Family Violence - Concepts and solutions

Frank Bates

Edited text of an address to the *Hunter Domestic Violence Education and Training Committee, 9 October, 1990.*

I

At the conclusion of a detailed socio-legal study of family violence, Freeman (1979) wrote:

> From the cradle to the grave, we are the objects of violence from those nearest and dearest to us. And it is a never-ending cycle for there is considerable evidence of intergenerational transmission of family violence. We know that individuals exposed to a high degree of physical punishment as children are more likely to resort to family violence as adults. Children reared in an environment of violence batter their children and spouses and in turn may find themselves exposed to violence in their latter years from their own children, who in turn were brought up by violent parents. A book which opens by discussing child abuse should close with a consideration of 'granny battering'. The wheel has come full circle.

Freeman was writing in 1979 and, in the ensuing eleven years, we seem no nearer to finding a global solution than we were then. As Freeman has properly noted, family violence occurs throughout the hierarchy of the traditional family and, thus, it may be that solutions which might be appropriate to one form of violence might not be appropriate to others. Hence, for instance, it might be that in the last instance mentioned by Freeman, the traditional sanctions of the criminal law might be broadly applicable, but less so to other of the instances to which he refers.

In any broader consideration of the topic, it is necessary to clarify some general issues which touch upon the area. First, it must not be thought that the violent family is anything new. The history of child abuse and infanticide has been chronicled by Radbill (1974). In an illuminating essay, this writer refers to the misuse of physical punishment and comments that:

> Throughout history there are accounts of the customary extremes in the chastisement of children. Pepys beat his boy until he (Pepys) was out of breath; John Wesley, Frederick the Great, Lady Jane Grey, and many others in adult life complained bitterly of their treatment in childhood. It always was taken for granted that the parents and guardians of children had every right to treat their children as they saw fit. When Henry VI, who was king when still in his cradle, grew old enough to put up an argument, his tutor had to appeal to council for assistance 'in chastysing of him for his defaults.' Thus regular flogging produced a most unhappy person in King Henry VI, even if it did make him a scholar and a gentleman. Charles I was more fortunate for he had Mungo Murray available as a whipping boy to substitute for him when punishment was indicated.

He also refers to mutilation of children, including circumcision and foot-binding, infanticide, abandonment and industrial mistreatment. That the situation existed and was recognised by law is, likewise, documented by Radbill who comments on various such laws, from the Code of Hammurabi, some four thousand years ago, to relatively modern times.

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The situation was little different in respect of spousal violence: thus, Helmholz (1974) describes the case of one Margaret Neffield in 1395 who, before an Ecclesiastical Court, produced witnesses that her husband had attacked her with a knife, forcing her to escape into the street. Previously, he had set upon her with a dagger, wounding her in the arm and breaking a bone. His defence was that what he had done was solely for the purpose of "reducing her from errors." The parallel with what has already been mentioned about physical punishment of children should not go unnoticed! It should also be said that, in that particular case, the wife was denied a remedy and, in consequence, the spouses were forced to continue living together. As Freeman (1979) has correctly pointed out, "Though many centuries old many of the features of this case have recurred throughout history." Indeed, the Nineteenth Century, lauded by many as being the era of the ideal conjugal family, was characterised, not merely by spousal violence, but an awareness (if only an inept awareness) of the phenomenon. Thus, McGregor (1957), in his seminal book *Divorce in England*, commented regarding the general concern over the phenomenon of violence generally in the 1870's, especially in respect of men against their wives. Again, in an article in *The Sunday Times* of August 24, 1851, John Stuart Mill listed some of the cruelties inflicted by men on their wives and companions. These included a bulldog being set on a wife, stabbings, blows with a poker, attempted murder by hanging and murder in a fit of drunkenness. Novels by Dickens, such as *Bleak House* and *Oliver Twist* contain similar descriptions of family violence.

