

INTRODUCTION

Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak to you today, and for the chance to hear your reactions to what I've got to say.

It was Fathers Day on Sunday so this is a good time to be talking about family and parenting issues.

I'm particularly delighted that the NFPI is hosting an event which matters so much to me personally.

The NFPI does a fantastic job in representing the interests of parents in our country, putting their issues on the agenda, and above all approaching those issues in an open-minded, reasonable and practical way.

And can I also thank Vodafone for their support in making today's event possible.

GWB

A few weeks ago, I made a speech that started setting out a new political agenda for my Party.

It's based on an understanding that there's more to life than money...

...and that we should focus not just on GDP, but also on **GWB** – General Well-Being.

Improving our society's sense of well-being is, I believe, one of the central political challenges of our times.

Today I want to talk about what, for me, is the most important aspect of well-being: family life.

IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY LIFE

For all children and most adults, our family is the most important thing in our lives.

My personal belief in the importance of family is based on my own experience.

But it is also based on the answer to a very simple question.

Which institution in our society does more than any other to care for the elderly; to look after the disabled; to bring up children with the right values; to pick up the pieces when things go wrong with drugs, alcohol, or mental health?

It's the family.

As Ferdinand Mount pointed out in his book *The Subversive Family*, the family has survived every attempt to bend it, break it or shape it to different ends, whether religious, ideological or sociological.

And in a world of faster and faster change, with fewer and fewer fixed points, the family can be our rock in a stormy sea.

That's why I think of the family not as something that belongs to the past, but very much part of the future.

Of course it's ironic that all the functions of the family I've described do not count towards GDP when performed free within the family...

...but they are counted as soon as they are formalised and provided by a third party for money.

It's a perfect example of how measures of national income or national wealth don't tell the whole story.

If you're a child growing up in a family where something is going wrong, it will be of very little comfort to know that the UK's gross domestic product is growing...

...even if members of the family are sharing in that economic growth.

Family life isn't a direct component of GDP.

But it's a huge component of GWB - the general well-being of our nation.

FAMILY AND POLITICS

So I don't believe that politicians can be cold and amoral about family life.

We can't just take a vow of silence on the grounds that family life is beyond the reach of hard-edged economics and hard-edged administration.

But neither do I believe that politicians should be using the levers of power to force people into certain lifestyles or family forms.

We must not imagine that legislation, regulation, targets and bureaucracies will somehow be able to engineer happy families.

This is the paradox of politics: politicians should not dictate how people choose to live their lives – but we cannot be indifferent to the choices that people make.

Since I became Conservative leader I have constantly re-stated the two values which underlie everything I believe.

I believe in trusting people – that if you let people make their own decisions, they and society will grow stronger.

But I also believe that we're all in this together – that no man is an island, and that we owe more to our neighbours than simply to leave them alone.

In reconciling these values, I have tried to develop a new politics which avoids the choice between amoral indifference one way, and coercive social engineering the other.

The new politics says that there is a “we” as well as a “me” in life.

But that “we” is not the government.

It is society – which is not the same thing as the state.

In a word, the new politics works by persuasion, not by power.

So in the most important element – family life – of the most important social challenge of our day – general well-being...

...politicians need to be involved, without being coercive.

Enlarging the political culture to include discussion of the family is one thing.

The government stepping in with its battalions is quite another.

In this area of all areas, heavy-handed governmental interventions are likely to produce unintended and counter-productive consequences.

In my last speech I quoted the philosopher Edmund Burke, who said that politicians "ought to know...what belongs to laws, and what manners alone can regulate. To these, great politicians may give a leaning, but they cannot give a law."

So often when it comes to the family, we need to give a leaning, not a law.

To encourage debate; to celebrate families and parenthood, and to acknowledge how vital they are in building a healthy society.

Government action affects families in so many different ways, and so in government we must back families, asking at the point of every decision: "does this help families or hurt them?"

Today I want to set out the direction we'll be taking on the big challenges facing families in modern Britain, and to look at four of them in detail.

Helping families make ends meet.

Supporting families with childcare.

Early years care and parenting support.

And helping couples with their relationships.

FAMILY BREAKDOWN

But first, I want to say something about my Party's attitude to the family, and in particular to family breakdown.

In Britain today there are families of all shapes and sizes who achieve that most deeply satisfying task – raising their children well.

Some manage it in the most extraordinarily difficult circumstances – in our toughest areas, in the deepest poverty, and without a stable relationship between two parents.

We Conservatives have sometimes failed to show that we appreciate their personal achievements, often hard-won.

George Bernard Shaw dismissed such narrow-mindedness pithily, describing such morality as the “trade unionism of the married.”

