

Contribution à Jane Jenson, Mariette Sineau (Eds), *Who Cares ? Women's Work, Childcare and Welfare State Redesign*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, coll. « Studies in Comparative Political Economy and Public Policy », 2001, pp. 56-87.

CHAPTER 3

BELGIUM: THE VICES AND VIRTUES OF PRAGMATISM*

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and
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Belgium's 'Social Pact' was the major political event of the first post-war decades. Secretly concluded during the war by senior bureaucrats, employers and unions, it was ratified at the Liberation by the National Union government (Vantemsche, 1994; Arcq-Blaise, 1994). This was a social democratic compromise, but one that delegated to the social partners decisions about the distribution of the fruits of economic growth (via wage policies) as well as management of the Social Security system created at that time (Marques-Pereira, 1990). This post-war Social Pact, in other words, was squarely in the tradition of the pluralist societal paradigm that had structured Belgium society since the end of the 19th century (Dumont, 1996).

Rather than constructing a truly republican nation, the Belgium state continued to support a civil society divided into three "worlds." The citizenship regime followed from an institutionalisation of the Christian, Socialist, and liberal

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worlds, with the latter two forming what we might call a lay world. Each had its own values and social projects; each was structured by its own organisations. In addition to unions and youth, women's and popular education movements, each had its own mutual societies, hospitals, newspapers, schools, and even banks, insurance companies and co-operatives (Devillé *et al.*, 1995; Paye, 1997b). In all this, the role of politics was primarily to manage the points of contact among these worlds, while guaranteeing to each the means to develop freely, according to its relative weight in society (*Mitoyens...*, 1990; Molitor, 1992). Political parties, as an extension of these worlds, played a crucial, indeed, often hegemonic role.

The state's capacity to make policy was, however, doubly constrained. A first limit came from the fact that “*grands accords*” (high-level accords) were concluded by the social partners without state involvement. A second was that a whole set of public services and other tasks were sub-contracted to the organisations representing the three worlds. This system is termed subsidised liberty.

In 1945 the familialist model of gender relations that had characterised the inter-war years still held sway (*Cent ans...*, 1987; Keymolen and Coenen, 1991; Peemans-Poullet, 1991; 1994). As a model, it entailed a certain ideal-typical gender division of labour. The wife and mother looked after child-rearing and housekeeping and other household tasks, whereas the husband worked to provide

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an income to satisfy the needs of the family. This model was incorporated into policy thinking and programme design of both the Social Security system and the family policies of post-war governments. For example, although the same Social Security deductions were taken from the salaries of female and male workers, the former did not receive the same amounts of unemployment insurance or sickness and disability benefits. Access to benefits was even more restrictive if the woman's salary was not the household's principal source of income. By contrast, male workers with a stay-at-home spouse received higher unemployment, sickness and disability benefits and retirement pensions than did other workers. Moreover, they could, without making additional payments, provide their spouse with 'derived rights.' These gave the stay-at-home wife access to the Social Security system's health benefits and a survivor's pension at the death of her husband.

For its part, family policy primarily targeted large families, that is those with three children or more, because of fears about the birth rate that had plummeted during the war. Level of family allowance benefits depended upon birth order, so that the amount paid was higher for later born than for earlier children. Moreover, families received the same allowance, whether both parents or only one paid into Social Security. Income tax credits varied according to the number of "dependent persons" (including a wife at home as well as children). There were also reduced prices for public transport for large families, and young

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men supporting their own family were excused from compulsory military service (Dumon, 1987; Delvaux, 1987).

In this model, women's labour force participation supposedly hindered the achievement of a satisfactory rate of population growth. The position expressed by a 1929 study still remained a basic principle into the post-war years: "A wise social, family and population policy must do whatever it can to impede the employment of woman and, above all, married woman working outside the home" (quoted by Peemans-Pouillet, 1994: 50). Therefore, in 1949 the Social-Christian-Liberal government created a "housewife allowance." This payment increased with each child and the allowance was paid, no matter the family's income, to any woman who did not engage in paid work.

As these programmes were coming into force, however, families and individuals were abandoning many of the behaviours that had sustained the familialist model. The early 1960s were years of transition towards a new era. Sociologists of the family began to observe new trend lines as early as 1963-64. Both the fertility rate of women of childbearing age and the marriage rate among single people were falling, while the proportion of the population which was divorced, single, living together without being married, or in recomposed families was rising (Rezsohazy, 1991: 16-22; Bawin-Legros, 1988: 77). These shifts in behaviour coincided with the birth-control pill's arrival on the market and the massive entry of women into the paid labour force. Such changes in social and

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economic behaviours helped erode support for the traditional familialist model among policy-makers.

Even at the end of the 1950s, there were signs of a shift towards an egalitarian model. In this new ideal-type, gender relations were supposed to be founded upon autonomy and equality among women and men. For example, the principle that married women were minors before the law (found in the Napoleonic Civil Code) was eliminated and in 1958, replaced with the principle that marriage did not alter one's standing before the law. Nonetheless, elements of the familialist model continued to temper the change under way. For example, the law still tolerated a series of inequalities in marriage, to the detriment of women. These touched on issues such as the management of property, the choice of the family's residence, and the exercise of parental authority. Even though the return of the Socialists to power put an end to the housewife allowance, it did not prevent a 1962 reform which calculated tax levels according to family rather individual income. Such a measure disadvantages dual-earner couples and favours those with a stay-at-home partner or one low income, due, for example, to part-time employment.

Discussions of the birth rate also revealed contradictory principles. For example, 1962 brought an official report (the *Delpérée Report*, named for the Secretary General of the Welfare Ministry) that distinguished, for the first time, between a population policy, intended to maintain population size, and a family

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policy, designed to assure a satisfactory standard of living for families.

Nonetheless, another official report, the Sauvy report (named for the French demographer Alfred Sauvy and submitted by the Walloon Economic Council) still favoured a pro-natalist policy to promote a high birth rate. The report argued from traditional representations of the importance of a stay-at-home wife and mother (Dubois, 1991: 18-19).

Egalitarian Citizenship at the Height of the Welfare State

By the end of the 1960s there was no denying that change was underway, however. A range of new social programmes consolidated the welfare state. Social Security benefits were increased and extended. For example, family allowances increased in value, women's access to unemployment insurance was improved, and payments made under the several different Social Security regimes became more uniform. At the same time, the state began to weave a social safety net providing a minimal level of protection to persons not covered by any Social Security regime. As well, a Guaranteed Income for the elderly was set up in 1969, while 1971 brought Guaranteed Family Benefits. A guaranteed minimum income programme (*le minimex*) arrived in 1974.

A new era in gender relations also began (*Cent ans...*, 1987; Keymolen and Coenen, 1991; Peemans-Poullet, 1991; Devillé and Paye, 1995). In 1969 and 1972, divorce by mutual consent became more readily available, while in 1974, it became possible to obtain a divorce simply on the basis of years lived separately

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(reduced in 1982 from 10 years to 5 years). Differential treatment and gender inequalities in unemployment legislation were removed in 1971, the same year that brought a law protecting pregnant workers. After 1973, it was no longer illegal to advertise contraceptive products and methods, and family planning centres gained official recognition. Wives' right to divorce "for cause" was made the same as husbands' in 1974,¹ while in 1976, marriage law became gender neutral. A 1978 law guaranteed equal treatment in employment.

Family policy also changed. It is important to note, however, that new programmes supplemented rather than displaced existing ones. A 'new familialism' took hold, adding a different representation of gender relations than was found in traditional familialism. This new model was less sensitive to pro-natalist concerns and more egalitarian. It focused on the well being of families, spawning information campaigns about marriage and married life, subsidies for marriage and family counselling, and grants to centres combating family violence, for example. Public services took over some of the work previously carried out within the family, usually by women. Programmes for childcare, elder care and care of the disabled were put into place, for example (Dumon, 1987; Delvaux, 1987).

