

Press Release from The Iona Institute

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New polls shows majority still believe marriage is better for society than cohabitation

A majority of people continue to believe that marriage is better for society and for children than cohabitation according to a new opinion poll commissioned by The Iona Institute and conducted by Red C. This is despite a massive 400% rise in the incidence of cohabitation since 1996. According to Census 2006 there are now 121,000 cohabiting couples in the country.

The poll also finds that over 90% of the public support a child's right to a mother and a father, where possible. Finally, it shows that almost three-quarters of people believe that parents should decide what is best for their children, except in cases of abuse or neglect.

The findings are significant with pressure growing to give the rights of married couples to cohabiting couples, to allow adoption by same-sex couples, and to hold a Constitutional referendum on children's rights.

The poll also shows that Fine Gael voters are generally the most supportive of marriage, followed by supporters of Fianna Fail, Labour, Sinn Fein and finally the Greens.

For example, whereas 53% of the public agree with the statement 'In general marriage is better for society than couples living together', this rises to 68% among the 233 Fine Gael supporters included in the poll. (The margin of error for the sub-sample of 233 is +/- 7%).

The findings of the poll are as follows:

1. In general it is better for children if their parents are married.

Agree: 61% Disagree: 18% No opinion: 21%

2. In general marriage is better for society than couples living together.

Agree: 53% Disagree: 23% No opinion: 24%

3. In general, a child has a right to a father and a mother where possible.

Agree: 92% Disagree: 2% No opinion: 6%

4. Except in cases of abuse or neglect, parents should decide what is best for their children rather than an outside organisation.

Agree: 72% Disagree: 15% No opinion: 6%

Commenting on the findings, David Quinn, Director of The Iona Institute, said: “In the coming years Irish society will have to decide a number of vital questions concerning the family. The first is whether we still believe marriage is of special benefit to society, and especially to children, and therefore whether it should continue to receive special support.

“The second, connected with this, is whether we still believe that there is a special value in children being raised by a mother and father. The family diversity viewpoint challenges this position.

“Finally we must decide whether or not we think the State should be given more power than it currently has to decide what is in a child’s best interests, or whether this should be left up to parents, other than in exceptional cases involving abuse or neglect. This is the issue at the heart of the debate about children’s rights.”

He continued: “Our poll shows that there is still extremely strong support for the notion that children have a right to a mother and father, where possible. There is also very strong support for the idea that parents should decide what is best for their children rather than an outside organisation, except where there is abuse or neglect.

“Finally, despite the huge rise in cohabitation a majority of the public continue to believe that marriage is better for society than cohabitation and a bigger majority believe it is best for children. This lends powerful support to the current practice of favouring marriage in the law.”

ENDS

Notes to editors

1. RED C interviewed a random sample of 1,009 adults aged 18+ years old by telephone between the 1st – 3rd December 2008. Interviews were conducted across the country and the results weighted to the profile of all adults aged 18+. The margin of error on the sample size of 1,009 is +/- 3.2%. Information in this report can be republished if sourced correctly and prior agreement from the Iona Institute and RED C is sought .

2. Data shows that marriage, on average, provides children with far more stability than cohabitation. According to the British Millennium Cohort Study, only 10pc of married couples will have broken up by the time their child is five, compared with 25pc of cohabiting couples.

Only 35pc of British children born into a cohabiting union will live with both parents throughout their childhood, compared with 70pc born to married couples.

In addition, the average length in Britain of a marriage that ends in divorce is 11.5 years compared with just two years for a live-in relationship. Irish data also shows that only 25 per cent of cohabiting couples are still cohabiting after seven years. The rest have either broken up or married.

3. The Iona Institute is a pro-religion and pro-marriage organisation.

www.ionainstitute.ie Phone: 01 6619 204 Email: info@ionainstitute.ie