

## 5 | FULLY COMMITTED?

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*As family life changes, it will be increasingly hard for those on the left to maintain a commitment to social justice while being indifferent to the quality and structure of families. The left should not be ashamed to stress the value of committed relationships and two parent families, while balancing this with showing respect and support for those who are not in those arrangements. This is not an obstacle to achieving objectives such as greater income or gender equality; on the contrary it is a necessary part of achieving them.*

The past few decades have seen huge changes in our personal relationships and family lives. Gay marriage and civil partnerships have re-defined this institution for today's society. People are increasingly having children before getting married, or are not getting married at all; and fathers are playing a more active role in their children's lives than ever before.

But one thing that hasn't changed is the left's discomfort when it comes to expressing its 'family values'. In government, Labour introduced groundbreaking reforms on family friendly rights in the workplace, expanded maternity leave provision and established Sure Start centres around the country to invest in children's early years. Yet both in and out of power it has often remained silent or ambivalent on issues like relationship quality and

commitment, allowing the right to colonise this important political terrain.

This leaves the left less able to speak to the things that mean most to us in our lives: the love we share with others and the family relationships that sustain us. It is also problematic because evidence is increasingly showing the value of committed relationships and connectedness for all areas of our lives. The left has typically approached the family through the parent-child relationship, but evidence suggests it is the quality of the couple relationship which is the single most important factor in a child's upbringing.

The left needs to abandon its reluctance to addressing issues like relationship quality and commitment. Instead it should not be ashamed to stress the value of committed relationships and two parent families, while balancing this with showing respect and support for those who are not in those arrangements. This is not an obstacle to achieving social justice objectives such as greater income equality and gender equality; on the contrary it is a necessary part of achieving these.

## **Family and relationships at the last election**

Several commentators have pointed to the difficulty Labour had at the last election in reconciling its economic and social agendas. The egalitarian pursuit of equality and distributive justice can unintentionally reduce the role of families to little more than unwitting economic units. When combined with a liberal preference for freedom of choice in personal relationships, this can result in a lack of clarity on goals for family policy and equivocal rhetoric.

If we look back to the last general election campaign, Labour's manifesto contained strong commitments on areas of family policy such as childcare and paternity leave. However, the power of relationships and the family to be a force for good in people's lives rarely made it into key speeches.

Conservative manifesto commitments on family policy were more modest in comparison. But the party was successfully able to mix its rhetoric on economic security and fiscal rectitude with a faith in marriage and loving relationships. David Cameron has been unapologetic and unambiguous in his views on the importance of commitment and has defended the family as the institution “where true power lies”.

## **Evolving research and public attitudes**

If this can make for good political positioning, the concern for the quality of relationships (if not the reverence for marriage per se) is also in line with what the evidence suggests. Research points to the primacy of relationship quality for a range of social goods, including child development. Relate have found that children who grow up with parents who have good quality relationships and low parental conflict (whether they are together or not) enjoy better physical and mental health, better emotional wellbeing and achieve higher academic attainment. Children with an “intact, two-parent family with both biological parents” do better on a wide range of outcomes than those who grow up in a single parent family (although many, if not most, children who grow up in a single-parent family also do well).<sup>1</sup>

Beyond family life, well-functioning relationships are also important for mental health, protecting against depression and improving engagement at work. They also have a direct impact on mortality: research by Relate has shown that those with stronger social relationships are 50 per cent more likely to survive life-threatening conditions than those whose relationships are weaker.

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1 McLanahan S, Donahue E and Haskins R (2005) ‘Introducing the issue’, in ‘Marriage and well-being’, *The Future of Children* 15 (2). Washington DC: Brookings Institute

Valuing committed relationships is also in tune with public attitudes. The British Social Attitudes survey shows that, while younger generations are less likely to disagree with couples having children outside of marriage than older generations, they still overwhelmingly aspire to being in committed relationships and to having a family. And while cohabitation rates have increased considerably (almost doubling in the UK between 1996 and 2012), many young people still aspire to get married. For example, in the US around 70 per cent of 'millennials' say they want to get married, according to Pew social trends data.

