

THE B.C. CONFERENCE ON THE FAMILY A STUDY OF PUBLIC OPINION ON THE FAMILY IN B.C.

JOHN FRIESEN

University of British Columbia

Abstract

A unique three phase model of public consultation and enquiry was undertaken by the Government of British Columbia in co-operation with the religious communities with the purpose of identifying those forces in society which enrich family life and those that are pulling the family apart. This article contains a short description of the public enquiry together with some of the findings and recommendations that relate to counselling in such areas as counselling in the schools, preparation for marriage, interpersonal relationship training, selection of helping professionals, accountability of helping professionals, parent-counsellor-teacher partnership, values clarification, family studies, preventative and information services, and the establishment of the B.C. Council on the Family.

Résumé

Le gouvernement de la Colombie Britannique de concert avec des communautés religieuses a mis sur pied un modèle unique de consultation et d'enquête ayant trois étapes. Ce modèle veut identifier les forces dans la société qui enrichissent la vie de famille de même que celles qui contribuent à semer le désaccord. Cet article contient une brève description de l'enquête publique. Il présente les découvertes et les recommandations qui ont rapport à la consultation dans les domaines suivants: l'orientation scolaire, la préparation pour le mariage, l'acquisition de rapports interpersonnels, le choix du personnel auxiliaire, l'identification du travail compétent accompli par les conseillers, la collaboration parent-conseiller-professeur, la clarification des valeurs, les études de famille, les services de prévention et d'information et l'établissement du B.C. Council on the Family.

Early in 1975, the then Premier of British Columbia and the Minister of Human Resources met with various concerned citizens and religious leaders to consider how government and the religious bodies might co-operate in dealing with a variety of social problems. It seemed to them that lying at the root of many current problems was the plight of the family, one of our 'endangered species'. Evidence for this viewpoint came from personal experience and a variety of studies (Sagar and Kaplan, 1972; Howells, 1971; Lang, Papenfuks, Walters, 1976), as well as from the Alberta Health and Social Development study (Lai, 1974) which showed that the root cause of institutionalization of children in Alberta stems mainly from the problems of parents such as, marital difficulties, rejection of the child and inadequacy of the parents in dealing with the child.

It dawned upon this group that while a good deal was known about the anguish of families in crisis, it was necessary to know what ordinary families thought of their situation in our changing world and what kinds of supports they looked for to strengthen their solidarity and to enrich their life. Only with such information could enlightened and acceptable strategies be devised by governments, institutions, agencies, counselling and psychological associations, and by families and individuals themselves in dealing with these concerns.

The idea of a conference on the family emerged from this realization. It would be less expensive than a Royal Commission and involve far more people. Such an event had never before been conceived or executed. The unique feature of the conference was an attempt to capture the thinking, feeling and experiencing

of people at the community level in their attempt to successfully work out patterns of family life. It was designed to realize a family's values, aspirations and personal dreams.

The conference consisted of three phases. Phase I, which took place in November of 1975, was designed to identify those issues in society which affect the family. Over 200 delegates were selected and invited from all parts of B.C. They were encouraged to enter into active discussion over a three-day period. Helping the delegates in their deliberations were 40 consultants who, as university professors, senior civil servants and members of other professions freely gave of their time and wisdom. Seven major issues were identified and considered worthy of further study. These were:

1. The two-parent family and other relationships
2. Values and morality
3. The family and law
4. Housing, health and finances
5. Professional and voluntary community support
6. Leisure, work and the family, and
7. Educational, cultural, and religious influences on the family.

In the following two months, a Study Kit (Butler & Friesen, 1976) was written and issued to the delegates, many of whom were by then already busy planning or developing and producing briefs. This was the essence of Phase II. It was a genuine grass-roots consultation about how things are today with the family and what families want by way of help and support. The data arising from an analysis of the briefs and questionnaire responses were available in a 150 page report (Friesen, 1976a). This volume was the official report of the findings of Phase II.

