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The Generational Stake

Why Different Fertility Patterns Produce Different Incentive Structures — and What That Predicts About Political Behaviour

Paper 3 of The Divergent Societies series

The Divergent Societies series examines three things happening at once across the late-modern Anglosphere. American politics has diverged from the rest of the West. Western societies have diverged from their own historical foundations. And Anglosphere political classes have converged with each other on a managed-decline trajectory while their countries diverge from their own past. The series asks how this happened, why conventional analysis missed it, and what the structural mechanism actually is.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief makes an observation that sits between demography and Madisonian institutional analysis. The inheritance calculation faced by a rational self-interested person is very different at zero children, one child, and five-plus children. The difference predicts different political and policy preferences reliably. The argument does not depend on virtue, vision, or character. It runs through the rational mathematics of having something at stake in the future.

The current senior figures in the United States executive branch — Donald Trump, JD Vance, Pete Hegseth, and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. — have, between four men, twenty-one children. The senior figures of the Anglosphere centre-left political class average around one child per leader. The difference is not a curiosity. It is a structural variable that predicts what each group does in office.

It is one structural variable behind the depth of the establishment's reflexive hostility to the high-fertility group with more precision than any cultural or aesthetic reading.

The mechanism is set out in detail in the companion update to *Thus Spake Ilos*¹. The application to current Anglosphere political dynamics is the subject of this brief.

1. The Empirical Observation

The four most prominent executive figures in the second Trump administration have, between them, twenty-one children. Trump has five across three marriages. Vance has three. Hegseth has seven (four biological, three step). Kennedy has six across two marriages. The mean is 5.25 children per man. That is more than triple the United States total fertility rate of approximately 1.6, and roughly four times the corresponding figure for the Anglosphere centre-left political cohort against which they are routinely compared.

The comparison cohort, briefly. Justin Trudeau has three children. Emmanuel Macron has none. Anthony Albanese has one. Mark Carney has four. Keir Starmer has two. Angela Merkel had none. Pedro Sánchez has two. Olaf Scholz has none. Across the senior centre-left European and Anglosphere political-class cohort, the mean sits between one and two children per leader. That is broadly consistent with the demographic average of the educated professional classes from which the cohort is drawn.

The Australian record over the post-war period is worth noting separately. It does not fit the European low-fertility pattern. But it does not give the comparison case some readers may expect either. Across the modern era of Australian federal leadership — Hawke (three), Keating (four), Howard (three), Rudd (three), Gillard (none), Abbott (three), Turnbull (two), Morrison (two), Albanese (one) — no Australian prime minister has ever led the country with a family exceptionally large for his or her generation. Three children was unremarkable for the generations of Hawke, Keating, Howard, and Abbott. In those generations, larger families were common in the broader population. But no political leader stood out from the political class on family size. So the Australian political class has never been operated by someone carrying the inheritance calculation in its concentrated form. The contrast with the current American executive group is not a contrast between two levels of high fertility. It is a contrast between an entire executive leadership group made up of people with exceptionally large families and a national political tradition that has never produced a single leader of that demographic profile. The current American group is genuinely unprecedented in Anglosphere executive government⁶.

Mike Pence is the instructive American illustration of the same broader pattern. As Vice President for the entirety of the first Trump administration, Pence sat directly inside the political project the Anglosphere establishment has since treated as illegitimate. He shared its policy positions and its consequential decisions. His three children placed him in the middle-stake fertility range. That was unremarkable for his generation and political register. It matched the family size of Howard, Abbott, Hawke, Keating, and senior Anglosphere conservative figures more generally across the post-war period. The establishment treated Pence as a conventional Republican of a recognisable

type, with conventional partisan opposition. Not the category-defying hostility directed at the current group. The reason for the difference was not how close Pence was to the Trump project. Pence was as close as anyone now in the administration. The reason was the kind of conservative Pence is. He is the Anglosphere conservative archetype the establishment has been calibrated to accommodate. The current group is not. No children produces the European centre-left managed-decline preference. Middle-stake fertility produces the Anglosphere conservative accommodation register — Pence, Howard, Cameron, Harper, May, Sunak, Morrison, Turnbull. Exceptionally-high-stake fertility produces the structural-restoration register the current American executive group represents. The establishment accepts the first two as recognisable categories of political opposition. It rejects the third as category-defying.

This is not a moral observation. It is an empirical observation. Both cohorts are operating rationally given the specific incentive structures their personal demographic situations produce. The point is that the incentive structures are different, and that the difference is structurally consequential.

