FABIAN SOCIETY

DADS ARMY

HOW BETTER PATERNITY LEAVE COULD HELP ALL PARENTS

Edited by Alistair Strathern MP and Amanda Martin MP

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About the editors

Alistair Strathern (the Labour MP for Hitchin) and Amanda Martin (the Labour MP for Portsmouth North) are co-chairs of the Labour Men and Boys Group.

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INTRODUCTION

Alistair Strathern MP

It is a real pleasure to bring together such a fantastic range of voices to set out the case for why supporting fatherhood – and tackling our unfair paternity leave system – is a cause as progressive as any other our party has championed over its proud history.

We set up the Labour Group for Men and Boys last year in recognition of the fact that, as a party of the left, we were sometimes at risk of failing to see and speak to the challenges facing many men and boys in Britain today. Across education, work, and mental health, the data is clear that there are very real challenges facing men and boys in the UK – challenges that are as in need of focus and action as any other. Yet all too often, progressives have been squeamish or nervous about treating them as legitimate issues worthy of focus.

This has meant that a whole host of challenges faced by men in our communities have been overlooked. Just as damagingly, it has risked tacitly endorsing the central argument at the heart of more extreme and reductive takes on manhood: that men and women exist in a zero-sum world, where advances for women have necessarily come at men's expense. By failing to engage with these challenges, we have let in not just other parties but other political forces. The battleground has become dominated by toxic voices peddling an unhealthy, corrosive vision of masculinity which suggests men's misfortune must be addressed by pushing back on women's progress.

We owe men far better. Not a toxic fantasy of dominance and resentment, but something older and more durable: the idea that being a good man means caring for those around you, showing up when it's hard, and knowing that asking for help is not weakness but wisdom.

Our group wants Labour to offer a vision that values men, and gives them purpose and opportunity, while contributing to stronger communities. Rather than merely preventing the worst takes on masculinity, we should celebrate it and bring out the very best of it.

From delivering the UK's first ever Men's Health Strategy to announcing investment in the trusted adults and role models young men growing up in Britain deserve, Labour has already taken positive steps. But further and bolder action is needed. This pamphlet brings together voices from across Labour and the labour movement to make the case for action in one area

where change is long overdue: supporting men to be active and present fathers.

Men consistently tell us they want to be there to support their family. More in Common found that men consistently cite "keeping loved ones safe" and "providing for your family" as the values that are the most important to them. Our parental leave system, however, holds them back from doing so, and entrenches a regressively gendered division of care.

Statutory paternity leave is just two weeks in the UK, among the very worst in Europe. We have heard heartbreaking accounts of the emotional and financial strain this places on families: dads forced to choose between providing for their family financially or being there during those crucial early weeks; mothers left to battle for themselves after difficult births without their partner's support; families forced into a set (and gendered) division of caregiving because it is what our leave system allows and incentivises.

Acting on paternity leave is a powerful opportunity to put this right by allowing dads to take on the active, caring role that so many of them desperately want. The wider societal benefits are clear. From reducing the gender pay gap to supporting mothers to return to work where they wish to, evidence from Kings College London and Equimundo shows those countries who have led the way in expanding paternity leave have reaped a wide range of social and economic returns.

The Labour party and the wider labour movement have together driven forward so many of the improvements to workers' rights that have transformed the lives of families across Britain. It falls to this new generation of politicians and movement leaders to take the next step by providing dads and their families with a parental leave system fit for modern Britain.

Alistair Strathern is the Labour MP for Hitchin and co-chair of the Labour Group for Men and Boys

1. EXTRA TIME

Amanda Martin MP

As England fought for glory at the World Cup, fathers and MPs watched on in football shirts emblazoned with an important message: "EXTRA TIME FOR DADS".

