

The Common Good: what does it mean for the family

The ideal of the Common Good animates the work we, at the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), carry out as policy advocates. We strive to achieve an agenda that sees everyone flourishing – from the most disadvantaged to the most fortunate. This means an agenda that has relationships at its heart. And that recognises that the *individual is not only sacred and unique but also social and connected*.

Where better for this ideal to play out than in the family? The family offers a blueprint for all relationships. Or, to quote Pope Francis, the family is the nearest hospital, the first school for the young, the best home for the elderly.

It is also the most powerful engine for the common good. Supporting the family and encouraging its formation, are the key elements of a social contract between the polis and individual citizens.

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But for decades that social contract has been fraying. Can we honestly say that society – more specifically the state – supports the family, allowing its members to flourish? We cannot.

The State has placed the individual – not the family – centre stage. It is now all about me, not we. The state prizes individuals as consumers and taxpayers rather than as parents. It has made divorce easier and quicker to obtain. It has failed to support families that seek to look after their most vulnerable – the very ill and the very old.

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Having a family no longer counts for much. As a family member, little is expected of you, and little is given to you.

The result is that families are breaking up and breaking down – leaving in their wake generations of alarming statistics. As the CSJ has shown, a child whose family broke down before they turned 18 is twice as likely to be abusing substances, suffer poor mental health, and end up homeless. They are almost twice as likely to end up in jail, and in debt.

This catalogue of horrors – not to mention of costs – is explained by neuroscience: the study of attachment, adverse childhood experiences and trauma all show that the brain is a social organ. Its functioning is dictated by caring connections: is malfunctioning by neglect and abuse.

Science, as well as sense, suggest that in seeking the common good, the state should invest in the one place where a nexus of positive relationships can be forged.

Think of the unhappiness spared, the money saved, the votes won if we could support the family as a simple social enterprise.

So, what can we do? How can we become a more family friendly Britain?

Here are three policies for change – each one aims to rattle the materialistic view of individuals, society and the common good that seems to prevail in Westminster.

1. Changing our tax system could make a significant change. We should tax parents on their combined income, and offer them tax credits for each child. With this one move, the government would recognise the value of the family, and the important role parents play in forming the next generation. It would make parenting and work more compatible. And it

would recognise the household economy of care: unpaid domestic work that brings enormous benefit to families and communities. The move would not only be in accordance with a social justice agenda promoting the common good — but it would also be popular with voters. According to the Department for Education Childcare Early Years Survey, 33 per cent of mothers would like to be at home full time and 57 per cent would rather work fewer hours in order to spend more time with their children.

2. Many of us have had first-hand experience of children's centres. But they focused on early years rather than the whole age range that families cover; on babies and toddlers rather than on parents, grandparents, etc. It was to extend the reach of the children's centre that the CSJ, in 2004, drafted a plan for Family Hubs: local centres that cater for couples and their children and for grandparents too. Almost 20 years on, this is now part of the Conservative Party manifesto. We could accelerate and expand the Family Hubs so that they would become a one-stop shop for statutory and voluntary services including couples counselling, breast feeding advice, housing advice, and so on. We can move the marriage and birth registrations from the formality of the town hall to the intimate centre where more personal conversations can be held. A one door for all will avoid stigma and prompt people to come through.
3. My final suggestion is about parenting support. Parenting can bring joy and enhance life — but it is also undoubtedly difficult, lonely and confusing: all the more so when struggling through a pandemic. Why don't we invest in parenting programmes that offer some guidance but, above all, the benefits of a network of men and women with a shared experience? Yet parenting classes provision is patchy and the standard offer is short term. Can we really embed new good habits and forge new good relationships in ten weeks? Government has been traditionally loath to enter this intimate space — what happens in a home is private. No one should sit in judgement of another's child rearing. However, when you consider that 98 per cent of children in care are there not because of their misbehaviour or afflictions but because of their parents' needs and when we realise that parenting is the number one determinant of a child's outcomes (even more than a child's socio-economic background), surely we should recognise that supporting positive parenting is key. We need to take parenting out of its isolated bubble within four walls and into the public square — because this is a public health issue.

So that is three very concrete policies; three relatively easy and inexpensive steps for government to take. But will they? Will the government have the foresight to see that a parent who brings up a child benefits society more than one who holds down a job?

Will it have the imagination to see that family hubs can become a building block of local communities? And will it have the gumption to ignore the ideological bogey man that says "family is off limits" for politicians and policymakers?

Or will it join the many regimes that have failed the family — from Plato's imagined Republic to the very real dictates of Marxism which saw (and I quote Engels here) the family among the upper classes as an "inhuman corrupt commercial arrangement and among the lower classes as non-existent." Even some of the Church fathers viewed the family unit with suspicion — celibacy St Paul warranted, was far superior.

I don't know whether the occupants of Downing Street today are wiser than St Paul — or Plato, indeed. But I do recognise a subversive quality in our Prime Minister — and here is an opportunity to overturn the materialist mission of the bienpensants by embracing instead the sacred, spiritual and loving nucleus that is the family.