2. A Note on Generalisation

Two clarifications are necessary before the analysis develops further. Each pre-empts a misreading the empirical observation can otherwise invite.

The argument is not sex-specific. The inheritance calculation works the same way for fathers and mothers. Mothers of large families face the same closing-off of the personal-accumulation strategy as fathers, and the same forcing onto the collective-improvement alternative. This brief uses the four American executive figures as illustration because that group is what the contemporary political-class hostility has been calibrated against. The argument applies across sex without modification.

Nor is the argument about biology. It is about structure and rational self-interest. The mechanism does not depend on biological reproduction specifically. A person who has adopted six children and raised them to adulthood faces the same inheritance calculation as a person who fathered them. The rational stake is in children raised, not children fathered. A person with five biological children whom they have abandoned and have no intention of supporting faces a calculation closer to the no-children case. The argument is about lived responsibility for the next generation, not about reproduction in the abstract.

Nor is the argument an empirical demonstration of the predictions it makes. It is a structural-incentive argument grounded in the rational economics of intergenerational stake: a self-interested actor with many descendants can protect them only by leaving them a flourishing social and economic environment, because personal accumulation alone cannot insure them. The empirical case at scale — large-N studies regressing political-class fertility against policy outputs across time and country — has not yet been built in the political-science literature. The predictions named below should be read as testable hypotheses for that work as much as descriptions of the current Anglosphere case.

A final clarification concerns outcomes. The inheritance calculation predicts the direction of a high-fertility actor's incentive — toward wanting a prosperous, well-governed, transmissible environment for many descendants. It does not predict that the want is realised. Realisation depends on whether functioning institutions exist to convert the incentive into results. High-fertility societies with weak or captured institutions — the Philippines, much of South and South-East Asia, and large parts of sub-Saharan Africa — are the demonstration: high fertility there produces the incentive but not the flourishing, because the institutional machinery and high trust society is missing. The inheritance calculation is one structural input, not a guarantee of civilisational success. The institutional half of the picture is developed elsewhere in this series⁷.

3. The Inheritance Calculation

Consider three rational self-interested actors at three fertility levels.

The first has no biological descendants. From a strictly Madisonian perspective, this person's self-interested calculation runs to the end of their personal lifespan and then terminates. They can hold values about the future as a matter of disposition. They frequently do. But the structural incentive to defer gratification against present consumption is muted. Whatever follows their life is, in the strict self-interest sense, somebody else's problem.

The second has one child. Their intergenerational stake is real but can be substantially insured by personal accumulation. Two working parents can leave the child sufficient capital to be insulated from a deteriorating environment across most foreseeable scenarios. The mathematics are favourable. Accumulated wealth divides by one. The smaller-pie problem of a declining civilisation is offset, at the level of the individual family, by the larger per-capita inheritance that follows from there being only one heir. Personal accumulation is a viable strategy. The rational actor will pursue it.

The third has five-plus children. The accumulated wealth divides by five, then by twenty as grandchildren enter the calculation, then by hundreds across the great-grandchildren and beyond. The mathematics turn unfavourable rapidly. Personal accumulation cannot insure a five-plus-child line against environmental deterioration, because the deterioration outpaces the per-heir inheritance available. The only strategy that scales is improvement in the underlying environment itself.

A self-interested high-fertility actor must want a healthy economy, working institutions, transmissible cultural inheritance, and a sustainable demographic structure — not as a matter of altruism but as the only viable path to leaving the line in a position better than one's own.

This is the inheritance calculation. It does not require the high-fertility actor to be more virtuous than the low-fertility one. It does not require them to love their children more, to have better

values, or to possess greater civilisational vision. It requires only that they correctly identify the strategy that scales for their actual demographic situation. That strategy is collective improvement, because no other strategy can succeed.

4. What This Predicts

The inheritance calculation produces specific predictions about the policy preferences of high-fertility and low-fertility political actors. The predictions are testable against the observed behaviour of the two cohorts.

Time horizons

High-fertility actors should weight long-horizon outcomes more heavily, because their personal strategies depend on delaying personal gratification for long horizon benefits. Low-fertility actors should weight short-horizon outcomes more heavily, because their personal strategies are insurable against long-horizon deterioration. The current Anglosphere policy environment exhibits exactly this differential. The high-fertility administration is prosecuting industrial reshoring, demographic policy, energy infrastructure, and cultural-inheritance restoration. These are policies whose payoffs are measured in decades but in most cases are being pursued by individuals carrying substantial personal and political costs in their prosecution. The low-fertility political class is prosecuting a high-consumption, fiscal expansion, and administrative-state expansion. These are policies whose costs are deferred and whose distributive effects favour the present cohort. Each cohort's preferences track its inheritance calculation precisely.