Fathers want to be there. They want to hold their newborn child, experience those first milestones and support their partners. Yet too many fathers find themselves back at work almost immediately. Rent has to be paid. Food and energy costs money. There is rarely a savings pot able to absorb weeks away from work. New dads face a brutally simple choice: be there for your loved ones or go to work to keep your family afloat. Our paternity leave system was not designed for today's economy.

Since April this year, paternity leave has become a day-one right. That is welcome progress. Yet statutory paternity pay is so low that many working-class dads cannot afford to take it. Ninety per cent of paternity leave claimed in the UK goes to higher earners, and more leave is taken in London and the south-east than in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the north-west and the north-east combined. This is not good enough, not least for my own constituents. I am proud that my seat is in Portsmouth, a working-class city shaped by the dockyard, the navy and skilled trades. Despite our southern location, our industrial history and levels of deprivation mean we are often called "a northern city on the south coast".

If we are serious about reindustrialising Britain, we cannot repeat the mistakes of the past. We need to invest in the social fabric of the communities we want to reindustrialise, supporting strong families as the foundation for sustainable growth. Class and employment status are clearly of central importance. A senior professional working for a large company may receive several months of enhanced paternity leave on full pay. A self-employed electrician, plumber, builder or decorator faces a very different calculation: they remain excluded from statutory paternity leave and pay altogether. If they do not work, they do not get paid. This is particularly difficult to justify when self-employed mothers can receive maternity allowance.

I think about my own dad. He worked weekends, took private plumbing jobs and did whatever he could to keep our family going. As a result, he missed parts of our childhood – not because he wanted to, but because he believed providing for us was what a good father did. We have spoken about this choice over the years. We both recognise how hard it was for him,

but he also sees how much tougher the pressures can be for working class dads today. The cost of living, housing and insecure work mean there is even less room to step away from work when a child is born.

I am proud of what my dad did for our family. But I want to build a system that means my sons won't have to make the same cruel compromises.

This is not just about money, as important as family finances are; our paternity leave system is bad for men's health. Research by Movember found that 45 per cent of UK fathers experience symptoms of depression or anxiety during their baby's first year, while nearly one in 15 new dads report experiencing suicidal thoughts, and more than half of tradespeople say they felt physically unsafe at work after the birth of a child due to exhaustion. This is horrific. Most fathers surveyed say better paternity leave would be the single biggest thing the government could do to support their mental health.

Paternity leave is not simply a few days off to celebrate the arrival of a baby. It can determine whether a father has the chance to establish a relationship with his child, whether a mother has support during one of the most physically demanding periods of her life and whether a family can cope without putting unbearable pressure on one parent.

There is also a wider question about what we want working class men to believe their lives can be. We are rightly concerned about the growth of online masculinity influencers and the appeal they have among some young men. Too often, young men are offered a narrow definition of success based on wealth, status and dominance.

But there is another model of masculinity. It is the man who takes pride in his work, provides for his family and is present for his children. It is the dad who gets up in the night, changes the nappy, takes his kids to school and supports his partner. It is the man we see in every part of our society, coaching the sports teams, doing the school pickups and being there for the everyday moments that shape a child's life. It is the man I want my sons to be able to be.

Labour introduced statutory paternity leave under Tony Blair. The current Labour government has made it a day-one right. The next step should be to make that right meaningful for everyone, including working class fathers in insecure and self-employed work.

This means longer leave and properly paid leave. It means addressing the absence of support for self-employed fathers. It means recognising that a right that cannot realistically be afforded is not much of a right at all.

The prime minister is right to talk about bringing hope back. Hope is a tradesman knowing hard work can provide a decent life for his family; a mother knowing she will not be left alone after giving birth; a father knowing that being there for his newborn will not mean failing to pay the bills.

Two weeks is not enough, but some can't even get two weeks. Working class fathers deserve better.

Amanda Martin is the MP for Portsmouth North and co-chair of the Labour Group for Men and Boys

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In the 2026 Autumn Budget, following campaigning from Amanda and the Labour Group for Men and Boys, the chancellor pledged to extend paternity leave rights to self employed fathers, partners and adopters. This totals around 150,000 parents.

