

Social Justice Challenge

Media Briefing - Monday 24th April, 2006

CHILDREN HIT BY UK'S HIGH LEVELS OF FAMILY BREAK-UP

Presented by Dr Samantha Callan
Chairman of the Family Breakdown sub-group of the
Conservatives' Social Justice Challenge

Social Justice Challenge

Upon becoming leader, David Cameron commissioned Iain Duncan Smith to head up a wide-ranging Social Justice policy review group to bring about an intellectual renewal to the Conservative Party's thinking on issues of social justice.

Iain has himself commissioned five people to head up individual sub groups each looking at a different area of policy. The five areas are:- family breakdown, economic failure, addiction and indebtedness, economic failure and welfare dependency, and the renewal of the voluntary sector.

The Social Justice policy group will be holding monthly press conferences, and each group will, by turns, be presenting its findings.

This media briefing relates to the press conference held by the Family Breakdown sub-group on Monday 24th April, 2006.

Members of the Family Breakdown sub-group

Dr Samantha Callan, chairman of the sub-group, heads up the research team Letsdolife, a division of Care for the Family. She has extensive experience in a number of different industrial sectors. As a research consultant her work has been used in debates at the UN and she gave the keynote address at the Institute of World Concerns inaugural conference on "The Changing Face of Family". Samantha has a Doctorate from Loughborough University, and Master's degrees from King's College Cambridge and Nottingham University. She specialises in cultural issues affecting organisational effectiveness. She has hands-on experience of juggling the demands of a young family with job and research commitments.

Harry Benson, deputy chairman of the sub-group, is a founder of Bristol Community Family Trust, a group which offers marital advice and promotes marriage and family values. Mr Benson himself runs marriage workshops through the Trust. Before undertaking this work, Mr Benson was a stockbroker in the far east and fought in the Falklands war.

Melanie Gill is a child psychologist. She brings to the group experience of working with children and has worked in some of the most deprived parts of Brighton helping children in the school environment who come from broken families and homes.

Suzanne Coward is the mother of a child with Down's syndrome. She is very active in Birmingham in representing other families with disabled children and works both the Birmingham City Council and the local voluntary sector.

Professor Robert Rowthorn is a world-renowned economist based at the University of Cambridge. A key area of interest is the role of family breakdown in economic productivity, both for the individual and the country.

**Briefing Document from the Family Breakdown Sub-Group of the
Social Justice Policy Group for press conference of 24th April 2006**

Introduction

Britain is a world leader in terms of family breakdown. We have the highest level of divorce and lone parenting in Europe and the fourth highest level of births outside marriage in Europe, after Sweden, Denmark and France. Does this matter? Are we as a nation just growing out of the notion that it is good for adults to make binding commitments and for children to grow up with both biological parents? It matters if you look at the *effects* of family breakdown, especially the effects on children.

A key principle of social justice is that of equality of opportunity. Children's life chances should depend only on their own motivation and abilities but the reality is that family structure, whether mum and dad are married, cohabiting or not living together at all, tends to have a huge influence on outcomes for children.

This issue is being studied in depth by the Family Breakdown sub-group of the Social Justice Policy Group, at the request of David Cameron. We will deliver our final conclusions and policy recommendations next summer. But our initial finding is that family breakdown cannot be neglected as an issue because it leads to child poverty, poorer performance at school and is often at the root of a bigger package of disadvantage from which children struggle to emerge. Therefore public policy goals, such as the elimination of child poverty and improvement in educational standards, are being undermined by what has happened to the two-parent married family.

Divorce is commonplace in the UK but is not the key driver behind the soaring rates of children growing up without the nurturing advantages provided by the two-parent family. Professor Jane Lewis of the LSE says, "We saw the separation of sex and marriage in the 1960s, and the separation of children and marriage in the 1980s," in other words, the beginning of high levels of child-bearing within cohabiting or more temporary partnerships.

Nearly one in two children are now born to unmarried parents, compared with one in eight in 1980. Again, does this matter? It matters because nearly one in two unmarried parents will have split before their child's fifth birthday and three quarters of all family breakdown affecting children under five involves unmarried parents.

David Cameron has spoken of the need to support marriage. We suspect that unless a way is found to reverse the tide of family breakdown in the UK, it will be difficult to deliver real social justice – equal opportunity for every child – and to tackle wider social problems such as crime, juvenile delinquency, school failure and drug abuse.

Children living in divided families are more likely to underperform at school, to turn to crime, to live in poverty and to be at risk of abuse. In much the same way, married

couples do better than their unmarried counterparts in terms of income, physical and mental health, and personal happiness.