Public financing of the services and infrastructure for care of young children was an integral part of this new family policy (Dubois, 1991; Dubois *et al.*, 1994; Humblet, 1996). At its origin, in the 1920s, childcare simply addressed

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the needs of the poorest children, and particularly those whose mothers were forced to go out to work. It was organised by social welfare institutions. As a result, the *Oeuvre nationale de l'enfance* (ONE - created in 1919) financed only spaces in day nurseries used by families with very limited incomes. In 1960, Belgium had at most 500 childcare spaces more than it had had at the end of the war. This meant there were only about 3,000 for a population of 480,000 children under the age of two. By 1965 the number had only climbed to 5,200.

Between 1965 and 1970, a first wave of new childcare services occurred, although it hardly touched the established institutions. Rather, the expansion came in kindergartens (*écoles maternelles*). Its goals were educational rather than welfare-based (Humblet, 1996: 116). Spaces for young pre-school children were created in *préguardiennats* (which we will call school-based childcare centres). It was primarily middle-class parents who used this form of care. Then a second wave of reform modified the established system, by altering the way subsidies were paid to childcare facilities. After 1971 public subsidies were calculated according to the number of children using the facility rather than on the basis of users' family income. The shift required an infusion of new funds to the ONE, which remained the principal source of financing for childcare facilities. At the same time, rates paid by parents were set on a sliding scale, fixed proportionally to their own income. New regulations also established higher standards for personnel employed by childcare facilities. Overall, the spaces available in both

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school-based childcare and other facilities rose by a factor of 3.5 between 1965 and 1980.

An important factor in this change was the involvement of a new institution, the *Fonds d'équipements et de services collectifs* (FESC), created within the *Office national d'allocations familiales pour travailleurs salariés* (ONAFTS) in 1971. The FESC supports facilities whose priority is daycare for the children of salaried workers. In practice this means the FESC will subsidise a facility if at least 60% of the children's parents are salaried. The FESC makes reduced-interest loans so as to stimulate the construction or extension of childcare facilities, covers costs not included in ONE subsidies (for example, the salaries of the cleaning staff or cooks), or by parental participation.

The years from the late 1960s through the 1970s reveal how much change was occurring, at the same time as it reveals a number of important continuities. It is clear that policy-makers and others were aware that female employment patterns were changing mothers' behaviour and that pressures for more equal gender relations were mounting. No single, agreed-upon model of gender relations existed, however. While an emerging egalitarian model challenged traditional familialism, it was also facing competition from a modernised familialism. These years also demonstrated that the pluralist paradigm was still in place. The three worlds – Christian, Socialist and liberal – had not lost their relevance. The egalitarian model and the new familialist model each had its

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origins in a different world. The political task was still to arbitrate among competing models.

The egalitarian model of gender representation developed primarily within the Socialist, and perhaps the larger lay, world.² The first objective of this model was to enable mothers to enter the paid labour force, this being seen as the key to their economic and personal autonomy. A second was to reduce gender inequalities in the workplace, hiring, promotion, pensions, and so on. In terms of policy, both goals translated into the call for new programmes, including infrastructure and services which would move the care of young children, traditionally the responsibility of mothers, into the public domain.

For its part, the Christian world was up-dating traditional familialism, giving a more family-based reading to gender equality. Without dismissing the legitimacy of women's desire for greater autonomy, it nonetheless defended the institution of the family and a gender division of roles, as long as the latter were "freely" negotiated between spouses. Therefore, there was preference for sticking to existing programmes, for bigger family allowances and for a new programme, the *allocation socio-pédagogique* (ASP – a child-rearing allowance). This latter benefit would be paid to mothers (above all, in the poorest families) who 'chose' to remain at home to raise their young children.

The pact concluded by the Social-Christian-Socialist coalition in 1968 reflected, in a very typical manner, the long-standing logic of compromise so

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central to Belgium's pluralist paradigm. The coalition promised - simultaneously - to develop "more public services for the family" and to recognise the "child-rearing role of the mother." Two new measures were created in these years, promoting seemingly contradictory goals. Publicly provided childcare was expanded, so as to enable, and therefore promote, mothers' labour force participation, whereas an allowance to be paid to mothers who cared for their own children discouraged their labour force participation. Despite the lack of coherence, Parliament passed the two programmes. In the terms of Belgium's pluralist societal paradigm they were less contradictory than at first glance.

The Difficult Birth of the FESC

Detailed analysis of the creation of the FESC and then the ASP reveal the gymnastics involved in tracing a path through the pluralist paradigm. From 1968 onwards the ONAFTS, the institution providing family allowances to salaried workers, was well in the black, thanks both to rising wages and a growing pool of salaried jobs (especially those held by women). The organisations represented on the Management Committee of the ONAFTS³ were divided over what to do with these unexpected surpluses.⁴ Their debates reveal the confrontation of two models of gender and family relations and the ways that organisations coming from different worlds worked to make sense of changing socio-economic conditions.

In a debate about whether ONAFTS funds should be used for something other than family allowances, Socialists wanted to give priority to investments in

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crèches (day nurseries). The representatives of the Socialist unions said, for example:

Making more day nurseries available to mothers of young children ... would allow them to remain in the work world. These nurseries would not be used by working mothers exclusively. Mothers whose partner is the one employed but who themselves are ill for a time could also use them. This would speed-up their recovery, by freeing them from child care and household tasks.

One of the reasons for making this proposal... is found in the Third Plan of the National Committee of Economic Expansion, which seeks to slow down immigration of foreign workers by encouraging the employment of women. In order to permit young girls as well as mothers of young children to work, programmes for children must exist. To entrust these children even to people of good will during the workday is a very bad solution. From a child development perspective it is not a good idea that day after day children are left with their grandparents who, for the most part, are not equipped to fulfil this onerous task. A community which calls on mothers to join the labour force must provide facilities for young children. As the community has heretofore failed to do so, the ONAFTS should take the initiative to construct day nurseries,

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... and do so everywhere the need exists ...

The association of Socialist women thought it preferable to offer services to parents rather than allocating them a supplementary - and probably derisory - sum of money through family allowances. In presenting its arguments, the group identified the factors hindering the full integration of women into economic life and the achievement of equal rights and responsibilities. The Socialist women emphasised three things:

- that there has been a fundamental change in family structures.

Young parents can no longer turn to their parents for childcare;
more and more the 'young' grandmother is herself still at work;

- that there is a lack of guaranteed and secure solutions of success,
as much for young children as for the tranquillity of mothers;

- that the failure to recognise that maternity is a social good has
translated into an unacceptably low number of available facilities.

Having enough would allow mothers to find the necessary balance between their professional and family responsibilities, at the same time as it would permit children to integrate very early into a stimulating environment ...

In addition, using ONAFTS surpluses to support day nurseries would correct inequities; working mothers paid into the system but received no extra

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benefits.

If they did not reject the idea of supporting day nurseries, other organisations in the Management Committee of the ONAFTS (representatives of confessional groups, the League of Families, the liberal unions and business) preferred that the government and Parliament address this need rather than the *Office*. They felt the ONAFTS should not spend its money on day nurseries as long as there were still needs that could be met by more generous family allowances. For the League of Families, moreover, "... the goal of the family allowance regime is certainly not an economic one and does not stretch to enabling more mothers to work."

According to the Christian Women, certain scepticism was in order. They said, one might

... ask whether it would be still appropriate to provide family allowances to children for whom the regime were now paying maintenance (via the financing of day nurseries). The children now placed in childcare centres come from families with very low salaries, particularly foreigners, or from families with high salaries, with two parents working in intellectual professions. In the latter case, the financial contribution of the ONAFTS to the construction of day nurseries would contribute directly to their [capacity to earn] high incomes.