2. THE MOTHERHOOD PENALTY

Frances O'Grady

Closing the gender pay gap will remain a distant dream unless men take a more equal share of the care of their babies and children. A new right to better paid paternity leave is not a panacea, but it would help.

There are more women at work than ever before, and the gender pay gap has narrowed. Yet the TUC calculates that, at the current rate of change, it will still take another 30 years to close. The "motherhood penalty" now accounts for the lion's share of that gap. It opens up dramatically after a first baby is born, because the bulk of childcare still falls to mothers.

Poor statutory paternity provision helps entrench a traditional division between breadwinning and child-rearing that young families increasingly say they do not want. The consequences follow women throughout their working lives. Only just over half of women who work full-time before having a baby continue to do so after maternity leave; among those who reduce their hours, nearly half take a lower-skilled job. ONS analysis found that five years after a first child, mothers' monthly earnings were on average 42 per cent lower than a year before the birth.

Affordable childcare and family-friendly working patterns are essential. But the motherhood penalty will persist if improving working fathers' rights is left out of the equation. If we want women to have an equal chance to earn, progress and stay in the workforce, we need to make it possible for fathers and second parents to share care from the start.

More than 20 years after a Labour government introduced paid paternity leave, Britain's statutory offer remains pitiful: just two weeks, paid at a rate less than half the national minimum wage. Self-employed fathers get nothing. Labour's Employment Rights Act makes parental leave a day-one right, but rights that families cannot afford to use are rights on paper rather than in practice.

Blue-collar dads lose out most. Some suggest lower take-up among working-class men means they care less about being good dads. This is sheer

snobbery. Working-class men love their babies just as much as middle-class men. But when the costs of having a baby are high, savings are scarce and statutory pay is low, many have little choice but to keep working. It is the state that is pushing men — and therefore women — into traditional roles.

Union members are more likely to get a better deal through workplace agreements, but negotiators need a decent statutory floor to build on. Without it, access to time with a new baby depends too much on who you work for, how much you earn and whether your employer chooses to do the right thing.

That inequality also reinforces the motherhood penalty. From the household's point of view, if one parent has to take low-paid or unpaid leave, it makes sense for the lower earner to do so. Usually that is the woman. She then loses earnings, experience and progression, widening the gap further.

The economic case for reform is strong. Joseph Rowntree Foundation and CPP modelling suggests that extending statutory paternity leave to six weeks paid at 90 per cent of average earnings could generate a net economic gain of £2.68bn as more mothers return to work and increase their hours. Once higher tax receipts are taken into account, the net cost to the Treasury would be around £220m.

Many employers are already doing the right thing and would welcome a level playing field, though it is worth saying that firms that already top up statutory provision see concrete benefits in terms of retention, morale and productivity. Better-paid leave should not be framed as a burden on business. It can reduce talent waste and help employers keep skilled women in their workforce while making family-friendly employment something ordinary workers can rely on rather than a perk for the fortunate.

There is a political choice here, too. Right-wing populists thrive on telling working people that the interests of men and women are in conflict. They are not. Better paternity leave is a practical example of solidarity: good for dads who want time with their babies, good for mums who want a fair chance at work, and good for children who benefit from fathers being present from the beginning. Labour should be confident about this argument. We should back men who love their kids and want to play an active role in their care and upbringing. We should reject the idea that committed fatherhood is somehow at odds with masculinity or economic success. And we should make clear that equality for women depends not only on rights for mothers, but on giving fathers the rights and support to take on an equal share at home.

After 14 years of Conservative cuts and neglect, Labour's wider programme of investment in homes, the NHS, social care and good jobs will take time to transform living standards. Families also need reforms they can feel quickly in their daily lives. There is no greater sign of hope than giving babies a better start and parents a fairer deal. A new settlement on paid paternity leave would help close the gender pay gap, keep more women in the workforce and give fathers the chance to be the parents they want to be. The sooner, the better.

