

Fighting over the Kinder ^[1]

Author: The Economist

Source: The Economist

Format: Article

Publication Date: 17 Aug 2013

EXCERPTS:

GERMAN mothers who take their pundits and politicians seriously have faced a grim choice over the past year. They can be Rabenmütter (raven mothers), who selfishly abandon their toddlers to pursue careers. Or they can be Heimchen am Herd, a phrase that started as the German translation of Charles Dickens's "The Cricket on the Hearth" and has come to mean housewives passed over by modernity and content to remain at the hearth with the wee ones.

This is the latest flare-up in a culture war that has made family policy one of the most contested issues ahead of the general election on September 22nd, shoving aside apparently weightier issues like the future of the euro and the politics of energy. On one side are conservatives, represented by the Christian Social Union (CSU), the Bavarian sister-party of the Christian Democrats (CDU) led by Chancellor Angela Merkel. On the other is almost everybody else.

Since August 1st each side has had a policy to tout. Progressives propose a new legal right for parents, once a child is a year old, to have a place at a publicly subsidised crèche. Conservatives counter with a planned new monthly payment of €100 (\$130), rising to €150 next year, to parents who choose not to use a subsidised crèche, presumably to care for their toddlers at home. Detractors are calling this the "hearth bonus".

These two new policies join a bewildering list of 156 existing entitlements for families, such as the Kindergeld that parents get for each child, as well as various tax breaks. Such variety is good because it captures every conceivable situation in life and thus gives parents choice, says Kristina Schröder, the family minister (who leads by example, having had a baby while in office). Critics say it is baffling, and reflects German confusion about women and family life.

Western Germany is more conservative than such neighbours as Scandinavia and France in its attitudes to babies, women and work. (Formerly communist eastern Germany is more progressive.) Only 24% of German toddlers were in crèches in 2011, compared with half in the Netherlands and three-quarters in Denmark, according to Eric Seils at the Hans-Böckler Foundation, a think-tank linked to trade unions. A shortage of child care is one reason why women in Germany are more likely than their neighbours to stay out of the labour market. It may also explain why they have fewer children (1.36 per woman on average).

The "hearth bonus" is unlikely to make many parents keep toddlers out of crèches. Its importance is more as a cultural signal that the CSU forced last year on its partners in government, the CDU and the liberal Free Democrats. The opposition centre-left parties promise to repeal it if they win.

The legal claim to a crèche is also largely theoretical. What matters most is whether the supply of child-care places keeps up with demand, and whether parents decide that the new crèches are good enough. Attitudes are changing faster than the political hysterics suggest. It is too bad, says Klaus Zeh, president of the German Family Association, a lobby group, that emotional debate and stereotyping "has hurt so many families".

-reprinted from the Economist

Region: Europe ^[2]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/13/09/fighting-over-kinder>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/13/09/fighting-over-kinder> [2] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe>