

Does the present warrant a future to marriage?

Introduction

Back home I am a bit of a rare breed – an academic who is convinced that well-functioning marriage is fundamental to the success of Britain and Europe. I'll explain in more detail why I think that and why this is so unusual.

Firstly however, let me set the scene a little as to the most recent changes in the UK political climate with regard to marriage and family life. Going back to 1997, we had an incoming Labour government who quickly established the eradication of child poverty as a key long-term goal. In common with much of the rest of Europe they chose to avoid the question “what is best, cohabitation or marriage” and to be almost exclusively concerned with how best to support families, particularly in their efforts to raise children, regardless of the marital status of their parents (Kiernan 2004:980). However, at times this reluctance to adjudicate between different types of relationship has threatened to collapse and the result has been dissent in government and incoherence in policy (Durham 2001).

The wording of key government documents, such as the 1998 Supporting Families consultation paper, was changed to lay stress on stability, not marriage, for the upbringing of children. Fearful of losing the support of middle England, the Blair government has created a family policy which is both ambitious and ambiguous, but its ultimate refusal to ‘discriminate’ in favour of marriage means it is in danger of overlooking an area of social life with significant implications for children’s wellbeing. The Children’s Commissioner for England, Professor Sir Al Aynsley Green, said recently “The most important cause of unhappiness in children is the threat of family breakdown” and yes, 28% of children in England and Wales will experience their parents’ divorce before they are 16. But the answer is not to avoid marriage. In the UK, as in other countries in Europe, cohabiting couples are far more likely to split up and the trend towards the separation of marriage and parenthood has become a far greater driver of breakdown. 1 in 2 cohabiting parents split before their child is 5, compared to 1 in 12 marrieds. Putting it another way, three-quarters of all family breakdown involving children under 5 is due to the collapse of cohabiting relationships.

I met the head of our then Prime Minister, Tony Blair's policy unit 2 and a half years ago and he said that in the early days of the new government a lot of pro-marriage policies had been discussed but were rejected by the older women especially in the cabinet. They had grown up through the sixties, considered it a good thing that the normative power of marriage had declined and would not support policies that acknowledged its benefits. At the time of our meeting there was, the policy adviser said, no group lobbying the government on the subject of marriage. All three of our main political parties were caught in a classic policy dilemma "how can government promote family stability without undermining lone parent families and, conversely, how can government support lone parents without undermining family stability." Compared to Europe we have very high rates of lone parenthood. SLIDE The problem with the policy paralysis we have been caught in is that very little is done to support the couple relationship in general because if a government is serious about giving people good information about how to sustain a relationship, they would have to admit that marriage makes a difference.

It is worth looking very quickly at what the family policy theorists say about such dilemmas. Bogenschneider states that "In controversial arenas, some politicians polarize issues by casting them in simplistic either-or terms yet these political characterizations are often inaccurate and frequently generate 'more heat than light, more politics than policies, more slogans than solutions'". To overcome this polarization and break the policy making impasse, she draws on the concept of true paradox—two ideas or principles that seem, on first blush, irreconcilable with each other but prove, on closer scrutiny, simultaneously valid. Two virtually opposite yet valid policy goals can be developed by reasonable, well-meaning people and can be pursued simultaneously. Policy makers should welcome and embrace these contradictory solutions, because more solutions typically mean better, not worse, policies.

Last year I was given the opportunity to help break the UK out of this paralysis that family policy seems to be stuck in when I was asked to be a senior member of the Social Justice Policy Group. This was one of the many Policy commissions set up by the leader of the opposition, David Cameron, in Jan 2006 to develop policy recommendations for

the next Conservative Party manifesto. This group looked at five “pathways to poverty” one of which was family breakdown. I was responsible for this section of the research and the final report. We also looked at educational failure, economic dependence, serious personal debt and addiction.