### **Dodging the issue**

The left needs to be clear in its objectives and straightforward in its language if it is to build a political project around secure relationships and families. But a fear of moralising and unresolved tensions between competing policy objectives has often prevented this.

For example, it is not clear where the left stands on issues such as how (or even whether) to recognise certain forms of family arrangement in the tax and benefits system. The Conservative party has been clear about its opposition to the 'couple penalties' it claims are to be found in the tax and benefits system. It has addressed this issue by introducing the £600 million marriage tax allowance. It has also designed its new Universal Credit benefit system so that it will be claimed and owned by couples jointly, usually paid in full to one partner. It also rewards part-time work so that parents are not discouraged from staying at home when they have children.

If Labour were only committed to a policy of promoting family work life balance, it could be expected to support any policy that enables one parent to stay at home with their children – if they choose to do so. However, it holds this objective in tension with two others: poverty

reduction and gender equality. In order to reduce in-work poverty, work incentives need to be as strong as possible for so-called 'second earners' to encourage both parents into work. This, combined with a desire to support women (who tend on the whole to be the second earners) back into work after having children, means many on the left tend to favour a dual earner household model.

Because it is unwilling to openly acknowledge the trade-offs between these competing objectives, the voice of the left is muted in this debate. As a result, the UK is moving towards a default position of rewarding a 1.5 earner model of family working arrangement through Universal Credit, and the left has little to say about it.

Labour has been careful to pledge support for families, whatever their structure. A concern for the welfare of single parent families has rightly been a focus for Labour ever since the victimisation of lone parents in the 80s and 90's as part of the Conservatives' attack on the welfare system. However, this concern, and a reluctance to appear judgmental, have prevented it from being unambiguous in stating what the evidence suggests: that those children brought up in a home with two loving parents do better in life.

This reluctance can prevent Labour from being whole-hearted in focusing on what family breakdown means as a barrier to children succeeding. Labour significantly increased investment support for parents and families while in government, but despite an interest in strengthening relationships in the early years of the Blair government, couple relationships became less of a focus over time, with investment in relationship support declining after 2003.

It also exposes a contradiction at the heart of Labour's approach to parental leave. At the last election, Labour proposed a month of 'use it or lose it' parental leave for fathers. However, it has not been willing to move to a policy on parental leave that equally shares parental leave

between the mother and father, preferring instead for mothers to retain the entitlement to maternity provision, and to have the option to share this with their partner.

In other countries such as Denmark and Germany, parental leave is equally shared between both parents, an arrangement which has secured more up-take from fathers and clearly sets expectations of involvement from two committed parents from the very start of a child's life. If supporting two parent relationships was a clear goal for Labour policy, it could be expected to sign up to this alternative policy position. However, up to now it has not had an honest debate about why it prefers to retain the current arrangements, which evidence suggests are less likely to result in shared parenting and greater equality in relationships.

These are areas a future left agenda on the family might choose to focus on, but unless these tensions are exposed and the trade-offs negotiated, the Labour party will lack a coherent and intellectually confident basis for this.

## **What role for government?**

Many will ask what difference government can really make when it comes to our intimate personal relationships. The state does not have the best answers, and in any case people will naturally turn to their family and social networks for expertise and advice. However, government can for example improve access to support for parenting and relationship counselling when people are facing difficulties, and this has been shown to help improve the quality of family life.

Government can also help create the conditions that will improve equality within relationships – a vital factor for improving relationship quality – through, for example, investment in childcare or promoting flexible working. Of course, the most important conditions for strong

families and relationships are having a stable income, decent housing and good health – all of which government can influence.

Making a commitment to valuing two parent families might be interpreted as exclusive and hostile towards those not in this arrangement. However, a concern for the diversity of people’s lives and experiences does not have to come at the cost of speaking to the many. These can be two parents of the same sex; ‘blended families’ or ‘co-parents’ living apart. The same thing holds true: that the functioning of their relationship is of prime importance to their children.

