

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage.



Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, Conference 2009

Where are we going on issues of family and social welfare?

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Most meetings on Parliament Hill don't start with a body count. But when frontline health workers who serve the poor and homeless meet once a month at a street mission in Ottawa, tracking recent street deaths is a standing agenda item. This coalition of people from various organizations meets only minutes from the House of Commons, but the practical nature of their discussion seems a thousand miles away from the politics of the Hill. With entirely different mandates, it seems the gap between poverty and homelessness and public policy might never be bridged. This need not be the case, as another gathering near Parliament Hill proved.

The annual Institute of Marriage and Family Canada conference brought the Right Honourable Iain Duncan Smith from London, England to Ottawa to speak to a group of over a hundred MPs, civil servants, non-profit workers and members of the public on March 12, 2009.



Listening conferees

Mr. Duncan Smith mixes dry British humour with an earnest message about his experiences exploring the pathways to poverty in the United Kingdom. Duncan Smith's think tank, the Centre for Social Justice spends countless hours meeting with frontline workers and residents in some of Britain's most downtrodden neighbourhoods, diagnosing social problems.



The Right Honourable Iain Duncan Smith gives the lunchtime keynote address

The result of substantial research, the Centre for Social Justice has developed three hundred policy recommendations, many finding non-partisan favour. In his address to the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada's policy conference, Smith identified educational failure, economic dependency and worklessness, personal debt, addiction and family breakdown as the pathways to social breakdown and poverty. He singled out family breakdown as being at the heart of the problem, calling for grassroots, community-based solutions that meet practical needs and coax cultural change.



Dr. Gabor Maté engages with a guest

Earlier in the day, Dr. Gabor Maté, an author and medical doctor on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, casually rested his elbow on the side of the lectern as he described the neuroscience behind parent-child attachment. He argued that peer relationships have replaced parent-child attachment to the detriment of children. He called for public policies that make it easier for a parent to stay home to raise children, but where economic pressure results in parents remaining in the workforce, child care must intentionally nurture attachments with adults.

And speaking at the IMFC conference in the afternoon, Kay Hymowitz, Senior Fellow at the Manhattan Institute argued that marriage breakdown has contributed to inequality and poverty far more than most people realize. In a thought-provoking cultural commentary backed by thirty years of statistical evidence and on-the-ground research, Hymowitz detailed the loss of what she called the 'middleclass script' in America's poor neighbourhoods. The loss of marriage combined with early childbearing in poor communities has contributed to a growing divide in America between the middle class and the poor, she reported.



Kay Hymowitz talks about marriage and social inequality

In short, the IMFC policy conference drew a line between family wellbeing and the pursuit of social justice. Throughout the day, attendees were introduced to IMFC research projects that illustrate this connection. Senior Fellow Dr. Kelly Schwartz introduced the Family Strengths project that examines what Canadians are doing right to build strong, healthy families. Andrea Mrozek previewed an upcoming project called The Cost of Family Breakdown that estimates the fiscal costs to taxpayers of family dissolution and unwed childbearing. Peter Jon Mitchell presented Growing up Married, Growing Up Common-law, based on the research conducted by Senior Fellow Dr. Frank Jones, that found teens of common-law parents are at greater risk of engaging in certain risk behaviours than teens of married parents.



Conferees at the book table

History shows that the old ways of addressing poverty reduction and social breakdown have not worked. The aim of the conference is to initiate new conversations about how core societal institutions like the family can influence the pursuit of social justice or put differently, improve community welfare.

But back to the first meeting at the street mission; an hour and a half after the front line health workers arrived, they were packing up their notebooks and heading back out to their clients. The Hill may seem a long way from the street, but the long term effects of policy decisions, good or bad do filter down to street level. The IMFC policy conference will challenge the broken thinking of the past, and encourage grassroots, community-based solutions to social breakdown. Healthy families are the original social safety net. Family repair will play a role in repairing our communities for the long term too; successful policy must recognize this fact.