Family breakdown also runs in families. Women whose mothers were teenage mothers are about twice as likely to have a teenage birth as those born to older mothers. Many very young mothers have babies to create the kind of loving home they themselves failed to experience. Patterns of deprivation are thereby repeated.

This briefing paper maps out some key statistics of family breakdown with the aim of providing a 'state of the nation' summary of the extent of the problem. The Family Breakdown working group will provide a more rigorous report on this by the end of June, then turn its attention to the key causes and drivers of the problem before looking at solutions. The 'solutions' phase to this policy formulation exercise has not yet been started and the Commission for Social Justice has no intention of rushing to judgment. This paper does not therefore provide any programme for action.

This commentary is in no way intended to stigmatise lone parents who do a very difficult job, usually with far fewer resources than couple families. However, as Alison Garland, from the National Council for One Parent Families points out "lone parenthood is not a lifestyle choice," lone parents rarely choose their status, enjoy raising children on their own, or want their own children to become lone parents themselves. Whatever the route into lone parenthood, relationship breakdown between the parents is always, by definition, implicated and children usually suffer as a result.

Main messages:

Family breakdown is a large and growing problem in the UK today

The number of divorces in the UK peaked in 1993 at 180,000, then fell for a few years before rising again. By 2004 the figure stood at 167,116. Two-thirds of couples divorcing have children under 16.¹ However, the growing problem lies not in marital dissolution (divorce rates have stayed at a stable, though high level over the last 20 years), but in the breakdown of families headed by cohabiting couples. There is an unknown number of cohabiting couples separating every year but cohabiting parents separate at about 5 times the rate of married parents^[CHR2].²

One in three children nowadays will experience parental divorce or separation before the age of 16. 90% of children born in 1958 were still living with both natural parents at 16, but for children born in 1984-6 the proportion is down to 65%.³ 26% of all British children (around 2.3 million children) are currently living in lone parent households.⁴ This figure has risen from 21% in 1996; ten years earlier it was just 15%.

¹ ONS

² Seven Ages of Man and Woman, Economic and Social Research Council, June 2004

³ ibid

⁴ ONS

Nearly 1 in 6 babies is now born in a home with no father[CHR3].⁵ 9 out of 10 lone-parent households are headed by lone mothers.⁶ Yet research also shows the critical importance of the presence of a father in a child's life.⁷

Family breakdown is a problem because it negatively affects children and adults

An NSPCC report into child maltreatment questioned 2,869 18-24 yr olds about their childhood experiences.⁸ The research showed that children experiencing frequent changes in family structure were especially vulnerable to abuse. Those who had grown up in lone parent or broken families were between three to six times more likely to have suffered serious abuse. Children on the 'at-risk' register are eight times more likely to be living with a natural mother and 'father substitute' compared with the national distribution for similar social classes.⁹ A recent US study found that children living in households with unrelated adults were nearly 50 times as likely to die of inflicted injuries than children living with 2 biological parents.¹⁰

Family breakdown dramatically raises the risk of domestic violence – the single biggest predictor of domestic violence is being a separated woman. A key study found that 22% had experienced it in the preceding year.¹¹

It affects women disproportionately in economic terms. According to the Institute for Social and Economic Research, after a marital split women are on average 18% worse off, and men are on average 2% better off – men often prosper at work and have less financial commitment to the children. Lone mothers are twice as likely as two-parent families to live in poverty at any one time.

⁵ Kiernan K. & Smith K., "Unmarried parenthood: new insights from the Millennium Cohort Study" *Population Trends* Winter 2003 26-33

⁶ Families of England and Wales, Census 2001, Office for National Statistics

⁷ Amato P., 1998, "More than money? Men's contribution to their children's lives," in Booth A., and Crouter A. (eds) *Men in Families*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

⁸ NSPCC *Child Maltreatment in the Family* February 2002

⁹ See Creighton, S.J., *Child Abuse Trends in England and Wales 1988-90* NSPCC, 1992, and commentary by Quilgar, D., *Poverty: the Outcomes for Children (Child Abuse)* Economic & Social Research Council 2001

¹⁰ Schnitzer P.G. & Ewigman B.G. (2005) "Child Deaths Resulting From Inflicted Injuries: Household Risk Factors and Perpetrator Characteristics" *Pediatrics* Vol. 116 No. 5 November 2005, pp. e687-e693

¹¹ Mirrlees-Black, C. (1999), *Domestic violence: Findings from a new British crime survey self-completion questionnaire*. London: Home Office[0]

¹² Department for Work and Pensions, *Households Below Average Income 1994/95 - 2000/01*, London: The Stationery Office (2002), p81