The response to the Study Kit was overwhelming. In all, over 400 briefs and over 700 Family Needs Assessment Questionnaire (Friesen, 1976b) responses were received at the Victoria Office of the Conference on the Family. They came from most school districts in the province, and from many sectors of provincial society: from the elderly and school children; from nuclear families and the divorced, widowed, and single parents; from rural and city communities; from Indian groups, church groups and women's groups.

In some cases the submissions were the work of a few people done in a single afternoon, whilst in others they were the product of meet-

ings which went on for several months occupying many people. In at least one instance, a whole community was involved in a project which entailed not only the writing of a brief, but also countless meetings all over town, radio hot-lines and extensive coverage in the local media.

While efforts were made to obtain representative sampling, the Conference on the Family does not claim to fully represent the views of all British Columbians. This is unfortunate from an empirical perspective, and yet it is facing the obvious reality that few, if any, public enquiries or royal commissions ever fully sample public opinion. At best, they reflect the views of concerned citizens who consider it worthwhile to make submissions.

Phase III of the Provincial Conference on the Family was held in Richmond, B.C., from the 1st to the 4th of November, 1976. Its task was to distil into practical recommendations any consensus emerging from the data developed in Phase II, and to ensure that the over 60 recommendations were addressed and delivered to their appropriate recipients, whether they be the various levels of government, churches or voluntary agencies or professional or international bodies.

This three-phase model for consultation with the public, on a subject of immense public importance, has already attracted attention in other Canadian provinces, in the U.S.A. and in Britain. The International Union of Family Organizations and the World Council of Churches have also become interested in this process.

The hope of the conference steering committee was that three major consequences should flow from the conference. The committee's first hope was that the enormous consultative activity that went on in Phase II will have raised the consciousness of many thousands of citizens concerning the values and needs of the family. The second hope was that the recommendations of Phase III will have serious attention paid to them by their recipients. And the third hope is that this new model of public consultation will have proved its value to each an extent that it will be adopted in other jurisdictions as a means of involving the general public in the serious discussion of matters of profound social importance.

In addition to describing the process in which the Conference on the Family was engaged, it is the intention of the writer of this article to identify some of the recommendations from the Conference which have direct bearing on counselling. While it is true that all the recommendations

passed at the Conference have implications for counsellors and their clients, some recommendations have immediate relevancy. It is these that are presented below.

Counselling in the Schools

The participants in the Conference basically supported and endorsed the work of counsellors in the schools. At the same time the lack of well-trained counsellors and their limited involvement with the family was an area of concern. A number of resolutions, listed below, were passed with this view in mind:

1. That counselling be provided at all levels of school to assist children in developing healthy self-concepts.
2. That counselling must be provided at the junior high school level and include preparation for parenting.
3. That the school boards be encouraged to hire trained family counsellors for preventive and crisis-oriented counselling.
4. That the same special resource services which are available to exceptional children in the urban centres of B.C., be made available in the smaller and more isolated schools in the province.
5. That the B.C. Council on the Family, as one focus of family month, publicize successful programmes in B.C. elementary and secondary schools which are concerned with the development of ethical and moral values.

As is evident from the recommendations, the Conference delegates perceived counselling in the schools to have a significant role to play, both in the prevention of social problems as well as in crisis intervention. Since the family network is the most vital, lasting and influential force in the life of man, the relationship between social, emotional, and learning problems with family functioning needs to be more fully explored by the counsellor. Thus families of children with learning disabilities require additional support and consultation and perhaps family counselling.

Preparation for Marriage

The Conference recommended that the B.C. Department of Education, in co-operation with other departments, encourage and fund programmes within the school system for family and parent education. They further recommended that the Provincial Government be responsible for collecting, assembling and distributing information to the general public on all the resources within the province which are designed to strengthen family life. Also in the area of programming, they recommended that the Provincial

Government provide funds for church and community sponsored preparation for marriage programs and related research, as well as set standards and provide training for those conducting these programmes. They did not recommend, however, as was occasionally suggested, compulsory preparation for marriage programmes for teenage marriages.

