

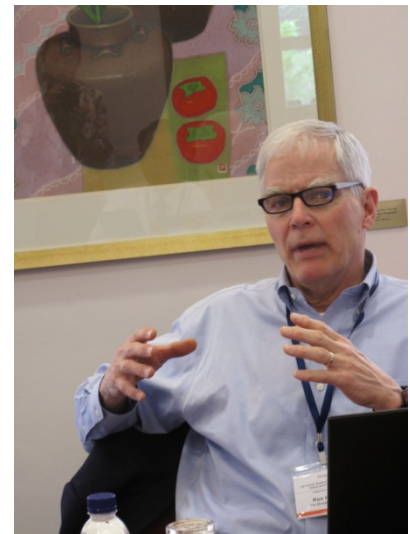
IPS Roundtable on

US Family Support Programmes: Current Status and Future Directions

Speaker: Dr Ron Haskins, Senior Fellow and Co-Director, Centre on Children and Families, Brookings Institution and Senior Consultant, Annie E Cassie Foundation, Baltimore, USA

12 May 2010

In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the landmark welfare reform legislation, the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act”, also known as the American Welfare Reform Law, and brought an end to a six-decade-old Federal guarantee of aid to poor families to raise their children. In his presentation of the same title, Dr Ron Haskins, a former White House policy advisor on welfare, addressed the rationale behind the reform as well as the impact of the work and marriage programmes made available through the reform. He noted that the reform was important for Republicans, and to some extent Democrats, who believed that policies emphasising the importance of work, marriage and the family, would serve to fight poverty in the United States (US). He highlighted research findings derived from simulation runs. These findings, he said, showed that altering work or marriage behaviour would have a significant impact on lowering poverty rates in America. These findings, said Dr Haskins, would further corroborate the family-centred beliefs undergirding the reform.



Under the 1996 reform law, the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) programme replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Instead of indefinite cash handouts, TANF provided cash benefits on a provisional basis and recipients could only be enrolled for up to five years. While on the programme, they also had to be employed or participate in a work preparation programme. Further, through the provision of block grant funding to states, TANF allowed each state greater say on the structure of their welfare system. According to Dr Haskins, TANF has been an effective tool in decreasing poverty rates among women and children in the US. Data from 1985 to 2005 showed that the majority of women who left the programme upon reaching the 5-year limit, were able to find work. The work participation rates among single and married mothers increased even as male work participation rates fell over the years. In 2005, 69 per cent of single mothers and 66 per cent of married mothers reported that they were working. Dr Haskins cautioned that the favourable employment numbers might be due in part to the good economy prior to the recession in 2008. This may have resulted in an increase in job opportunities. Nonetheless, he noted that the improvements observed for single mothers since 1995 should not be discounted. Favourable trends of decreases in poverty rates were observed for African American children and children in households headed by women.

With regard to the initiatives that promote stronger families, such as programmes focused on abstinence for teenagers and young adults, as well as federal funding for community pro-marriage initiatives, Dr Haskins noted that the results were mixed. He observed that for the abstinence programme, only unmarried women aged 15-19 reported fewer out-of-wedlock births. Among the 20-34 year olds, however, these numbers have continued to grow. Looking ahead, he felt that more needed to be done to discourage out-of-wedlock births and encourage marriages among the older ages through community-based programmes on abstinence education and birth control, marriage

education (including unwed parents), marriage tax credit reform, social marketing campaigns to champion the institution of marriage in the US as well as federal grant programme for communities to conduct pro-marriage programmes for example encouraging men’s involvement with housework.

The roundtable session concluded with a lively discussion between Dr Haskins and the invited participants. The issues discussed touched on the declining importance of the institution of marriage in the US, differences in stability of cohabitation in the US and Europe, as well as the importance of pre-school education. The participants also provided Dr Haskins with insights on the framework available to assist dysfunctional families in Singapore achieve self-reliance and foster resilience. This is the “many helping hands” approach that involves not only the government, but also incorporates the community and volunteer organisations in the effort.



* * * * *

Notes taken by Kang Soon Hock, IPS Research Fellow