At the same time we must look at the evidence of what works best for most children.

Everyone can agree that a stable family background is most likely to deliver the environment that children need.

And more and more of the evidence that's coming in shows that the institution of marriage has a good record in terms of delivering a stable family background.

This is not about preaching.

It's not about religion.

It's about the evidence of what works.

Our Social Justice Policy Group is investigating families and family breakdown in depth, and it recently produced a 'state of the nation' report drawing the evidence together.

Within five years of the birth of a child, 8% of married couples split up, compared to 52% of cohabitees and 25% of those who marry after birth.

Overall, the 1999 Hart report for the then Lord Chancellor's Department estimated the annual costs of family breakdown at £5 billion.

Other estimates have put the figure as much as five times higher.

But whatever the financial cost, there's no doubting the emotional and social cost of family breakdown.

Of course there are bad marriages that shouldn't survive – marriages full of bitterness and even abuse.

It's important that we're clear about that: again, this is not about preaching.

Of course it can be better for children to be brought up by one happy parent, or a happy parent and a happy step-parent, than two unhappy parents.

That said we must always remember that bringing up children is a social duty as well as a personal pleasure...

...that a child's long-term interests do not always coincide with a parent's short-term desires...

...and that a child's best interests should always come first.

In general it's clear that marriage works, so it shouldn't be too much to expect governments to support and sustain the married family.

Our Policy Group is listening and reflecting on how best we can do this.

MORE TO FAMILY LIFE THAN MARRIAGE

But let's not think that marriage is the be-all and end-all of family policy.

Families, whether they're married or not, face a huge range of pressures and challenges, and we need to address them all.

So just as we say that there's more to life than money...

...so we say too that there's more to family life than marriage.

MAKING ENDS MEET

One of the biggest challenges families face today is the task of simply making ends meet.

The rising costs of housing; rising expectations – even the cost of Christmas.

All these pressures and more are putting many families under real financial strain.

Now there's a simple truth when it comes to helping families make ends meet.

One of the most important things a government can do is keep mortgage rates and taxes as low as possible.

That means following the economic strategy we have outlined.

Putting economic stability before tax cuts, to keep interest rates down.

And sharing the proceeds of economic growth, to get taxes down.

If we achieve that, we will be able to afford a more family-friendly tax system.

Financial pressures on families are, of course, not just a British phenomenon.

And I believe that in the area of family policy, there's much that we can learn from international experience.

In Germany, Chancellor Merkel's party at the last election put forward ambitious plans to offer financial help to families.

These included a raised personal tax allowance of 8,000 Euros, and a transferable child tax allowance of the same amount.

Taken together with other allowances, this would have meant that a family with two children could earn up to 38,000 Euros – over £20,000 – tax free.

That's a truly Conservative approach – trusting families with more of their own money.

It contrasts with the approach we've seen from Labour these last nine years.

Gordon Brown, like me, wants to help families make ends meet.

His solution has been to target support.

Specific amounts of money given to specific groups of people for specific purposes – all worked out from his office in Whitehall.

This top-down way of helping families is certainly well-intentioned.

But it produces unintended consequences which can very often make life harder for families, not easier.

Tax credits are now a major source of financial distress.

Payments are made at the beginning of the year - and then often clawed back at the end, when the family has already spent the money, putting even more pressure on household budgets.

And there are the huge costs of running such a complex, bureaucratic system, taking money away from the families who really need it.

If we win the next General Election, we will work with the tax credits system we inherit.

Our first aim will be to make it simpler and fairer.

But in the longer term, we should think about how to apply our Conservative belief in trusting people to the challenge of easing the financial pressures on families.

One option would be to give transferable tax allowances to married couples - and couples in civil partnerships - with young children.

Transferable allowances would be expensive, and they would not benefit families on low incomes or out of work, where family poverty is most endemic.

So we will need to consider other policy options to help poorer families.

In particular, we will need to find ways to help lone parents.

Some years ago, David Willetts famously said that the Tory war on single parents is over.

We do believe that stable relationships are important.

And we do want to help girls avoid teenage pregnancy.

But we reject the view that promoting the long-term interests of children means disregarding the claims of today's lone parents and their children.

So for the Conservative Party today, it's not just a case of the war on lone parents being over.

The weapons have been put beyond use.

That's why, as well as all the things we want to do to promote stable relationships and to support married couples, we also need to think more about how society can help increase the well-being of lone parent families.

In the context of the review of the Child Support Agency, we recognise that getting help to lone parents is a key element of the battle against child poverty.

The current system isn't working and we will support practical proposals coming out of the Henshaw review to get the system working.

But any proposals will need to address the gross injustice suffered by the hundreds of thousands of families trapped on the old system, and will need to offer a short term answer – not another multi-million pound IT solution which will take years.