Frances O'Grady is the former general secretary of the TUC and a Labour peer

3. TAKING BACK FATHERHOOD

David Lammy MP

My dad moved to London as part of the Windrush generation in 1956. Having given up on becoming a vet, he plied his trade as a taxidermist out of a small workshop in north Tottenham. He was a true craftsman – an artist. But with five children, his life began to unravel when recession hit in the early 80s. His business lost its way, and so did he. When he began to drink more heavily, he turned to the US for a new beginning and the promise of a better future. I was 12 when I last saw him at King's Cross station.

From that day, standing before him on platform 5, fatherhood became a defining theme in my life. My mind raced with burning questions about why he left and how we would cope. At that tender age I could not comprehend how a father I loved so dearly would end up so coldly withdrawing from our lives. I could not comprehend the multitude of factors that had coalesced to trigger his departure.

After Labour entered opposition in 2010, I founded the all-party parliamentary group on fatherhood – a year before the London riots. In the preceding Blair and Brown years, I had seen how much Labour had to say about women's and children's rights, and they rightfully spearheaded huge reductions in teenage pregnancies, domestic violence and child poverty. But I felt that they had much less to say on issues facing men, and particularly fatherhood. When the London riots came to pass in 2011, I recall the palpable sense of fatherlessness gripping the streets of Tottenham. I remember visiting Wood Green crown court in the aftermath and seeing a young man standing in the dock with no family standing behind him, and no future ahead. To my mind, we had not put enough effort into studying the socioeconomic environment in which he grew up. He was shunned by the commentariat and failed by successive governments.

Indeed, for much of this century, we were stuck in ideological stasis. The left – predominantly offering an economic analysis – looked askance at discourse around men and fathers for fear of stigmatising single mothers. The right took an approach that was either acrimonious or misguided. Summed up by David Cameron's castigation of 'runaway dads', they

believed that hostility towards absent fathers alongside an obsession with marriage would resolve this multi-faceted, intergenerational question.

The failure of both sides to navigate questions of fatherhood and masculinity created a void, and fringe figures like Andrew Tate have dominated the space ever since. Their audience is a generation of young men alienated by an increasingly precarious economy and an antiquated conception of masculinity underpinned by traditional gender roles. Struggling within these narrow parameters, too many do not get the support they need. One of the worst manifestations of this is an excruciating suicide rate, with over 5,000 men taking their own lives in 2024.

When I first started talking about fatherhood I was told it was an odd thing to do. The general consensus among detractors on the liberal left was that it was symbolic of the patriarchy. Nobody had dared to make the case that issues such as fatherlessness, knife-crime, domestic violence and child poverty were all interwoven.

Until now. Although the last two decades have been a slow struggle for progress, it has been a joy to witness a new generation of MPs begin to grapple with this issue, bolstering the men and boys work I was proud to lead across government. Frustrated that the situation has become worse, not better, their energy is creating something powerful. We are seeing a more caring, inclusive and inquisitive approach. Rather than ostracise and alienate, we have begun to seek to understand. We must continue celebrating male role models that can inspire young men through their complexity, vulnerability and emotional intelligence, and show that these attributes are strengths, not weaknesses.

This momentum needs to translate into transformative policy changes, and one issue that has been at the forefront of my mind over the past 20 years is paternity leave. When I set up the APPG, I was acutely aware that countries around the world were far ahead of the UK – which was and is often cited as having one of the worst paternity leave offerings in the developed world. Other countries recognised the importance of bringing family policy in line with 21st-century sensibilities and worked to change systems skewed against fatherhood. They are now reaping the rewards.

Two weeks of paternity leave suggests there is no expectation for fathers to care. It entrenches outdated notions that fathers should be at work and women should be in the home. Harmful stereotypes – that boys shouldn't cry, that asking for help is weakness, that real men hide their feelings – are being baked in from the off as society sets ever more unachievable standards. The benefits of rectifying this are manifold: a stronger family unit, a reduction in maternity discrimination, positive expressions of masculinity, and lower childcare costs to name but a few.

