

The OECD and the reconciliation agenda:
Competing blueprints

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Biography

Rianne Mahon is Chancellor's Professor at Carleton University where she teaches in the Institute of Political Economy, the School of Public Policy and Administration and the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. She is co-editor (with Sonya Michel) of *Childcare Policy at the Crossroads: Gender and Welfare State Restructuring* and author of numerous articles and chapters on child care politics in Canada, Sweden, and the European Union. She plans to write a book examining the interaction of the OECD with Canada, Sweden, Ireland and South Korea over policies to reconcile work and family life.

The OECD and the reconciliation agenda: Competing blueprints

Across advanced capitalist countries, welfare state restructuring has come to include a “farewell to maternalism” – i.e. political support for mothers’ domestic caregiving role – albeit one proceeding at different speeds and taking diverse forms (Orloff, 2004). For some, the “farewell” may be identified with the withdrawal of support for mother-caregivers, especially in the form of the shift from “welfare to workfare” for lone parents. Yet it also involves the prescription of “reconciliation of family and work” policies designed to support mother-wage earners. Just like the earlier maternalist policies, these new policies can take different forms, with quite different consequences for women’s equality and for children’s rights. National states continue to play an important role in redesigning welfare regimes to meet new challenges and welfare regime theory suggests that this will result in path dependent change: the different forms of maternalist policies will leave their stamp on how states seek to reconcile work and family life. Yet channels of policy learning are increasingly multi-scalar, including an important role for transnational flows of ideas or “fast policy”, packaged as a set of transferable “best practices” (Peck, 2002; Jessop, 2003).

In other words, the shift from maternalism to reconciliation is not simply due to structural changes (e.g. the shift to post-industrial employment), demographics (ageing societies), nor even the impact of second wave feminism, although all of these have contributed. It is also being strongly promoted by influential supra- and international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The OECD operates as an important source of transnational policy knowledge construction and dissemination. Through regular country reports, special thematic studies, colloquia and the like, it contributes to transnational policy transfer and learning. It is therefore of interest to ask, just what sort of advice?

Throughout the 1980s and for much of the 1990s, that advice bore a marked neo-liberal stamp (McBride and Williams, 2001; Armingeon and Beyeler, 2004). As the twentieth century drew to a close, however, the OECD’s social policy prescriptions began to reflect a “third way” or “inclusive” liberalism” perspective,¹ with a (liberal) feminist twist. It is this perspective that dominates the new social policy agenda announced in *A Caring World* (1999), and which carries through the important series dealing with reconciliation policies, *Babies*

¹ I follow Porter and Craig (2004) in seeing the “third way” as a form of “inclusive liberalism”, fashioned in the 1990s in response to the limitations of 1980s-style neo-liberalism.

and Bosses. As will be argued in this paper, this set of prescriptions promotes a shallow version of gender “equity” and does little for the rights of children. The key concern is the formation of “flexible” labour markets and households for a globalised economy.

Yet the OECD has not one prescription for bidding farewell to maternalism, but two. Although the prescriptions in *Starting Strong*, the special thematic review of early childhood education and care (ECEC), fall short of the feminist ideal of a full *sharing* of care and paid work by men and women (Fraser, 1997; Stratigaki, 2004), it clearly stakes out an alternative that not only is more “woman-friendly,” but also treats children as citizens “in the here and now,” not simply investments in the future labour force. Moreover, it eschews the “fast policy” model of policy transfer, in favour of contextualized learning.² This raises questions about what shapes the policy advice tendered by international organisations and, more basically, how we think about them.

Farewell to maternalism, hello?

Feminists have rightly argued that the welfare states, begun in the late 19th century and consolidated in the 20th, focused on the male breadwinner and the risks – unemployment, injury, old age – he faced. Yet it was never just about the male breadwinner; welfare regimes also incorporated a maternalist strand, supporting in various ways the role of women as providers of (unpaid) care in the household.³ The maternalist component could take the form of joint (family-based) taxation, spousal allowances in male breadwinner social insurance programs or child/family benefits paid directly to caregivers. In many countries, moreover, mothers were exempted – for greater or lesser periods – from the necessity of turning to paid work in the absence of the male breadwinner. While they varied in the degree of generosity and in who was designated beneficiary,⁴ in none of these variants was the domestic caregiver on par with the male breadwinner. Rather, as Orloff points out, “nowhere did the programs of modern social protection instituted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries...embody feminist ideals of women’s individuality and independence.

² On fast policy, see Peck (2002: 349); on contextualized learning, see Zeitlin 2003:15).

³ The “maternalist” strand, and the forces behind it, constitutes the focus in Jenson (1985), Koven and Michel (1993), and Skocpol, 1992).

⁴ See Sainsbury (1996), especially chapters 3 and 4.

Instead, gender difference was linked to gender inequality and women's lack of independence" (2004: 6).

While the workfare turn in the U.S., Britain and Canada has focused attention on the repeal of the right of lone mothers to assistance as domestic caregivers (Bashevkin, 2002), it is actually the whole gamut of maternalist policies that are in question today. The end to maternalism is not just about retrenchment, moreover, as the (partial) termination of women's domestic caregiving role generates the need for alternative care arrangements (Jenson, 1997; Daly and Lewis, 2000; Mahon, 2001). In other words, the end of maternalism has given rise to pressures for new state initiatives such as public support for non-parental child care, parental leave arrangements, "flextime" and the like.

Yet, just as there were different ways of sustaining maternalism, so, too, are there different ways of supporting mother-wage earners. These differences have consequences for equality – among women, between men and women, and among children.

In North America, attention has understandably focused on the neo-liberal model, for which the U.S., at the national and state level constitutes the paradigm exemplar. In the U.S. women's labour force participation rate is amongst the highest in the world while the solution to the resulting need for extra-parental care is largely found in the existence of a large pool of low-wage workers (Esping-Andersen, 1999). In care work, this labour force is usually female and often racialised (Glenn, 1992). National state involvement comes in the form of neo-liberal labour market (and immigration) policies, as well as the turn to workfare, but state and local level experimentation play an important part (Peck, 2001). The national government also offers tax deductions, for corporations as well as individuals, which has encouraged the extension of corporate (or "private") welfare to "reconciliation" needs – for those well-positioned in the labour market (Michel, 1999).