It may be thought that this is irrelevant for the purposes of modern discussion. It is not, for the reasons advanced in a book on a related subject: Pearson (1983) has documented, in respect of an historical analysis of street crime and hooliganism, the searches for some kind of past millennium. He looks at the "twenty years ago" platitude, the allegedly ideal situation which

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prevailed "before the war" and, especially, the apotheosised reign of Queen Victoria. "This has been", he writes, "a history of myth and tradition, in which there are no historical bolt-holes in which to hide from the difficulties of the present or to clothe ourselves in the achievements of the past. It is also a story of failure – a failure in the development of society to win the consent of substantial proportions of its people, and to find a secure and trusting place in the social fabric for its youth, no less than a failure of rational thought to dispel the illusions of the past." Although Pearson was writing of another social phenomenon and of another country, those remarks are quite patently germane to the present discussion.

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There are often, more immediately apparent, myths which should be instantly capable of self-dissipation, although it appears that they are not. They have been amply catalogued by Seddon (1988) and will be generally well known to readers of this paper; nonetheless, they are worth rehearsing, if only to assist in their dissipation. Initially, as Seddon has himself written,

> " Most of these myths have the effect of transferring responsibility for the violence to the victim. They may even be believed by the victim who blames herself (or himself) for the violence.

The first of these is that the violence is somehow provoked by the victim, even were this true, which in the vast proportion of cases it is not, that could not excuse a violent response. Second, the "fantastic" (to use Seddon's own word) claim is made that the victim is masochistic, and it is probably true to say that outright sadism or masochism is not a central feature of family violence.

Third, it is assumed that domestic violence is a private matter where law and its agencies have no business – this is the most central and most dangerous of these myths because it touches upon so many issues central to the present debate. As the distinguished Scots legal theorist and comparatist Watson (1977) has pointed out, family life was an area of human activity where the basic norm is "Law Keeps Out". It is, indeed, that norm which has for so long concealed domestic violence in all its forms.

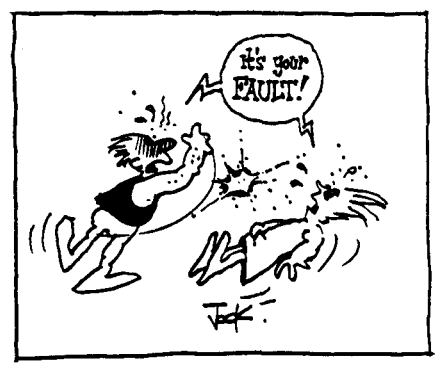
The next question which will shortly be addressed is how and when the state, through its various agencies, should interfere in the internal dynamics of the family. In attempting to answer that question, I fear that we are handicapped by the statement to be found, inter alia, in s.43 (b) of the *Family Law Act* 1975 that the family is, "...the natural and fundamental group unit of society..." This statement is regarded by many as a self-evident truth (Leach 1969). Although it has been decided by the Full Court of the Family Court of Australia in *In the Marriage of Mehmet (No.2)* (1987) F.L.C. 91-801 that "family" refers to the nuclear family, that may not always continue to be the case, as the word has been variously used at common law throughout the years (Dickey, 1982: Bates, 1979).

The fourth myth to which Seddon (1988) refers is that perpetrators of domestic violence are "abnormal". In the case of wife beaters, Seddon writes that,

> Many bashers are, to outward appearances, loving partners. The helper who meets the allegedly violent party may find it very difficult to believe the client's story. He or she should, however, be aware that it is a fairly common phenomenon for the violent party to be very adept at presenting an acceptable, sometimes charming, face to the world.

Seddon, though, does not deal with child abusers of one sort or another, but it is likely that the same conclusions are applicable. For instance, in the aftermath of the Cleveland affair (Campbell, 1988), a parent who was active in the group Parents Against Injustice (PAIN) and had appeared on its platforms was subsequently found to have sexually abused his six year old retarded son (Campbell, 1988).

Before leaving the realm of myth, there is one other fable I should like to dissipate: that is that alternative family type arrangements are never violent. A useful illustration is provided by the decision of Asche J. in *In the Marriage of Kitchener* (1978) F.L.C. 90-436 where a welfare officer's report had been sought on various matters relating to the children and the suitability and fitness of each party, to have custody, following a consent order that the wife had sole custody. In that order, the wife had made an undertaking that she would take all reasonable steps to ensure that a Miss X, with whom she had been living in a homosexual relationship, would move out of the residence. Miss X left, but later returned. Evidence revealed that their relationship was characterised by acts of violence, involving incidents of assaults on the wife, and on one occasion, a serious assault on a child. These incidents resulted in a charge of assault against Miss X and the children being removed to a reception centre.