### **A complicated history**

Part of the left’s difficulty in finding the right language to articulate its hopes and fears for the family lies in the many contrasting forces that have shaped it. The New Left of the 1960s was at the forefront of challenging the cultural norms of marriage and the nuclear family. Since then the left has prized personal freedom and choice over convention, and being pro-family on the left risks being seen as being against equality, gender equality or minority groups. Ambivalence can also be traced back to feminist movements which were highly influential on the left in the last century and challenged marriage as being a site of oppression for women, and family life as reproducing inequalities between men and women. Both movements left deep imprints on the modern left and its attitudes to the family.

Of more recent influences, Jon Cruddas has argued that Labour’s embrace of economic liberalism in the last few decades had a tendency to “drop people out of the equation”, relegating concerns for personal relationships and wellbeing altogether. Others have argued that for egalitarians, the family is a contested institution: a means for

improving chances in life on the one hand and for reproducing inequalities on the other. Blue Labour thinking that has emerged in recent years sought to restore Labour's lost tradition of 'fraternity' alongside 'liberty and equality'. In so doing, Maurice Glasman argued that Labour should have concern for the "the family as a unit – stable relationships, good parenting and care for the elderly".

These last insights struggled to take hold and it is unclear what influence they will have on the Labour party in the coming years. But there is nothing inherently socially conservative about being interested in supporting committed relationships and ensuring both parents can have a role in their child's early years. The Labour party may need to reconcile what Jon Cruddas called its "exiled traditions" with its present if it is to move towards a modern agenda for the family.

## **Conclusion**

As family life changes, it will be increasingly hard for those on the left to maintain a commitment to social justice while being indifferent to the quality and structure of families. For example, what does the left have to say to the growing number of cohabiting couples who may increasingly want new or different ways of expressing a public commitment other than marriage and securing the rights this confers? What about the risk of a plateauing in progress achieved over the last few decades on gender equality unless couple relationships change to enable greater sharing of work and care within households? And what of the family 'care gap' that is opening up from 2017 as the number of older people in need of care outstrips the number of adult children able to provide it, and the implications this will have for the most disadvantaged families?

The left is more likely to be able to respond to these challenges if it is explicit about its goals and open about

its values. In order to do so it needs to let go of its ambivalence towards talking about the family as a unit, and be unashamed in arguing for the merits of supportive, committed relationships.

## **EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE: FAMILY**

As Britain debates its future in Europe, many pro-Europeans argue that the EU has done a tremendous amount to reduce inequalities within families and also between them. One frequently cited example is the current EU legislation on maternity and parental leave. It is indeed crucial that binding legislation exists on the minimum requirements on maternity leave and protection of pregnant women at work. However, in the current context of changing forms of family life as well as the transformation of the character of work, this legislation is outdated and inadequate. It may be a reasonable pro-European argument, but it is definitely not an inspiring one.

The European Commission has promised a fresh approach. Its new 'roadmap' could have been the starting point, but instead continued with a very traditional approach towards families, failing to address the concerns of different family structures or offer them a supportive social policy.

Current surveys show that low-income families are more likely to vote 'leave' in the EU referendum; this should not be a surprise. The (far) right offers an alternative, exclusionary way of doing politics as a solution to the crises we face. Against this background, reclaiming more national sovereignty and return to the traditional, nuclear family are both symptoms of the dissatisfaction with neoliberal democracies.

The task for the left is to go beyond this narrow interpretation of family and equality policy. A more comprehensive approach would strive for a stable family life for everyone by including issues of financial, material and emotional care; quality, availability and affordability of care; and family health. Indeed, revaluing and investing in quality care is the cornerstone of a progressive alternative. As the quality of family life affects educational and professional performance, stable and caring family ties are as important for the left's pre-distribution agenda as economic reforms.

**Judit Tanczos**