The U.S. model also includes important feminist elements, however. Thus feminists have secured employment equity rights (O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver, 1999) as well as the right to freedom from sexual harassment in the workplace (Zippel, 2000). As Orloff notes, this has contributed to a labour market in which "women with good educations or training are able to take advantage of many employment opportunities, and have ...penetrated the upper echelons of private business and the professions and masculine working-class occupations to a

greater degree than their Nordic or European counterparts" (2004: 24). These feminist gains are, however, not sufficient to challenge the dominance of the neo-liberal model in the U.S. Consequently, this version of reconciliation comes at the price of greater (class) inequality among women and the "care solution" – via low wage labour of some - does little to contribute to the growth of good post-industrial jobs (Myles, 1988; Esping-Andersen, 1990).

Children do not figure large in neo-liberal discourse, as they are seen as the responsibility of their families. Yet there is some – albeit limited - room for remedial state action to "save" children from the "cycle of poverty" through targeted programs like Head Start. For the most part, parental market power determines the quality of child care to which children have access. While children of middle and upper class families are more likely to have access to better quality child care, those from lower income families "are found predominantly in the lowest-quality, least-regulated programs" (Morgan, 2005: 225).

In Europe, three other blueprints have attracted more attention than the neo-liberal: the neo-familialist, third way, and egalitarian. The neo-familialist draws on while seeking to modernise traditional views of gender difference. It is more likely to be found among the conservative welfare regimes of continental Europe, but there are also signs of this approach in social democratic Finland.

Neo-familialism shares with neo-liberalism an emphasis on "choice," but here the choice is understood not as in terms of markets for care but as women's right to choose between a temporary housewife-mother role and labour force participation, with the balance tipped in favour of the former. This is underpinned by the neo-familial view of child development: maternal care in the early years is understood as in the best interests of the child. While this position was supported by in the 1950s and 1960s by child development experts like Bowlby (Michel, 1999), the dominant view today sees an important role for quality childhood education and care.⁵ The neo-familial model nevertheless hews to the earlier view. Thus the hallmark of the neo-familialist model is publicly supported long child care leaves (two-four years) - and little, if any, public support for nonparental child care for children three and under. Women are encouraged to return to work, but rarely to their former job, and usually on a part time basis, when the child enters public preschool. This model does little for gender equality and, as typically low rate of reimbursement means that it

⁵ See for example the work of Fraser Mustard (Mustard and McCain, 1999).

operates primarily as an incentive for working class, not professional women, to withdraw from the labour market.

Whereas neo-familialist reconciliation policies would preserve the older gender difference model, third way advocates favour a gender sameness view, in which equality of the sexes is defined as encouraging women to remain in the labour market. Ignoring the unequal division of care work within the home, third way advocates focus on short (“to preserve their human capital”), but funded, parental (in name, maternal in practice) leave and public support for child care. Consistent with the “new public management” theory on which third way, like neo-liberal, thinking draws (Giddens, 2003: 14), the state is not to play the role of provider. Rather, in the name of efficiency and equity, the public role should be limited to supporting the choices of consumer-citizens through demand-side subsidies, improving the flow of information, and/or regulation. States work thus work in “partnership” with the private (commercial and non-profit) sector, usually at the local level. This form of reconciliation is found in hybrid regimes like Britain’s and Canada’s (liberal with social democratic elements) or the Netherlands (conservative-social democratic).⁶

The third way should not be confused with neo-liberalism, although there are shared elements. Rather it should be seen as part of the attempt to “re-embed” the globalising market economy set in train by the neo-liberalism of the 1980s. As Porter and Craig note,

For nations, this means adopting world trade rules and conservative fiscal policies, removing trade barriers and opening capital markets...For individuals, this primary inclusion is inclusion in labour markets, or in training for these, a preparation which now begins in social investment made all the way from (before) the cradle to the community to the (global) workplace and economy. (2004: 392)

In contrast to Thatcherism, such re-embedding involves recognizing “the social” but seeks to establish new rules – “responsibilities (to work or to train) as well as rights”. Earlier social democratic/social liberal visions of equality of condition are abandoned, for post-industrialism has supposedly rendered equality “in the here and now” no longer feasible, due to the productivity gap that exists between the goods and service sectors. As net job growth will occur in the latter sector, politicians will have to choose between inequality (the US

⁶ Mahon, 2002 on the UK and the Netherlands; Lister, 2004, on Canada and the UK.

model) and un- or low employment (arguably the continental European choice).⁷ In the name of liberal inclusiveness, third way advocates are thus prepared to accept the formation of a market for personal and social services as low wage, low skill jobs. There is a role for the state here, in “making work pay” via targeted tax credits and the like, and in providing training and other supports designed to help people get off the poverty bus (Esping-Andersen, 1999).

In other words, equality in the here and now is abandoned in favour of equality over the life course. What this overlooks is that women, as well as racialised minorities, hold a disproportionate share of nonstandard jobs. Moreover, women’s continued primary responsibility to provide care creates barriers to their making off the poverty bus. Although third way advocates reject long care leaves as destructive of (women’s) human capital, they see part time work as a good “bridge” back into the labour market. In this sense, they share with their neo-familial counterparts an acceptance of a one and a half earner model. In addition, in the third way model, children are viewed instrumentally, as adults-in-the-making. Public expenditure for quality child care is thus seen as an investment in the labour force of the future. In his recent work, Esping-Andersen highlights the normative dimension:

If childcare policy were nothing more than a response to women’s demands for greater compatibility, there would be a priori, no reason why the welfare state should assure uniform high quality standards.... The key point is that a policy of universal access to high quality day care for the zero to six-year-olds kills two birds with one stone. It obviously helps resolve the incompatibility problem that working mothers face, and it is arguably an effective tool in the war against social inheritance...it is a productive investment in children’s life chances and in society’s future productivity. (2003: 117)

Investment in quality child care thus links concerns about the constitution of flexible and competitive labour markets, now and in the future, with the discourse on equality of opportunity over the life cycle.

There is a fourth “egalitarian” blueprint, which might incorporate the following features:

⁷ This is the argument put forward by Iversen and Wren (1998) and Esping-Andersen (1999). See Mahon (2000) for a critique of the logic underpinning this.

