-for-profit sector is a major deliverer of social services in this country, so questions about the accountability of the sector's service providers, how this is managed and measured, and the sector's own views on this subject are vitally important.

I found this book to be an excellent and enlightening read, as well as a very useful summary of issues the sector and contractors have been advocating for decades. As Cribb rightly points out in the preface, ensuring good provider performance doesn't lie in the contract documents but in the relationships and practices used to generate and monitor the contracts. However, I might add that since Cribb undertook her study the development of results-based (integrated) contracts (described on page 21) is proving to be a helpful tool for making non-government organisation service provider performance more transparent.

In Chapter 2 there is a useful summary of the information available about the voluntary sector in New Zealand, which provides a valuable context for Cribb's analysis. One omission, which would have added value to the discussion here, is any further exploration of the importance or otherwise of the status of the people delivering services for community and voluntary organisations. Whether a service is delivered by a volunteer or by a paid employee may well be relevant to a discussion about accountability, and it wasn't clear at this point in the book whether voluntary organisations (organisations that have a governance structure made up of volunteers) that utilise paid staff to deliver their services have different views on, or a different

approach to, accountability compared to organisations that use volunteers (some of whom may be salaried professionals or retired professionals) to deliver services. However, the case study material later in the book shows there is a difference between organisations that rely solely on volunteers and those that use paid professionals, and, anyway, Cribb's exploration of contracting issues focuses on a broader level of accountability.

Chapter 3 defines accountability within the contracting framework and explores the way the relationships between principal and agent in a contract arrangement have been discussed in the literature. I found this analysis to be one of the highlights of the book. Cribb also explores accountability in relationships where the agent has voluntarily chosen to undertake work. Accountability to clients/the community is as important as accountability to taxpayers in a government-funded service. Attention is paid to the issues and tensions that arise when an organisation is accountable to a multiplicity of different stakeholders.

Thesis work tends to make black-and-white distinctions, which blur in reality. Nevertheless I found it helpful to have catalogued the characteristics of "answerability" in a contract or "hard" accountability relationship and "responsiveness" in a voluntary or "soft" accountability relationship. It was also useful to be reminded that people bring a range of perspectives and assumptions to establishing and managing provider-funder relationships. These assumptions will have a major impact on the effectiveness of the relationship in achieving the objectives of both parties (or of multiple stakeholders).

The final section of Chapter 3 discusses the different applications of accountability. Financial accountability is very familiar, but perhaps less so are process accountability (following correct procedures), programme accountability (quality of the work), prioritising (relevance of the work undertaken), and identifying consequences, not to mention compliance accountability, maintenance of professional standards, and accountability to paid staff.

Having developed an excellent context for her work, Cribb uses Chapters 4 to 7 to describe the research she undertook to explore questions not addressed (or not addressed well) in the literature. These were: to whom are voluntary organisations accountable, for what, and why? Cribb bases her analysis of these questions on information from four case studies, which provide a matrix of four scenarios covering high/low government funding and high/low dependence on volunteers.

In the final chapters of the book Cribb uses her research findings to analyse and explore the reality of government-funded service provision by not-for-profit providers. Of particular interest is the exploration of the tension providers face in accepting funding

to deliver specific government programmes and using those funds to achieve positive outcomes for clients. Cribb's research clearly shows that these are not necessarily the same thing. The perceived reluctance of some officials to engage more closely and effectively with providers, in the interests of improving services received by clients, is a telling point.

Cribb argues that current relationships between funders and providers are structured on the premise of principal–agency theory, in which funders focus on controlling and directing providers. Her research clearly shows that a more effective relationship would be built if funders saw themselves as stewards and worked with providers in a collaborative framework using soft accountability management mechanisms.

I found the exploration of the pitfalls and positives of a collaborative approach to contracting an exciting confirmation of the success this approach is having under Funding for Outcomes integrated contracts.¹ The cross-government collaborative funder–provider approach of results-based contracting, with its focus on questions such as “Are clients better off?” rather than the more traditional “How much did we do?” is a good starting point for addressing the challenge posed in Cribb's book.

1 See Ann Pomeroy (2007) “Changing the Culture of Contracting: Funding for Outcomes” *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, 31:158–169.