II

Having sought to identify two mythologies – the mythology of the closed family and the mythologies of domestic violence – what courses of action are open to the state and its relevant agencies? As regards the first, from the point of view of the abused spouse, the obvious and immediate remedy is dissolution of marriage as provided for by ss. 48 and 49 of the *Family Law Act*. However, the reality of the situation may not be so straightforward. The basis of the irretrievable breakdown ground, that the, "...court is satisfied that the parties separated and thereafter lived separately and apart for a continuous period of twelve months..." must be made out. As Seddon (1988), once more has noted, one of the common features of violent relationships is that the victim does not leave. There are four basic reasons for this situation: first, women may not

leave because they fear that any children may suffer should the family be split up. Second, women are frequently financially dependent on their partners and, hence, the woman's only other available option may be benefits under the *Social Security Act* 1947. These may not, of themselves, be easy to obtain, and are likely to involve the woman in an unhappy administrative process (Bates, 1987). They may also, particularly if they have the care of young children, find it hard to find employment which, in turn, may be poorly paid. A third reason is the difficulty of finding employment and, although refuges may provide a short-term solution, the long-term outlook is often bleak. Fourth, despite the violence, the victim may still have some emotional attachment to her abuser; as Seddon writes, the victims,

> ...live in the hope that the violence will stop. Sometimes the emotional attachment allows the violent party to manipulate the victim. Alternatively, some victims are reluctant to admit that the relationship is not working out. Leaving the family home represents a dramatic step which proclaims to the world that the marriage is foundering.

There may also be religious or social pressures against dissolution, as well as familial pressure, but it may be that these are of less importance than once they were.

Most of these myths have the effect of transferring responsibility for the violence to the victim. They may even be believed by the victim who blames herself (or himself) for the violence."

Nevertheless, the ground must be made out and it may not be easy to prove that a couple living in the same house are, in fact, living separate and apart, even though specific provision is made in s. 49(2) of the Act in respect of that situation. Hence, in *In the Marriage of Pavey* (1976) F.L.C. 90-051 at 76,332 the Full Court said that,

> In such cases, without a full explanation of the circumstances, there is an inherent unlikelihood that the marriage is broken down, and common residence suggests a continuing cohabitation. Such cases therefore require evidence that goes beyond inexact proofs, indefinite testimony and indirect inferences. The party or parties alleging separation must satisfy the court about this by explaining why the parties continued to live under the same roof and by showing that there has been a change in their relationship gradual or sudden, constituting a separation.

Again, in *In the Marriage of Quigley* (1976) F.L.C. 90-074 at 75,350 Emery J. emphasised that until,

> ...the home has been abandoned, or the Court can be assured that there is some compelling reason - other than to continue some of the incidents of the matrimonial relationship - for the failure to abandon the home, and that it will with certainty be abandoned in the immediate future, the Court should not be satisfied, except by the very strongest evidence, that there has been either a sufficient repudiation of the marital relationship or a sufficient manifestation of that repudiation and a decree should not be pronounced.

In *Quigley*, and various other cases (Bates, 1989), the ground was not made out and, it seems clear to this commentator, that the operation of the ground has been taken seriously by the courts.

Two final points in this regard should be made: first, it should be noted that Australia has a relatively low rate of dissolution of marriage in the developed countries, with which comparison is usually made. Only Sweden, West Germany (as it then was) and France have lower rates (Finlay and Bailey-Harris, 1989). Second, dissolution in any formal sense, is not available to children although it is true that some children have sought to use other methods which had similar effect. Thus, for example, in 1978 the Washington Supreme Court decided *In re Snyder's Welfare* 532 P. 2d 278 (1978) and utilised a child welfare statute which permitted "incorrigible" children to be taken into care. The court allowed a fifteen year old girl to claim that she herself was incorrigible, and, thus, to be placed in a foster home with guardians whose views were closer to her own than those of her natural parents. The court, in the words of Hunter, A.J., (at 281) were of the opinion that

> The issue is whether there is substantial evidence to support a finding that the parent-child relationship has dissipated to the point where parental control is lost and, therefore, Cynthia is incorrigible.