1. Parental leave structured to foster an equitable sharing of domestic child care between mothers and fathers, with additional supports offered lone parent wage-earners;
2. Provision of universally accessible, affordable child care non-parental care services
3. Children have the right to early childhood education and care, whether or not their parents are working or involved in some form of training;
4. Care is provided by skilled providers and the value of their skills is recognised through equitable wages, good working conditions and in-service opportunities to improve their skills;
5. Provision is made for democratic control, including a strong element of parental and community voice.

Sweden and Denmark, countries with “social democratic” welfare regimes, come the closest to this ideal.

This model does better than all the others in terms of equality of the sexes, in that it promotes equal *sharing* of the remaining domestic caregiving. It contributes to the continued abatement of class inequality in that, by supporting the development of quality child care, provided by caregivers whose skills are duly recognised, it contributes to the growth of good post-industrial jobs. In fact, one of the strengths of Esping-Andersen’s earlier (1990) work, is that it showed the connection between differences in social policy regimes and the important variations in the structure of post-industrial labour markets. While the liberal (American) model yields a polarised “good jobs, bad jobs” labour market, a social democratic regime produces a lot of decent jobs and far fewer bad ones. With regard to the child, an egalitarian view would seek to balance the third way emphasis on the future payoffs to be gained from early childhood education and care with concern over children as beings in the here and now (Lister, 2004). Bronwen Cohen, Peter Moss, Pat Petrie and Jennifer Wallace (2004) would take this further, arguing that children need to be seen as active citizens, with rights of their own, including voice. It is this approach that permeates the important work on quality in child care services produced by the European Commission Childcare Network (2004).

Transnational policy learning: The OECD

The end of maternalism and the concomitant embrace of reconciliation policies are not simply the spontaneous response to a set of common challenges. Rather, the change is occurring through a (contested) process of policy learning (and unlearning), which involves the development of new capacities for public action. The national state remains an important locus of such policy learning and contestation. Yet, as Peck notes, “channels of policy learning, transfer, and networking are increasingly being structured in transnational...terms as new knowledge communities, intermediary agencies, global consultancy houses, and multilateral partnerships are established to facilitate and foster the process of fast policy transfer” (2002: 349). Peck focuses on the role played by such cross- and transnational networks in the shift from welfare to workfare. Similar dynamics come into play in the broader field of reconciliation policies where supra- and international organisations and advocacy networks are contributing to national policy learning processes.

Some work has been done on the role of the European Union in this regard.⁸ This chapter focuses, however, on the role played by the OECD, an important international organisation whose membership includes the United States and other key advanced capitalist countries.⁹ It functions as a key source of economic, and more recently, social policy analysis and prescription – of a particular flavour. Its advice is likely to be especially important in situations such as that with which this paper is concerned, when states are involved in a process of “unlearning” old policies (maternalism), and learning new ones (reconciliation). In this context, the OECD contributes a new way of framing social policy problems, and marshalls its moral authority behind the new paradigm.

The OECD’s modus operandi makes it a good example of the process of transnational “fast policy transfer.” In contrast to contextualized policy

⁸ See in particular Ross (2001) on the formation and mode of functioning of the European Commission’s Childcare Network; Mahon (2002) on the shift of child care policy from the Equal Opportunities portfolio to the Employment Strategy; and Stratigaki on how the latter move co-opted and subordinated feminist demands to the goal of creating a “dynamic” (flexible) labour market.

⁹ The original 20 included the United States, Canada, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Japan joined in 1964, Finland in 1969, Australia 1971 and New Zealand, 1973. Over the last decades, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Mexico, Poland, South Korea and the Slovak Republic have joined.

learning,¹⁰ fast policy transfer involves the development and circulation of “essentialized readings of effective local [and national] programs in which a small number of supposedly decisive (and potentially replicable) design features are privileged and promoted. In the process, complex and locally embedded interventions are rendered as simplified, disembodied and reproducible administrative routines...” (Peck, 2002: 349). Sahlin-Anderson’s (2000) examination of the OECD’s role in propagating “new public management” (NPM) corroborates Peck’s thesis. For her, this involves a process of “editing in which “national experiences and reforms tend to be presented to others in terms of existing templates, examples, categories, scientific concepts, theoretical frameworks and widespread classifications that are familiar. These concepts, references and frameworks form the infrastructure of editing and they restrict and direct how the accounts are given” (Sahlin-Andersson, 2000: 13). Editing tends to be most pronounced in certain parts of the reports – i.e. the executive summaries, introductions and conclusions – which are most likely to be read by time-pressed policymakers. Thus in the case of NPM, “the final and summarizing chapters...downplayed the differences and uncertainty; they presented a reform agenda which embodied the principle features of the national reforms...The reforms were described and justified as responses to a common set of problems facing all OECD countries, and they were labeled as a coherent and consistent package” (Sahlen-Andersson, 2000: 16). As Porter and Webb underline, such editing “helps to define economic and social reality, not just measure what already exists, using objective categories” (2004: 11). In other words, what is transmitted is not simply research results but the very definition of common problems and prescribed solutions.

What kind of frame does the OECD employ in its editing processes? In the broadest terms, the frame stems from its mandate - defining “standards of appropriate behaviour for states which seek to identify themselves as modern, liberal, market-friendly, and efficient...” (Porter and Webb, 2004: 10). Yet liberalism, especially its technical underpinnings in economics, has undergone a series of important modifications since the OECD was formed in 1961.

Initially, the OECD functioned within a Keynesian policy paradigm. In fact, during the 1960s it operated as an important source of transmission of “Keynes plus” prescriptions. For instance, when Gösta Rehn, co-inventor of the famous “Rehn-Meidner” development of Keynesian ideas (Martin, 1979), was

¹⁰ The latter involves “careful examination of both the institutional environment from which a given policy solution originated and the local conditions surrounding its proposed implementation elsewhere” (Zeitlin, 2003: 15).

seconded to the OECD, the organisation became a promoter of active labour market policy as a solution to the Phillips curve inflation-unemployment tradeoff. In the 1970s, however, it became an early convert to neo-liberal supply-side paradigm (Serré and Palier, 2004: 111). With the publication of the McCracken report (1977), demand management was seen as no longer able to solve problems of unemployment but rather to fuel inflationary expectations. Neo-liberal nostrums continued to shape its country reviews throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Armingeon and Beyeler, 2004) as well as informing its 1994 Jobs Strategy (McBride and Williams, 2001). All of these documents were produced by its powerful Economic Secretariat, however. Was this view shared by other divisions?

