

Building a pro-Marriage Culture across Europe

I was asked to speak today about the fact that notwithstanding the rates of divorce and separation healthy and united marriages do exist in England and Europe today.

I was delighted to be asked to speak about this, to be able to launch off from such a positive starting point. The psychologist Dr Janet Reibstein refers to the fact that life-long fulfilling relationships *do* exist, as ‘The Best Kept Secret’. For the people she studied, “Being in a marriage-like partnership is the central, transformational and ever-replenishing relationship of their lives.” Her latest book, of the same name, describes in great detail many different relationship stories and those of us who have been married for some time (Paul and I are coming up to the 20 year mark) will recognize how she sums up the approach of one long-term couple, “instead of perfect contentment, they strive for pragmatic, imperfect solutions”. She claims that “every individual love story today pivots around the same conundrums: the tension between individual freedom and commitment, the task of regenerating mutual interest and desire in the teeth of predictability and routine, the need for security and stability against the push for novelty and the sheer difficulty of the economy of time and energy for each other within 2 complex lives. All these over increasingly long lives.”

Over two decades ago Burgess (1981:179) observed that “we tend to have an idealised conception of marriage and the family. It is often portrayed as a romantic and intimate oasis. In reality, it is often an intimate battleground. Mutual investment in one another generates its own risks and pains.” Many find it hard to keep taking these risks and the pains can seem too great to bear. There are many reasons why partnerships end but a high-divorce society itself brings pressures on longevity. There often seems to be little incentive to keep going when close friends, whose weddings we went to, have called it a day, moved on, found the person who *really* makes them happy.

I do rowing marathons, or to be more accurate, quarter marathons. I met someone at my gym who does full rowing marathons, that’s 42, 000 meters, in order to raise money for a charity called the Ectopic Trust because his wife has had two ectopic pregnancies and,

tragically has lost both her fallopian tubes. He has managed to achieve the world's 5th fastest time but he's a pretty ordinary bloke, and I suspect that's because not many people do marathons. He trains hard but admits he probably should eat a little less, get a bit more sleep. His stamina and determination are what makes the difference. Anyway, I used to just do a couple of thousand meters at the end of my work out but thought I would join him on his next marathon, which meant training a bit harder, even though I was only aiming for 10,500 meters. It's not an officially recognized distance, unlike the half marathon, but I felt it was realistic given the length of time I had to train etc.

Anyway, after a bit of quiet solo training I was managing to do six or seven thousand meters but I'd hit a bit of ceiling. What made all the difference was when I started to train with my marathon rower friend. He helped me with my rather inefficient technique, he showed me a few exercises to break up the long haul, but the main thing was that he was on the next rower, keeping going for more than an hour at a time. Just being around someone else who was slogging it out was the spur for me to keep going. This really brought home to me how important it is to be around other people who are persevering with their relationships. That's why we need a pro-marriage culture across Europe. We need a culture that acknowledges the benefits of long-term stable relationships, and doesn't skate over the differences that tend to exist between marriage and cohabitation; we need role models who might be able to pass on a few tips which have helped them to younger couples or those who are going through a rough patch, we need to see people gritting their teeth and saying "this is worth sticking with because better times are coming." This has a foundation in research. A study by Professor Linda Waite has overturned the conventional wisdom that those trapped in unhappy marriages are better off getting divorced. Waite found no evidence that unhappy couples who divorced became happier than those unhappy couples who stayed married. In fact two thirds of "unhappy" couples who stuck it out reported that they were happy five years later. Remarkably, 8 out of 10 of "very unhappy" couples reported that they were happily married five years later. I'm not talking today about keeping people in abusive relationships. A recent UK survey of 3,500 divorcees found that 40% had "grown apart",

18% said that the “magic had gone” and only 13% blamed domestic violence. By way of comparison, US studies suggest 80% of divorce is due to growing apart.

Because the emphasis now, tends to be all on the *quality* of a relationship. Quality *is* important, but we all know that it fluctuates a little with mood, tiredness, life circumstances. There has to be more to sustain a relationship than what Professor David Popenhoe calls ‘the thin and unstable reed of affection.’