The court was likewise of the opinion that it was irrelevant as to whether the parents or child had brought about the breakdown in the relationship.

it is assumed that domestic violence is a private matter where law and its agencies have no business - this is the most central and most dangerous of these myths because it touches upon so many issues central to the present debate.

Thus, dissolution may, of itself, be of limited utility to the victims of family violence, but other forms of more direct and effective intervention are available. The primary question, however, which arises is when and if they should be used. On the one hand, are the well known United States writers Goldstein, Freud and Solnit (1979) who speak of the principles of, "...least intrusive invocation, least intrusive adjudication and least intrusive disposition." The reason which they advance in support of these principles is, in their own words,

> ...because any interference with family privacy alters the relationships between family members and undermines the effectiveness of parental authority.

To give effect to those principles, Goldstein, Freud and Solnit set out seven specific instances where the intervention of the state and its agencies may be justified. Without seeking to analyse these instances in detail, as that has been done elsewhere (Bates, 1984), it is safe to say that all of them represent particularly obvious and, in some cases, gross examples of family dysfunction and, even at the time they were initially posited, many commentators, myself included (Bates, 1984), considered them to be excessively restrictive and rigidly categorised.

On the other hand, three English writers, Dingwall, Eekelaar and Murray (1983), adopt a rather different standpoint when they write that,

> If we recognize ...rights for children, we must accept corresponding restrictions on parents' rights and on family autonomy. We must also acknowledge, however, that, if children's rights are to be taken seriously, their interpretation and enforcement must find some institutional

> expression. Many mistreated children are physically unable to initiate their own remedies: others must be licensed to do it for them.

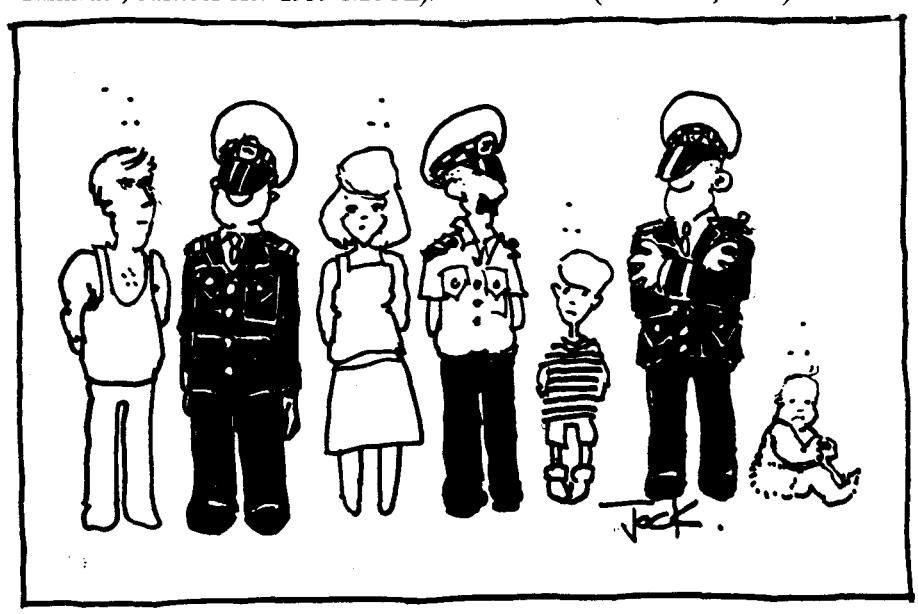
They conclude their book by saying that:

> Moral evaluations can and must be made if children's lives and well-being are to be secured. What matters is that we should not disguise this and pretend it is all a matter of finding better checklists or new models of psychopathology – technical fixes when the proper decision is a decision about what constitutes a good society. How many children should be allowed to perish in order to defend the autonomy of families and the basis of the liberal state? How much freedom is a child's life worth?

Although these commentators concentrated their attention on the protection of children, it will be first apparent that many of these broad considerations are applicable to all of the forms of violence to which reference was made at the beginning of this paper. The issue then becomes not so much the need for intervention, but the nature and quality of that intervention.