The policy group consulted as widely as possible and held 3,000 hours of public hearings and received submissions from over 2,000 organisations. We traveled all over the country to speak to as many people as possible as well as overseas to see how other countries have been tackling these problems. I am not a member of the Conservative Party or indeed any political party, I’m an independent academic, with a background in social anthropology and a doctorate in cultural change. So why did I accept? I saw it as a key step to make marriage and prevention of family breakdown an acceptable subject in public policy terms and a way of influencing the government by making sure the opposition talked about marriage in a constructive, *research-based* way. One of our underlying arguments was that we need a cultural change in the nation, to get aggressive about dealing with family breakdown but NOT with those caught up in it. All political parties should prioritise it - but turning a tide, changing a culture is very hard work!

Our first report, which came out in December last year, refused to be drawn into straight forward cause and effect ie. to say that family breakdown causes poverty, educational failure or crime or vice versa. But the correlations between educational failure, serious personal debt, crime and addiction are undeniable. Three quarters of young offenders describe their educational attainment as nil, the same proportion are from lone-parent families. Our polling showed that if you are not brought up in a 2-parent family you are 75% more likely to fail at school, 40% more likely to have serious personal debt , 70% more likely to be a drug addict and 40% more likely to have alcohol problems.

But I am getting ahead of myself: What are the social trends we are currently living in and do they give grounds for optimism or not? Very simply, and as many of you will know, the following statements pretty much sum up what is happening across Europe:

People in general are having

Fewer children, later in life

Fewer and later marriages, more marital breakdown

There is a marked increase in non-marital unions, and children born outside marriage

Smaller households

More living alone

Striking rise in number of children living with one parent

Fall in the number of couples with children

We are seeing a combination of forces which are resulting in the *ageing of some life-transitions*. Ageing societies also show an increase of age at first marriage and at remarriage, at leaving the parental home, at first childbirth. Individuals themselves are choosing to delay many of those transitions which demonstrate a commitment to full adulthood – full economic independence from parents, formal adult union through marriage or committed long-term cohabitation, and parenting. We're seeing a shift from a high-mortality/high-fertility society to a low-mortality/low-fertility society.

But The Oxford Institute of Ageing suggests that perhaps the major impact on 21st century European families is rapidly changing trends in marriage. Marriage rates are falling across Europe, though at varying pace.

Table 1 illustrates the development in crude marriage rates¹ from 1960 to the year 2000 in the European Union. In terms of a European pattern in the development of marriage rates, the overall trend has been one of declining rates for most of the period with a modest upturn in some countries in the latter years while the rest of the countries continue their decline in crude marriage rates. It is interesting to note that in 1960, Germany had the highest EU crude marriage rate standing at 9.5 per 1000 with Ireland having the lowest at 5.5 per 1000. By the end of the century, Denmark had the highest rate at 7.2 per 1000 with Greece having the lowest at 4.3 per 1000. By comparison, in the year 2000, Germany's rate had fallen to 5.1 per 1000 while Ireland's was almost back at its 1960 level. For those countries experiencing a modest upturn in rates at the end of the century, the rates leveled off in the mid 1990's for all countries except Denmark where the lowest

level had been in 1980. In the U.K., crude marriage rates have been falling since the early 1970's and fell by 3-4% per annum during this period (Murphy and Wang, 1999) with a fall from 330,000 first marriages in 1961, to 200,000 in 1997.

Crude marriage rates are of course strongly affected by the demographics of the population in question. A measure of marriage which avoids these problems is the so-called total first marriage rate, **which expresses the probability of first marriage for a person if that person passes through his/her life conforming to the age-specific first marriage rates of a given year. The rate refers to a synthetic cohort and is the sum of the age-specific first marriage rates in a particular year (generally up to age 49), and can therefore exceed 1.0 in years of strong progression of the number of marriages, although it is excluded that a person can contract more than one marriage.** Total female first marriage rates for the countries of the European Union for the period 1960-2000 are shown in table 2. Trends in the total female first marriage rates are similar to that seen for the crude marriage rates with declining rates for all countries (with a little variation across countries in the onset of the decline) and with a modest upturn at the end of the century for some countries.

Turning to the question of age, the graph shown highlights only five countries but Eurobarometer data indicates that although marriage (among 25-34 year olds) is most popular in the southern European countries of Greece and Portugal, this is much less the case in the other southern European countries of Italy and Spain, which have low proportions in marital unions and the highest proportions of single people. In the Nordic countries as well as in France, cohabitation is more popular than marriage at these ages whereas marriage is seemingly more popular in countries such as Austria, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and Luxembourg.

Unmarried cohabitation is increasing at all adult ages with individuals marrying later and being increasingly less likely to remarry following divorce. However, the rates of unmarried cohabitation vary widely from over 20% in Sweden to between 1-5% in Southern European countries. Similarly births to unmarried cohabitantes vary from over 50% of all births in Sweden and Latvia to single figures in Greece and Italy. Britain

appears to sit somewhere between our Scandinavian and Southern European counterparts in terms of rates of cohabitation and unmarried parenthood.

The rise in divorce rates has been very pronounced in Europe since the 1960s although it is leveling off at a high level in the UK. Still, Gonzalez' data indicates that the United Kingdom has topped or come close to topping the European table of divorce rate rankings for several decades. When demographers have looked at those who have experienced parental divorce (compared with those who did not), across all nations they are more likely to form partnerships and to become parents at a young age; they are more likely to opt for cohabitation over marriage; they are less likely to have their first child within marriage; and their own partnerships and marriages are in turn more likely to terminate.

Sigle-Rushton et al say that "Some theories of divorce suggest negative associations should decrease over time (as divorce becomes more common selection hypotheses suggest that the average child of a divorced family would come from a less troubled family. Liberalisation of divorce laws and greater reliance on mediation are likely to have reduced family conflict and stress, as well as the stigma of divorce) but associations of divorce and subsequent indicators of disadvantage re remarkably stable over the period considered (which analysed life course data from children born in 1958 and 1970.)

Divorce rates are very concerning but the greater likelihood that cohabitation will break down is even more so. Writing in the prestigious journal, *Demography*, Daniel Lichter concludes that the common view of cohabitation as a stepping stone to marriage, needs to be "seriously questioned" because so many live-in couples split up. He says it is more accurate to see cohabitation now as simply an "intense form of dating" unlikely to lead to the altar and serial cohabitation may be an emerging norm.

His research was undertaken in America but mirrors the experience of Britain, where the average length of cohabitations is less than two years and where only four per cent last more than 10. Within five years of the birth of a child, eight per cent of married couples in Britain split up, compared to 52 per cent of cohabitees and 25 per cent of those who marry after the birth. The Cornell University study reported that half of all

Comment [SC1]: p125 Last year Britain's most eminent family law judge said Labour had done nothing but undermine the institution of marriage. Urging new state support to encourage couples to marry, Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss said the "sad fact" was that the Government had failed to help married couples and accused ministers of "downgrading the status of marriage". She said tax incentives to marry had been stripped away and lamented that couples were now better off financially if they lived together without a wedding. Critics say that since Labour came to power in 1997 official policy has maintained that all lifestyles and family structures are equally good. Labour had abolished the married couple's allowance, the last tax break for married couples, and introduced tax credits that favoured single mothers over couples. It had also adopted a policy of removing the very word marriage from official forms and documents. There are more than two million cohabiting couples in England and Wales, three-quarters of whom have children, and according to Civitas, the Right-of-centre think-tank, cohabiting relationships are fragile by definition. Both men and women in cohabiting relationships were more likely to be unfaithful to their partners than married people, it said.

cohabiting unions ended within a year and 90 per cent within five years, mostly because couples broke up.

Cohabitation is obviously closely connected with extra-marital childbearing, but also with entry into lone parenthood, because of these breakup rates. These slides show births outside marriage have increased significantly in all European countries since 1980. (Point out Malta) In the mid-90s, eminent sociologists¹ predicted that, just as during the 1960s divorce eclipsed death as the primary cause of lone motherhood, by the end of the century divorce would be eclipsed by the increase in childbearing by the never-married.

But what are the consequences of those social trends, do they really matter? I'm going to concentrate on Britain because a) we have such pronounced problems arising from our demography and b) instead of treating these trends away from stable marriage as inevitable we are finally beginning to say 'something has to be done'. In the UK we are facing a future with lower marriage rates and a much greater likelihood that children will not grow up with both their parents – and we don't like the way this has already contributed to the wear and tear on the fabric of our society.

Looking at it from the point of view of children and putting it very simply, less marriage means more family breakdown, Children living in divided families are less likely to succeed at school, avoid crime, poverty and abuse and family breakdown is often at the root of a bigger package of disadvantage from which children struggle to emerge. Equality of opportunity is a key principle of social justice but whether a child's parents are married, cohabiting or not living together at all, tends to have a huge influence on outcomes. (In the UK) Unmarried parents are mostly younger parents in more socially disadvantaged groups who often have partners and children from previous relationships.

Family breakdown is a legacy. Girls born to teenage mothers are about twice as likely to become teenage mothers themselves. Many have never known a father's love in anything other than a fleeting way. Sexual encounters come early, momentarily tempering the

¹ Kiernan, Land and Lewis

Comment [SC2]: More and more research is coming out Cohabitants also had more health problems than married people, "probably because cohabitants put up with behaviour in their partners which husbands and wives would discourage, particularly regarding smoking, alcohol and substance abuse".

Now, despite the increasing rejection of the centrality of marriage within modern life, the health benefits of marriage have been consistently confirmed in both national and international research. The researchers Prior and Hayes looked at which kinds of people were being hospitalised and they found a dramatic increase in bed occupancy among men aged 25-44: they are showing signs of greater vulnerability to ill-health and they attributed this to the lack of social support they were now getting through later and non-marriage, saying that, p138 Since 1981 the most vulnerable men are those who have never married, social isolation is a key factor, marriage provides a support system.

longing for attention and affection, but often regretted. Unplanned pregnancies give many, very young mothers the chance to create the sense of family they never knew, but often repeat the cycle of deprivation. 26% of all British children (around 2.3 million children) are currently living in lone parent households and nearly 1 in 6 babies is born in a home with no father - yet research shows the critical importance of the presence of a dad in a child's life.

An NSPCC study into child maltreatment found that children who'd experienced 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'.² A recent US study found that children living with unrelated adults were nearly 50 times as likely to die of inflicted injuries than children living with 2 biological parents.

Family breakdown dramatically raises the risk of domestic violence – the single biggest predictor of domestic violence is being a separated woman. Women are also hit much harder financially. After a marital split women are on average 18% worse off, and men 2% *better* off - they often have less financial commitment to the children. At the same time as coping with economic hardship, many have to comfort hurt, confused and often angry children whilst struggling with their own severely bruised self-esteem. But it's not just women who suffer. Divorced men attempt suicide five times more often than married men.”

The economy suffers: My policy group estimated that it costs British society £20-24bn per annum (13.5bn – 15bn MTL). Understandably lone parents are eight times as likely to live in a workless household (ie. to be almost completely dependent on social security benefits) as couples with children – we have the highest rate of children living in workless households in Europe. Single parents in other countries, such as Nordic countries, who tend not to experience such high levels of disadvantage, tend to be older

²compared with the national distribution for similar social classes

than in the UK. Therefore they tend to have careers, higher income, and a wider life experience than the UK. They are less likely to lack physical and emotional resources. Lone parents have twice as much risk of experiencing *persistent* low income as couples with children therefore their children are at far greater risk of being in poverty.

Family breakdown increases the risk of crime. 70% of young offenders are from lone parent families. Parenting style is also very important but children of separated families are twice as likely to have behavioural problems and turn to drugs, smoking and heavy drinking.

