

"I say put the children first!"

Penelope Leach, author of best-selling parents' manuals like *Baby and Child*, has made a call for drastic social change to recognise children's rights. Janet Burstall and Belinda Weaver went to talk her.

PENELOPE LEACH HAS issued a call for a revolution that could be as profound a transformation of society as the women's movement, and in many ways is its natural sequel" (Gwen Kinkead, *New York Times Magazine*, 10 April 1994)

Leach is arguing that children's rights must be socially recognised and legally guaranteed. In her book *Children first* (1994; now out in paperback) she writes:

"The interests of children themselves will not be fully met... as long as they are regarded principally as objects of adult concern... No society can claim to do its best for children as children unless what it does is based on acceptance of children as people.

"Nobody would wish to remove the rights to have their 'childish' needs met that children have been given through laws concerning child maintenance, child labour and education, and through innumerable exemptions from the responsibilities borne by adult citizens. But societies originally gave those special privileges to children within 'the empire of the father' and by virtue of their incompetence to act outside it.

"Wives were once within that empire too, but the modern world that has recognised women as competent legal persons has not similarly recognised that 'children are people too', and as such are entitled to the same human rights as everybody else; rights that belong to them in their own right as individuals, rather than as

appendages of parents or guardians who have a right to own them."(p.203)

When we talked to her recently, she added:

"The paternalist family — the assumption that families will, can, and should meet all

the needs of children and do it privately, without being interfered with, and without public help — is what we've got to get rid of, because things have changed. I don't think it even ought to be an ideal any more. Almost everybody needs help."

WL: "Part of the problem of getting proper support for families is that the family is seen as an economic unit, so the family should provide the support for all members within it. It would take a big shift to recognise each person in the family as an independent individual."

PL: "I don't think families are the building blocks of society any more. Individuals will still form themselves into families, individuals still need families, but it is the individuals who are the building blocks.

"As long as we believe paternalist families are the units, children sink or swim with their families. Now the individual rights of children have to be validated by the state, as the individual rights of everybody else are, because families aren't there to do it. There isn't such a thing as *the* family anymore. There are lots of individual people grouping themselves in lots of different ways. One of the failings of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is that it did not say children should have the legal right to live with the people they deem to be parents. My point would be that parenting is something that you earn. We can't any longer say that this is the family, we have to say who does this child experience as family? And as far as I'm concerned, if that's two women, for example, that's how it should be."

Leach is no pre-feminist, putting moral



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pressure on individual mothers to sacrifice themselves for their children but, to her irritation, this is how she has been interpreted by many reviewers and readers.

PL: "On the whole the feminist reaction (to my ideas) has changed hugely in the last 10 years, to my pleasure. The right to do well by children is a right that has come very late to the women's movement, and that's what *Children first* has been seen as addressing. Indeed, the Penguin version of the book has entirely feminist quotes on the back."

WL: "A number of feminist journalists feel that you set a standard, in your book *Baby and Child*, for example, which cannot be lived up to, or is difficult to live up to at the same time as going to work."

PL: "I suggest that anyone who feels guilty pitch it into the nearest trash can... I occasionally meet somebody who says 'I had this book by my bed for 3 years and it made me feel so guilty.' I say 'What was it doing by your bed for more than a week?'"

"My main concern is for the people who feel deprived of their children, who are blackmailed, either by career or by money, into having to leave them. There is this conviction, certainly in the male world, and to some extent in the feminist world, that all women want full-time day care, and it is totally contradicted by the data.

"Some women do, yes, and a lot of women with slightly older children do, but the vast majority of women with young children do not.

"Nor do they want to be stuck at home, thank you very much. They want to do both. That's the sort of circular message of

the book.

"What makes the difference to a young child is not whether you're with family or not, not whether you're at home with mum or grandparent, or in a child care centre, but the motivation and enthusiasm of the people you're with. And there is nothing magic about a mother, particularly a mother who wishes she were somewhere else. There's certainly nothing magic about a grandmother whose arm has been twisted.