The overriding consideration should be getting the child support flowing to lone parents with care, helping them back into work and lifting their children out of poverty...

...even if that means accepting a little rough justice to have a system that works.

The problem with the CSA is that a focus on solutions which are notionally fair, but complex, has allowed the perfect to become the enemy of the good.

Now is the time for a pragmatic approach.

CHILDCARE

And we must be pragmatic too about childcare.

For many families with young children, childcare isn't just an issue – it's the biggest issue in their lives.

Politicians mouth platitudes about giving parents more choice... I know – I've done it myself.

But today's reality is that most mothers don't have a choice about whether to work or not.

They have to work in order to help pay the bills and maintain the lifestyle they want for their family.

Looking for, and paying for childcare is breathtakingly complex, and especially tough for lone parents, parents from disadvantaged groups, and parents with disabled children.

So I believe that government has a duty to make good childcare affordable.

Sadly, our childcare costs are now among the highest in Europe.

Gordon Brown's solution is the childcare tax credit.

Again, this is symptomatic of a top-down approach.

As the Treasury Select Committee has recently concluded, the credit is complicated for parents to claim.

It can't be spent on informal care like that provided by friends and relatives, and its eligibility is restricted.

Perhaps that's why less than a quarter of low income families claiming both the child tax credit and the working tax credit claim the childcare tax credit element too.

Our policy review is looking at ways of making the support provided by the childcare tax credit simpler and much more user-friendly.

Making sure that working parents get the money irrespective of the childcare they use is one simple way of improving the current system.

But in the longer term, a more Conservative approach is to trust people to make their own decisions about their family lives.

Our tax system has a direct impact on family life and well-being.

We must look at the fact that a working man can get tax relief on his mobile phone bill, but a working woman can't get tax relief for someone who looks after her child.

Tax relief on childcare for working parents would end this anomaly, and our policy review is investigating this option.

And alongside transferable tax allowances it would put real choice in the hands of parents.

A real choice about whether to work or stay at home.

And a real choice over the type of childcare they can use.

This may mean that more parents stay at home to look after their child – work that's vital to our society but which at present is unpaid and unrecognised.

So I think we need to look again at the definition of workforce participation rates.

It can't be right that when a parent goes out to work and employs someone to look after their child, there are two people at work...

...whereas, when that same parent stays home to do the job, the official figures show labour force participation of zero.

Such a move would contribute greatly to a change of culture to give families more flexible options.

There can never be just one solution to the care needs of a child.

That is why flexibility in provision is vital.

EARLY YEARS CARE AND PARENTING

This applies particularly in the early years.

The Government's flagship programme to help families with young children is Sure Start.

Last Friday, I was in Wythenshawe in Manchester, in one of the most deprived wards in the country.

I was listening to parents and residents as part of the research I've been doing into how we can give more support to families.

I was given a litany of state failure: gangs with guns but police too thinly spread to make much difference.

Youth clubs closed and nothing for young people to do.

And the usual complaints about the complexity of the tax credits system.

But it was when the conversation turned to the local Sure Start project that the air really turned blue.

One parent told me bluntly that "it's a complete and utter waste of three million quid."

To be frank, that surprised me.

I'm a big fan of the thinking behind Sure Start.

It's during the very early years that children from deprived backgrounds lose out most, and it's here that parents most need support.

But in Wythenshawe, money has been thrown at the problem and is now drying up.

The demands of local parents - for safe play areas, for example – have been completely ignored.

And by spending so much so quickly, particularly on staffing, Sure Start has taken valuable resources like carers and therapists out of other local services.

It's a pattern repeated all over the country, and it's the direct result of Labour's top-down approach.

In developing our policies on early years care, we will be guided by our core values: trusting people and sharing responsibility.

Rather than Labour's approach, which consults parents on Sure Start services and then promptly ignores their views, barging in with a pre-ordained model, we will trust parents to decide how money is spent on early years care in their area.

And rather than creating local take-it-or-leave-it monopolies, we will share responsibility with networks of local clubs, voluntary organisations and social enterprises.

So we will improve the Sure Start programme by putting parents in control and ensuring that funding goes first to all those local providers of early years care that are doing a great job.

Next year, for example, we celebrate the centenary of the Montessori Schools which have contributed so much to the education of young children.

We share their fear that the Government could penalise them with clumsy regulations when it is exactly such diversity of provision which we should encourage.

We also want to see the flourishing of other types of parenting support.

Being a parent is hard – particularly when there's no-one around, like a grandparent, to tell you how to do it.

Whether it's practical advice like how to make playtime stimulating or prepare healthy meals...

