

Policy Watch

Mothers' UNION
Christian care for families



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

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Welcome to online monthly Policy Watch, available on Mothers' Union website at the beginning of each month at <http://www.themothersunion.org/policywatch.aspx>

Tracking issues in Social Policy

June 2009

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Equality Bill

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The Equality Bill (which is over 500 pages long including explanatory notes!) received its second reading in the House of Commons on 11th May. The Bill brings together all existing legislation relating to discrimination on the grounds of age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

It addresses discrimination in the work place, in the provision of goods and services, and in public service provision. The Bill also introduces a duty on public sector bodies, such as local authorities, to consider reducing socio-economic



inequalities – in plain speak they will have to think about how they can stop poverty acting as a barrier to doing well at school, receiving necessary health care or being trained for a job.

The Bill contains proposals to address the gender pay gap. It will permit the Government to require public sector bodies with 150+ employees, and private sector employers with 250+ employees to publish information about the differences in pay between their male and female employees. It will also prohibit the use of "secrecy clauses" that contractually prevent employees from discussing their pay with each other.

The Bill will also make it unlawful to prevent women from breastfeeding in public places, such as cafés and restaurants; and discrimination against pregnant women as a result of their pregnancy will not be classed as sex discrimination - there is some concern that this clause will weaken protection for pregnant women.

The Bill has now moved to Committee stage which will run from 2nd June to 7th July 2009.

Keep a Policy Watch for updates as the Bill progresses through Parliament.

Welfare Reform Bill

The Welfare Reform Bill's aim is to help more people to find worthwhile employment and to reduce dependency on benefits. The concern of the Church is that this should be done through supportive attitudes and structures rather than punitive measures, particularly in the current difficult economic climate where jobs are hard to find. Only then can these reforms lead to genuine life improvements for individuals, for families and for the community as a whole.

Church of England's Particular Concerns Child Welfare:

The Bill requires unemployed parents whose youngest child is seven years old, to apply for Jobseekers Allowance unless they are assessed as eligible for the new Employment and Support Allowance, or are entitled to Carers' Benefits. They must look for work in accordance with a scheme prepared by their Job Centre. If they are not in employment after two years they must participate in 'full-time activity', developing their skills and 'work habits' in order to receive Benefits. While such provisions may work well for many families, it may place others under unreasonable stress unless enough flexibility is built into the provisions to meet each case on its merits.



For parents with children over seven years old it is essential that good affordable childcare is available – and for part-time workers it must be sufficiently flexible to cater for the family's needs. It is not in the interests of children of this age to be in childcare or school for very long days. Childcare provision is not yet universally accessible, and without such provision it is hard to see how this Bill can work. For those in full-time 'work-related activity' as required by the Bill, childcare and its associated costs may be an even greater issue.

There is a serious risk that the proposals outlined in this Bill will push single parents (mostly women) into the position of occupying the lowest paid, part-time jobs so that they are available for their children after school, raising issues of gender equality and simultaneously failing to address single parent family poverty.

Joint Birth Registration:

The Church of England affirms a child's right and need for both a father and a mother, wherever possible and we believe that public policy and legislation should support and encourage this right and responsibility. However, we are not convinced that a legislative approach is appropriate to the 'problem' of sole registration. Indeed we fear that the cost of this legislation will be largely borne by the most vulnerable, including those mothers who have genuine reasons for exemption from joint registration, who will face additional bureaucracy.

Cohabitation Bill

Lord Lester's Bill on cohabitation is intended to keep pressure on the Government to reform legislation on cohabitation following the recommendations of the Law Commission's consultation '*Cohabitation: the Financial consequences of Relationship breakdown*'. In 2008 the Government announced it did not intend to reform the law until they had analysed the effects in Scotland, where a similar reform has been introduced.

Lord Lester's Bill would allow the courts to make financial provision for a cohabiting partner where a relationship which is ending satisfies one of two criteria: it has either lasted at least two years or a child has been born within the relationship. Rights would be automatic but there is provision for couples to opt out.

At second reading and at committee stages both the Bishop of Winchester and the Bishop of Southwark spoke in support of some sort of legislation which protected the vulnerable. However there was general concern that the Bill as it stands is too radical and wide-ranging and might undermine the unique position of marriage in law.