McBride and Williams admit that the Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs¹¹ (DELSA) had staked out a more moderate line than the Economic Secretariat, one that, in fact, rebutted the Jobs Strategy's core arguments. This represents a shift in orientation from the neoliberalism that marked DELSA social policy stance in the 1980s¹² (Deacon, 1997). The turn seems to have begun in 1991, when the Council commissioned a new round of social policy studies by the Directorate (Deacon, 1997: 71). The *New Orientation for Social Policy* (1994) was perhaps the first to articulate the emergent "social investment" paradigm, which seeks to align the member states' social policies with flexible labour markets. On this the "new social policy agenda" announced in 1997 was clear:

A new approach to social protection will have a stronger emphasis on interventions earlier in life and more preventive (and less remedial) measures. The goal would be to re-define equity and security in terms of barriers towards life-course flexibility, and to avoid definitions which suggest that the goal of social policy is to provide protection against flexibility...

Employment opportunities are likely increasingly to favour people who show flexibility, whether through being from a household with other earners (so that short-term fluctuations in income are

¹¹ Established in 1974 as the Directorate for Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs (DEELSA), it became DELSA, when Education was split off to form its own directorate. For simplicity's sake, I will simply refer to it as DELSA.

¹² The OECD was not the only international organisation to turn from the radical neo-liberalism of the 1980s to an "inclusive liberalism." Thus in the early 1990s the World Bank too began to map its poverty reduction strategy, stressing the themes of "opportunity, empowerment and security" – in a globalised economy (Porter and Craig, 2004:394). See also Cammack (2004).

supportable) or because of their own adaptability. (Pearson and Scherer, 1997: 7)

These themes are further developed in *A Caring World* (1999), produced under the direction of Mark Pearson and Willem Adema, who would later be responsible for *Babies and Bosses*.

In the introduction to *Caring*, the Secretary General noted that the new paradigm was beginning to catch on among member states: “The new social policy agenda is how to achieve social solidarity through enabling individuals and families to support themselves. (OECD, 1999: 4) The new paradigm accords well with the third way’s (economically) active, “empowered” citizens, and its emphasis on “welfare to work.”¹³ It accepts a greater role for the state than is admitted in neo-liberal discourse but, in the new social policy agenda, states need to operate within the strict fiscal parameters established by globalisation (OECD, 1999: 35). Expanding employment is important, but this is to be done through the use of supply-side measures. It prescribes “making work pay” not by focusing on job quality, but rather by (directly or indirectly) subsidising low wage employment (“welfare in work”).¹⁴ The new social policy agenda is also informed by NPM’s concern to promote the formation of markets – or quasi-markets – as a solution for governments concerned “to do less with more,” by counteracting the power of by budget-maximising bureaucrats. It also reflects NPM’s emphasis on decentralisation. As *Caring* notes, the economic case for decentralisation concerns the capacity of local authorities to tailor policies to local needs and their sensitivity to financial pressures, which will induce them to invest in reducing social assistance rolls (1999: 103).

The gender and generational dimensions to the third way project appeared too in the OECD’s new social policy agenda.¹⁵ Thus *Caring* announces

Social policies based on the male-breadwinner model of family relations have become outmoded.... First, the growth of female labour market participation provides a forum of self-insurance to

¹³ In a recent presentation, Mark Pearson (2004), Head of DELSA’s Social Policy Division, noted that welfare to work was one of two (the other being ageing populations) concerns that have dominated since the mid-1990s.

¹⁴ There is, however, some effort to promote greater equity between standard and non-standard work via prorating wages and extending equivalent benefits to workers holding non-standard jobs.

¹⁵ In fact, Pearson (2004) suggests that “family, caring and social well-being” are central to the emerging social policy paradigm.

households, with the income risks attached to involuntary non-employment reduced. Second, working women become entitled to insurance-based benefits in their own right. Third, demands increase for some sorts of social support (in particular, childcare and maternity and paternity leave). (1999: 14-15)

In other words, dual earner families constitute an important complement to the flexible labour markets long recommended in OECD economic policy documents. They also make pension reform easier, a theme that has run through its recommendations since the 1980s.¹⁶ This new family requires public support, of course, but in different ways from that accorded the male breadwinner/female caregiver family of the past. Lone parents, and the poverty to which their children are exposed, are of particular concern. Here, high quality early intervention programs can help break the cycle of poverty, but as these are seen as costly, such programs should be narrowly targeted on the most disadvantaged families (1999: 86). The best way to address the poverty of lone parents is seen as welfare-to-work programmes.

The intellectual foundations of this new view of families were laid in an earlier study commissioned by the OECD, *Sustainable Flexibility* (1997). Here Carnoy and Castells linked their analysis of the flexibility requirements of the new economy to a view of the family as an “investment-production partnership”:

The family in a flexible work system is...a hub of productive and reproductive activity. When it is potentially “strong” (with two highly educated adults at its core) it serves as a risk hedge against periods of unemployment, as a source of child development for its offspring, of investment capital for adult and child education and training, and of personal security and growth. (1997: 41).

The state’s role is to “enhance the household partnership’s capacity to invest in learning...” This includes “helping the family acquire education for its children even as parents are on flexible work schedules; [and] giving parents new possibilities to take further education and training themselves” (1997: 49).

¹⁶ Looking back on the OECD’s achievements, Pearson (2004) noted that “overgenerosity” of some provisions had been reduced and sources of retirement income “diversified.”

In 2003-4, the generational emphasis¹⁷ seems to have shifted somewhat, from the child as investment in the future, to the problem posed by ageing. This time women's labour force "activation" is presented as part of the solution to ageing – along with other under-represented groups in the labour market.¹⁸ Again this requires reconciliation measures. As the 2003 Employment Outlook notes, "financial incentives are not enough. Subsidised child care services, promoting flexibility for workers with family responsibilities and expanding part time work can be effective ways of facilitating access to employment, notably among women."¹⁹ The reconciliation message was reiterated in the 2004 Employment Outlook, which noted that, while some have succeeded in boosting employment levels, "governments must consider a range of issues including the need to boost employment levels and meet individuals' needs for job security and work-life balance."

