

Policy Watch

Mothers' UNION
Christian care for families



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

Produced by the Faith & Policy Unit of Mothers' Union and Sue Burridge from the Mission and Public Affairs Division at the Church of England

Welcome to online monthly Policy Watch, available on Mothers' Union website at the beginning of each month at <http://www.themothersunion.org/policy.aspx>

Tracking issues in Social Policy

August 2009

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A report commissioned by Iain Duncan Smith MP has proposed a raft of measures including some to encourage marriage and strengthen family life. "Every Family Matters" was published by the Centre for Social Justice in July after months of research into the family law system in the UK.

The review advocates for a compulsory three-month "cooling off" period for couples before they can start divorce proceedings; a network of family relationship centres to advise before and during marriage; tax breaks to encourage couples to marry and the reversal of Labour's plans to give unmarried cohabitants the same rights as married couples.

Mr Duncan Smith said research suggested young people had "incredibly high expectations" of marriage. He added that the idea of compromise by couples "seems to have disappeared".

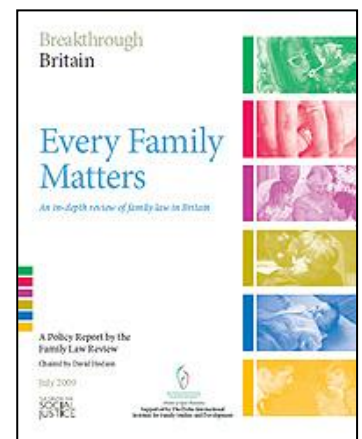
Critics of the plans include Nick Clegg MP, leader of the Liberal Democrats. Speaking at an event in July, Mr Clegg criticised the Conservatives' focus on treating marriage as a financial transaction and legal road blocks to divorce as patronising: people don't make decisions about relationships based on an extra £20 a week they might gain if they stay married.

To read the review in full visit <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/>

We'd love to hear your views on the review's proposals:

- Do you think they would help promote and support married life?
- Would they help strengthen family life?
- Are they feasible?

Email your views to rachel.aston@themothersunion.org or phone 0207 222 5533.



UK Parental Leave Debate

Speaking at the Relate Institute's annual lecture, Rt. Hon Nick Clegg MP, leader of the Liberal Democrats said that "strong relationships are the building blocks of society" and that Government needs to rediscover "the power of human relationships". He was keen however, not to romanticise back to a perfect era but to recognise that "the face of a standard relationship has changed beyond recognition". He went on to discuss the role of the State which he believes is to relieve pressure on people by reducing stress, not to prescribe



what makes a good or strong relationship. Wishing to provoke further debate over the area of paternity leave, Nick Clegg put forward the Liberal Democrat Party's position which would be to give parents 18 months leave to share between them with 6 months "use it or lose it" leave.

In a similar vein, Reform (a Westminster-based think tank) produced a report called "*Productive Parents*" with Maria Miller MP, Shadow Conservative Minister for the Family speaking at the launch. The report pinpoints three major failings for the current maternity and paternity leave system which their proposals would seek to rectify: a bias towards higher income earning mothers; an encouragement for fathers to stay at work after the birth of a child; and mothers having to make either/or decisions about the nature of their maternity leave. Key recommendations are:

- Turning maternity pay into a flat rate "parental payment" of £5,000, payable monthly and shared between the mother and the father. This equates to £192 per week, compared with the current basic statutory maternity pay of £123 per week.
- Providing six months of unpaid leave to each of the mother and the father, during the first year of a child's life, to be taken at the same time, or one parent after the other.

The current system allocates 52 weeks maternity leave to all UK female employees, 39 weeks of which is paid, with the first six weeks paid at 90% of full pay and the remainder at a standard rate of £123.06, or 90 % of average gross weekly earnings. A spouse or partner of the woman (including same-sex partners) may request a two week paid (at a fixed rate) paternity leave. Both the mother and her partner can additionally request non-paid parental leave, which can be for up to four weeks annually, with a current limit of 13 weeks. Keep a **Policy Watch** for an EU consultation on parental leave in the autumn.

Child Poverty Bill

Calling all members in Copeland Constituency (Cumbria)!

During the second reading of the Child Poverty Bill in the House of Commons (20th July) Jamie Reed, MP for Copeland, said that he would be taking steps to tackle child poverty within his constituency.

'This summer, I will hold a child poverty conference in my constituency. That will bring together local Sure Start centres, voluntary providers of child services, local government, social services, GPs, schools, businesses and Churches. The aim of that group will be to identify the child poverty in my constituency, its scope, location and nature, and then to develop a plan to beat it. Fundamentally, the aim is to defeat child poverty in my constituency well before 2020.'



If you live in Jamie's constituency, please do consider contacting him about this conference. You can write to Jamie at Phoenix Enterprise Centre, Jacktrees Road, Cleator Moor, Cumbria CA25 5BD or phone 01946 816723. Please do also let the Faith & Policy Unit know if you take part!

News from the Nations

Wales – consultation on violence against women

The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) has launched a consultation on a new action plan to address violence against women, and to update the Welsh Assembly Government's Domestic Abuse Strategy. The WAG believes that more needs to be done to reduce domestic violence, rape and sexual assault, forced marriage, 'honour'-based violence and sex-trafficking. To read the consultation, please go to <http://cymru.gov.uk/consultations/housingcommunity/vaw/?lang=en>

The consultation ends on 21st September. Some Welsh dioceses may be responding to the consultation – please contact your Diocesan Social Policy Contact if you are interested in taking part.