Recombined families or step-families are the most rapidly growing family type. Doesn't this mean 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, it is an understatement to say that such families tend to face extra stresses and strains and are more likely to break up. Children living in stepfamilies are three times more likely to run away from home than children living with both their natural parents. 25% of all youngsters living in stepfamilies run away before they are 16, many are younger than 11.

However, it is clear when looking at UK data that **marriage is still the majority choice and is less likely to lead to family breakdown**. 64% of families with dependent children are headed by a married couple. Six out of seven couples are married and 55% of marriages last a lifetime. Two thirds of first marriages stay the course. Recent research on marriage reported that participants felt that being married was an important part of their life and identity, but 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.

Married people live longer, are paid higher wages, and are healthier and happier. Most adults and young people aspire to marriage. When MORI asked which lifestyle adults would most prefer, only 4% chose being unmarried with a partner and children, while 68% chose being married and with children. In terms of health, the researchers Prior and

Hayes looked at which kinds of people were being hospitalised and since 1981 they found a dramatic increase in bed occupancy among men aged 25-44: they are showing signs of greater vulnerability to ill-health and Prior and Hayes attributed this to the lack of social support they were now getting through later and non-marriage, saying that the resultant social isolation is a key factor. Finally, marriage provides a meaningful and beneficial life script, especially for men. People tend to enter into it with far more of an orientation towards the future than if they are just cohabiting. When young men become fathers and their children rely on them, depend on them, it becomes imperative to find and keep work, to kick bad habits, to develop a greater sense of responsibility. One devastating effect of the decline of marriage has been the increase in fatherlessness.

It has been argued that marriage is not the business of the state but due to what has been termed “the erosion of the traditional nexus between marriage and childbearing” our more informal, more fragile relationships leave many children in the position where they are not dependent on their fathers but on the Welfare state.

These issues are very complex but social policy has to take a helicopter view and make difficult decisions to set the right direction of travel. A specialist at Washington DC’s Centre for Law and Social Policy, Theodora Ooms, cites 4 reasons why marriage should be on a family policy agenda

1. Married men live longer are happier and healthier
2. Married fathers are more likely to be involved with children because the father's relationship to the child, more than the mother's, is tied to the quality of his relationship to the child's mother
3. Children do well economically, socially and psychologically if biological parents have a strong conflict-free marriage
4. Economic impacts- married people work harder, save more and accumulate more wealth

She concludes that we need social policies that create the social conditions that parents need, decent wages and benefits etc but we also need policies which encourage married parenthood. It is for reasons like the ones she has cited above that I am convinced that there is a future for marriage, even though the trends seem to be going in the wrong direction.

It is precisely because countries like the US and, more belatedly the UK, are saying “enough is enough, we are sick, as a society of the fallout from unchecked family breakdown.” The idea that intervening in some way to prevent family breakdown is symptomatic of a ‘nanny state’ is becoming an indefensible excuse and for the main reason that states which do nothing end up having to carry out the functions that the family was always better equipped to do. When children have to be taken into local authority care in the UK their lives usually take a turn for the worse. Our government spends nearly 25,000 lire on each child, a staggering total of over 1.5 billion lire per annum. Yet just 1% of care leavers go to university, between a third and a half of homeless people were in care and children in care are four times more likely to suffer mental health problems. The majority of these children have been abused or neglected but 8% of our children in care are there because there are just no related adults to look after them. Perhaps there was only one parent who was estranged from her family and she died in a car accident.

The breakdown of the family, the best social support mechanism there is is becoming an ever more pressing issue. It is so pressing that we have begun to break out of the policy paralysis I mentioned earlier. A couple of weeks ago a very senior cabinet minister admitted that there was a moral case for recognizing marriage in the tax system. There is some concern that our current government which has been in power now for ten years has run out of ideas and it has begun to adopt those of the Opposition. When it comes to family issues the only appropriate attitude has to be “here they are, come and get them, we’ll even help you implement them as long as you don’t shy away from the most important premise to them all which is that committed, well functioning marriage makes a difference.”