After 14 years in the political wilderness, we are now on fertile ground. It was a privilege to be part of a cabinet that launched a review of the parental leave and pay system (due to be published in early 2027) and to lead preparation for the UK's first ever national summit on the challenges facing men and boys. But with no guarantees on the next general election, we need to move fast while Labour is in power. It was a Labour government that introduced child benefit, maternity leave and paternity leave, and it can only be a Labour government that makes the next step.

When I was 12, I could not comprehend why my dad left. What I now know is that we must do all we can to cultivate the father-child bond and turn it into something unbreakable. Paternity leave reform is a good place to start.

David Lammy is the MP for Tottenham and the founder of the all-party parliamentary group on fatherhood

4. RAISING BETTER ROLE MODELS

Natalie Fleet MP

I have spent my political life talking about violence against women and girls because I know what happens when girls are failed by adults and institutions. But I also know what a good man can do.

I became a mum at 15. When my daughter was three months old, I met my husband Ritchie. He chose to be her dad. He has been there ever since, and now I get to watch him be the same loving, hands-on grandad to her little girl.

This has shaped how I think about fatherhood. I am not interested in telling families what shape they should be. I am interested in whether the men in children's lives show up, care for them and make them feel safe. There is nothing weak about changing nappies, making tea, or listening properly – in communities like mine we have always believed that putting somebody else's needs before your own is exactly the measure of a man.

For me, this discussion belongs squarely inside Labour's mission to halve violence against women and girls (Vawg) in a decade. The new Vawg strategy is right to put more weight on prevention rather than dealing with violence after it happens. Part of this approach must be asking what we can do to stop boys growing into men who hurt women. That process starts at home, long before any explicit discussions about gender equality. Ten to Men, an Australian study which is the largest longitudinal survey of men and boys in the world, found that boys who reported the highest levels of affection from a father or father figure in childhood had a 48 per cent lower risk of going on to commit intimate partner violence. The quality of boys' relationships with fathers and father figures matters to women's safety.

You cannot build a relationship with your child, however, if public policy treats you as an optional extra from the moment the baby is born. In Britain, most fathers still get just two weeks of statutory leave, paid at no more than £194.32 a week. For many families, that is not a meaningful choice: Dad goes back to work because the bills still need paying and mum is left carrying most of the care. Families with money can soften this dilemma; families without it cannot. Our current system reinforces old gender roles most strongly for working-class families in constituencies like mine, especially as cost-of-living pressures push most households towards needing two earners.

Equimundo's work around the world has shown the value of "caring masculinities": connecting manhood with care, empathy and shared responsibility rather than authority, control and dominance. Its fatherhood programmes use men's identities as carers as a practical way into changing attitudes about gender and violence.

Girls take all of this in as well. Research on father-daughter relationships links warm, involved fathering with girls' wellbeing and shows how those relationships can influence girls' ideas about gender, relationships and their own possibilities. Fathers can help shape what girls come to expect from men and, in part, what they come to expect for themselves. I want girls to grow up seeing men do the caring as well as the earning. To see a dad cook the tea, change a nappy, say sorry, comfort somebody who is upset and treat their mum as an equal.

None of this means pretending every father is a positive influence. I know better than most that some are not. And some children simply will not have a dad in their lives. That is one reason Labour's ambition for half a million more young people to have access to a trusted adult outside their home by 2035 matters. The man who makes the difference might be a stepdad, grandad, uncle, youth worker, coach or mentor.

The parental leave review gives Labour a chance to begin at the start of family life. Six weeks of properly paid, non-transferable leave for fathers and second parents would give more men the chance to become carers in practice, not just in principle. Supporting active fatherhood is not a side issue for women's equality. If we are serious about equality for women, we should be serious about helping men become active fathers. That starts with giving them the time to do it.