Risk tolerance

High-fertility actors should tolerate higher present cost for future improvement, because the accumulation strategy is closed off and the alternative requires bearing the cost of structural change. Low-fertility actors should be more cautious about disruptions to present conditions, because the personal-accumulation strategy depends on present conditions being maintained. This predicts the political class's preference for managed continuity over disruptive correction, even where disruption is necessary. It also predicts the high-fertility group's willingness to bear the present cost of policies the political class calls reckless — tariffs, regulatory reform, immigration enforcement, institutional reform — because the closed-off accumulation strategy makes the alternative worse.

Demographic policy

High-fertility actors should treat fertility decline as a major policy target, because their inheritance calculation depends on the demographic structure still working. Low-fertility actors should treat fertility decline as irrelevant or even as a positive thing, because their inheritance calculation can be insured against reduced future labour through personal accumulation. The pattern is observable. The current high-fertility group has placed family-formation policy at the centre of its agenda. The Anglosphere political class has progressively normalised replacement-

level migration as a substitute for the country's own reproduction. The two responses are not equivalent moral choices. They are the predictable outputs of two different inheritance calculations.

Civilisational inheritance

High-fertility actors should value the cultural inheritance they pass on more heavily, because their descendants' welfare depends on the inherited environment still working. Low-fertility actors should be more permissive about cultural change, because the personal-accumulation strategy is largely indifferent to which cultural forms survive. This predicts the documented divide on historical inheritance, civilisational pride, classical education, religious tradition, and family structure. The high-fertility group wants to preserve and restore. The low-fertility group is comfortable transforming. The divide is not principally about values. It is about whose strategy depends on the inheritance being preserved.²

5. The Establishment's Reflex

The inheritance calculation also explains the depth and reflexiveness of the political class's hostility to high-fertility political opponents. The establishment rests on a demographic precondition: a political class drawn predominantly from low-fertility groups, for whom personal accumulation is the rational strategy and the small-family equilibrium is not under challenge. That precondition is the demographic architecture — the population-level family-size patterns the rest of the apparatus sits on top of. A political opponent whose inheritance calculation forces them onto collective improvement does not just advocate different policies. They threaten the whole equilibrium that makes the political class's short-horizon thinking rational.

If the high-fertility approach were to become electorally dominant, the political class would face a Madisonian collapse. Their personal incentive structure would still be calibrated to the small-family strategy. The political environment would reward the large-family strategy. They would either have to retool against their own self-interest or be replaced by people whose self-interest already aligned with the new environment. The reflexive hostility to high-fertility political opponents is the rational response of actors defending the equilibrium that makes their personal strategy viable.

This is why the contempt directed at the current administration runs as deep as it does. And why it extends across multiple administration figures with very different presentations rather than attaching to a single personality. The companion brief³ documents the extension of the contempt to JD Vance, Pete Hegseth, and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. These figures look and sound nothing like Trump and nothing like each other. The establishment is not responding to presentation. It is responding to the demographic signal each of them carries. They are not cultural threats. They are structural ones.

The establishment is not defending taste. It is defending the demographic architecture that makes the small-family strategy work for the political class itself. The high-fertility administration is the first group with executive power whose inheritance calculation is structurally incompatible with that architecture. The contempt is the architecture defending itself.

6. The Madisonian Implication

Once the inheritance calculation is named as a Madisonian variable, several conclusions follow that conventional political analysis cannot easily reach.

First, fertility is itself a political variable in a deeper sense than is usually acknowledged. The fertility composition of a political class determines what inheritance calculations the people running the political system are operating under. A political class drawn predominantly from low-fertility groups will, on Madisonian grounds, optimise for managed decline regardless of what its members say their ideologies are.

Second, calling on the political class to be more virtuous is not the corrective. A political class whose personal inheritance calculation is satisfied by managed decline cannot be argued into long-horizon thinking. The argument is asking them to act against their actual self-interest. The Madisonian standard requires that good outcomes follow from self-interested behaviour, not from virtuous behaviour. The corrective has to change the structural incentive. Either by changing the demographic composition of the political class itself — which is a generational project — or by designing institutions whose rules produce long-horizon outcomes regardless of who runs them. Both are hard. Neither is achieved by moral exhortation.