Manx branch petition to the Tynwald, Isle of Man

Members of the Manx branch, Isle of Man, are continuing in their efforts to get free nursery education extended to more children across the island to rectify the current system of patchy provision.

Mothers' Union members have written to all members of the Isle of Man Government, the Tynwald, on two occasions and have had a question asked in the Legislative Council (Upper House). On 6th July 2009 they had the opportunity to present a 'petition of grievance' to the Tynwald, calling for free nursery places for all children from September 2010 and the petition was accepted and found to be "in order". Keep a **Policy Watch** on further developments!

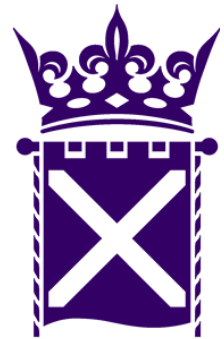
"Whilst in UK 5 x 2.5 hour sessions per week nursery provision for the year prior to starting school is available to all children, this is not so in the Isle Of Man. It is there for some but not island wide. We have sought to have this rectified as we see it as injustice to young families."

Helen Parry, Branch President

Scotland – ten years of devolution

The Scottish Parliament celebrated its tenth birthday this July and received praise for its work from Her Majesty the Queen when she addressed MSPs in Holyrood. The Climate Change Act, which we reported on last month, was finally passed and commits the Scottish Government to cutting greenhouse gas emissions in Scotland to 42 % by 2020 and 80 % by 2050. The Parliament is now in recess until September and the new session will see legislation introduced to:

- introduce minimum pricing for alcohol sales
- reform the examination system in secondary schools
- allow for investment in affordable housing
- bring forward a referendum on Scottish independence.



However, popular opinion may not be supportive of the last proposal - a BBC poll found that only 28% of respondents wanted greater independence for Scotland, whilst 48% wanted Scotland to remain part of Great Britain.

Northern Ireland

A report on childcare provision in Northern Ireland was presented to the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People in June 2009. Further work is now being carried out to assess options and costs and is expected to be completed by the end of 2009. This will then form the basis of a draft childcare strategy, which will be open to public consultation when produced, most likely next year.

Republic of Ireland – changes to child benefits

At the end of 2009 the Early Childhood Supplement (ECS) will be abolished. ECS is currently paid to families with children under 5 years of age to financially assist with the cost of raising children, for example paying for childcare. A family of three children, all under the age of six, would have received €3,300 last year in ECS (3 x €1,100), as well as child benefit of €6,420 - a total of €9,720. This May the ECS age ceiling was reduced to five years and the monthly payment to €41.50, meaning an annual value of £500 per child. The loss is more than €2,000 to a family of three with one child moving out of eligibility this year.



Child benefit is also set to be cut, taxed, or made subject to a means test. ECS will be replaced in January 2010 with a free pre-school year of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for all children between the ages of three years three months and four years six months but there are still concerns that children and families will suffer as a result of the changes.

Social Policy in Action

Is your MP* a friend of the family?

During the summer recess, why not use the break from monitoring social policy updates to plan some time getting to know your political representative? 2010 will bring with it a general election in the UK, so now is a good time to think about how you might engage more with your local MP. Below are some suggestions.

* Or MSP, AM, TD or any other political representative!

Pray for him or her regularly: perhaps write to your MP to ask if they have any particular prayer needs; pray for his/her family too and for a good work/life balance.

Invite him/her to your next branch meeting/Diocesan meeting/Trustees' meeting: ask them to speak or just have them as a special guest.

Visit him/her at the local constituency surgery. Or organise a group to visit Parliament (or National Assembly/Parliament) to meet and greet your MP: they can organise a tour of the parliament for your group and you might get an opportunity to present a petition, lobby them about a current issue or thank them for doing good work serving you as constituents.

Invite them to visit a project that you run in your Diocese: Loving for Life, AFIA, prison work, women's refuge, child contact centre, etc.

Send them any resources you produce: Diocesan newsletter, prayer diary, Policy Watch, briefing papers.

Send them notes of encouragement from yourself or your group (Branch, Deanery or Diocese): birthday, Christmas and Easter cards; thank you notes for speaking out on certain issues (of local or national concern).

Research some of the issues your MP speaks about most often. Monitor what they speak about in your local newspaper or keep an eye out for them in the national press. Use Parliament websites, internet search engines like Google and internet sites like www.theyworkforyou.com to get to know your MP's interests.

Organise a local hustings event before the next election. Invite your MP and the prospective candidates from the other political parties along to answer questions from the audience, take part in a debate on a topic of your choice (e.g. "What would you do to support stable family life and marriage if you were elected?"; "How would you prevent childhood being commercialised?"; "What would you do to help those whose family life has met with adversity?"). You could host it in your local church or a larger venue. Think about which other local organisations you might want to partner with and publicise the event as widely as possible.

Can you make a difference?

If you haven't already heard – Mothers' Union has launched a new social policy toolkit, 'Making a Difference'! This A5 booklet explains what social policy is, how you can get involved and how the UK Government, devolved and local governments, European Union and United Nations work. You can use this book as a reference tool or as a social policy study guide; in a group or as an individual. 'Making a Difference' is available from Central Services on 020 7222 5533 for just £3.