In the introduction to her book Reibstein describes how she responds to the question often posed by social scientists and journalists, “should we all expect relationships to be temporary and also unfaithful?” In her words “I find myself shocked, not to mention irritated, that there is such ignorance regarding the insatiable, ongoing, time-honoured and even animal need to be in a happy, secure, erotic and deepening union with one other person. We may not be skilled at getting there: we obviously lack the secret to having them. But the evidence of partnership breakdown does not convince me that we do not strive for or want desperately to have lasting and wonderful relationships.”

What I want to do today is make it clear (A) *why* we need to establish that marriage is still a meaningful institution, then (B) talk about the changes in our perceptions of marriage which are making it harder to sustain. (C) I will describe how marriage tends to differ from cohabitation – what is it about marriage anyway? Then I want to describe what is happening in countries which are ignoring family structure and concentrating almost exclusively on improving outcomes for children. Finally, (E) I will talk very briefly about what tends to work in relationships and how social policy can support rather than undermine these processes.

So why are we having to state, unambiguously that marriage is still intensely important to individual families and wider societies, when it is probably a self-evident truth in many of your lives? Over the last forty years we have seen dramatic shifts in our social trends. Although Europe is fairly diverse, there are after all 46 countries in Europe, There are key similarities such as *postponement*. In general, with some exceptions, key

demographic events, and more specifically events leading to the formation of new households and families, have been postponed in the lives of women and men. In the new millennium, leaving the parental home, forming a new union, getting married and becoming a parent are experienced on average later than before. Some countries (mostly in Southern Europe) have been characterized by extreme levels of postponement, experiencing the so-called *latest-late* pattern of transition to adulthood. Some of the events, like the transition to motherhood, have been postponed to ages that have not been observed in the past. This general trend towards postponement is also accompanied by an increasing *de-standardisation* of life courses.. In other words, people in general are having

Fewer children, later in life

There are 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

Let me just unpack that dry and dusty term ‘destandardisation of life courses’ for you with a quote from Professor Stephanie Coontz, who wrote the book “Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage.” She says

“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 challenging the normative status of marriage in other words, the idea that marriage provides a life script in the way it did in the middle of the 20th century when people left home to get married. Indeed the academic literature in the UK described how marriage marked the beginning of adult life as recently as 1988.

When looking at attitudes towards marriage and the family across Europe, it is clear that the family and marriage itself are highly valued across the continent. Large majorities within each country recognize the legitimacy of marriage as a social institution. Anthony Abela from the IPROSEC research project¹ found that the greatest support for the institution of marriage is recorded in Malta, closely followed by post-communist EU candidate countries, the other neighbouring Mediterranean countries and Sweden (Abela 2003). Slightly less support is found in EU continental countries, Ireland and the UK. With the exception of Sweden, most respondents from the other European countries think that a long-term relationship is important for a happy life, and that children need both parents to grow up happily.

However important marriage is to grass roots couples however, many European elites are currently somewhat uncommitted to marriage, rather wedded to the notion that ‘alternative long-lasting stable family-type relationships’ will have to suffice given these social trends – and their own biographies. The media, policy makers, many politicians, find it incredibly hard and in many cases politically dangerous to be overtly in favour of

¹ The IPROSEC - Improving Policy Responses and Outcomes to Socio-Economic Challenges – research project was funded by the EC within the Framework Programme 5 key action for “Improving the Socio-Economic Knowledge Base”

marriage, and that ambivalence is partly responsible for the impression that marriage is declining in importance and possibly even on the way out.

I just want to look briefly at where this ambivalence comes from. Laura Tennant, writing in the *New Statesman* describes the liberal-left orthodoxy on marriage. She says, “Ever since Marx and Engels postulated marriage as a patriarchal structure to secure the legitimacy of children and the safe transfer of property between generations, the left has viewed marriage, along with church and state, as an instrument for social control and prefers to think of it as historically contingent and socially constructed. But as Bob Simpson, an anthropologist at Durham University, states, “Heterosexual monogamy is an enduring basis for constructing social orders the world over. On a social and biological level, that pattern is a stable one which has cropped up in different times and places.” This speaks for marriage not as artificial template or recent invention, but as a primal relationship meeting a profound human need.