Family breakdown is a problem because it negatively affects society

The 1999 Hart report for the then Lord Chancellor's Department estimated the costs of family breakdown at £5bn.¹³ Over 80% of this cost comprised social security payments. Another research study [CHR5] estimated the direct costs of family breakdown at £15bn by including additional dimensions such as lost productivity and related costs to the criminal justice system and the education system.¹⁴

Family breakdown increases the risk of crime. 70% of young offenders are from lone parent families. It is also true that parenting style and the experience of care contribute to this risk¹⁵ but children of separated families are twice as likely to have behavioural problems, perform less well in school, become sexually active at a younger age, suffer depression and turn to drugs, smoking and heavy drinking.¹⁶

One expert said that "The key risk factors for onset [of criminal activity] are present in childhood and adolescence: coming from a low income family, school failure, impulsiveness, criminal parents, delinquent peers, delinquent schools, bad neighbourhoods, erratic parental child-rearing, poor parental supervision and disrupted families."¹⁷

Family breakdown is a problem because it contributes substantially to child poverty

Family breakdown takes families into poverty. Research carried out by the DTI's Task Force on Overindebtedness found that a major cause of financial difficulties was relationship breakdown.¹⁸

One in two lone parent families are on income support compared to one in thirty couple parent families [CHR6].¹⁹ 69% of lone mothers are in the bottom 40% of household income versus 29% of couples with children [CHR8].²⁰ Lone parents have twice as much risk of experiencing persistent low income as couples with children – 50% versus 22%.²¹ Therefore children living in lone parent households are at far greater risk of being in poverty than children living in couple households, 48% compared with 20% on the After

¹³ Hart G., 1999 *The Funding of Marriage Support* Lord Chancellor's Department

¹⁴ Lindsay D., 2000 *The Cost of Family Breakdown* produced for the Lords and Commons Family and Child Protection Group

¹⁵ Youth Justice Board (2002) *Review 2001/2002: Building on Success*. London: The Stationery Office

¹⁶ Rodgers, B. and Prior, J., 1998 *Divorce and Separation: The Outcomes for Children*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

¹⁷ Farrington, D., 2003 "Developmental and life course criminology: Key theoretical and empirical issues - The 2002 Sutherland award address." *Criminology*, 41, 221-255

¹⁸ Consumer Affairs Directorate 2001 *Report by the Taskforce on Tackling Overindebtedness* (<http://www.dti.gov.uk/ccp/consultpdf/review.pdf>)

¹⁹ Lyon N., Barnes M., & Sweiry D. (2006) "Families with children in Britain: Findings from the 2004 Families and Children Study (FACS)", Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No 340 Corporate Document Services

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ DWP, *Households Below Average Income 1994/95 - 2000/01*, London: Stationery Office (2002), p141

Housing Costs measure and 31% compared with 16% on the Before Housing Costs measure.²² For understandable reasons lone parents are eight times as likely (45%) to live in a workless household as couples with children (5.4%),²³ and our level of lone parenthood greatly contributes to the fact that the UK has the highest rate of children living in workless households in Europe.²⁴

Family breakdown is a problem because it tends to be reproduced in the next generation

Teenage sexual activity is much more widespread among children of divorced, broken and single parent homes.²⁵ Ermisch and Pevalin found that women whose mother was a teenage mother herself are about twice as likely to have a teen birth as those born to older mothers.²⁶ Girls from divorced families are almost twice as likely as their contemporaries to become teenage lone mothers. Children who experience parental divorce are also much more likely to have their own marriages or cohabiting relationships break up.²⁷

Family breakdown is most prevalent in families where parents did not marry

Family breakdown is increasingly taking place in households in which partners have never married. Family breakdown is not rising due to divorce.²⁸ Although divorce figures remain high in this country they have leveled off (just one in seventy married couples (1.4%) get divorced each year²⁹) However breakdown in cohabitation remains high. Kiernan et al predicted that just as during the 1960s divorce eclipsed death as the primary cause of lone motherhood, by the end of the 1990s divorce was set to be eclipsed by the increase in childbearing by the never-married due to the erosion of “the traditional nexus between marriage and childbearing.”³⁰

One out of seven (16%) UK couples are unmarried³¹ and the average duration of cohabitation is two years. Less than one in ten unmarried couples (4-8%) are still content to be unmarried after ten years – most either split or marry.³²

²² IFS 2006

²³ Office for National Statistics, *Work and Worklessness among Households*, London: The Stationery Office Autumn 2001

²⁴ Palmer G., Carr J., & Kenway P., 2005 *Monitoring poverty and social exclusion* Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2005