In addition, the Conference recommended that a preparation for marriage manual be developed and distributed to all couples who apply for a marriage licence. They suggested that the Provincial Government be responsible for the funding, preparation, distribution and updating of this manual in keeping with the outline contained in the report. Basically this outline grouped information under the following headings: marriage programmes and counselling services available; legal requirements and information; health information; financial information; information about children and related programmes. The Conference further recommended that the Provincial Government amend the Marriage Act to provide for the mandatory distribution of this brochure to all applicants of a marriage licence and to all people requesting the publication of banns. This would be provided at no cost. This brochure would also be available for general distribution.

Interpersonal Relationship Training

It was recommended that interpersonal relationship skills and personal life skills, e.g., budgeting, finances, wills and real estate agreements, income tax, consumer education, communications, nutrition, fitness, be taught in the Public School System, as a means of developing more meaningful relationships with others; as a way of improving our understanding of roles within the family and the ability to accept and fulfill these roles; and as a method of developing an environment that provides for close emotional relationships and intimacy. These skills should also be taught to adults in the community as is evident in the following recommendation:

That interpersonal skills be fostered in the community to strengthen caring relationships in the following ways:

1. Increase the number and scope of interpersonal skills training courses. (These should be non-judgemental — open to all individuals — not just parents in P.E.T. for example.)

2. On-going workshops in communities open to individuals from various life-styles and walks of life in order to open up communications and develop communication skills.
3. The education of children in "life skills" (interpersonal communications) in schools involve parents and trained professionals as much as possible.

Selection of Helping Professionals

While considerable importance was placed on the need for academic training for those in the helping professions, it was not considered to be a sufficient criterion for employment, as is evident from the resolution below:

That a new look be taken at the method of selecting social service employees giving major consideration to personal qualities as well as considering academic or formal training, and that regular programs be devised for updating skills in interpersonal relationships of social service employees.

Accountability of Helping Professionals

Conference delegates pointed out that there is presently very little consumer protection for persons receiving services from helping professionals. Thus, many persons, especially the handicapped, are put on medication and this treatment program is rarely, if ever, reviewed. In addition, the present system discourages psychiatrists and other professionals from providing family counselling and therapy as opposed to individual therapy. The fee for service for individual therapy is greater than for family therapy and often less demanding. It was also felt that files rarely reflect the person's present situation and this leaves the door open for numerous injustices that spring from outdated information or at times inaccurate information. It was therefore recommended that:

1. the accountability of helping professionals be reviewed with a view to providing standards that apply to all helping professionals in the province.
2. provision be made for persons receiving helping professional services to obtain an independent evaluation where the person is dissatisfied with aforementioned evaluation or plan.
3. the client be provided with access to information upon which evaluation and treatment plans are made. This would include full access to all records to ensure that clients or guardians can make an informed decision regarding services or therapy that are proposed for them.

Parent-Teacher-Counsellor Partnership

An area which has come under considerable public criticism during the last several years in

B.C., has been family life education. Such programs have usually been synonymous with sex education and as such have generated public reaction. The B.C. Department of Education has attempted to pacify this situation by requiring the establishment of parent-school committees to provide public input into controversial curricula. In this regard the following recommendation was passed:

That we endorse the B.C. Department of Education's established program, by which every school must establish advisory groups to help feed back the feelings of parents, especially in the area of family life education.

Values Clarification

Although value issues were not directly dealt with by the delegates they underly and encompass all the other issues to some degree. In certain ways, the Conference on the Family was about values. It was nothing more than an attempt to come to grips with the problems of living in a world in which the once taken-for-granted stability of value systems no longer exists. In line with this viewpoint, 28% of respondents on the Family Needs Assessment Questionnaire (Friesen, 1976) considered value confusion to be the most serious problem facing the family today.