She goes on “The sexual revolution opened up the possibility of a lifetime of free-flowing erotic liaisons and the undesirability, if not impossibility, of confining one's activities to a single partner. Later, radical feminism argued that marriage was merely an arena for the economic and sexual exploitation of women. More recently, the emphasis on individual fulfillment has worked against the compromises that marriage entails, and our longer lifespan makes "till death us do part" a promise ever harder to keep..”

Let me just deal with those last two developments which have questioned the ongoing validity of marriage. Firstly, the notion that marriage exploits women. I would agree with Anastasia de Waal, head of family and education at the London-based thinktank Civitas. She says “The worry now for campaigners for women's rights should be the close connection between cohabiting partnerships and lone parenthood. In the past 30 years, the number of both cohabiting and lone-parent families has rocketed. It's no coincidence that the two have risen simultaneously. While 70% of children born within marriage can still expect to live with both natural parents until 16, that's the case for just 36% of those born

into a cohabiting relationship. The instability of cohabitation is sold as freedom, but essentially this fragility has become a new form of women's "enslavement".

That women can today parent alone, and unstigmatised, is a triumph, but this is blighted by the reality of lone motherhood. While some middle-class single mothers are having a ball, they're the minority. There's nothing empowering about being left, penniless, holding the baby. Around half of lone mothers have no earned income and scrape by on welfare benefits. Of those who aren't officially poor, many have to do the jobs of two people.”

That's the reality of many lone parents in the UK. One in two lone parent families are on income support compared to one in thirty couple parent families.² 69% of lone mothers are in the bottom 40% of household income versus 29% of couples with children.³ Lone parents have twice as much risk of experiencing persistent low income as couples with children – 50% versus 22%.⁴ Understandably lone parents are eight times as likely (45%) to live in a workless household as couples with children (5.4%),⁵ 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. Serious academics say that it is possible to have high rates of lone parenthood without all these disadvantages and look to Scandinavia but the UK's lone parent profile is very different to countries like Norway and Sweden. Their lone parents tend to be older than in the UK. Therefore they tend to have careers, higher income, wider life experience than the UK and they are less likely to lack physical and emotional resources. Single parents in the UK with all these attributes do manage far better, so it is not just about increasing benefits. Money matters but it is not the whole story.

² 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

³ *ibid*

⁴ DWP, *Households Below Average Income 1994/95 - 2000/01*, London: Stationery Office (2002), p141

⁵ Office for National Statistics, *Work and Worklessness among Households*, London: The Stationery Office Autumn 2001

But nearly half of our lone parent households were formed after divorce, so we cannot treat marriage as a magic bullet. In the UK three quarters of all family splits involving children under 5 results from cohabitation breakdown, our divorce rates are high but have stabilized. However there are other countries who are still on the upward curve (graph of divorce in Europe) Why are marriages failing?

That takes me onto the second development, the emphasis on individual fulfillment. Let me wind the clock back a little to the beginning of the 20th century because childbearing outside of marriage, cohabitation, and same-sex marriage are the result of long-term cultural and material trends which included two great changes in the meaning of marriage over the last 100 years. To see these trends in the grand sweep of history I must go back even earlier and remind you that for thousands of years, marriage organized people's places in the economic and political hierarchy of society and served so many political, social, and economic functions that the individual needs and desires of its members (especially women and children, its subordinate members) were secondary considerations. Love was considered a very poor reason to get married. However, in the 18th century, the revolutionary new ideal of the love match triumphed in most of Western Europe and North America representing a break with literally thousands of years of history. The private, relational side of marriage became increasingly important and the public side less so. However both are necessary. Commitment has been described as the glue of relationship. Certain kinds of glue come in two separate tubes (adhesive and hardener) that must be mixed together to form a strong bond. Forces that are internal (the relationship) and external (public ceremony and status) work together.

