

WHO'S RESPONSIBLE?



Get tough

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The mayor of Minneapolis argues that the current welfare system needs radical reform.

By Donald M. Fraser
MINNEAPOLIS

Over the course of his 38-year political career, Minneapolis Mayor Donald M. Fraser has established solidly progressive credentials. As a state representative, U.S. congressman and national chair of Americans for Democratic Action, Fraser has fought hard on behalf of the disenfranchised, whether low-income Americans or human-rights victims in other nations. But his recent position on welfare reform has earned him such slurs as "poor-basher" and "sexist"—and has even caused critics to compare him to "family values" demagogue Dan Quayle.

Why the controversy? Fraser, the current president of the National League of Cities, has come to believe that the current welfare system is "destroying our families" by creating a culture of irresponsible parents. The editors of In These Times feel that Fraser's argument is worth our readers' attention. We asked him to write the following article.

nce the debate on health care is finally resolved, welfare reform is likely to be next on the national agenda. Unfortunately, most of the current proposals offer little hope for solving the most serious of the current welfare problems: the lack of support for children.

Welfare, officially known as the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, provides federal funds, administered by the states, to help children living with a parent or relative who meets a state-established standard of need. The program—

which was begun under the Social Security Act of 1935 and expanded in 1962—serves about 4.8 million households. It has long been criticized for creating a culture of dependency among the poor. In recent years, many states have begun providing training and support to enable parents to become self-sufficient. These efforts have been reinforced by recent federal legislation. Success, however, has been only modest.

Nonetheless, the Clinton administration is now proposing a two-year limit on assistance, after which recipients would be forced to find work. If no private-sector job could be found, some form of government employment would have to be created.

City officials are apprehensive about this approach for two primary reasons. First, they would be confronted with the need to create jobs for thousands of people who have ended their two-year spell on welfare. And second, Clinton's proposals do nothing to change the aspects of the current system that discourage

two-parent families.

A lot of people don't like talking about the collapse of marriage and family in America. The issue raises uncomfortable questions about class, race and sex, about morality and responsibility. But we can't afford to hide from the facts. When I became mayor of Minneapolis in 1980, for example, 27 percent of the births in our city were to unmarried parents. Thirteen years later, an estimated 50 percent of the births are to unmarried parents, and the numbers continue to climb. In some neighborhoods these figures run to 80 or 90 percent.

The numbers are highest in some of our minority communities, but the rate of growth appears to be higher in the white community. The rate of illegitimacy is currently running about 25 percent among whites—about where the African-American community was in the early '60s.

What do these statistics mean? We're not completely sure. The amount of research into the causes and effects of single-parent families is meager, given the importance of the issue. But experts generally agree that, everything else being equal, children are better off in a two-parent home.

True, some single parents raise wonderful children. But too many young people are placed in double jeopardy: not only do they grow up in poverty, but they also suffer from a poverty of nurture and support. And children who grow up with inadequate support and with low expectations have trouble in school and are more likely to become

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Single mothers at a transitional living center in Chicago.

entangled with the law. For the children, this often means wasted and prematurely shortened lives. For city residents and officials, it means higher crime, higher police costs, more social disorganization and a less productive workforce.

The current welfare system encourages fathers to walk away from the families they have helped start. They can justify this avoidance of responsibility on economic grounds: with only one parent, the children can become eligible for AFDC benefits.

Thus, the father can comfort himself with the thought that his family will be better off without him around. And if he's paid at minimum-wage levels or is an irregular earner, he is correct in that assessment—especially since low-paying or part-time jobs rarely offer health insurance.

Research by William Julius Wilson confirms that marriage rates are higher among men who earn higher wages. But the employment situation for the urban poor is only worsening. Blue-collar jobs are disappearing; the jobs that remain offer ever-lower wages. And the minimum wage has not kept up with the growth of national income. It's ironic that the increasing failure of two adults to join in a household where their earnings could be pooled comes at precisely the time when that partnership is most needed. Separation only intensifies both parents' poverty and lessens their ability to give support to children.

Yet the Clinton administration's proposals could actually serve to *increase* the number of single-parent families. A single mother would receive counseling and skill train-

ing, and would be put on a track that leads to a job—not necessarily a good-paying job, but still a job. It might be hard to convince that woman she would be better off with a husband—since being with a husband would mean being without training and employment. Under the Clinton plan, women might see a child as the ticket to the job market. The father would once again be left out of the picture.

True, a woman who is able to become self-sufficient would likely provide a better home environment for her children. But without a second adult in the household, the woman would find it extremely difficult to be a good mother while at the same time trying to hold a job on a minimum income. Again, the big losers would be children.

But there is a way to restructure our nation's welfare system so that it encourages two-parent families and helps those families to a secure economic future. It would mean drastic reform. The basic idea would be to eliminate the AFDC as we know it, and to split the current welfare system into two pieces. Under this system, the federal government would be responsible for helping to support children in lower-income families, and states would provide the additional help that some families need.