Such broad policy documents certainly contribute to shaping the social policy paradigm of member states. It is through the publication of country-specific assessments, however, that the OECD is able to employ the "name and shame" instrument of peer review to press "laggards" to learn. In the next sections, therefore, we focus on two such reviews: *Babies and Bosses* and *Starting Strong*. The first, produced under the direction of those involved in the framing documents discussed above, consists of three volumes,²⁰ that analyse the full gamut of reconciliation policies in Australia, Austria, Denmark, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Portugal and Switzerland. *Babies and Bosses* counsels the rejection of maternalism in favour of supports for the new dual earner (or lone parent earner) family. Not surprisingly, it shares the third way view of how to support such a family with *Caring*. As we shall see, while the detailed chapters do recognise "anomalies", the power of the social investment paradigm prevails. The prescriptions thus fall short of "helping both mothers and fathers." In other words, this view of reconciliation does not include measures designed to ensure men and women equally share the unpaid care work. Where children appear, moreover, they are treated in an instrumental way.

¹⁷ As reflected in the self-description and main projects listed on DELSA's website: www.oecd.org/departement/0,2688,en_2649_33729_1_1_1_1_1_1,00.html

¹⁸ The others are older workers, migrants and the low-skilled. DELSA and Gender Coordination unit have projects involving the integration of immigrants. DELSA is also in charge of a series specifically focused on ageing and employment countries, notable Japan, Korea, Sweden, and the UK. www.oecd.org/about/0,2337,en_2649_33729_1_1_1_1_1_1,00.html.

¹⁹ www.oecd.org/documentprint/02744,en-2649-33729-14753163_1_1_1_1_1_1,00.html

²⁰ A fourth including Britain, Canada, Finland and Sweden was released in June 2005.

This is in marked contrast to the advice tendered by the *Starting Strong* project, which examines the early child education and care practices of more than half the member countries, placed in their wider economic, social and policy context.²¹ Located in the Education Directorate,²² this thematic review came under the Education and Training Policy Division, headed by Abrar Hasan, with Michelle Neuman and John Bennett as project managers. Drawing on a different epistemic community, *Starting Strong* works from a “broad and holistic” view of children as individuals and as active members of their families and communities. It also sees providers as skilled workers whose skills should be properly valued²³ and this, too, is in marked contrast to *Babies and Bosses*.

Babies and bosses: The family--friendly OECD?

Babies clearly presents women’s increased labour market participation as a solution to common problems (if, to a different degree) of poverty, low fertility and ageing. It recognizes, moreover, that replacing maternalist with a new, “reconciliation”-oriented, “family friendly” policy may involve the “potential escalation of public intervention” but “this may not be a bad thing” (2002: 13). Echoing Carnoy and Castells, it is argued that having two earners,

the family becomes richer; it becomes less vulnerable to labour market shocks (i.e. if one partner loses their job, the family still has income from work); family dissolution is less catastrophic for the partner who becomes the main carer for the children if she has income from work.... It is incumbent on governments to eliminate barriers to work, so that families can realise these gains. (OECD, 2002: 22)

The country studies contain useful information, and those prepared to read the chapters that provide detailed analyses of various aspects will find observations that suggest the limitations of its third way frame. Nevertheless, the

²¹ These are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. All countries volunteered – the U.S., when the Clinton government was still in office.

²² The Education Directorate, once part of DELSA, was created in 2002.

²³ The first summary report, *Starting Strong*, was dedicated to “those who work with and for children on a daily basis” (OECD, 2001:4).

three volumes stand as good examples of the “fast policy” approach, in which a third way analytic grid is used to edit (and criticise) national experiences.

Thus member states should eliminate the remaining vestiges of maternalism. Australia, Austria, Ireland, Japan and the Netherlands are thus chided for not having done more to break with maternalism while in the volume dealing with Austria, Ireland and Japan, all three countries are warned that more needs to be done: “...current labour supply is less than it could be, and human capital is underused. This result is not an efficient use of labour market resources, and were this situation to be perpetuated, it will limit economic growth relative to potential. At the same time, the declining number of children also has obvious implications for the shape of future society” (OECD, 2003: 10).

In some countries, the solution involves the elimination of spousal allowances from government and employer social insurance schemes (e.g. Japan). Other countries are encouraged to move to individual, rather than family, taxation (e.g. the Netherlands and Austria). Of greater concern, however, is the special treatment of lone parents as exempt from the obligation to seek work. The “welfare to work” orientation is to be embraced by all. Accordingly, the Swiss are admonished to “avoid negative effects on financial incentives to work,” when implementing supplementary family benefits (OECD, 2004: 14). Similarly, the New Zealand government is encouraged to modify its Domestic Purposes benefit to “make work pay” and to enforce mutual obligations “requiring sole parents to seek work actively” (OECD, 2004: 12). Ireland is asked to “reduce long term benefit expectations” among recipients of One Parent Family Benefits and to develop “a comprehensive employment support approach” to ensure that the family income supplement “becomes a more effective tool in helping single parents back to work” (OECD, 2003: 12).

The authors of the *Babies and Bosses* series favour “choice” but not the neo-familial choice between parental (maternal) care and child care services. Parental leave is seen as constituting an important part of the new family-friendly policy kit, but neo-familialism’s long leaves are rejected as destructive of mothers’ human capital and weakening their labour market attachment. Thus Austria is encouraged to “introduce higher Child care Benefit payment rates for those who return to work at an earlier stage, for example, upon one year of parental leave” and to “ensure parents are fully aware of the different durations of Child care Benefit (30/36 months) and the employment-protected parental leave period (up to the child’s second birthday), to reduce the risk of parents not returning to work when the parental leave period is over” (OECD, 2003: 11).