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As for the representatives of the confessional unions, they certainly felt that “each woman must be free to decide if she will remain at home or if she will go out to work. A lack of day nurseries could render this choice impossible.” Nonetheless, they feared that it would be discriminatory for the ONAFTS to finance construction of such facilities because all families could not benefit from them. Only those with an employed mother or those living in large urban centres (where childcare spaces were more numerous) would have access to facilities financed out of the *Office's* surplus. When the representatives of these organisations turned to the matter of family allowances, they proposed a significant increase (with the exception of the employers who wanted their contributions reduced). They advocated raising the allowance by an amount equivalent to a half-month's payment,⁵ arguing this was necessary because the allowances still did not cover all the costs of raising a child.

Members of the Management Committee coming from the Socialist world rejected this suggestion. As a Socialist unionist underscored,

... the family allowance benefit must not cover the full costs of supporting a child. Parents must continue to assume a part of the responsibility for the expenditures necessary for raising children.

In effect, children belong to their parents and not to the state ...

When various compromise solutions failed to elicit agreement, the Minister of Welfare, a Flemish Social-Christian, made the decision, as he was

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empowered to do. He instituted additional family allowance payments, at a cost of a billion Belgian francs (ONAFTS, RA 1970: 2). Concurrently, however, he invited the Management Committee to draw up a draft bill establishing an endowment of 400 million BF for a “special fund financing public services and infrastructure” destined to meet salaried workers’ needs for childcare facilities. When discussion dragged on and the Management Committee failed to reach agreement on a bill to set up the FESC, the Minister wrote the text himself.⁶

The bill was finally sent to Parliament, which passed it.⁷ The mandate of the FESC was to finance “public services and equipment” for families of salaried workers, and it received an endowment from the ONAFTS to do so.⁸ Whereas the House approved the bill without discussion, some Social-Christian Senators, part of the majority, voted against the text because they wanted to create, alongside the FESC, a *Fonds d'allocation socio-pédagogique*, (Fund for Child-Rearing Allowances) similarly endowed. They claimed:

It is imperative to respect fully parents’ liberty of conscience. They must be able to decide whether they will use a day nursery or they will raise their children themselves. This liberty of conscience would not be guaranteed if certain advantages were only offered to one side (DS627, 8/7/1971: 3).

Entrenched as it was in the new familialism, their discourse was not hostile in principle either to publicly provided childcare or mothers’

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employment.⁹

The FESC was created in 1971 but it could not begin to function until a new Minister of Welfare, a Flemish Social-Christian of the new Social-Christian-Liberal government actually promulgated the necessary royal decrees in 1974. And, in the name of balance, he simultaneously launched another ASP trial balloon.

The Aborted Child-Rearing Allowance

In 1971 when the ONAFTS Management Committee first received a proposal from the Flemish Social-Christians to establish a child-rearing allowance (DS534, 17/6/1971), it unanimously rejected the idea. The Committee found the proposed amount of the benefit completely unrealistic. The suggested allowance of 8,000 BF would have made the allowance higher than the monthly before-tax revenue of close to three-quarters of women workers (A77, 5/10/1971). Four years and several draft bills later, the Management Committee again rejected a Social-Christian text, but this time only by a very narrow majority. The debate about the ASP (*allocation socio-pédagogique*) at that time reveals the same divisions we saw with respect to the FESC.

On one side, the Socialist organisations insisted that priority go to public services, at the same time as objecting in principle to any ASP. Thus, the representatives of the Socialist unions argued that an ASP would only hinder women's full and equal integration into the work world. Rather than helping

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women re-enter the labour force after childbirth, such an allowance would prolong their absence while reinforcing traditional gender roles at home and at work. The Socialist women's organisation mounted the following criticisms:

- the cultural, social and economic roles of the mother is not necessarily recognised nor valued by paying an ASP. The father and the mother fulfil concomitant roles in child-rearing, and it is therefore appropriate to speak of the cultural, social and pedagogical role of the family, and more precisely of the parents [rather than only the mother];
- if these parental roles are to be recognised properly when mothers enter the labour force, adequate working conditions must exist ...;
- paying an ASP would be like reintroducing the housewife allowance. It provides no measures that permit mothers, once their children are older, to enter or re-enter the paid labour force;
- paying an ASP is no guarantee that the mother will have a free choice between employment and ... devoting herself exclusively to home-making tasks and raising young children. Such a choice is the result of many factors, among which are need and the desire to go out to work. Moreover, there is a risk that the ASP will divert attention from other programmes that would make such a choice a real one.

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While arguing that would be more logical to finance any new programme from general revenues or the Social Security system (and that recipients should not be restricted to the spouses of salaried workers), the other organisations on the Management Committee (except the employers) supported the idea of an ASP. Nonetheless, the proposition did not carry in the Committee.

Despite opposition and the lack of a recommendation in 1976,¹⁰ the government decided to create a fund for an ASP (based on 0.25% of employers' payments into the ONAFTS). The new allowance would be available to those families of salaried workers who already qualified for family allowances (DC680/1, 28/10/1975: 4 and 38). It was left to the government to set the amount of the allowance and to define eligibility conditions, including income ceilings and age limits.

In contrast to the debate surrounding the FESC, parliamentary discussions of the ASP were long and detailed. They pitted Christian-Socialist parliamentarians who supported it, against Socialists and Communists who opposed it. The exchanges focused on two basic issues. One was the link between the ASP and the traditional model of gender relations, while the other was the kind of public action that would guarantee a "free choice" by mothers either to raise their infant children themselves or to place them in childcare facilities.

Characterising the ASP as "socially backward," its opponents judged it to be:

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... antipathetic to anyone who sincerely wants to address ... the need to [achieve] real equality between men and women, ... absolutely contradictory [to the objective of the emancipation of women] ... discriminatory ... doubtful... totally against the current of sociological trends which are, happily, improving ...

Justification of [such a limitation on the equality between men and women] is really found in traditional ideology, in the classic notions of patriarchal ideology, notions which are reproduced socially in women's roles, in men's roles, in the definition of women's work - it is only for pin money, not a real job - in child-rearing - it is the special role of mothers - and so on. Such traditional notions mean that when we face a basic problem such as ... the current economic crisis ... choices are limited. At such times there is a return to the idea of sending women back to the home ... because it is their special place because ... they are the pillar of the family, the family which paradoxically creates the psychological conditions for women's subordination (AC, 12/12/1975: 1273-74; also AS, 31/12/1975: 1146-47).

Supporters of the ASP defended themselves from the charge that they sought to relegate women to the domestic sphere as well as to revive traditional familialism. The Prime Minister and the Minister of Welfare, both of them

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Flemish Social-Christians, insisted the bill made no

... distinction between whether the mother or the father, a woman or a man assumed responsibility for child rearing. It is not impossible that a father caring for a child in a household with an employed mother might receive an ASP (AC, 12/12/1975: 1274; AS, 2/1/1976: 1179).

The principal argument of the ASP supporters, already deployed during the FESC debate, was that state funds must not be used to favour one form of care over another; it must not discriminate among families according to the kind of care selected. Defining parents using day nurseries as “privileged” (AS, 2/1/1976: 1179), given that the state subsidised facilities up to an amount of 100,000 francs per child, supporters of the ASP considered “... it only reasonable that the state should contribute when a mother or father is caring for a child ...” (AC, 12/12/1975: 1274). Marshalling the major arguments in favour of the child-rearing allowance, a Social-Christian deputy provided this summary:

[the ASP] must be able to permit one of the parents, if he or she really wishes, to withdraw temporarily from the labour force. It could be used to extend a maternity leave, but also to pay for the care of a child and lighten domestic tasks or to augment the household's belongings. Its strong point is its recognition of parental responsibility and its [contribution to] improving the

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quality of their involvement with their children. It must be accompanied by other measures to improve the conditions and hours of work. One can never stress too much the importance of the first three years of a child's life for healthy development.