Getting back to more recent history, this emphasis on emotional satisfaction and romantic love intensified early in the 20th century. The change in the meaning of marriage was famously labeled as a transition "from marriage as an institution to marriage as a companionship." During this first change in meaning, marriage remained the only socially acceptable way to have a sexual relationship and to raise children in much of the industrialized world (with the possible exception of the Nordic countries.) Gillis labeled the period from 1850 to 1960 the "era of mandatory marriage."

Then, during the last few decades of the century, an ethic of expressive individualism—the belief that “each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized”—became more important and more than has ever been the case, the emotional satisfaction of the spouses became an important criterion for marital success. Beginning in the 1960s, marriage’s dominance began to diminish, and the second great change in the meaning of marriage occurred. An even more individualistic perspective on the rewards of marriage took root. When people evaluated how satisfied they were with their marriages, they began to think more in terms of the development of their own sense of self and the expression of their feelings, as opposed to the satisfaction they gained through building a family and playing the roles of spouse and parent. The result was a transition from the companionate marriage to what we might call the individualized marriage. This transition has been characterized as a shift in emphasis “from role to self”.

Sociological theorists of late modernity (or postmodernity) such as Anthony Giddens have also written about the growing individualization of personal life. They note the declining power of social norms and laws as regulating mechanisms for family life, and they stress the expanding role of personal choice. They argue that as traditional sources of identity such as class, religion, and community lose influence, one’s intimate relationships become central to self-identity. Giddens writes of the emergence of the “pure relationship”: an intimate partnership entered into for its own sake, which lasts only as long as both partners are satisfied with the rewards (mostly intimacy and love) that they get from it. The pure relationship is not tied to an institution such as marriage or to the desire to raise children. Rather, it is “free-floating,” independent of social institutions or economic life. Unlike marriage, it is not regulated by law, and its members do not enjoy special legal rights. It exists primarily in the realms of emotion and self-identity.

Mike Mason, a Christian who wrote *The Mystery of Marriage*, puts these concepts in less complimentary terms

p193 The modern idea of marriage sees love as a vehicle for self-fulfilment and talks of the importance of “preserving one’s individual identity, “respecting differences” and “the freedom to be me”...these are important concepts but they are also easily twisted into propaganda for selfishness....the cramming of personhood into the narrow box of ego, as if a person were nothing more than his own conscious urges and desires. But that is exactly what marriage works against, attacking self-centredness in all its disguises, simultaneously and tirelessly throwing the ego off balance...our identity is not something we take into a relationship but what we draw out of it. It is something we do not have at all unless we discover it through reciprocity with others

A good way to look at the implications of this are to see it in terms of its impact on commitment. The pure relationship is an ideal type, something we are arguably heading towards as a society, and partly evidenced by increasing cohabitation and living apart together. Research on cohabiting couples which asks them how they view their relationship tends to produce the response that they are just as committed as marrieds, although subsequent break up rates question this. They don’t tend to admit that they are less committed but it’s important to unravel the complexities of commitment if we are to appreciate how it underscores supportive relationships in modern societies.

Michael Johnson (1991) broke the concept of commitment into three dimensions:

- Structural Commitment – feeling one has to continue a relationship because of constraint from external pressure (such as marriage vows) and censure from others;
- Moral Commitment – feeling one ought to continue a relationship in terms of one’s own value system (this can come from religion or a culturally rooted sense that marriage is for life or that a partnership involving children should not be severed simply for personal gratification);
- Personal Commitment – feeling one wants to continue a relationship because it is satisfying and pleasurable.

So the pure relationship, independent of social institutions or economic life, entered into for its own sake and existing primarily in the realms of emotion and self-identity is held

together by personal commitment only, whereas relationships based on the notion that marriage is for life and everything reasonably possible should be done to preserve the union, are strengthened by the marshalling of structural and moral commitment.

Let me just illustrate how marriage, if run along 'pure relationship' lines, can falter, by giving an example of a uniquely 21st century scenario.

Couple divorce after online 'affair'

A Bosnian couple are getting divorced after finding out they had been secretly chatting each other up online under fake names says Ananova. Sana Klaric, 27, and husband Adnan, 32, from Zenica, poured out their hearts to each other over their marriage troubles, and both felt they had found their real soul mate. The couple met on an online chat forum while he was at work and she in an internet cafe, and started chatting under the names Sweetie and Prince of Joy. They eventually decided to meet up - but there was no happy ending when they realised what had happened.