There is also concern as to the impact of cohabitation legislation on informal 'religious' marriages. It is Lord Lester's intention that this legislation will protect those who enter into religious ceremonies (such as

in mosques) who are not aware that these do not have legal validity. The Church of England would not want polygamy in any form to be legalised. The Christian view of marriage is that it is monogamous – the union of one man and one woman, to the exclusion of all others. This understanding has shaped our English law. We are very aware, from our brothers and sisters across the Anglican Communion, of the pastoral and moral problems that arise in certain countries because of polygamy, especially the problem of injustice to women and children who have been in polygamous relationships. We would not support any move to allow people to enter into polygamous marriage in the UK or to encourage the practice of unrecognised polygamous relationships.



However on grounds of social justice, where a polygamous marriage has been entered legally in another jurisdiction and the family are subjected to such behaviour that makes them eligible for refugee status, then we have said that there could be grounds for allowing them into this country and for them to be eligible for benefits.

Worldwide Policy

EUROPEAN UNION: Proposals to amend the Pregnant Workers' Directive

The European Commission (the body responsible for proposing legislation in the European Union) has proposed updating and extending the rights and protections of female workers across the European Union who are pregnant, have just given birth or who are breastfeeding. The proposals include:

- Increasing maternity leave, including *compulsory* leave
- Prohibiting the making of plans to dismiss workers who are pregnant or on maternity leave and giving them the right to request reasons if they are dismissed
- Ensuring women can return to the same or equivalent job following maternity leave
- Giving women returning from maternity leave the right to request flexible working.



The UK already fulfils and in some cases exceeds the proposed changes. However, the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform is carrying out a consultation, to which Mothers' Union is responding.

For a full briefing, please go to: http://www.themothersunion.org/policy_uk_legislation.aspx

To read the full consultation, please go to:
<http://www.berr.gov.uk/consultations/page50579.html>

Campaigns Update: Commercialisation of Childhood

Implementation of the Byron Review – Northern Ireland

On 19th May the Northern Ireland Assembly debated a motion on the implementation of the Byron review, which we reported on in Policy Watch throughout 2008. In the Private Members' debate, the Assembly resolved "That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to outline how she is implementing the recommendations from the Byron Review in relation to the safeguarding and protection of children".

Although the Byron review focused on evidence drawn from England, the proposals she set forth apply universally to users of the internet across the world. However, her recommendations included setting up a

UK-wide body to oversee work to protect children online and in a digital environment. Dr Byron's recommendations fell into three broad areas: reducing the availability of harmful and inappropriate material in the most popular parts of the Internet; restricting children's access to harmful and inappropriate material by working with the industry, parents and children; and working to build children's resilience to the material to which they may be exposed so as to give them confidence and skills in navigating new media.

Contributors to the debate agreed that the Byron Review was a start, not an end, to protecting children online and therefore called on the Minister for Education to account for what has been done to implement the recommendations in Dr Byron's review.

Faith reflection

A greedy man brings trouble to his family, but he who hates bribes will live.
Proverbs 15:27

The ongoing controversy over MP's expenses, with the fall-out and accusations that it has already engendered, is too complex to judge purely from reading the newspapers (though many of us may feel that we would like to!) However, what it has done, is to create within many, a severe loss of confidence in the ones we have elected to govern and care for us as a nation. We are disheartened to feel that our interests have not been served by those in power, but their own.

This situation is reflected in the much smaller setting of the family unit, where our natural expectation is that the parent will automatically put the well-being of their children ahead of their own. Although we know that this is not always the case, many of us are grateful for the love and selflessness of our parents in caring for us before themselves. In this month when we are celebrating Father's Day, we particularly thank God for fathers who juggle work and home commitments, seeking to provide for their family; not only for their physical needs, but also their emotional and spiritual welfare.

Where we are aware of shortcomings, both within those who govern us and those who parent us, we are so glad that we can look to our heavenly Father. He perfectly provides, loves and cares for us. He is the one in whom we find the greatest example of self-sacrifice that we will ever experience, when he gave up his own son for the sake of our ultimate and eternal well-being.



Join the Discussion

Have you visited the Social Policy pages on the Mothers' Union website recently?

NEW

Visit www.themothersunion.org/policy_international.aspx for a discussion and briefing paper on this year's United Nations Commission on the Status of Women theme. This paper can be used in Mothers' Union groups to discuss our Worldwide Policy work.

Whilst you're visiting the website, why not take part in the monthly poll or discuss a policy issue on the members' section forum?