Mothers who work outside the home receive insufficient help in confronting their dual responsibilities (AC, 10/12/1975: 1020).

Opponents of the allowance rejected such arguments. They were sceptical of both the gender-neutral discourse and idea of choice. "Do you know many fathers who are going to choose to stay at home to raise their children?" a Socialist deputy asked ironically (AC, 12/12/1975: 1274). Another wondered:

What does the oft-repeated slogan "woman's freedom of choice" really mean? It implies that the woman who has children must be free to choose either to be employed or to devote herself exclusively to household tasks and child rearing. The argument is made that, thanks to a child-rearing allowance, women who today are obliged to work will be able to choose to remain at home. For us, this is the wrong way to present the issue. ... Isn't the choice of staying home in large part the result of limits found in the traditional schooling for girls? It gives girls, especially those coming from working-class families, very few chances to learn an interesting and responsible job. As a result, staying home most

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often means an escape rather than a free choice. ... Moreover, in the guise of scientific findings, women are told that a constant maternal presence is necessary. There is unrelenting emphasis on their responsibilities in their roles as mother, wife and guardian of the family and on their family duties. The feeling of guilt drilled into their heads - that a woman who works outside the home shirks her responsibilities - makes mothers' choice very far from anything that we might call 'free' (AS, 31/12/1975: 1147).

The ASP debate clearly distinguished two ideological positions. On one side were those who, convinced that participation in the paid labour force was *the key to the emancipation of women*, criticised the idea of "choice" and the notion that the state actions should be "neutral." For these proponents of the egalitarian model, gender relations remained unequal precisely because the traditional model still reigned supreme in the minds of many. Therefore, in order to achieve real equality between women and men, the state would have to promote publicly provided childcare and discourage family-based care. On the other side were the new familialists who invoked the freedom of parents to decide how to share family responsibilities. Moreover, making parents available to their children was *the key to successful rearing of young children*. Thus they attached the label "discriminatory" to any programme supporting public provision if it were not matched by equivalent support for family-based care.

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These discourses follow the classic opposition between left-wing and liberal visions of the principles of liberty, of the distinction between “real” and “formal” equality, and of whether the role of the state was to promote change or not. In the background are even larger questions such as the relation between culture and nature, between progress and tradition. With respect to gender relations the debate comes down one between universalist and differentialist positions.¹¹ Whereas an universalist stance seeks to transform women into individuals equal to men (particularly through employment), differentialists celebrate what they describe as typically feminine characteristics which enable women better to undertake certain roles (mothering and caring for young children, for example).

If universalism underpins the egalitarian model and the traditional familialist model adopts the differentialist perspective, the new familialist model seems to bridge the two. It both accepts women's right to lead a life, especially a work life, equal to men's, and seeks to protect women's right to continue certain traditional activities, such as devoting themselves to child-rearing when their children are young. This modernised familialism provides a middle way between the progressive egalitarian model and the conservative traditional one. It also fits very well into the terms of Belgium's pluralism, where the role of the state is to foster the material conditions allowing people to live their lives in accordance with their personal convictions. According to pluralist principles, state subsidies

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to both non-parental care (FESC) and family-based care (ASP) were not contradictions. They were, in contrast, simply a coherent expression of foundational values, and in particular the notion of 'subsidised liberty.'

The compromise arrived at by 1975 could hold only if there were good economic times. The oil shocks of the 1970s and the ensuing economic restructuring altered the situation. The government, invoking businesses' mounting difficulties and the costs of fighting unemployment, quickly amended its own draft bill so the fund no longer had a guaranteed income (DC680/7, 12/11/1975).¹² From that point on the ASP remained on the books but was never implemented.

The Egalitarian Model Tested by the Economic Crisis

By the end of the 1970s, Belgian politics were shaped by two phenomena. One was skyrocketing unemployment and government debt (up to 140% of GNP at the beginning of the 1990s), which was putting pressure on social spending. The other was federalisation. In 1980 a new division of powers gave new responsibilities, including family and childcare, to the Communities (French, Flemish and Germanophone) while employment policy went to the Regions (Bruxelles-Capital, Walloon and Flemish). The result was a not modification of pluralism *per se*, but certainly the ways it is applied in policy making and the broader political realm changed (*Mitoyens...*, 1990; Molitor, 1992; Lentzen and Mabilille, 1995).

A very different situation than that of the post-1945 years is emerging.

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First, the traditional division of Belgian society into its three “worlds” is being challenged. Each is now subdivided by language, into either Flemish or Francophone. If in the 1960s the division had been a sociological one, by the 1970s it was political, and by the 1980s and 1990s, institutional. The result is that the weight or importance of each world is no longer measured at the national level but regionally.¹³ Furthermore, new political parties have appeared. The regionalist parties of the late 1950s and 1960s were followed at the beginning of the 1980s by ecologists and extreme-right parties, including Vlaams Blok, the neo-fascist Flemish nationalist party. The issue was how to incorporate these parties into existing ideological structures, concretised by the 1973 Cultural Pact as well as the long-standing system of subsidised liberty.

The result is that post-war citizenship regime underwent profound changes, especially as the three “worlds” started to wither. Unions became more distant from “their” political parties. The practices of partisan nominations lost legitimacy, as did the idea of ‘watering’ the associations of each world with public funds. In an even more basic sense, the rise of individualism undermined citizens’ links to intermediary organisations while the younger generations began to engage in ‘zapping.’ This means that they chose institutional affiliations - unions, mutual societies, women’s groups, and so on - less on the basis of their identification with a particular world, than according to the concrete benefits which membership and participation might bring.

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The state also faces new challenges and has developed new practices, including in social spending. Confronted by budget shortfalls, the central government has sought to reduce spending by taking back powers previously 'sub-contracted' to civil society organisations. Wage policy and management of the Social Security system are clear examples of this 'repatriation.' Moreover, the government has begun to set limits within which negotiations among the social partners have to occur. If they fail to reach agreement within the imposed constraints, the government then imposes a settlement. Finally, regional and communal institutions have begun to develop their own policies and these sometimes diverge from those of the central government. The result is that the system of subsidised liberty has begun to fragment.

In order to appreciate fully the impact of such changes on childcare policies and the representation of gender relation we would need to analyse each level of government and particularly the three Communities. Not being able to that here, this analysis is limited to the central government and its fiscal and employment policies as they affect childcare. Even before doing that, however, we need to give a broad-brush portrait of new orientations in economic and social policies, particularly the family policy dimensions.

When the Liberals joined the government in 1981 and formed a coalition, until 1988, with the Social Christians, understandings of the economic crisis and how the state might act to end it, changed in a major way. After 1981, any

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'solutions' to economic crisis would come from supply-side policies which were supposed to return businesses to profitability. These tended to focus on fiscal incentives, such as reduced taxes and lower deductions for social programmes, as well as deregulation that would supposedly eliminate the 'rigidities' of the labour market. There was an explicit rejection any demand-side policies to stimulate consumption, such as public spending, whether Keynesian or welfarist, and regulation of labour markets. Ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht reinforced such orientations, making them appear to be treaty-imposed constraints.

The Social Security system also experienced major changes. The accent was on eliminating deficits and new management practices. The family allowance system was remodelled in major ways. Surpluses were used to sop up problems in other sectors (such as sickness and disability insurance) while, except for certain categories of the poor (children of the unemployed, for example), family allowances were drastically reduced. Unemployment insurance also experienced several major reforms. In 1980, three categories of the unemployed were created: heads of families (these were single-parent families or those with only one employed spouse), people living alone [*the isolés*], and two people living together [*cohabitants*]. The latter, approximately 70% of whom were women, had their benefits reduced several times and were the only ones who could be excluded from the system if they were unemployed too long. From 1991 to 1995, some 20,000 unemployed a year (about 90% of whom were women), were thus taken

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off the roles.