²⁵ 'Does Your mother Know?' -- Family Matters Institute 2001

²⁶ Ermisch, J. & Pevalin, D., 2003, “Who has a child as a teenager?” ISER working paper 2003-30, Colchester: Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex

²⁷ Kiernan, K., 1997, *The Legacy of Parental Divorce*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation; McAllister, F., 1995, *Marital Breakdown and the Health of the Nation One plus One*

²⁸ Haskey, J., 2002, “One-parent families - and the dependent children living in them - in Great Britain” *Population Trends*, 109, 46-57

²⁹ Office of National Statistics, 2006, “Marriages and divorces during 2003, and adoptions in 2004, England and Wales”. *Population Trends*, 123, 77-82

³⁰ Kiernan K., Land M. & Lewis J., 1998 *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain* Oxford UP

³¹ Government Actuary Department, www.gad.gov.uk

Nearly one in two children (42%) are now born to unmarried parents, compared to one in eight children (12%) in 1980³³ and nearly one in two unmarried parents (43%) will have split before their child's fifth birthday, compared to one in twelve married parents (8%)³⁴ [CHR9] Three quarters (75%) of all family breakdown affecting children under five involves unmarried parents.³⁵

Kathleen Kiernan, Professor of Social Policy and Demography at York University, states that children of cohabiting parents are more likely to live in different *de facto* step-family arrangements because their parents were more likely to split up than married parents. "We know that the more transitions, or experiences like this, that children have, the more detrimental it is to their wellbeing," she said.³⁶

Even if we have high rates of family breakdown, recombined families or step-families are the most rapidly growing family type.³⁷ Surely this means that children can still benefit from having two parents, even if one is not biological? Although many stepfamilies do provide a loving and stable environment for the upbringing of children, such families tend to face extra stresses and strains³⁸ and are more likely to break up. Moreover, those living in stepfamilies are three times more likely to run away from home than children living with both their natural parents; children of lone parents are twice as likely to do so. 25% of all youngsters living in stepfamilies run away before they are 16, and many are younger than 11.³⁹

Marriage is still the majority choice and is less likely to lead to family breakdown

The 2001 UK census showed that 64% of families with dependent children are headed by a married couple, 12% by a cohabiting couple and 23% by a lone parent (almost half of which were never married). Six out of seven (84%) UK couples are married⁴⁰ and most marriages (55%) last a lifetime, including two thirds of first marriages.⁴¹

³² Ermisch, J. & Francesconi, M. 1998. *Cohabitation in Great Britain: not for long, but here to stay*. ISER, University of Essex

³³ ONS

³⁴ Kiernan, K., 1999 "Cohabitation in Western Europe" *Population Trends*, 96, 25-32

³⁵ Benson, H. 2005 "What interventions strengthen family relationships: A review of the evidence." Paper presented at 2nd National Conference on Relationships Education. London

³⁶ "Unmarried families are more likely to fall apart," (by Alexandra Frea) Times February 5th 2005

³⁷ According to the 2001 Census there are 631,000 stepfamilies with dependent children in England and Wales, of which 346,000 are married couple stepfamilies and 285,000 were cohabiting couple stepfamilies. Overall, in 2001 in England and Wales, 10% of all families with dependent children were stepfamilies.

³⁸ Ferri E. & Smith K., 1998 *Step-parenting in the 1990s* Family Policy Studies Centre/JRF

³⁹ *Home Run: Families and Young Runaways*, Children's Society October 2001; Smith J., Gilford S., O'Sullivan A., 1998 *The Family Background of Young Homeless People*, Family Policy Studies Centre/JRF also Quilgar, D., 2001 *Poverty: the Outcomes for Children*, ESRC

⁴⁰ Government Actuary Department www.gad.gov.uk

⁴¹ Estimates based on: Ermisch, J. (2001) *When forever is no more: Economic implications of changing family structure*, University of Essex: ISER working paper

Marriage is under-researched in the UK but one recent study reported that participants felt that being married was an important part of their life and identity, but also that society in general did not value marriage to the same extent as they did. Marriage was perceived as an act of great symbolic importance and a public statement of commitment.⁴²

Many studies show a link between being married and reduced risk of negative social outcomes for married parents and their children. Although selection effects of family structure⁴³ undoubtedly account for some of these differences⁴⁴ longitudinal studies show that being married provides a clear protective effect towards longevity, mental health & health for adults.⁴⁵