I want to conclude by doing what anyone who deals in demography should really aim for, that is to inject a sense of history into the popular and political debate on marriage and the family. From 1600 to the late 19th century Western Europe was unusual in its marriage patterns. Marriage was late over that period, certainly in rural areas men were 27 or 28 and women were slightly younger. Marriage, unlike in other societies was non-mandatory. Before 1800 10% of adults never married and in the late 19th century that figure rose to 20%. There have been spikes in unmarried births at different points in history such as early in the 19th century. The historian Stephanie Coontz puts it like this *“I have spent much of my career as a historian explaining to people that many things that seem new in family life are actually quite traditional. Two-provider families, for example, were the norm through most of history. Stepfamilies were more numerous in much of history than they are today. Divorce was higher in Malaysia during the 1940s and 1950s than it is today in the United States. Even same-sex marriage, though comparatively rare, has been accepted in some cultures under certain conditions. I still believe that when it comes to any particular practice or variation on marriage, there is really nothing new under the sun. But when we look at the larger picture, it is clear that the social role and mutual relationship of marriage, divorce, and singlehood in the contemporary world is qualitatively different from anything to be found in the past. Almost any separate way of organizing family life has been tried by some society at some point in time. But the coexistence in one society of so many alternative ways of doing all of these different things—and the comparative legitimacy accorded to many of them—has never been seen before.”*

That is what is new and what has to be challenged, the notion that all family forms are equally valid. Glenn and Sylvester contend that governments have to draw a distinction between supporting all kinds of families and supporting people in all kinds of families.

However marriage cannot be treated as a ‘magic bullet’ for family stability. In *all* relationships, modern values, new opportunities and expectations, and the equalisation of career aspirations of men and women have led to less definite gender roles within the home. This can lead to significant stress even where there is no social disadvantage.

However where there *is* poverty, educational failure, drug addiction etc there may be significant barriers to durable relationships such as poor mental health.

My policy group did not just recommend that the government support marriage through the tax system but also that significant resources be poured into the treatment of mental health problems for adults and children and that their whole families' needs be taken into account. We also drew up a system of state-funded relationship support which would operate through a voucher system. Rather than one or two large providers delivering marriage, parenting and marriage preparation services, the intention was to provide significant amounts of money for the voluntary sector, that is for providers like the Cana Movement.

I was interested to see the high levels of social acceptance there is for marriage preparation in this country. According to Professor Vassallo's research, over 85% of Maltese consider Cana marriage preparation to be necessary, whereas in Britain, it has been estimated that only 1% of people go through marriage preparation. The figure is higher when weddings have been conducted in church and churches provide the overwhelming majority of the marriage preparation in the UK. However foremost researcher on Christian trends, Peter Brierley concludes that only 7.5 percent of the adult population attended church and well under half of people want to get married in a church building. Essentially in the UK, and possibly in other countries, people do not turn readily to the church for help and, in addition, there is still a stigma attached to asking for relationship education or support.

The UK thinktank Demos states that to tackle the stigma around asking for relationship support, the dominant cultural model of marriage – that it is based on romantic love – needs to be countered. GB Shaw described marriage as an institution that brings together two people 'under the influence of the most violent, most insane, most delusive, and most transient of passions. They are required to swear that they will remain in that excited, abnormal, & exhausting condition continuously until death do them part.'

Demos continue: “The reality is that good quality relationships need work, patience and self-awareness. Fostering longterm relationships – particularly when they involve children – is a complex and skilled job that requires people to learn new skills and approaches to living with others.”

So where does this leave the question we started with? Marriage is hard to sustain over the life-course but, I believe we can make it seem less like pushing water up hill if we do all we can to foster a pro-marriage culture. I want the final word to go to the Canadian Professor Dan Cere who writes so eloquently on the sheer survivability of marriage. HE says:

Can this ancient conjugal tradition leave its new subversive competitors in the dust of postmodern history? This rugged tradition has weathered numerous tough historical challenges. It's probably naive to underestimate the ability of this dangerously cunning & primordial competitor to adapt to its new environment.