Third, the apparent civilisational vitality of high-fertility political programmes is not a coincidence. It is the predictable output of an incentive structure that aligns rational self-interest with collective improvement. A civilisation that recovers high-fertility patterns at population scale will recover the political-class composition that produces long-horizon policy preferences as a matter of rational self-interest, not moral conversion. This is the structural reason why religious traditions that maintain high-fertility codes have, across millennia, produced the civilisational outcomes Lost Coherence⁴ and Thus Spake Ilos⁵ identify. The codes are not arbitrary moral commitments. They are Madisonian devices that align self-interest with civilisational welfare through the inheritance calculation.

Conclusion

The inheritance calculation is one of the cleanest available examples of a Madisonian structural variable in contemporary political analysis. It connects demographic fact to incentive structure to predictable policy preference. It does this without invoking virtue, sentiment, or vision. It explains

why the contempt directed at the current high-fertility executive group is reflexive and structural, not aesthetic and personal. It explains why a political-class average of one or two children per leader produces a managed-decline policy profile across the West that no amount of moral argument has been able to reverse. It explains why the religious traditions that survived as civilisational codes all built in high fertility as a norm. Not because high fertility is a moral good. Because it is the demographic input that makes the rest of the code rationally adaptive for the next generation.

The political response to a high-fertility executive group is the establishment defending the demographic architecture that makes its own personal strategy work. The cost of that defence is being paid by the publics whose political class is performing it. Until the variable is named, the policy debate will continue to be conducted in moral and aesthetic language that hides what is actually at stake. The inheritance calculation is one structural variable among several — the institutional infrastructure and the propagation channels described elsewhere in this series⁸ operate alongside it — but it is the variable conventional analysis most consistently misses. Naming the inheritance calculation is the first step in returning the debate to the ground where it can be argued honestly.

Notes

¹ On the structural mechanism of the inheritance calculation as a Madisonian device, see Prothean Institute, Thus Spake Ilos, Whitepaper, v3, May 2026, Section 4 (subsection on the family-obligation code as Madisonian mechanism).

² The Australian comparison is particularly instructive. The political class's position on Australian Indigenous heritage, on Anzac inheritance, on civilisational pride, and on classical Western education is not a matter of considered values. It tracks the inheritance calculation precisely. Whose great-grandchildren will inherit which Australia is the question. The answer differs by fertility profile.

³ Prothean Institute, The Idiot Reading: Why the Anglosphere Right Still Thinks There's an Idiot in the White House, Policy Brief, May 2026, particularly Section 3 on the test cases generalising beyond Trump.

⁴ Prothean Institute, Lost Coherence: Unified Social Energy, the Monument Problem, and the Structural Conditions of Civilisational Flourishing, Whitepaper, March 2026.

⁵ Prothean Institute, Thus Spake Ilos, Whitepaper, v3, May 2026.

⁶ The current low-fertility political class is a post-1960s phenomenon. Pre-1960s Anglosphere leaders typically operated in higher-fertility ranges — Churchill had five children, Franklin Roosevelt six, Eisenhower two, Attlee four, Menzies four — consistent with the broader population fertility patterns of their generation. The detachment of the political class's fertility profile from its underlying population's fertility profile is recent, structural, and concurrent with the broader civilisational shifts documented in Lost Coherence. The pattern this brief examines is therefore not eternal. It is the consequence of a generational transition that began with the post-1960s demographic and cultural shifts and has now produced a political class composed predominantly of people for whom the inheritance calculation does not bind.

⁷ On the institutional architecture as the second half of the Madisonian bargain — and on why demographic recovery and institutional restoration are each necessary but not sufficient alone — see Prothean Institute, The Forgotten Half of the Madisonian Bargain: Why Western Institutions Worked for Two Centuries, Why They Are Failing Now, and What the Conventional Analysis Has Missed, Policy Brief, May 2026.

⁸ On the propagation channels and the institutional infrastructure as the structural variables operating alongside the inheritance calculation, see Prothean Institute, The Convergence Mechanism: How Anglosphere Political Classes

Synchronise Without Coordinating, Why the Convergence Propagates One-Directionally, and What the Cases Where Propagation Was Blocked Tell Us, Policy Brief, May 2026, and The Forgotten Half of the Madisonian Bargain: Why Western Institutions Worked for Two Centuries, Why They Are Failing Now, and What the Conventional Analysis Has Missed, Policy Brief, May 2026.

About Prothean Institute

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- Equipping leaders with frameworks that connect emotional resonance to rational clarity and practical governance.

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