It was therefore proposed by the delegates from the Conference on the Family that programmes such as value seminars be developed and conducted throughout the province and that these seminars teach and reflect the values we wish to live by, such as tolerance, the sanctity of life, co-operation and that we expose exploitative advertising.

Family Studies

At the present time, the universities in B.C. do not have established Departments of Family Studies, even though a number of departments and faculties provide coursework in family studies, family counselling and therapy. At the same time, there exists a vast lack of adequately prepared and supervised lay marriage counsellors who could benefit from training. Furthermore, it was felt that we need a core group of trained people to co-ordinate and implement a preventative program of family enrichment rather than spend a monumental amount of money on crisis treatment which often does not eliminate human suffering. Therefore, it was recommended that:

Universities establish Departments of Family Studies, within the jurisdiction of a faculty of inter-disciplinary studies. Strong encouragement be made to all B.C. universities to undertake

doctoral training programmes in family counselling. The graduates of these programmes will provide leadership, training, guidance and support for lay and professional marriage counsellors and also provide supervision of their counselling.

Preventative Services

Conference participants felt that existing health and social services, both professional and volunteer, were usually problem or crisis oriented rather than preventative. This feeling was expressed in one brief which stated: ". . . the government now demands too much in the way of statistics to prove that they are solving problems. The government should instruct its social service employees to spend at least 10% of their time on preventative services". Interestingly, the present Minister of Human Resources, while addressing the Conference on the Family delegates, clearly indicated that his Department would in the future provide three to four million dollars for community based preventative programmes. In this regard, it was recommended by the Conference on the Family that:

The provincial Government reallocate Health and Human Resources Department funding to provide more monies to the Preventative Mental Health Programmes.

Information Services

The urgent need for relevant information relating to available services was stressed by delegates. Without this awareness of the range of services available in local communities, families and individuals in need simply cannot reach out for help. It was therefore recommended that:

Delegates recognize their responsibility in helping to find ways and means of disseminating much needed information regarding family support services in their own communities.

B.C. Council on the Family

Finally, a further recommendation that has wide implications for counselling was the establishment of the B.C. Council on the Family. The following motion was adopted:

Whereas the provincial conference on the family is aware of a widespread public desire for a continuing organized concern in the wellbeing of the family in this province, and

Whereas this conference has, through its own process, brought into being a province-wide network of citizens willing and anxious to assist both in further examining the needs of the family and in promoting its wellbeing, and

Whereas this far-ranging awareness and willingness has sprung largely from the fact that this conference has enjoyed the confidence and

practical support of both the provincial government and the religious bodies in the province

We recommend to the Premier and to the Executive Council of the Province of British Columbia that:

1. A British Columbia Council for the Family be established forthwith by the Provincial Government in co-operation with such religious bodies and community agencies as may wish to be involved;
2. The aims, objects, constitution, membership and terms of reference of the Council be negotiated between the Provincial Government and the Steering Committee of this conference. (Membership to include a fair representation of the geographical areas of the Province.);
3. The terms of reference of the council include at least
 - a. The facilitating of community self-help projects to support and strengthen families,
 - b. In association with appropriate bodies, local, provincial, national or international, furthering public knowledge and promoting public concern about the wellbeing of the family
 - c. The follow-up and implementation as far as possible of the recommendations of this conference, and in particular
 - d. The execution of the recommendation for a British Columbia family month;
 - e. The reporting, through a newsletter, of the Council activities;
4. The initial paid staff be one full-time coordinator, who should be a member of the Council, and one full-time secretary;
5. The other members of the Council act in a volunteer capacity with expenses paid;
6. The cost be shared between the Provincial Government and the participating religious bodies and agencies on a basis to be agreed between them.

Conclusions

Never in the history of British Columbia has there been such an effective outreach programme to concerned citizens right across the Province as that which has been achieved by the Conference on the Family. A number of valuable recommendations have been developed, some of which hopefully will be translated into public policy. In addition, a vast network of concerned citizens has been established encompassing all areas of the Province which is committed to enriching the quality of life for individuals and families alike.

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