Tax Reform and Childcare

Begun by the Social-Christian-Liberal coalition, and legislated by the Social-Christian-Socialist government, the 1988 tax reform included a much-touted “family dimension.”¹⁴ The overall objective was to:

... to lighten the fiscal burden on employment income and, at the same time, to make the personal income tax regime more favourable to the married and to families with children, without losing sight of the situation of single people. ... It signals the end of discrimination between married and non-married couples and the enlarged freedom of choice in the organisation of work and family life (DS440/1, 26/9/1988: 1-2).

The draft bill included a measure long sought by many women's organisations. Up to 80% of the costs of childcare for the under-threes could be deducted from employment income or its (taxable) equivalents. To qualify for the deduction, the child would have to be placed in a recognised childcare centre, cared for by a childminder, subsidised and regulated by the ONE (now the *Office de la naissance et de l'enfance*) or its Flemish equivalent, the *Kind en Gezin* (Child and Family), or looked after by an “independent” childminder regulated by one of these organisations.

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The plan elicited much debate and many suggestions for amendment. The Ecologists, speaking from the opposition benches, argued that any taxpayer should be able to deduct childcare expenses; the measure should not be restricted to those already in the labour force. They claimed their amendment would encourage non-employed single mothers to use childcare while getting trained, which would help their integration into the labour market (AS, 26/10/1988: 70; AC, 30/11/1988: 394). For his part the Minister of Finance, a Francophone Social-Christian, opposed transforming the childcare deduction into a more general financial benefit for families; the objective of universal coverage was best met by the family allowances (AS, 27/10/1988: 122 and 134). As for the Flemish Liberals, they proposed a 100% deduction, so as to eliminate any “penalty, even a partial one” associated with having children (DS440/2, 21/10/1988: 84). Nonetheless, they opposed the deduction going to any taxpayer already claiming the conjugal quotient (for a non-employed spouse). They felt such a tax break justifiable only in the case of single parents or two-income married couples” (DC597/4, 24/11/1988, no. 56). The Minister of Finance did not share this perspective, contending instead that even households with a single income should be able to deduct childcare expenses if the non-employed spouse fell sick or was hospitalised (DC597/7, 24/11/1988: 127). He also wanted to keep the 80% limit, so as to discourage childcare providers from raising their rates. He assumed they would be less likely to do so if parents still had to cover part of the costs

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(DS440/2, 21/10/1988: 84).

But it was from the ranks of the majority, and its Social-Christian wing (especially the Flemish part) that the greatest objections came. “Being a supporter of equal treatment of all children in this country,” a Social-Christian Senator felt he must argue against the deduction. He sought to eliminate any “discrimination” among children. Any parental decision or choice about the kind of care to provide for their children, whether at home or not, should receive a tax advantage. To do otherwise would be to discriminate and to treat children differently (AS, 26/10/1988: 112; also AC, 30/11/1988: 395). He also framed the issue in budgetary terms, arguing that one category of children would cost the community much more than another. As one of his colleagues had calculated, 50 to 80,000 children placed in day nurseries are going to share close to 1.2 billion (that is, the amount calculated to be lost to the treasury by the deduction); whereas the other 300,000 cared for at home, will have to be content with less than half of this amount (this is based on an estimate of the amount of the tax deduction termed the conjugal quotient) (AS, 26/11/1988: 72). Therefore, the Senator demanded that single-income households with children be compensated (DS440/2, 21/10/1988: 85).

Despite the fact that the statistical analysis appended to the draft bill demonstrated that households with one income, and especially those at the lower end of the income scale, would benefit most from the tax reform, a Flemish

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Social-Christian proposed an amendment to increase significantly the basic income tax credit of families with a child under three and no childcare deductions. This proposal was justified in terms of choice and the need to make the income tax regime, as the other state activities in this domain, neutral as to parents' decision about whether to care for their own children or to use childcare facilities (DS440/2, 21/10/1988: 60).

In the end a compromise was reached, one that no doubt involved a concession to the Socialists, then part of the majority coalition. The government accepted a Social-Christian amendment that set a maximum 10,000 francs deduction for the conjugal quotient (this had risen to 12,000 by 1997) (DS440/2, 21/10/1988: 61). At the same time, the Minister of Finance also accepted an amendment which authorised the government to set a ceiling on total deductions of childcare expenses (rather than 80% of all expenses), for cost containment reasons (DS440/2, 21/10/1988: 86).¹⁵

The amendments did not please those promoting the egalitarian model, in this case primarily Ecologists and Flemish Liberals. Although supporting policies favouring families and children, they did not want such goals to provide an excuse to return to old-fashioned values, sending women back home to raise children. The Secretary of State for Finance, a Flemish Social-Christian, rejected the implication that the government was reviving the traditional model. She saw the tax reform as doing exactly the opposite, because it gave "men and women a

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chance for labour market participation” (AC, 30/11/1988: 393).

Most of the supporters of the amended bill were found among the promoters of the new familialist model. Thus, a Francophone Socialist Senator, in terms which also exemplified how much this party had distanced itself from feminism, vaunted the reform as putting single and two-income families on the same footing before the tax man, and thereby conferring “the freedom to choose between work and home” (AS, 26/10/1988: 63). This was a clear stance in favour of “neutrality” in the tax regime, providing no encouragement to use non-parental rather than parental care or vice versa. This was far from the feminist critique presented by a Flemish Ecologist deputy, for whom tax advantages to mothers who care for their infant children does nothing less than:

... make then opt for returning home. This means that the woman must abandon her plans for her own life, postpone her career, and focus on mothering and child-rearing. ... However, women with young children who choose to stay at home today, without being aware of it, are opting to be at home for the rest of their lives ... Staying home three, six, nine years means that she is out of the labour market. She no longer accumulates work experience. She is not keeping up with technological innovations. She is completely ‘out of the loop’ ... At a time when this society, this policy, provides no measures to reintegrate stay-at-home women into the

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labour market, I find dangerous, and even hypocritical, policies that are advantageous only to housewives. They are far from any truly free choice by women to work outside or to stay at home (AC, 30/11/1988: 394).

The debate on tax reform shows, then, that the egalitarian model had not triumphed over the rhetoric of free choice. The debate also provided an occasion for promoters of traditional familialism, primarily Social-Christian deputies, to become more adept at using gender neutral language to present their ideas about - traditional - gender roles. Thus the speech of one Senator lauds:

The irreplaceable quality of care given to children in the family setting, above all during early childhood. Those parents who provide childcare at home render other incalculable services to society. They seek no job outside the home and save their Community the exorbitant costs ... of a space in a day nursery (AS, 26/10/1988: 71-72 - emphasis added).

Or, as another intoned,

... we have too great a tendency to seek from the state certain things that the household is well-equipped to provide. When one relieves the household of some of these essential tasks [there is a risk] of selecting the most costly solution (DS440/2, 21/10/1988: 85, emphasis added).

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Such remarks also reveal the way that a discursive link was developing between the supposed need for spending restraint and the advantages of parentally provided care, in a political context forged by economic crisis. For example, when certain Social-Christian Senators criticised the draft bill for not providing the same tax breaks to single-earner households, the Minister of Finance declared: “... we would do more for such households if there were no budgetary problem” (DS, 26/10/1988: 63). Here the Minister was using an argument about the financial difficulties of the government to avoid having to settle the ideological conflict about using state resources to foster a particular kind of childcare. To have made a choice would have been contrary to pluralism. The Minister relied on the budgetary argument, just as had been done during the parliamentary debate on the ASP, to moderate claims which, he judged, dis-equilibrating.

