

Family Policy – A Constant of French Politics

The idea of a family policy was born in France in the 19th century, Léon Harmel was responsible. Harmel was born in 1829, he was an industrialist in the French town of Reims, and he represented the social-democratic trend. Harmel was the first to adopt the idea of a family salary, which would be based on the principle that the father or mother of the family should be able, with the same salary, to support a higher cost than a single person, since they were providing for the future of society.

Immediately World War I was over, the first compensation institute was established in France, which at the time was bleeding from the conflict. This institute was the predecessor of our institutes for providing family benefits. Its establishment was initiated by Emil Romanet, a businessman from the French city of Grenoble. In 1920, the General Director of the Roubaix Mathon Motte company established a central committee for family benefits. Finally, in 1932, at the request of the French Minister of Labour, Loucheur, family benefits became generally binding. Since then, family policy has been an integral part of French internal affairs policy irrespective of the government's political colour. During the War, Marshal Pétain's government along with the National Resistance Council confirmed the necessity for a strong family policy. Vichist politics in this case applied the public movement of government resolutions, in its major part. Thus, we can assert that the durability of the French family policy is based on a long past consensus.

The family policy remains a priority of French politics even though not acknowledged as one. If we total all the expenses used for the benefit of maternity and family, we arrive at the significant amount of 44 billion EUR, of which 5.774 billion EUR was expenses associated with maternity, and 38.175 billion EUR for families. To these expenses can be added 12.7 billion EUR for tax allowances and 10.2 billion EUR for improving family pensions.

The extent of these numbers substantiates the fact that family policy is an important part of French policy and that it covers direct financial support, tax allowances, measures associated with maternity, measures set by the labour law, as well as systems of facilities for childcare.

Social security authorities, state, local government bodies, enterprises and various associations contribute to the expenses of the family policy. The result of this long-term policy is indisputable. France and its fertility rate of almost 2 children per woman during two consequential years ranks with Ireland as one of the countries with the highest fertility rate in Europe. The number of births is 300,000 higher than the number of deaths while the life span is increasing every year (by five months for men and by three months for women).

This was just a reminder of the general framework. It is necessary to highlight also that the French family policy concentrated on the care for small children, since it considers the issue of reconciling family and professional life to be urgent even during this pre-school stage of children's lives.

Let us not forget that in 2007 there were 4.8 million children up to 6 years of age and 2.4 million children up to 3 years of age registered in France. The majority of children up to three years of age were born to a family in which at least one parent was involved in a professional activity, and only six

out of ten children up to six years of age live with double-occupation parents. We have also recorded the fact that in 39% of children up to 6 years of age, whose parents both work, the mother is engaged in a part-time employment. Due to these conditions, the organization of childcare systems during working days is a significant and key factor in reconciling professional and family life.

Like the rest of Europe, the phenomena of both parents being involved in professional activity is also rising in France. More and more couples jointly and freely opt for this way. If we enable the parents to have access to quality pre-school care, both parents can remain financially independent, to be involved in their professional career, while still carrying out their parental duties. The situation in France is, however, eloquent in its own right: the high level of employment among women associated with the high fertility rate reaching, almost, the threshold of regeneration, and which, in any case, significantly exceeds the European average.

The main method of childcare for children of up to three is still family care (70%), because parents can use various assistance services or full or partial interruption of their professional career for a particular period of time. The demand for childcare facilities remains high and enrolment is saturated. Every French MP knows that the issue of places available in nurseries or other facilities for pre-school care is one of the main concerns of young couples.

Parents may entrust their children of up to three either to a maternity assistant, to a collective childcare facility, or may use family care services. They may also entrust their children to a person in the neighbourhood, who is directly employed or who is an employee of childcare services. Thus, they can use childcare services directly in their homes.

Parents may also use various types of collective childcare, whether in state or private facilities:

- collective nurseries (regular attendance of children up to three years of age);
- kids corner (casual attendance);
- kindergartens (regular attendance of children from three to six years of age);
- family nurseries (family childcare services);
- facilities with multiple enrolment options for childcare.

All these facilities are controlled by departments and the tariffs are identical. The total of all these types of childcare does not provide enough places (42 places for 100 children up to three years of age).

Therefore, in 2007 the French government introduced **the plan for small children**. This plan consists of 9 main measures, which should better reflect the needs of families. The measures should be implemented within 5 years. These measures are the following:

- 1) **Increasing efforts to create new places for children.**

The objective is to create 12,000 new places within five years in nurseries in each year and to increase the number of maternity assistants by 60,000. In 2008, subsidies for financing new places in nurseries were increased by an additional 56.5 million.

- 2) **Removing obstacles to the development of childcare places and simplify the recruitment of childcare experts.**

This renewed the directive stipulating the framework guidelines for nurseries and their operation.

- 3) **Assisting small and medium sized enterprises in establishing nurseries or commissioning them.**

The objective of this measure is to enable small and medium sized enterprises to authorize the managing employees of nurseries to negotiate "childcare services contracts" with institutions providing family benefits.

- 4) **Handing over to experts additional information so as to help provide the same services within the entire territory.**
- 5) **To assist in implementing the act that renews the profession of maternity and family assistants.**
- 6) **Developing employment in the care of childcare.**

This was to establish "childcare platforms" in all regions, with rectories, and provide gratuities for new areas, since there is a shortage of experts.

- 7) **Better inform families on all current possibilities of childcare.**

New internet websites were created "leas pages poussins" ("chick pages") to provide current information.

- 8) **Establishing pilot "mini nurseries".**

The objective is to help the opening of such new forms of childcare that combine the elements of individual and collective care on agreement and with comments from respective authorities.

- 9) **Increase the flexibility of maternity leave.**

On agreement with social partners, this measure enables any woman with a trouble-free pregnancy to transfer, with the agreement of her doctor, a part of her maternity leave allocated to the period before the birth to the period after the birth.

The state intends to support company nurseries, as well. Company nurseries were authorized in 2004, and over 230 have been established. The objective was, also, to enable company nurseries to be established, which was facilitated by the childcare plan. These nurseries can better reflect parents' wishes and can contribute to reconciling family and professional life.

To conclude - we can confirm that the introduction of new, flexible, heterogeneous and adaptative systems of childcare is an important prerequisite for actually reconciling family and professional life. The well-being of employees and their children, a contribution to easing the problems involved in the parental responsibility in the area of childcare, may all positively affect the quality of social relations and the quality of the working environment. Everybody wins: parents, families, companies, and government bodies. These measures are costly, however, expenses to increase the fertility rate and decrease the pressure on parents would be much higher. In our aging Europe, threatened by depopulation, more than ever we can say "the greatest wealth is in people".