Married people live longer⁴⁶, are paid higher wages⁴⁷, and are happier.⁴⁸ In terms of aspirations, adults show overwhelmingly that they would choose marriage over cohabitation. When MORI asked 805 adults which lifestyle they would most prefer, only 4% chose being unmarried with a partner and children, while 68% chose being married and with children.⁴⁹ Marriage is good for your health. Married people are less likely to suffer from long-term illnesses⁵⁰ and far less likely to die in hospital as surgical patients.⁵¹ Across studies, mortality rates are 250% higher for unmarried men and 50% higher for unmarried women compared to those married.⁵² Marriage makes men more successful. The 10-40% wage premium married men receive compared to the unmarried is common to almost all developed countries. Children of married couples do better at school. In an Australian study matching married and cohabiting couples for age, education, socio-economic status, personal attributes and relationship length, children of

⁴² Sutton E., Cebulla A. & Middleton S., 2003, *Marriage in the 21st Century*, Centre for Research in Social Policy Report 482, Loughborough University

⁴³ In other words married people are simply happier, healthier and wealthier in the first place, they 'select into' the married state and 'skew' the outcomes for being married

⁴⁴ Waite, L., & Gallagher, M., 2000, *The case for marriage*. New York: Doubleday

⁴⁵ Wilson C. & Oswald A., 2005 "How does marriage affect physical and psychological health? A survey of the longitudinal evidence." Unpublished manuscript

⁴⁶ Married people, especially married men, have longer life expectancies than otherwise similar singles/divorcees (Ebrahim et al, 1995 "Marital status, change in marital status and mortality in middle-aged British men" in *American Journal of Epidemiology* 142, 1995, pp 834-842)

⁴⁷ A large body of research throughout the developed world finds that married men earn between 10 and 40% more than do single men with similar education and job histories. See for example, Gray and Vanderhart 2000 "The determination of wages: Does marriage matter?" in Waite L. et al (eds) 2000 *The Ties that Bind; Perspectives on Marriage and Cohabitation*, Aldine

⁴⁸ See for example Gove et al, 1983, "Does Marriage Have Positive Effects on the psychological Wellbeing of the Individual" in *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour* vol.24 p.122-131

⁴⁹ MORI Polls and Surveys, 1999, Family and Marriage Poll, MORI Corporate Communications

⁵⁰ Murphy, M., Glaser, K. & Grundy, E., 1997, "Marital status and long term illness in Great Britain." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 59, 156-64

⁵¹ Goodwin, J.S. et al., 1987 "The effect of marital status on stage, treatment and survival of cancer patients" *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 258, 3125-30

⁵² Ross, C., Mirowsky, J. & Goldstein, K., 1990, "The impact of the family on health; Decade in review." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52, 1059-78

married couples were significantly more likely to do well at school.⁵³ [CHR10]US research concurs that children of cohabiting parents do less well – reduced academic performance, more school problems – after controlling for social, economic and parental factors. Cohabiting parents tend to spend less time engaged with their children,⁵⁴ [CHR11]possibly because there is less time, because cohabiting partners do not specialise in the same way that married partners do.

Organisations which support marriage make the key distinction that it is *healthy* marriage that delivers benefits. As in all relationships, modern social values, new opportunities, choices and expectations, and the equalisation of career aspirations of men and women have led to less definite gender roles within the home which are often difficult to work out in practice. Marriage is not some kind of magic bullet for family stability as divorce rates show, but statistically it is more likely that children born into a married couple family will grow up with both biological parents and avoid the negative experience of disruption.

Concluding Comments

Without wishing to ignore the complexity of these issues, this briefing paper makes clear the connection between poverty and family breakdown and indicates that unless the scale of the latter is acknowledged, child poverty targets (which an incoming Conservative government would aspire to reach) are unattainable. Moreover, as Sir Graham Hart states in his report to the Lord Chancellor cited earlier “The human misery resulting from marital conflict and breakdown is immense. For example divorced men attempt suicide five times more often than married men, and women three times more often.”

American sociologist, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead describes what happens when divorce rates are high, but her comments apply where family breakdown of all types characterizes society. She says “in a culture of divorce children are the most 'unfree'. Divorce abrogates children's rights to be reasonably free from adults' cares and woes, to enjoy the association of both parents on a daily basis, to remain innocent of social services and therapy and to spend family time in ways that are not dictated by the courts...Divorce involves a radical redistribution of hardship from adults to children and therefore cannot be viewed as a morally neutral act.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Sarantakos, S., 1996, “Children in three contexts: family education and social development” *Children Australia*, 21

⁵⁴ McLanahan, S. & Sandefur, G., 1994, *Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

⁵⁵ Whitehead B.D., 1997, *The Divorce Culture* Random House