The Impact of Employment Policies on Childcare

The economic situation, at the beginning of the 1980s, oriented most of federal political activity¹⁶ towards the fight against unemployment, and the improvement of business competitiveness. It is symptomatic of this new situation that the parental leave allowance, an idea floated in the 1970s, was finally created within the framework of a larger programme. This is an allowance permitting a Voluntary Career Break (*Interruption volontaire de carrière*). Officially, the primary goal of this measure is to redistribute work (DC757/1, 6/11/1984: 36), via part-time employment and flexible working time.

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i - The Voluntary Career Break as a Parental Leave

At the end of 1984 the Social-Christian-Liberal government proposed a strategy to re-launch economic growth. The “employment and competitiveness” dimension of the project established the Voluntary Career Break. It permits workers to take a partial or full leave from their job, without any risk of being laid off. This is a paid leave and may last from six months to a year. The employer has to consent to the leave or it must conform to conditions set out in a collective agreement. The final condition is that workers on leave must be replaced by another worker receiving full unemployment benefits.¹⁷ The leave is renewable, up to a total of five years. The allowance is paid at the lowest unemployment insurance rate, that is, the one available to an unemployed worker who is cohabiting (DS757/2, 3/11/1984: 132 and 139). In the case of a half-time leave, the benefit is halved. Any worker taking such a leave maintains all Social Security benefits for example, access to family allowances and health care.

Workers can request a Career Break for any reason. Nonetheless, the government and the majority of parliamentarians imagined that the major use would be for “child-rearing, family reasons or other personal reasons” (DS757/1, 6/11/1984).¹⁸ Seen as a form of parental leave, the Voluntary Career Break generated a fair amount of consensus, even if certain defenders of the egalitarian model noted that:

It will probably be mostly women who will ask for the leave. This

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factor then constitutes an additional labour market disadvantage for them. Employers will tend to hire a man in order to avoid such interruptions. Fathers would also do well to ask for parental leave. The current text only partially tackles this problem (DC1075/21, 3/1/1985: 173).

What dispute there was came mostly from Social-Christian deputies. They sought to link this new programme to the legislated but non-functioning child-rearing allowance, the ASP (DS757/2, 3/12/1984: 135). In doing so, they revealed the extent to which they were now committed to the new familialism. They accepted the legitimacy of mothers' employment as long as it did not interfere with child-rearing. Therefore, they claimed that the Career Break Allowance and the ASP would complement each other. On the one hand, a paid leave from employment was available for those workers wanting to care for their own children but then wishing to return to their job, without putting their employment rights at risk. On the other hand, the ASP should be available for parents not yet in the labour force. "Equal treatment is necessary for reasons of equity and justice and requires that the two programmes be activated at the same time and for the same duration of time" (DS757/2, 3/12/1984: 143-144).

Other issues soon entered the debate. Briefs advocated extending the Career Break - described as a parental leave - to partners who helped their self-employed spouse, to the unemployed,¹⁹ as well as to any spouse in a household

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whose income fell below a certain level. Again, limiting a paid parental leave to two-income and single-parent families was described as being unfair to two-parent but single-income families: “This [Voluntary Career Break] discriminates according to families’ choices and in favour of one family model. ... It amounts to a form of political apartheid, experienced by families who live side by side...”(AS, 7/12/1984: 601).

In addressing such matters, rather than invoking the primary goal of the measure - that is work sharing - the Minister insisted that the integration of women into the workforce was inevitable:

The societal perspective to which this project subscribes is one that assumes that men and women now wish to engage in paid employment. This is the reality of today’s society, and of tomorrow’s (AS, 8/12/1984: 641; see also AC, 8/1/1985: 1250).

A new version of the theme of reconciling work and family life was starting to be sketched in here. Originally, this notion had buttressed the egalitarian model, with the accent being on collective responsibility for tasks traditionally assigned to mothers (including childcare), so as to permit them to integrate better into the labour force.²⁰ However, by the mid 1980s, as we are going to see clearly in the discussions of part-time work and flexible working hours, the theme of reconciling work and family came to anchored in the rhetoric of “free choice.” As such, it fitted with the new familialism, serving to re-

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domesticate several tasks (including childcare), by inducing “the parent who wishes” to withdraw temporarily or partially from the world of paid employment.

ii - Promotion of Individualised Working Time

Employers are fond of the idea of part-time work or reduced working hours. Seen as a way to deal with unemployment (DS264/1, 9/1/1978), by the end of the 1970s, draft legislation (often promoted by the Social-Christians) sought to produce a better fit between the Social Security regime and a reduction of working time. Such proposals ran up against the unions' refusal to come to a general agreement with the employers over the redistribution of work, and including a generalised reduction in the definition of “full-time” work (CG ONAFTS, A127, 18/7/1978).

Agreement had still not been reached in 1989 when the Social-Christian-Socialist government introduced a draft bill which, among other things, provided new regulations for part-time employment and flexible working time. Given that such flexibility was judged crucial for ensuring the competitiveness of firms, the government set out to protect the conditions of employment of part-time workers (AC, 8/12/1989: 797). In legislating, the government granted new recognition to part-time work. Above all, the goal was to end ‘false part-time.’ Such employment practices deprived the Social Security regime of income (when firms made under-the-table payments), or resulted in overpayment of benefits (to ‘fake part-time’ workers who received an allowance because they suffered from part-

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time unemployment). This initiative was part of the budget-cutting efforts of 1989 (DC975/10, 4/12/1989: 44).

Having made reconciliation of work and family life one of his priorities,²¹ the Minister of Employment and Labour, a Flemish Social-Christian, declared that, while respecting the need for budgetary equilibrium, it is also necessary “to reconcile ... employers’ need for flexibility with workers’ need to balance the demands of working and family life” (DC975/10, 4/12/1989: 42). Or, as one of his fellow Social-Christians said of the new regulations with respect to flexible working time, “... they make possible a better adjustment of the effects of working life on the family” (AC, 7/12/1989: 752).

The defenders of the egalitarian model, Ecologists and Flemish Socialists (even though the latter, as members of the majority, voted in favour of the project), argued that the proposed regulations actually undermined the objective of reconciliation. They would allow, for example, an employer to assign an employee working half-time eight hours a week for two weeks and then 40 hours the third week, and the worker might be informed of this schedule only 5 days in advance (DC975/10, 4/12/1989: 69; AS, 18/12/1989: 1025). Claiming that these were nothing more than “theoretical” examples, the Minister insisted that it is necessary “to give every chance to those who want to work part-time” (AC, 8/12/1989: 797-798). He went on to say: “everyone knows that, more and more often, the two partners have a job, whether full-time or part-time. In order to

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permit free choice, we must design a framework compatible with the aspirations of each of them” (AS, 18/12/1989: 1025). Again seeing the inevitability of women's labour force participation, the Minister links the rhetoric of free choice, already seen by as a tenet of the new familialism in the childcare debate, and the theme of reconciliation. From here on in, the latter was part of the new familialism whenever work sharing was on the agenda.

Supporters of the egalitarian model deployed their classic criticisms of supposedly free choice against the notion that part-time work was a way to foster “reconciliation of work and family life.” Pointing out that part-time work had become the norm in certain highly feminised sectors, they underlined the fact that many of such jobs do not provide any real choice between full-time and part-time work (AC, 7/12/1989: 756; AC, 8/12/1989: 790). A Flemish Socialist set out the full list of feminist objections to part-time work:

First, part-timers cannot be assigned major responsibilities; therefore, they are assigned low-skilled jobs. Secondly, they do not have promotion opportunities; they remain marginal, thereby reinforcing secondary labour force status that women already generally have. Thirdly, the working conditions of part-timers are poor ... with shorter working hours, their rhythm of work is faster. Very often, too they work outside of normal working hours. This is not positive for family and social life. Fourthly, part-timers have

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more difficulty participating in works councils and in unions.