In practical terms, this would mean integrating federal support for children into the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a program designed to encourage breadwinners for

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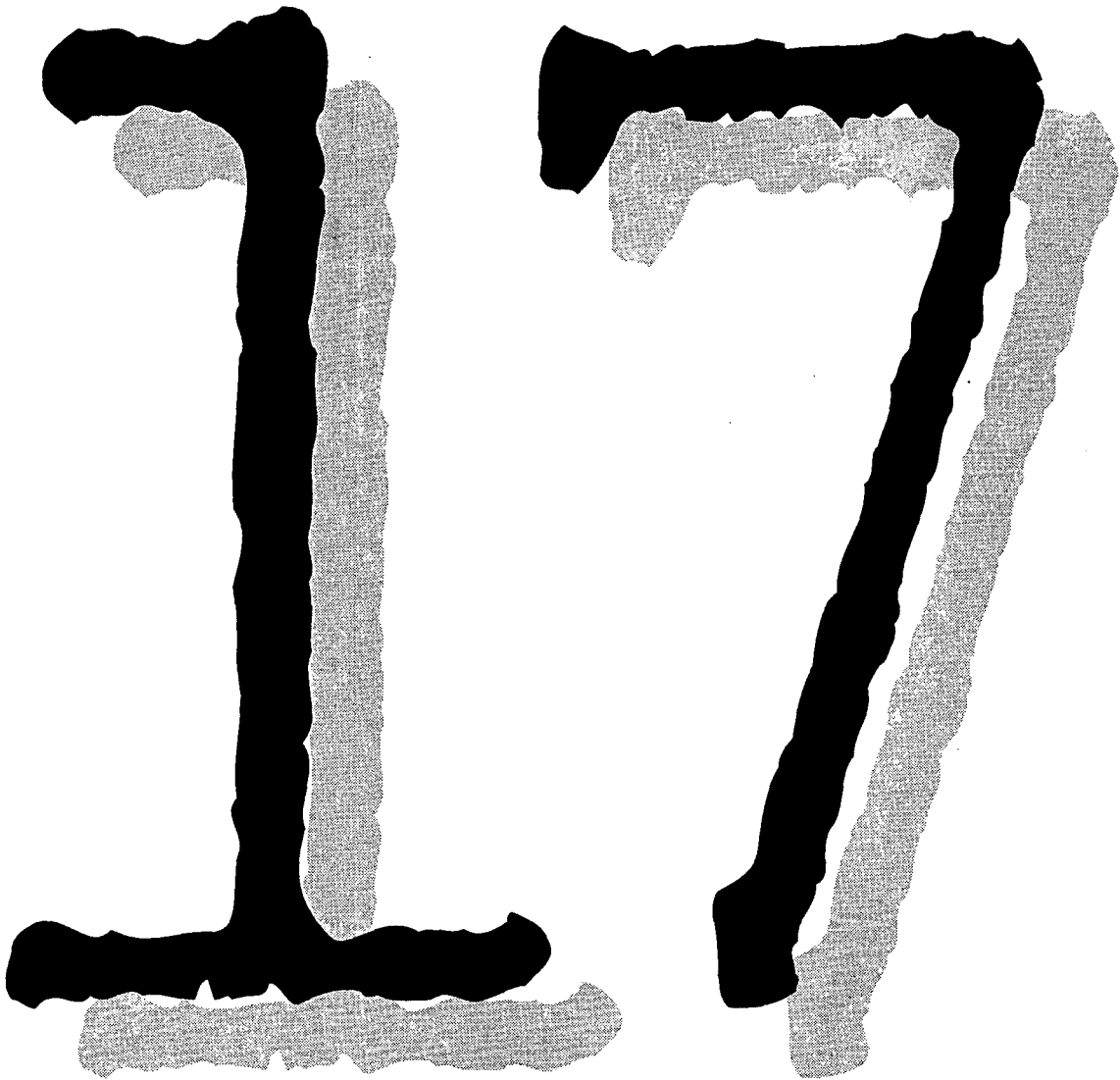
IN THESE TIMES

SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY SECTION



SEVENTEEN MORE YEARS!

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The first 17 years are always the hardest. And they were especially hard for us, a socialist publication begun at the dawn of the Reagan-Bush era. In fact, it's a miracle that we have survived, when dozens of new and old left journals have fallen by the wayside like tree leaves in autumn.

But here we are, and here we hope to be—for at least another 17 years.

There is a secret to our success. We started out undercapitalized, and we have, until now, remained undercapitalized. Like all small political journals, we cannot get much advertising. And unlike right-wing political journals, we are generally denied foundation support. But we have had the unfailing support and generosity of our readers. And that has made our survival possible.

Every year at this time, we publish a section of greeting ads as both a token of that support and a contribution to our survival and growth. The organizations and individuals listed in the following pages are among our best friends. As always, we are deeply grateful to them.