After a leave of suitable length, parents/mothers should be in paid work. The *Babies* studies do make some attempt to address labour market and workplace barriers to women's labour force integration. Japan, in particular, is criticised for the highly gendered split between regular and irregular employees and the Japanese government is encouraged to "enforce more actively gender equity and equal pay for equal work legislation" (OECD, 2003: 13). At the same time, the series recommends the expansion of part time work to Austria, Ireland and Portugal as a "women-friendly" development (OECD, 2003: 2004). It does this despite its recognition that part time work contributes to channelling women into low paid, nonstandard jobs. Thus, for instance, the first volume notes that "many households in Australia and the Netherlands distribute paid work along a 'one and one half' earner model in terms of hours of paid employment, while in terms of contribution to household income a 'one and one quarter' model appears a better description" (OECD, 2002: 28). The second volume admits that "the gender gap in terms of job quality is larger than that in employment rates...." (OECD, 2003: 14).

Moreover, the *Babies* volumes recognise that it is women whose lives are being changed in this new "family-friendly" world, not men. The first volume notes that "men do not appear to have changed their behaviour markedly...Indeed male behaviour remains largely traditional in all three countries: take up rates of parental leave among men are low, and although the gender gap in unpaid housework is smaller in Denmark than in the other two countries, caring remains primarily a female activity" (OECD, 2002: 14). In the second volume, it is noted that there is a long hours culture for male workers in all three countries, leaving men little time to make a contribution to daily housework (OECD, 2003: 15). In this context, the vision of shared care through the reduction in working time for both parents, which has been on the agenda in the Netherlands, "is likely to remain illusory for the near future, as it would require a fundamental change in male labour market behaviour, evidence for which is lacking" (2002: 15). Despite this, reconciliation does not include measures to change men's work patterns.²⁴

²⁴ In the "policy brief" prepared for the 2005 meeting of Social Affairs Ministers, there is a sudden shift on this question. Here it is clearly stated that "nowhere is it suggested that mothers rather than fathers should provide personal care throughout this period. Nevertheless, gender inequality in care-giving within families remains widespread" (OECD 2005a: 4). Later in the text it highlights potential solutions, notably Sweden's introduction of two "daddy months" and Iceland's one-third allocation for each parent and one-third shared leave. (OECD, 2005a: 6). This about-shift, likely the fruit of Janet Gornick's five-month secondment to the program in 2003, was echoed in the Social Affairs Ministers' final communiqué: "The importance of both mothers and fathers to the long term development of children should be recognized and both should be encouraged to play a full and active role in family life."

What happens when mothers are at work? Clearly non-parental child care arrangements are needed and here *Babies* advocates parental choice in the form of a (subsidised) child care market. Public sector “monopolies” are not recommended, even though *Babies’* authors recognise that wage rates and employment conditions in the Danish system, which are mainly municipally-run,²⁵ are much better than in the countries relying on private sector provision (OECD, 2002: 91). Private provision is to be preferred as it “is geared towards serving customer demand...and may also be conducive to innovative practices” (OECD, 2002: 88). Here and elsewhere in the reports there is also the suggestion that private provision is to be preferred when there is need for rapid expansion to “exploding public budgets and tax rates” (OECD, 2002: 88). Thus recent Australian (since 1990), Dutch and Japanese policy decisions, which support the growth of private, including commercial, provision, get the stamp of approval.

At the same time, *Babies* acknowledges that in the Netherlands, choice “is severely constrained by very limited child care capacity” (OECD, 2002: 97). In other words, markets are not capable of delivering the number of spaces needed, at a price parents can afford. There is a role for government to compensate for the failure of markets to generate adequate supply. For the authors of the *Babies* volumes, however, demand-side subsidies are to be preferred to subsidising the supply side. Part of the rationale is “equity,” the logic here being that, in the context of scarcity, supply-side subsidies only benefit those who are able to get a place and do nothing for parents who cannot find one. If governments subsidise parents, then the latter presumably can find some form of care, even if in the informal sector (OECD, 2003: 149). The main reason, however, has to do with “efficiency”: demand-side subsidies put pressure on providers to keep costs low and to meet parental demands, e.g. for more flexible opening hours. Cleveland and Krashinsky suggest, however, that “the debate over demand-side and supply-side is often really a debate over what kind of quality will be provided and what kind of standards will be set” (OECD, 2003a: 42). In other words, demand-side subsidies usually cost less because they are set at levels that are too low for many parents to purchase high quality care.

What, then, of quality? *Babies and Bosses* certainly recommend that public subsidies only be used for quality child care, including that provided by childminders. Yet how is quality to be assured? This is where *Babies’* economic,

www.oecd.org/documentprint/0,2744,en_2649_201185_34668207_1_1_1_1,00.html. No recommendations of the introduction of daddy-months was included, however.

²⁵ While noting that Danes can choose between municipal child care and private provision, they acknowledge that most Danes choose public provision as they “dislike the idea of having their children looked after by a commercial provider” (2002:21).

or public choice, view of child care providers as a group pursuing its own self-interest, potentially at the expense of children and parents unless checked by market-like mechanisms, comes through strongly. Thus the first volume notes the important role allocated to parents in the Danish system but raises the concern that “without any external bench-marking, the system leaves local professionals in a very powerful position, relative to parents” (OECD, 2002: 108). The Australian quality assurance system, introduced after the way was opened to subsidising commercial provision, is discussed in considerable detail. Caution is needed even here, however: “Although this system appears to be working well at the moment, care is needed to avert the risk that over-reliance on other child care professionals may create a profession more concerned about defining its collective interests, rather than promoting wider social objectives...” (OECD, 2002: 21). In other words, the authors of the *Babies* reports are concerned parents and governments will be held hostage by self-interest optimising professionals. It is this that underlies their emphasis on demand-side subsidies as well as the call for external benchmarking.

Babies and Bosses thus does lay out a post-maternalist vision of “family-friendly” policies but it is one informed by the same third way approach mapped out in the frame documents. As such it refrains from advocating for the full sharing of care and paid work (the Dutch ideal, but not the practice) as between parents. Instead, governments should make it easier for mothers to care for their child during its first year,²⁶ and then to choose part time work while their children are young. Children figure in this series as potential impediments to parental/maternal labour market participation and, to a lesser extent, as human capital to be developed by prudent social investments. Although the issue of the quality of non-parental child care is raised, *Babies* favours demand-side subsidies to private providers over public investment in the development of a high quality early child and education system. The expansion of child care should thus occur within the fiscal parameters (low tax, low spend) consistent with “making work pay.” Pressure will be kept on “child care professionals” to keep costs down, while meeting parent demands for flexibility. As we shall see, this is a very different approach from that taken in the *Starting Strong* reviews.