Before going on discuss the nature and quality of the intervention, two general and related points must be made. First, there can be no doubt that the Cleveland affair and its bureaucratic (Department of Health and Social Security, 1989) and legislative aftermath (*Children Act* 1989) have confused an already confused situation and cause us to question the assumptions of all concerned parties. Second, it seems as though only two factors will force government, at whatever level, to act quickly and effectively in matters dealing with dysfunctional family dynamics. These are, first, shocking instances of fatal, or near fatal, violence which are brought, usually through media coverage to community attention and, second, the consistent activities of articulate pressure groups. Examples of the first would include the well-known decision of the Full Court of the Supreme Court of South Australia in R v R (1981) 28 S.A.S.R. 321 (Bates, 1987) and the various cases of fatal child abuse in England from 1974 to 1987, which include such well publicised instances as Maria Colwell, Jasmine Beckford and Kimberly Carlile. It is hard to tell which of the two courses is ultimately the more telling, but reliance on the former is, at the least, disturbing.

As to the nature of the intervention, effectively all of the acts which are presently discussed are criminal offences; hence, a logical agency to deal with matters of family violence, of all kinds, is the police force. Indeed, recent legislation in the State of Queensland ss. 31-5 (*Domestic Violence (Family Protection)) Act* 1989, casts a **duty** on police offences to investigate **and act** on reasonable suspicion of domestic violence. Similarly, under the same Act, police powers are spelt out in detail as they are in New South Wales *(Crimes Act* 1900 s. 357F), although the provisions in that State lack the emphasis on police responsibility as is the case in Queensland. The other States' legislation is altogether less specific than in Queensland and New South Wales (See Victoria, *Crimes (Family Violence) Act* 1987 s. 7; South Australia, *Justices Act* 1921 s. 99; Western Australia, *Justices Act* 1902 s. 172; Tasmania, *Justices Act* 1959 s.10GL).



This approach may not wholly find favour and it is probably not insignificant that the Queensland and New South Wales provisions have not been adopted throughout Australia. It is so notorious as not to need documentation that police are not popular in Australia and it has been documented (Renvoize, 1978) that they are unwilling to involve themselves in domestic disorders. At the same time, especially in North America there is evidence that police forces are, in fact, seeking to change their attitudes and practices (Bell, 1978; Jaffe and Thompson, 1978). One can only agree with Parnas (1978) that,

> Incidents of inter-spousal violence, no matter how minimal, must remain subject to police intervention. For years a disproportionate number of disturbances, assaults, batteries, uses of deadly weapons, mayhems, and homicides have involved family members. Despite the resources necessary and the danger inherent in responding to such calls, no entity other than a police agency has the authority and ability to cope with such volatile situations. Central to the function of the police and the criminal law is the protection of life and limb.

As regards assaults, of whatever kind, against children the traditional sanctions may also be of value, especially in the case of middle-class parents (and another myth which could usefully be dissipated is that child abuse only occurs in a working class environment) where a respect for traditional legal values and processes is generally assumed (Van Stolk, 1973).

After initial intervention, the law provides for the application of various orders, which have various names and to which various powers are attached. Thus, d/ 114(1) of the *Family Law Act* 1975 refers to "injunctions" to which a power of arrest is attached in s. 114AA. The New South Wales *Crimes Act* 1900 ss. 562B(1) refers to "Apprehended Violence Orders"; the Victorian *Crimes (Family Violence) Act* 1987 s. 4(1) describes them as "Intervention Orders." South Australian

(*Justices Act* 1921 s. 90(1)) and Western Australian (*Justices Act* 1902 s. 172(1)) legislation speaks of "Orders to Keep the Peace" and Tasmania (*Justices Act* 1959 s. 106A(1)) of "Restraint Orders." In Queensland (*Domestic Violence (Family Protection) Act* 1989 s. 4(1) which has the most particular legislation, reference is made to **protection orders**. It is clear that these orders are both necessary and desirable, especially as in Queensland where an order may be granted (s. 5(2)) if a Magistrate's Court is satisfied on the balance of probabilities that,