Already there are too few women in these bodies ... Fifthly, a part-

time job makes difficult to achieve economic independence ...

[while] such independence is the condition of the women's

development. Sixthly, women continue to carry all the household

tasks: they have the time! Men don't need to help them. In this way

the gender division of labour is reinforced. Seventhly, collective

infrastructure no longer needs to be developed (day nurseries,

laundromats, etc) if, while doing their mothering, women also do

laundry ... (AS, 7/12/1984: 631).

The deputy was worried that, given the traditional gender of labour in the family, a labour force that concentrates women in jobs in which they are easily replaceable, and a female psychology which is less career-oriented, a real and free choice between full and part-time work would be nothing other than "a joke."

This Flemish Socialist concluded:

The new work-sharing formulae favour women's return to the

home ... This is of course nothing new: it is well known that

whenever there is a crisis women are chased out of the

employment network ... If they are not yet banished from the

country, as immigrant workers are, they are nonetheless banished

to the traditional gender division of labour, for the greater comfort

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of men (Ibid: 629).

Accused of seeking a return to the traditional model, the Ministers of Employment and Labour vigorously denied this was their motive. Supporters of the new familialism, they described their measures as enabling “parents” better to equilibrate family time in relation to working time, giving them the means to choose freely. As the Francophone Social-Christian said:

Far for me to want to send back women home. Today no one could even imagine doing such a thing. We are constructing a society where, little by little, as many women as men will have access to the labour force. But we must also be welcoming to children, able to rear and take care of them. We can no longer imagine a system in which certain people are permanently excluded from the labour market. By means of career breaks, we are trying to place new value on certain ways of spending time: the time spent as a couple and in family activities, the time taken for training, as well as other goals, all without negative consequences on one's career (AS, 8/12/1984: 641-42).

A few Social-Christians remained nostalgic for the traditional family model. They raised financial, educational and even pro-natalist arguments to push for child-rearing by mothers. They sought to marry these ideas to an acceptance of

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the reality, indeed legitimacy, of mothers' labour force participation, however.

Thus, starting from the premise that a lot of long-term unemployed women "... do not wish to find a job because they consider, quite rightly, that it is more important to devote themselves to child-rearing, and that the income from work, as compared to that coming from unemployment insurance, does not justify the efforts and sacrifices they would have to make," one Senator judged:

... that a lot of these women, if they have the chance, would take a much longer career break than the one now available ... [It would also be a good idea] to give priority in employment to women who have raised a large family. The service rendered to the community is immense: more stable children, less delinquency, better training and education ... Our current demographic problems are such that we must pay more attention to these women, as well as to those who, also thanks to a career break, care for elderly persons, the sick, the handicapped, rather than imposing this burden on our old-age homes, nursing homes, or other public services. One day we are going to have to recognise the savings we make because some people care for their own children, the elderly, the sick or handicapped and have to offer them a fair remuneration for their contribution. We only need to think of the cost of day nurseries! (AS, 18, 12/1989: 1006).

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The Senator finished up by saying, “Obviously everyone must have complete freedom to make a choice.”

As the 1990s dawned, the egalitarian model of gender relations had succeeded in diffusing the view that mothers' labour force participation was both inevitable and legitimate. Being linked to Belgium's pluralism, however, it could not avoid being in competition with, and even in representational terms being surpassed by, the rhetoric of “free choice” and “reconciliation” in the realms of employment policies and childcare. These latter two representations of gender relations were the tenets of the new familialism, and were even employed by those nostalgic for the traditional family model.

It was, then, much more fiscal pressure on state spending than any ideological commitment that led to the state never to implement the ASP. In the debates about the child-rearing allowance, it was obvious that pluralism, and the balance of forces among different views of the family and gender relations had generated a recognition of “parents' right to choose” not to participate in the paid labour force and to raise their children themselves. It was, furthermore, more the struggle against unemployment and for competitiveness, rather than any ideological commitment, that led the state to institute financial incentives for temporary or partial career breaks, in particular for “parents who choose” to look after their own children. That the non-implementation of the ASP flew in the face of the new familialism while the Voluntary Career Break was alien to the

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egalitarian model attests to the axiomatic neutrality that still characterised Belgium's citizenship regime, even as the welfare state is redesigned. The “mega-goal” of the Belgian state is still, as it has been for so many decades, to foster the material conditions that will permit all citizens, no matter which of the “three worlds” they belong to, to lead a life in conformity with their personal convictions.

Towards a Frontal Assault on the Egalitarian Model?

The story just recounted goes up until 1990; the major decisions were by then in place. Nor have we, for reasons explained above, analysed the effects of the decentralisation of family policy and care for young children to Belgium's three Communities that has been going on since 1980. It is possible, however, to continue the story into the 1990s, by quickly surveying more recent legislative initiatives. Here we can identify two dynamics which continue to put equality to the test and threaten its place in the citizenship regime.

On the one hand, state actions in the realm of non-parental childcare reveal a continuing trend towards the multiplication of childcare options. Employment policy fosters the creation of jobs with lower status and less rights than classic full-time jobs. These include, for example, programmes that provide large subsidies to employers who hire an unemployed person. These are used, *inter alia*, to remove childcare workers from the ranks of the unemployed and into paid albeit low-paid jobs. There are also now tax deductible job vouchers

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[*chèques-service*], available to persons willing to hire an unemployed worker through a local employment agency (*Agence locale pour l'emploi - ALE*). In 1995, 91% of the working hours remunerated by means of such vouchers - 75% of which were worked by women - were for housekeeping, but already 2% of them covered care for the sick and for children (*Le Soir*, September 10, 1996).

An assessment of such programmes in terms of equality would examine the differential situation of women, as users and providers of childcare. It would then ask: can equality accommodate programmes that foster integration of some women into the labour force on the basis of programmes that relegate others to less advantageous forms of employment? A document published in 1994 by the Minister of Employment and Labour, a Flemish Social-Christian woman who was also the Minister responsible for Equal Opportunity Policies, proposes doing just that. Published as a set of guidelines for municipalities seeking concrete examples of measures that would foster gender equality, the document suggests that local governments promote care for sick children provided by unemployed women hired through the ALE.²²

This idea restarted a polemic that had raged in the 1980s over childcare provided by childminders working in individual homes. In contrast to the childcare workers employed in day nurseries, “mother’s helpers” [*assistantes maternelles*] require no formal training and do not have the status of salaried worker. The 1990s controversy again pitted Socialist women’s organisations

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against Social-Christian ones. The former, as supporters of the egalitarian model, sought a “real” professional status for childcare workers. This would involve, they argued, putting childcare workers on a salary and employing them in a real workplace, a day nursery. The Social-Christian organisations, in contrast, as proponents of the new familialism, were satisfied with much less training while vaunting the quality of contact (closer, more “maternal”) between the childminder and the child when the latter is at home (Humblet, 1996: 121-124).²³

A second trend is the reinforcement of state efforts to foster parental rather than publicly provided care. This strategy is not new, of course, but it is seen in the strengthening commitment to part-time employment as a solution to the unemployment problem and as way of making firms more competitive. After having first reduced the supplementary allowance paid to “involuntary” part-time workers, 85% of whom were women, the Social-Christian-Socialist government reinstated the allowance in 1995, albeit making it variable as a function of whether the part-time worker lives in a household with another adult or is head of a household.²⁴ The Social Security rights of workers who opted for part-time employment due to lack of a full-time job were also improved. The government thereby also encouraged part-time employees to maintain that status if they wished it or if they were using one the programmes for reduced working time, such as a half-time Voluntary Career Break. Finally, a full-time employee who temporarily reduces working hours in order to care for a child under three has the

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same rights to unemployment benefits as a full-time worker.²⁵

Seduced by the efficiency of the “Dutch model,”²⁶ Belgian policymakers, particularly those of the Social-Christian and liberal world, have called for a new accord between the social partners that would bring moderation in wage increases and more work sharing through an increase in part-time jobs. In the Netherlands, more than two-thirds of employed women have only part-time jobs. (Dock and Janssen, 1996).²⁷ Moreover, with the “Dutch miracle” reinforcing their ideological convictions, certain business and financial leaders no longer hide their preference for the traditional model. The President of the Walloon business association (*l'Union wallonne des entreprises*) announced that: “the labour market could not absorb all the baby-boom women, nor all the foreigners. His solutions followed. Half-time jobs for women and a refusal to welcome all the world's misery” (*Le Soir*, October 23, 1996).