Early child education and care: Policy for children

²⁶ The one time *Babies* acknowledges that fathers might be induced to take their share of “parental” leave is in the discussion of Austrian policy, which offers six months (after the first 30 are taken by the mother) to the other parent, but at a low rate of pay. The authors suggest that this period might be shortened but the rate of remuneration raised in the hope of attracting more fathers to take it.

Although the *Starting Strong* thematic review started in DELSA, it was set in motion by the 1996 meeting of Education Ministers which focused on “life long learning”. This was part of the broader shift from neo- to inclusive liberalism. In this case, it involved moving from the preoccupation with technology (ICT) and growth (the “knowledge economy”) to the social (and human capital) prerequisites for a “knowledge society” (Larner et al, 2005: 10). In adopting the goal of making life long learning accessible to all, the Ministers of Education recognised that this involved “strengthening the foundations for learning throughout life, by improving access to early childhood education, particularly for disadvantaged children” as well as revitalising schools and supporting adult learning (OECD, 1996: 1). Although the Ministers’ communiqué reflected a liberal concern to target “disadvantaged” children, the ECEC Policy Branch of the Division of Education and Training interpreted its mandate in terms more consistent with the egalitarian model.

Starting Strong thus drew on a different epistemic community – experts in early child development rather than economists – than *Babies*. As might be expected, then, rather than being treated primarily as potential impediments to their mothers’ labour force participation, children occupy a central place in this project. Thus all children should have access to quality ECEC, irrespective of their parents’ labour market status. This is as true for under-threes as it is for pre-schoolers, though in most countries, infant and toddler care is still treated as a babysitting service for working mothers. More broadly, *Starting Strong* rejects the narrow child as human capital-in-the-making focus found in other third way writing and practice (OECD, 2001: 41). Clearly ECEC can and should help lay strong foundations for future learning, but children must also be seen as active learners and citizens in the here and now – just as they are in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The ECEC review thus recognises that “children not only have their own culture, but also their own rights and ‘voice’” (OECD, 2001: 42). This means using appropriate pedagogies²⁷ and the rejection of didactic teaching methods, narrowly focused on laying the foundations for literacy and numeracy. It also means that children participate in the ongoing quality assessment process.

A second important difference between *Starting Strong* and *Babies* is the view of staff. For the former, staff are self-interest maximising agents who are inclined to use their professional knowledge to fend off principals (parents, governments). Moreover, although their detailed analyses show that, while no

²⁷ There is no one best pedagogy, as the ECEC project recognises (OECD, 2004a).

child care staff are well-paid, those in publicly-owned centres fare better, they prefer a competitive market for care, and subsidies targeted at parent-customers to keep providers efficient. In contrast, *Starting Strong* argues the importance of appropriate training and working conditions to quality ECEC:

Quality ECEC depends on strong staff training and fair working conditions across the sector. Initial and in-service training might be broadened to take into account the growing educational and social responsibilities of the profession. There is a critical need to develop strategies to recruit and retain a qualified and diverse, mixed-gender workforce and to ensure that a career in ECEC is satisfying, respected and financially viable. (OECD, 2001: 11)

In personal services like ECEC, quality depends not only on the skills of the providers but is also fostered by fair wages and good working conditions, which are crucial for recruitment and retention.

Although *Starting Strong* recognises the skills required to deliver quality ECEC, it also recognises the importance of quality assessment. For *Starting*, however, this is envisioned as a dialogical, democratic process: “defining, ensuring, and monitoring quality should be a participatory and democratic process that engages staff, parents and children” (OECD, 2001: 11). In support of this dialogical and on-going process, governments have a role to play in ensuring the collection and availability of good data²⁸ and supporting on-going research and innovative practice.

A third important distinction between *Starting Strong* and *Babies and Bosses* is its approach to parental leave and its remuneration. Compared to the six months or so leave found in several other countries, the leave recommended in *Starting Strong* is at least one year, in deference to the needs of young children. The Swedish model is often invoked – that is, a one year entitlement, remunerated according to employment status and it includes a guaranteed right to return to the same level of work. Through the introduction of “daddy months”²⁹, Swedish parents are encouraged to share in the care of children, in recognition of the need to promote greater bonding of male partners of their children and, in the future, a more equitable sharing of child-rearing. The public attitudes thus formed and the link between employment insurance and the funding of the leave serve to lessen employers’ tendency to avoid employing

²⁸ See OECD (2002b) for a more detailed discussion of the kinds of data needed.

²⁹ Currently only 2 out of the total 13.

women of child-bearing age. Parental leave is closely linked to an entitlement to early childhood services from eighteen months, and includes out-of-school provision for children 6-12 years, so as to enable women to avoid part time jobs, which tend to be less-well paid and reduce pension rights at the end of career.

Starting Strong does not take a clear position on public versus private provision, though it does note that most OECD countries favour public delivery, at least for preschoolers (OECD, 2001: 90). The *Irish Country Note*, moreover, brings out the disadvantages of commercial care:

Without public management and sustainable public funding, market-led childcare provision remains fragmented and inequitable. For this reason, governments in English-speaking countries are obliged to intervene constantly by increasing childcare allowances, reviewing quality supervision and even directly funding parts of the system, such as Head Start (U.S.)... that are aimed at targeted groups. Although competition can lead to some good programmes, these are often confined to parents who can pay high fees. When dominated by private, for-profit interests, profits are often derived from high fees, increasing numbers of children per staff and/or low staff wages. There is a tendency to employ untrained staff at the bottom end of the market, where modest and disadvantaged families are the clients. (OECD, 2004b: 46).

Starting Strong does not explicitly come out in favour of supply-side subsidies. It does, however, underline the fact that, again, in systems which rely on demand-side subsidies, it is difficult for low income families to get access to quality ECEC (OECD, 2001:57, 94 and 130). It goes on to spell out the key conditions for developing a quality ECEC system, laying particular emphasis on the need for *substantial* levels of public investment, including in the infrastructure, and co-ordination, both horizontal and vertical³⁰ (OECD, 2001: *passim*).

