

Jon Cruddas MP: Speech on Childhood and Family Life, Manchester, May 13, 2013



Good morning everyone, and thank you Wythenshawe Forum for hosting the event today.

I should add a special thanks to Kayte and Graeme from IPPR who have organised everything with their usual great efficiency. They tell me Manchester City Council and Barnardo's have been a great help. And Paul. I appreciate your generous welcome.

We're here on the first of a series of visits around the country as part of the IPPRs *Condition of Britain* project. Over the next few months we'll be meeting people, listening to their hopes and fears for our country. IPPR will build up a picture of our society and Labour's Policy Review will be drawing on its findings to shape policy for 2015.

A One Nation politics for rebuilding Britain.

We begin with childhood, which feels right.

It's where we all start out from.

Family is the foundation stone of our lives.

It gives us love and provides us with our moral values.

Our hopes for our children are also our hopes for our country.

They touch a deeply rooted desire in us to make the best possible world for them.

I'm a politician, but I'm also a father and so I speak as both.

Being a father is a tough job.

We can probably all remember the first time we arrived home with a new baby and how daunting it felt. For me it was exactly 20 years ago this week.

Bringing up our children pushes us to our personal limits and then more.

They make us the fathers we are.

They connect us to our own childhood memories and give us a sense of belonging and home.

Children change us forever, and always I think for the better.

Families are under growing pressure today.

The failures of our economy has left us with a living standards crisis, but it has also put pressure on mothers and fathers. Too often that has meant women dropping out of the labour market, and men unable to spend time with their children.

Too many jobs are insecure and low paid.

In homes up and down the country everyone knows our economy doesn't work for working families.

I believe that government needs to lend mums and dads a helping hand.

We need to recognise the family as the most precious institution we have.

The Policy Review I am leading is looking at how we can support good family relationships:

- Prioritising family mental health and wellbeing;
- Valuing a father's family role as highly as his working role; helping men play a larger part in looking after the home and the upbringing of their children;
- Tackling the commercialisation of childhood and a market culture that only values children for what they own.

Children thrive in good relationships

Childhood is our personal foundation.

Children who are loved in stable relationships grow up with self-esteem and the readiness to grasp life's opportunities.

Childhood is also the foundation of society.

We do not live separate from one another.

We are dependent on other people throughout our lives.

Children need good family relationships to develop feelings of safety and belonging.

They grow up with confidence when they know they are worth being loved, and when they experience the esteem of others.

Childhood is also the time in life when we are most influenced by society.

A child's anxiety, depression, or bullying are problems that originate in the family and the society they grow up in.

Children who suffer poor parenting struggle in life.

They can be aggressive, lie, cheat, and take advantage of others.

We know that poor attachment or traumas in childhood such as cruelty and domestic violence effects long term mental health.

There is a high cost to pay for the failure to deal with problems early in a child's life.

Children who have these bad experiences can grow up struggling to cope with life's stresses and they can find it difficult to make good relationships.

When children aren't coping or when they are behaving badly, they are warning us something in society is wrong. We need to ask ourselves why mental illness and behavioural problems amongst children has risen so dramatically in the last decade. A minority of children are living truly dreadful lives and we are now seeing their number escalating.

But even children from well off families are facing growing pressures.

Over 30 per cent of young people under 25 suffer from one or more psychiatric conditions -

1 million children and young people are mentally ill.

This isn't the problem of an unfortunate few but of all of us.

An important contributory factor is the rapid changes of recent times:

- The loss of skilled work and the growth of low paid insecure jobs
- Increasing commercialisation
- The decline in deference to authority
- The decline of institutions that once gave us our sense of moral obligation to others and a sense of duty to our country.

These changes have disrupted family relationships and the social ties that bind communities together.

We are a society that has become more individualistic.

We are freer to lead our own lives, but our freedom comes at the expense of community which gives us a sense of belonging.

The rules and obligations of parenthood are no longer clear.

How-to-parent manuals, TV programmes and advice columns testify to our need for guidance and advice. It's difficult to know how to do the right thing.

And parents can lack the confidence to exercise authority, to say no and stick to it, or to establish appropriate boundaries.

Growing commercialisation has created a selfish, 'do what I want' mentality.
Money not morals has become the measure of too many things.