Finally, and most strikingly, we hear again today, just as when the traditional family model predominated, a discourse about work and the care of young children that is no longer gender neutral. It is as if the goal is again to bring women into the labour force under different conditions than men, so that they will continue to take responsibility for domestic labour and especially care for the youngest children. With respect to the representation of mothers' work, history seems to be repeating itself. Nonetheless, the dénouement of this story will still depend a great deal upon the political appeal of this “new” discourse. But more

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than that, it will depend on whether young families who, in contrast to their parents, have grown up with the egalitarian model, can resist the new familialism.

Notes

¹ Until 1974, a wife could sue for divorce “for fault” only if her husband had brought his mistress into the conjugal home, whereas any act of adultery (in the home or elsewhere) by the wife was grounds for a husband to seek a divorce.

² This hypothesis remains to be proven, given that the liberal parties intervened very little during the legislative processes examined here. Perhaps the cause of this relative lack of visibility was the fact that they were more open to Catholics than were the Socialist parties from the 1960s onwards.

³ This Management Committee is composed of equal numbers of representatives of employers, unions and socio-cultural organisations, including the two family leagues, the Socialist women’s movement (*Les Femmes prévoyantes*) and the Social Christian women’s movement (*Vie Féminine*). In collaboration with the department responsible for social affairs, the Committee manages the ONAFTS and the FESC. The authors wish to thank Mr Verstraeten, the General Administrator of the ONAFTS, for allowing us to consult the archives of this organisation, and Mr Darge, Assistant Secretary General of FESC, for his support and the information and insights he shared with us.

⁴ When we cite the documents of the Management Committee (CG) of the

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ONAFTS, we use the following abbreviations: 'P' for proposals, 'A' for advisories, and 'D' for decisions, whereas when we refer to the ONAFTS' reports of its own activities we use the abbreviation 'RA.' The quotations in the next few paragraphs are from ONAFTS, P17, 19/5/1970.

⁵ This would have been added to the "thirteenth-month" supplement that already existed.

⁶ This action angered the Socialist organisations; they then decided to boycott future meetings of the Management Committee devoted to this matter (ONAFTS, RA 1971: 9- 10).

⁷ See DS466, 2/6/1971, and 627, 8/7/1971; AS, 14-14/7/1971; DC1062, 15/7/1971; AC 1/7/1971; MB, 12/8/1971. When we cite parliamentary sources, we use the following abbreviations: "DC," for the parliamentary documents of the House, 'DS' for the parliamentary documents of the Senate, 'AC' for the parliamentary yearbooks of the House, 'AS' for the parliamentary yearbooks of the Senate. Finally, we will use the abbreviation 'MB' for *Moniteur belge*, and 'AR' for royal decree.

⁸ To this end, it received from the reserves of the ONAFTS an endowment of 400 million BF. The law stipulated that the FESC could receive other endowments from the ONAFTS reserves, as well as from other sources. An amendment, no doubt of Socialist origin, tried in vain to make the endowment from the ONAFTS

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reserves annual (DS627, 8/7/1971: 14-16).

⁹ Certain other Senators hewed to traditional familialism. For example, one said: “Given that, due to economic changes, certain mothers are obliged to work outside the home, it is imperative to take steps to provide for the care of their children. Nonetheless, the best child-rearing is that done by the mother herself. As the director of a day nursery in France recently stated: ‘day nurseries are a necessary evil’”(DS627, 8/7/1971: 3). Such rhetorical flourishes did not generate enough support to undermine the original text, however.

¹⁰ See DC 680, 1975-1976; AC, 9-12/12/1975; DS742, 1975-1976, AS, 30-31/12/1975 and 2-3/1/1976; MB, 6/1/1976.

¹¹ Even if a feminist version exists (see, for example, the work of Luce Irigaray), differentialism has been developed primarily by the philosophers of the traditional, antifeminist model.

¹² The budget crunch also affected funding of publicly provided care. At the same time that it promulgated the royal decrees implementing the FESC, the government substantially increased the portion of childcare costs covered by parental fees (AR, 1/8/1974).

¹³ In a general way, one could claim that each world (in the sociological sense) is preponderant in one region: the Catholic world in Flanders, the Socialist world in Wallonia and the liberal world in Brussels.

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¹⁴ DS440, 1988; AS, 26-27/10/1988; DC597, 1988-89; AC, 30/11-1/12/1988; MB, 16/12/1988.

¹⁵ A royal decree fixed this ceiling at 345 BF per day (an amount still in place in 1997). The average contribution of parental fees to childcare expenses has been estimated, in 1992, at 300 BF/day in the day nurseries of the French Community, and at 362FB in those of the Flemish Community (Dubois *et al.*, 1994: 34).

¹⁶ Even if formally Belgium only became a federal state with the constitutional reform of 1993, in practice it has been one since the constitutional reform of 1980.

¹⁷ See DS757, 1984-85; AS, 5 and 8/12/1984; DC1075, 1984-85; AC, 7-9/1/1985; MB, 24/1/1985.

¹⁸ Typically, sectoral collective agreements concluded under this legislation linked a Voluntary Career Break to family situations such as the birth of a child or caring for young children (Maingain, 1993: 78-79). Since 1991, moreover, a small supplement to the Career Break allowances used to care for a child under three is available.

¹⁹ The Volksunie, the Flemish democratic nationalist party, proposed to convert into family allowances the unemployment benefits of unemployed workers who provided all the care for children or parents (DS757/2, 3/12/1984: 68-69; DC1075/2, 15/12/1984: 12). In response, the Minister announced his intention to create an equivalent of the Career Break for the unemployed. This was done in

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1985.

²⁰ See above, the arguments made by Socialist women during the FESC debate.

²¹ Concretely, the Ministry's priority can be identified in the following actions.

Voluntary Career Break benefits were higher if child-rearing was the reason for the leave. A new right to an unpaid leave (maximum 10 days) for "compelling family reasons" was created. Specialised studies of the issue abounded. The Ministry organised a Round Table with associations whose work involves fostering such reconciliation.

²² The document is entitled: *Une politique communale d'émancipation dans la pratique*. It is also worth noting that gender neutral language was not considered necessary in the text. The Ministry clearly only had female unemployed in mind, as its use of the feminine form in French indicated.

²³ Note that, in conformity with pluralism and the rhetoric of free choice, the ONE decided to develop the services of "mother's helpers" as well as the day nurseries. As a result, with the support of ONE subsidies, between 1985 and 1992, the number of "trained childminders" increased tenfold in the French Community.

²⁴ Exercising its responsibility over employment policy, in 1994 the Region of Flanders instituted a subsidy to encourage full-time workers to become part-time.

²⁵ Worker did not, however, have the right to supplementary benefits when working part-time.

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²⁶ At the beginning of the 1980s, the Netherlands unemployment rates were equally as high as Belgium's. By the mid-1990s the Dutch rate was half that of Belgium (Hemerijck and Visser, 1997).

²⁷ Between 1983 and 1995, part-time employment in the Netherlands rose by 550,000 jobs, whereas in the same period in Belgium, they went from 280,000 to 480,000, one-third of which were held by women.