Clearly, this kind of system requires substantial public backing and requires resources that the low tax states favoured by *Babies* would find difficult to marshal. In contrast, in several country reviews, *Starting Strong* underlines that countries that invest in early childhood services of high quality reap many

³⁰ Like *Babies*, *Starting Strong* recognises that decentralisation can bring some real advantages but this needs to be balanced by the “need to limit variation in access and quality” (OECD, 2001:9)

benefits in terms of child development, the prevention of future inequalities in education, more equal opportunity for women and significant savings in welfare dependency. Direct provision of the service by the state is not considered a necessity when appropriate private partners are available. *Starting Strong* underlines, however, that the state has every interest in supplying strong funding and policy direction, high levels of training and support to educators and parents to achieve and maintain high quality.

Its preferred system of governance certainly allocates an important coordinating role to national states. At the same time, it stresses the democratic involvement of children, parents and their local (and ethnic) communities in the co-determination of the aims and methods, as well as in quality assessment. It also eschews the “fast policy” approach in favour of contextualized learning. This is clear throughout its studies. Thus while Sweden and Denmark may stand out as especially strong examples, the recommendations for other countries, like Ireland and Canada, build on textured and dynamic analyses of their particular situations. This approach reflects its conception of ECEC as systems that develop through an on-going, dialogical process, in which different values and perspectives are at play, a conception that has much in common (and not by accident) with that developed by the European Commission’s Childcare Network in the 1990s (2004).

Starting Strong thus has many of the elements of the egalitarian model outlined in the first section. It counsels the establishment of an ECEC system that would offer quality care to all children, irrespective of the labour market status of their parents. Its recommendations would also contribute to the development of good post-industrial jobs, and thus would help counteract the emergence of a polarised labour market. Women would continue to hold many of these jobs, and thus would benefit from improved wages and career possibilities. Ideally, however, there would be a better gender balance among staff, reflecting a view that men are carers too.

Yet *Starting Strong* does not come to grips sufficiently with the unequal distribution of unpaid care work in the home, which contributes to gender inequality in the labour market. The low value placed on women’s domestic care responsibilities, moreover, feeds into a system that systematically undervalues care work in the market place. In this sense it shares the strengths and weaknesses of the European Commission’s Childcare Network, on whose foundations it builds. For the latter, it was important to make the needs and interests of children central:

Whilst the Network has been established as part of an Equal Opportunity Programme, and retains a strong commitment to supporting equal treatment for women in employment, it has emphasized that the needs and interests of children must also be a major concern.... However, the Network has not seen the two interests...as in opposition. Both can be met and are indeed interdependent, since services that are adequate in quantity but poor in quality will be a major obstacle to employment for many women...(2004: 1)

In this respect, both the Network and *Starting* make an important contribution to make to realising the egalitarian vision. Yet as we have seen, gender equality is easily subordinated to “primary” goals such as growth and competitiveness. For gender and generational equality and social justice, the child-centred vision needs to be incorporated into a broader strategy for “sharing” work and family life.

Conclusions

The OECD is thus an active participant in the push to eliminate the last vestiges of maternalism and it forms an important part of the international chorus calling for policies to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life. Its role can be understood as contributing to the establishment of “reconciliation” as the new common sense, especially for conservative regimes in Europe and Asia and “laggard” liberal regimes of Australia, Ireland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. Yet the OECD has not one but (at least) two distinct conceptions of the post-maternalist world – one informed by third way thinking, the other by a vision that is consistent with the egalitarian blueprint. Both, moreover, part ways, albeit to quite different degrees, with the neo-liberal model favoured by the dominant state in the contemporary world order, the US. How is this possible?

Deacon makes a claim for the “relative autonomy” of international organisations like the OECD, and particularly their human resource specialists, from the policies of the powerful states among their membership (1997: 61). Such autonomy is important if international organizations are to contribute to

reproducing the hegemony of a liberal (capitalist) world order under US leadership. This does not mean that all countries must follow the American neo-liberal design. In fact, hegemony requires a “belief that the system of rule created by the dominant group brings material and other benefits to all or most participants” (Wade, 2002: 217).³¹ The turn toward “inclusive liberalism” on the part of international organizations like the OECD and the World Bank thus represents an attempt to “reembed” the global capitalist economy, in light of reactions to a decade of aggressive neo-liberalism (Porter and Craig, 2004). The “new social policy agenda” of which *Babies* forms an important part signals such a turn by an important unit of the OECD. Nor does it contradict the core advice still being prescribed by the Economic Department. Like other inclusive projects, the reconciliation agenda constructed by *Babies* draws on the same economic language and its benefits are “tied to participation in the globalizing economy for both men and women” (Larner et al, 2005: 6). Its implementation would do little to advance equality between the sexes or across generations.

The ECEC unit’s perspective represents more of a challenge to the status quo. It is not as well-placed as the family friendly unit in DELSA, however. It reports to a smaller, more narrowly focused (education) Directorate than DELSA (labour markets and social policy). More importantly, it is but a small unit of the Education and Training Division, where it pales by comparison to the unit charged with the Division’s main business, the national education reviews. Its potential strength comes from the way it structured the review process. It carried out its work in such a way as to draw *in* and develop a transnational network of early childhood specialists and advocates. It thus blurred the boundary between epistemic communities, made up of experts linked by cognitive and professional ties (Haas, 1992), and transnational advocacy networks – “networks of activists, distinguishable largely by the centrality of principled ideas or values in motivating their formation” (Keck and Sikkink, 1999: 89). In this it has built on, and extended, the earlier work of the European Commission’s Childcare Network. Just as the latter forged links among child care advocates operating at different scales – local and national – adding the European, the ECEC branch has done the same across the OECD. Its success, of course, will depend on the capacity of advocates to make good use of these reports in their struggles and most face substantial obstacles. Part of the hope may lie, as Cohen et al conclude, in countries where “the long default position of the child located in the private sphere of the family is being disturbed by some glimmerings of the ‘public child’, replete with voice, rights and citizenship” (2004: 211). Yet this “new child” will

³¹ Wade, who explores the U.S. role in the World Bank’s treatment of Stiglitz and Kanbur, also rightly stresses belief that the process is fair (“justice is seen to be done”).

need allies which might be found, inter alia, in recharged feminist and trade union movements.

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