"I'm not in the market for self-sacrifice from women. Kids need enthusiasm. If you are reluctantly stuck at home, you probably aren't doing a very good job by your child anyway. How could you be?"

Penelope Leach writes in her book:

"Attempts to prescribe home life for small children at the expense of women who are mothers — such as those made by the 'family values' lobbies in various countries — inevitably fail because home life (and 'mothering'), as such lobbyists perceive it, is a thing of the past." (CF, p.245)

We talked to her about how work could be reorganised to free parents 'to do well by children'.

WL: "It would be an enormous help trade unions genuinely fought for reduced working hours for everybody."

PL: "Sure, I agree 100%."

"Modern work is peculiarly hard to combine with any form of caring and that's one of the big changes in work. More traditional forms of work were much easier to combine and were combined."

WL: "You propose to bring work into local communities. How would that help? How can you effect that change?"

PL: "For a lot of people, to lose the commute is the most enormous help. I'm not suggesting that you could do work and child-care at once. It would be irresponsible even to try. Nobody's saying you can take these work phone calls at home. You've still got to have child care. But there are differences.

"It's a different kind of child care you need if you're still part of the child's world. You're coming much closer to a village situation where you're basically in charge, but there are a lot of other people keeping an eye too. Who you can trust your baby with if you're around and in and out is terribly different from who you can trust if you're going to be 70 miles away for 10 hours."

WL: "You suggest setting up computer centres where workers can get together to work near to home."

PL: "Those are a great deal more realistic than a lot of ideas of mine, because the motivation is the enormous saving to business on business centres. If you cost out the real estate charges for high street locations

for offices, there really is quite a lot of money available while still presenting real economies.

"I know a couple of places where this has actually happened. One is an LA bookshop, of all the improbable things, and they're on the 8th child who has been raised in and through the bookshop. Just now they could have gone for a larger and more central location and made the whole thing more formal, or they could go for another building down the street and elaborate the informality. They've gone the latter way and it's been very much more economic.

WL: "What about agitation on the part of parents who are workers who start to demand that sort of change? Instead of being top down, bottom up?"

PL: "Well, you might get that, but, you



Penelope Leach: "I'm not in the market for self-sacrifice from women".

see, somebody will turn round and say, ah but I don't want that, I like going into the high street office. I keep having to say these are ideas, choices, not laws.

I'm not saying this is the way it *should* be. I'm saying we've got a set of expectations about the way it has to be, and most of us if we're female are too busy and too stressed even to think. We're so desperately trying to get through the week without a disaster. I'm trying to say there are other ways it *could* be.

"I don't know which way it should be. How can I know? For me, for somebody else? But I have had the chance to take the time to look at a lot of different ways in different places. All I'm trying to do is put some of them together and say: take it from there.

"What about parent power? Firstly, we've got to have the men aboard. If you could get that, parents are practically everybody.

"I even had to argue with the Labour Party Social Justice Commission why it was so imperative that parental leave should be parental leave, not maternal leave. Some people don't realise that if you put up too many provisions for women, provisions for mothers, then you may put employers off against employing them. Make it parental. You're not going to employ any potential parents, then who can you employ?"

"On the other hand, quite apart from getting the men involved, we are bloody unresponsive to each other at the moment as mothers.

"I was in an office in the States the day that two young female lawyers had, after months, got it accepted they would leave early to pick their kids up from school. There was the most frightful backbiting — "They're their kids, they're not our kids, why should we cover for them?" — and it was mostly from women.

"You know, they weren't actually suffering. Nobody was having to work terribly hard. They just had to cover somebody's telephone for an hour at the end of the day."

WL: "It's hard for parents of young children to be active unionists in any case."

PL: "I think the unions in this country have soft-pedalled much more than they should have, and I'm very shocked by even the left's approach. I don't think we can afford to leave them to the extent that we have. And we have. For many of the younger people that I know, joining a union just isn't something they're thinking about at all in their 20s."