...or emotional advice like how to cope with tantrums or set boundaries with firm discipline...

...most parents could do with some help.

In recent years, there's been an explosion of information about bringing up children: TV programmes like *Wifeswap* and *Supernanny*, books and magazines, and online resources.

These can be more useful than formal options like parenting classes, to which there is often a stigma attached.

So we should encourage the growth of modern forms of parenting advice.

Britain's families need *Supernanny*, not the nanny state.

Technology creates new opportunities and challenges for parents too.

For example, mobile phones help parents keep in touch with their children, but they also give access to picture messaging, video, games, chat and the internet – all of which children understand well but can leave parents bewildered.

So it's great that the NFPI has worked with Vodafone to provide parents with advice and information to help their children use technology in a safe and responsible way.

I know that Vodafone has introduced measures to prevent children getting inappropriate material through 'content control', a bar preventing access to adult content.

It's a great example of the positive role that business can play in helping to make our society more family-friendly.

And technology has also created opportunities for new peer support services for parents, like mumsnet.com which I visited for an online chat with parents soon after the birth of my son a couple of months ago.

In a society where families are more dispersed, and the traditional advice from grandparents is less readily available...

...we must welcome and support all innovative efforts to give parents the information and encouragement they need.

That's what we mean by trusting people and sharing responsibility.

COUPLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

The final issue I'd like to address today is the challenge of helping couples with their relationships.

It is so important that both parents be involved with their child - even if sadly they have split up.

Yet all too often today a father may lose contact with his child if he and the mother split up.

That is why today, in the House of Commons, we will be voting for an amendment to the Children and Adoption Bill.

We believe that the law should assume there is joint involvement of both parents in the child's upbringing, even after they have split up.

Obviously there have to be exceptions where the continuing involvement of one parent would be harmful to the child.

But surely our starting position has to be that a child has a right of maximum access to his or her parents, unless there is clear evidence that doing so is damaging to the child?

When we think of family policy, we rightly focus much attention on the relationship between parent and child.

But the truth is that often the best way of improving the parent-child relationship is to improve the couple relationship.

This is not something that can be ‘delivered’ by the state.

But society has a strong interest in strengthening couples’ relationships.

By sharing responsibility with grass-roots experts in the voluntary and social enterprise sectors, government can support those making a real difference.

And by encouraging a public debate on couple relationships and their vital importance to successful parenting, we can help reduce any stigma that might be attached.

Organisations like the NFPI, Relate and One Plus One - and many thousands of smaller charities and social enterprises - have huge experience in this area that we can draw on.

And again, we can learn from what happens in other countries.

The Australian Government is setting up sixty-five new Family Relationship Centres in cities and towns across Australia.

These Centres will be the cornerstone of Australia’s new family law system.

They will be a source of information for families at all stages, including people starting relationships, those wanting to make their relationships stronger, those having relationship difficulties and those affected when families separate.

The Centres will also offer individual, group and joint sessions to help separating families make workable arrangements for their children without having to go to court.

Family Relationship Centres will be run by a range of organisations whose professionally qualified staff will deliver high quality, confidential and impartial services.

It looks like an excellent model, and one I’m asking our Social Justice Policy Group to study closely as part of its work on relationships.

Another important aspect of the couple relationship that our policy review will be investigating is the time around childbirth.

Some relationship experts describe the moment of childbirth as the ‘Magic Moment’ which can either play a key part in bonding a couple and increasing parental responsibility...

...or is a missed opportunity which leaves a couple drifting further apart and on a downward spiral.

Making sure that both parents are really engaged at the moment of birth is therefore important.

So I’m also keen that our policy review should learn lessons from successful projects around the world addressing this specific aspect of the couple relationship.

CONCLUSION: SAFETY AND SECURITY

Over the weeks, months and years ahead, I want us to broaden and deepen our understanding of how we can improve family life.

And I want to lead the debate on the issues that worry parents most.

Issues like childcare and relationship support that I’ve touched on today.

Issues like flexible working and work life balance that I spoke about a few weeks ago.

And other important issues like bullying, drugs, marketing to children and neighbourhood safety.

Our vision is of a society in which all children are brought up in safety and security, with the emotional stability that’s so vital for a good start in life.

And our argument is straightforward.

Family life is the most important part of the well-being of our society.

Raising children is therefore at least as important as anything else any parent ever does.

In the new politics, politicians can help this to be recognised by raising the status of parenthood...

...and we can do this without moralising or legislating for family life.

By trusting people and sharing responsibility we can also help by supporting families in ways that reinforce society while leaving them free to make their own lives.

I believe passionately that if we can develop a new and exciting agenda for family life, it will be the most important thing we can do for the future well-being of our country.

ENDS