Natalie Fleet is the MP for Bolsover

5. FATHERS OF THE FUTURE

Alan Johnson

I started fatherhood young: my third child was born when I was 20. Upstairs in our Slough council house – in 1971, home births were encouraged – the midwives eased my wife through a difficult birth. The umbilical cord had become wrapped round our son's neck. The problem was dealt with calmly and professionally, but as a result, it was after midnight by the time the nurses left.

In a few hours' time, I would have to leave as well. I was a postman, and in those days we started early. So I left my exhausted wife, newborn baby and two small daughters, who'd slept peacefully through the drama, to go to work. In those days there was no legal or statutory right to maternity leave, which was entirely at the discretion of individual employers. As for paternity leave, that was a strange Scandinavian concept, alien to we British men, who were encouraged to celebrate the baby with a round of drinks at the pub and leave everything else to the mother.

Today we have a broader understanding of what fatherhood involves. Being a good dad is about participating at every stage of a child's life. It is about changing nappies, getting up in the night, doing nursery runs and school pick-ups, reading bedtime stories and generally taking a share of child-rearing responsibilities. Family life has changed as well. These days, in most couples with children, both parents work. So it is not just that fathers want to play a bigger role at home; in most families, it's a necessity.

Yet while family life has moved on dramatically, and maternity leave has reflected this advance, our system of paternity leave has struggled to keep pace. A new father in Britain is entitled to just two weeks statutory paternity leave. Because statutory pay is so low, most working dads cannot afford to take what's on offer. We rightly encourage fathers to be fully involved in their children's lives, yet we maintain employment laws that make it difficult for them to do so at the most crucial period, when the experts tell us parental bonding is essential.

This is about work and fairness as well as fatherhood. Taking time away from work comes at a cost that few families can afford. My involvement in the trade union movement taught me that an employment right is of little

use if working people can't afford to exercise it. This is particularly true of paternity leave.

New analysis from The Dad Shift brings the problem into stark relief. Just 9.5 per cent of those receiving statutory paternity pay are in the bottom half of the earnings distribution. Around nine in 10 recipients have come from the upper half in every year of HMRC's figures since 2014.

A father with a generous employer or a large enough salary may be able to spend several weeks or months at home after the birth of his child. Someone on a more modest income won't have that choice. Being there at the beginning of a child's life shouldn't depend on the size of your salary or the generosity of your employer. In my old Hull constituency, improving statutory paternity entitlement in the way Dad Shift proposes would make around 990 working dads and non-birthing parents eligible for the proposed new entitlement each year.

I was proud to be part of a government that began changing the relationship between work and family life. Introducing paid paternity leave was an important step. But this progress was made a quarter of a century ago. What represented a major advance then shouldn't be the limit of our ambition now, particularly when society is grappling with the problems of a dangerously low birth rate.

The arrival of a baby is the biggest adjustment a family has to make. A mother may be recovering from childbirth while trying to feed and care for a newborn on very little sleep. Fathers deserve the opportunity of being there as well – of caring for their baby, supporting their partner, adjusting to family life together.

All the research emphasises the importance of those early weeks as the foundation for what comes afterwards. If we want mothers and fathers to share responsibility for bringing up their children, it makes no sense to begin parenthood with an employment system that makes it financially unfeasible for one of them to participate. That is why I support The Dad Shift's call for a generational improvement in statutory paternity entitlement.

When I was a 20-year-old postman, paid paternity leave was a Scandinavian pipe dream. Thirty years later, I was fortunate enough to be part of the Labour government that introduced it. Another generation has grown up since then. We ask far more of fathers now than we ever did when I first became one. And fathers now ask more of themselves. Two weeks of poorly paid leave belongs to the world we're leaving behind, not the one we're trying to create.

Alan Johnson held three cabinet roles from 2006-2010, including home secretary