> (a) wilful injury to the person of one spouse has been committed by the other spouse and is likely to be committed again;
>
> (b) wilful injury to the person of one spouse has been threatened by the other spouse and the threat is likely to be carried out;
>
> (c) wilful damage to property used or enjoyed by one spouse or available for use or enjoyment by one spouse has been done by the other spouse and is likely to be done again;
>
> (d) wilful damage to property used or enjoyed by one spouse or available for use or enjoyment by one spouse has been threatened by the other spouse and the threat is likely to be carried out;
>
> (e) intimidation or serious harassment of one spouse by the other spouse has occurred and is likely to occur again;
>
> (f) indecent behaviour towards one spouse by the other spouse, contrary to the wishes of the first-mentioned spouse has occurred and is likely to occur again.

At the same time, too much ought not to be expected of them; a sad fact which may be exemplified from the decision of Butler J. of the Family Court of Australia, dealing with injunctions available under s. 114 of the *Family Law Act*, in *In the Marriage of Lee* (1977) F.L.C. 90-314. In that case, his Honour, in dissolving an order made by a magistrate, commented (at 76,676 that,

> ...the granting of an injunction to enforce the removal from or the barring of entry to the matrimonial home is a grave and drastic order and it should not be made unless it is impossible for the parties to live in the same house, there being on foot an imperative or inescapable or otherwise intolerable situation.

All of that was after medical evidence had been given that the husband had an alcohol problem and had assaulted the applicant wife.

III

The global context cannot be said to present a happy picture and one could be tempted to resort to something like the response of Mr. Lyon, Minister of State to the British Home Office to a Select Committee, quoted by Renvoize (1978). Mr. Lyon stated,

> I am not sure there is anything this Committee or the Government can do about it. There is a solution: the solution is that husbands ought to treat their wives better.

The Committee properly responded that, "That is not a solution, it is a pious hope." That did not faze Mr. Lyon, who then said, It is the only solution, with respect in personal relations. There is only one real solution, that is that human beings should treat each other better.

...it seems as though only two factors will force government, at whatever level, to act quickly and effectively in matters dealing with dysfunctional family dynamics. These are, first, shocking instances of fatal, or near fatal, violence which are brought, usually through media coverage to community attention and, second, the consistent activities of articulate pressure groups.

The bridge to some sort of appreciation of the situation in which we find ourselves is provided by the great United States jurist Allen (1964), who says:

> Ignorance, of itself is disgraceful only so far as it is avoidable. But when, in our eagerness to find 'better ways' of handling old problems, we rush to measures affecting human liberty and human personality on the assumption that we have the knowledge which, in fact, we do not possess, then the problem of ignorance takes on a more sinister hue.

I have already hinted at the true reason for our wilful ignorance - it is that many groups and individuals who often have considerable influence in the community at large are unwilling to confront and accept the realities of family life for ideological reasons. This state of affairs will continue whilst we continue to hide behind the rhetoric of statements such as that contained in s. 43(b) of the *Family Law Act*. Putting the matter another way, violent partners and parents must be exposed as such and their victims protected - the law and its agencies have a crucial role to play which cannot be shirked or be circumscribed by curial or administrative subterfuge.

In addition, it is also in error to compartmentalise violence in the family: violence between spouses may have direct and indirect effects on children and/or older family members; the line between physical, sexual and emotional abuse of children may be a very fine one. But, ultimately, it may all come back to the law's perceptions of family and its responses, when, in actuality those responses should be confronting realities rather than perceptions.

The American poet Wallace Stevens, himself a lawyer, may well have best encapsulated the position:

> They said, 'You have a blue guitar,
> You do not play things as they are.'
> The man replied, 'Things as they are
> Are changed upon the blue guitar.'
> And they said then, 'But play, you must,
> A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,
> A tune upon the blue guitar
> Of things exactly as they are'.

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Please Note: In the previous issue of *Children Australia*, (Vol 15 No 4), the article by Schultz, Schultz and Craddock, *Toward Identification of Strategies to Strengthen the Family Unit*, contained an incorrect figure. On page 4, column 3, paragraph 1, and again in the highlight box , page 5 column 2, the figure 31.8% (of women have divorced again) should read, 21.8%. This was a typographical error in the manuscript.