A culture of entitlement has encouraged people to take and to ignore the obligation to give back. The English riots in 2011 were partly a consequence of this culture: young people looting for the pleasure of taking what they wanted with no thought for the consequences to others. Parents worry about the affect of this culture on their children.

They express anxieties about a fashion industry that sells clothes to make children look older than their years; a sexualisation of society that subjects girls bodies, and boys also, to harshly critical scrutiny.

Parents fear the danger of cars, knives and strangers, which means that children no longer have the same freedom to play out as earlier generations.

Children can become isolated and cut off from friends and opportunities to play.

The growth of social media has provided new ways for children to relate together but many parents do not understand this new digital culture and they are wary of the risks.

Families are juggling 2, 3 or 4 jobs as living standards fall.

Mums and dads don't have enough time for each other.

Relationships can get put on hold.

Conflict can grow and relationships breakdown.

Labour market trends are set to continue to erode the security of working families.

Families need security: government needs to lend families a helping hand.

The failure of politics

I believe that there has been a profound failure of politics to support family relationships and children are paying the price.

In Government Labour did many good things.

We reduced child poverty.

We took action to improve the lives of children.

But too much of what we did relied on top down income transfers.

In the end we focused on the 5 per cent worst off children but did we in part help in stigmatising them? Our language became cold and remote; our politics bossy, technocratic and appeared as interfering.

Many people ended up not liking us.

David Cameron started off well when he became Leader of the Conservative Party.

The Conservative government would, 'make Britain the most family friendly country' he told us.

But his promise has come to nothing.

The Coalition government is failing children.

Poverty, inequality and exclusion are growing.

The Big Society has failed and the Conservatives have abandoned compassion and retreated into their default politics.

To many they are returning as the nasty party.

Where the economy is a global race and families must fight alone to survive in the market.

Children are on their own and they must sink or swim in the harsh competition for school places and exam results.

The Conservatives have dominated debate about the family with their stereotype of a feckless underclass of absent fathers.

They've concentrated on demonising a small minority and ignored the majority.

Many fathers have two basic priorities; their family, and work to improve the lives of their children.

And many feel that the Conservatives have failed them on both counts.

No support for fathers, and no jobs.

Our politics has failed to build a society in which families thrive and all our children flourish. If we're going to rebuild trust in politics then politicians need to talk about what matters in people's lives; family life, a home, decent work.

We need an economy that pays people a proper wage they can live on.

We need to value marriage and the virtues of reciprocity, fidelity and honesty.

Yet there can be no return to simple big state solutions.

Tax credits are important, but on their own will not in themselves solve the problems we face.

We need a new kind of statecraft when there is no money.

An approach to supporting families rooted in how people live their lives not how Whitehall thinks they should.

1. We need government and parents working together to support families.

We will support families with childcare.

Parents know we are in the midst of a childcare crisis.

But the Government's has sent out a clear message: 'we've got nothing to offer you'.

Its voucher scheme doesn't start until after the next election.

A plan to increase the ratios of children to carers may or may not be government policy.

The plan is wrong.

We won't build a better society by creating warehouses of regimented, unhappy children.

We need children's centres across the country as part of our common life.

It's not just about the centres we can afford but about the relationships they help build.

We want to include mothers and fathers in running the centres, for example, through the equivalent of school governing bodies.

We will look at what more can be done to encourage parents coops and mutual approaches to childcare.

Children's centres often do not see engaging with dads as part of their role.

It is, and it must be.

We will explore whether inspection frameworks should be explicit about father engagement.

We will support families during the birth of their children.

Men report that maternity services leave them feeling less informed than their partners and less competent to care for their baby.

We need to encourage change in maternity services to engage the whole family and include fathers.

We should learn from hospitals like the Royal United in Bath, which is working towards allowing dads who want to, to stay overnight during and after the birth.

We will support families with parental leave.

Families need a good start – the first twelve months of a baby’s life are the most important in shaping their future life chances.

That is why we will defend the parental leave introduced under the last Labour government – and where possible, look to extend it.

We will support families by treating mental illness.

Post natal depression cruelly affects 20 per cent of all mothers.

It is a factor in childhood and later life depression and can have a devastating impact on the whole family.

Yet most women do not receive any treatment.