In *Children first* Penelope Leach argues that individual care, by childminders or parents, is generally better for under-3s than nurseries, while

nurseries are better for over-3s. We suggested that she had been so critical of institutional day care for small infants, that she had failed to advocate some things which could improve it, rather as if she accepted that it can't be done.

PL: "That may well be true.

"What I'm asking for, or suggesting, is a similar commitment of resources and thinking to individual day care as there has been and is being for centre care. I'm not saying that all one-on-one care is good. It obviously isn't, but not all centre care is good either.

"What I'm saying is that the bias is towards centre care for reasons I go on about. Because excellent centre care is always going to be an expensive option, raising at least the risk that the best will not

be available to the poorest who need it most, I would like to see an equivalent dedication to alternative forms, and I include in that the whole package of things like parental leave, which has been much misunderstood.

"I'm not saying that every woman should stay at home for 18 months, but I'm saying that any woman who would prefer to should be able to. I'm saying that ought to be an option in a civilised society, but that doesn't mean I think all good mothers would. I don't think I would have.

"One thing I don't say strongly enough: the difference between having to leave the child every day from say 8 in the morning to say 6 at night, and leaving the child for half days, or 2-3 days a week — this is the point about the six-hour working day in Sweden, for instance, and most of the Scandinavian countries. Eight to 6, five days a week, is too long for a baby to be anywhere but at home."

Leach's book is first and foremost a proposal for social and political change. What is the significance of the changes she proposes?

Leach herself suggests:

"Policies that address the basic conflict between children's need for parents' presence and companionship, and parents' need to be elsewhere and with other people, for example, can transform the lifestyles not only of individual parents and children but also of whole communities and eventually societies." (p.244)

Stephanie Coontz, an American socialist, puts it similarly:

"There are serious dilemmas involved in reconciling individual liberty with interpersonal commitments. We must say clearly that the needs of adults for independence have to be balanced by the rights of children to dependence. Only then can the left construct a persuasive answer to the right wing on this question (of family values)."

A comparison with the women's movement is relevant. In the early 1970s we thought that the women's movement, or a sizeable chunk of it, was leading us to revolution. In fact it didn't. There have been enormous changes affecting women, but they have left some aspects of women's oppression virtually untouched. Often they have benefited only the better off. There has been no assault on the class society which underpins oppression.

It may be the same with Leach's proposals to improve the lives of children. They could become part of the socialist programme of a revived labour movement; or they could be partially accommodated by capitalism in the most well-off countries, for better-off workers.

If this is so, then we must include children's rights as a clear, unambiguous part of a socialist programme. We should campaign for the labour movement to champion the rights of children, and the right of parents "to do well by children". This in turn must include organising parents within trade unions and the Labour Party, and making it easier for parents, mothers in particular, to participate. ■



The Art of the Holocaust

Those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it

FIFTY YEARS AGO in the spring of 1945 the advancing Allied armies liberated the people interned in the Nazi concentration camps. The camps were overcrowded, filthy and vermin-infested hell-holes in which people from every European nation waited to die — from starvation, disease or by gassing.

They were political opponents of the Third Reich, members of resistance movements, religious dissenters, gypsies, Russian POWs, criminals, homosexuals and, of course, Jews, the largest "category" of Nazi victims.

The work of artists, poets and writers who were prisoners in these same camps provides us with the most poignant testimony to the pain and anguish which filled up the lives of camp inmates. But they also show how human solidarity can survive even under conditions deliberately designed to bludgeon the least trace of spirit or kindred feeling out of the toughest human being.

Many of these artists did not survive, but much of their art was smuggled out or hidden in the secret holes and corners of these camps and retrieved after the war.

The drawing we show above is entitled "The Transport". It is by Pierre Mania. Mania was a French artist interned in Buchenwald. He survived the war.

• *Art of the Holocaust* by Janet Blatter and Sybil Milton is published by Pan Books.

Cathy Nugent