Richard Layard has proposed a *Charter for Parents and Children*. It rightly focuses on the need to widen women’s access to professional psychological therapy.

The era of thinking that we have done our job caring for mothers once they are through the physical experience of childbirth is long gone.

We need to look at Richard’s ideas, and those of others, to see how we reform our healthcare systems for the 21st Century.

We will support families by improving our schools.

Schools need to help children develop good character, teaching them an ethical vocabulary.

We can learn from the values based education of Neil Hawkes to develop positive values, such as respect, honesty, compassion, trust and integrity.

Helping children take responsibility for their own actions improves their self-esteem and helps them to assess their own behaviour.

Standards go up with self-confident children.

Children learn best and develop their cognitive skills most effectively when they have emotional wellbeing.

I'd like to see more schools adopt the practice of mindfulness which helps children to become attentive to their feelings and to manage stress.

Curiosity and responding to high expectations requires a positive frame of mind.

2. We need to value father's family role as highly as his working role.

More and more men want to be involved fathers.

Fathers should be able to share involvement in their child’s school life and healthcare.

They should have rights enshrined in employment law; for example, we will look at paid leave to attend antenatal sessions and hospital appointments during pregnancy.

But public services operate on the outdated assumption that engaging with fathers is not important. And some men’s violence against women creates an anxiety that all fathers are a risk to be managed.

We must not let policy be dictated by a small minority of men.

As David Lammy argues we should have high expectations of all fathers and a zero tolerance approach to the small number of irresponsible fathers.

Their behaviour is stopping progress for the majority.

We need a ‘whole family’ approach which assumes, where it is safe, that a child needs a relationship with both parents.

Being a good father is about more than earning a living for the family.
Men want fulfilling home lives and women want fulfilling working lives but policy still pushes mothers into the home and fathers into work.
The majority of men feel fathers are undervalued.
They work the longest hours in Europe and yet 82 per cent say they want to spend more time with their children.
Fathers are good for children and shared parenting is good for mothers.

25 per cent of all families with dependent children are lone parent households and over 90 per cent of them are headed by mothers.
By the time British children are 16 around half no longer live with their father.
A third do not see him at all.

Children need their fathers even if he doesn't live with them.
Those who grow up with involved fathers do better than those who do not.
Boys without fathers are more likely than their peers to be involved in crime, heavy drinking and drug use.
Boys and girls are more likely to have low educational attainment and suffer low self-esteem.
In government we will work to reduce the numbers of children who have no meaningful contact with their father.
Responsible fatherhood is about making a commitment and we are looking at how we can strengthen these commitments.

3. We will tackle the commercialisation of childhood and a market culture that only values children for what they own.

We will work with parents to limit the commercial pressures on children.
This government set up the Bailey Review into the commercial and sexual pressures on children. It recommended a series of measures to help protect children from the market and the media. The problem is the government is doing nothing.
Edward Timpson, speaking for the government on the recommendations said; 'I have no desire to rock this particular boat.'

I take that to mean its business as usual.
But parents do not want advertisers targeting children, or pop videos depicting degrading images of women.
And they don't want their children accessing pornography on the internet.

The commercialisation of childhood creates a status seeking consumer culture in which children judge one another by what they own.
For children without money it is a humiliating experience of inferiority.
The stores that were targeted in the riots were the stores selling the status brands.
They are a warning of what will happen if we fail to re-establish a culture of respect and mutual give and take.

We will look at how we can help to empower parents to decide what content their children see online and we will learn lessons from other countries, such as Sweden, which has banned advertising to children under 12.

Conclusion.

We cannot afford a sink or swim, winner takes all approach to the family.
Where the majority who are not victorious must cope as best they can.
It is not the future we want for our children.

One Nation Labour will build the institutions and markets we need to pay our way in the world.
We will provide good quality childcare to enable mothers and fathers to work and give their children the best chance in life.
At the heart of One Nation is family and the relationships which give love and protection to our children who are the future of our country.

The ambition of One Nation Labour is to create a modern society, in which all children have time to be with their parents, and have the opportunities to play and learn, the readiness to achieve, the character to strive and persevere and the emotional skills to make good relationships.

It is what each of us wants for our own children.
A better country.
A future we can all believe in.
Thank you.