Now they are both filing for divorce - with each accusing the other of being unfaithful. Sana said: "I thought I had found the love of my life. The way this Prince of Joy spoke to me, the things he wrote, the tenderness in every expression was something I had never had in my marriage. "It was amazing, we seemed to be stuck in the same kind of miserable marriages - and how right that turned out to be. We arranged to meet outside a shop and both of us would be carrying a single rose so we would know the other. When I saw my husband there with the rose and it dawned on me what had happened I was shattered. I felt so betrayed. I was so angry."

Adnan said: "I was so happy to have found a woman who finally understood me. Then it turned out that I hadn't found anyone new at all. To be honest I still find it hard to believe that the person, Sweetie, who wrote such wonderful things to me on the internet, is actually the same woman I married and who has not said a nice word to me for years."

But with non-marital relationships fragility comes with the territory, it is seen as inevitable, almost an evolutionary development, a sign of progress. Certainly the public policy emphasis is now on separating amicably and making contact arrangements that are satisfactory for both parents so that conflict is at a minimum. Now in some ways this is highly appropriate because the key issue for children's wellbeing is the level of conflict between their parents, not, by the way, the level of happiness in their parents' relationship. Booth and Amato found that high conflict marriages are as damaging to children as low conflict divorces. Children who didn't see their parents' divorce coming either blame themselves or just internalize the assumption that relationships are inherently unreliable.

Elizabeth Marquardt's research indicates that such children, even those whose parents have a best-case scenario separation (ie. where there is regular and unconflicted contact or residence with both parents) often experience significant levels of inner conflict which dominate their childhood and continue into adulthood. They feel pushed to the side of their parents' lives as the latter struggle to reorder their lives after separation. Inner conflict arises in children when they struggle internally to make sense of the differing value systems which their parents found impossible to reconcile, and which may have contributed to the breakdown in the relationship in the first place. Many reported a sense that they had had to grow up too soon and that their childhood was characterised by loneliness. These more subtle effects of divorce, which produce no clinical symptoms (rather than the dramatic negative effects on a minority), have been termed "sleeper effects" which become most evident when people leave home and try to form lasting relationships themselves. Marquardt does not argue that no one should ever get divorced nor that divorced people are morally reprehensible. Neither does she deny the "resiliency perspective", that most children of divorce develop into well-adjusted, successful adults.

Her contention is that the debate has been dominated by the adult perspective and despite the necessary concern we must continue to show for parents themselves, this should not prevent us from looking unflinchingly at the experience of children of divorce.

If policy only looks at helping people pick up the pieces after breakdown and fails to do enough to prevent it happening in the first place, this shows inadequate regard for the impact on children and adults of the severing of a close emotional bond. At the very least, research indicates that many people who have initiated family breakdown would have found it helpful to have been warned about the harsh realities of post-separation/divorce family life. But far more can be done in terms of prevention than just issuing dire warnings.

Family breakdown costs the UK 13.5 billion maltese lire per year, yet the government spends just one five thousandth of that amount on prevention. Since January 2006 I have been advising the current Opposition Conservative party on measures to build a more stable society. Last July we published a report with a significant body of well-researched policies to help prevent but also to help those who are struggling with the aftermath of family breakdown.

We recommended that an incoming government set up *A national relationship and parenting education voucher scheme for couples and parents at key life stages*

This would entail the development and national roll-out of nine streams of relationship and parenting education programmes, operated locally by the voluntary sector through appropriate access points (like doctors' surgeries, through referrals from health visitors, registrars etc). We said that any attempt to reverse the long-term trend of increasing family breakdown needs to be backed by serious long-term strategies. This scheme represents a radical step change in our national approach towards improving relational competence with **services reaching 800,000 families every year** once full capacity is reached. Evidence from US programmes indicates high take-up: 100,000 completing marriage and relationship education programmes in Oklahoma since 2001 with positive effects (lower conflict, higher satisfaction, lower divorce risk) and younger, lower income respondents more - not less - likely than others to report interest in relationship education.

Let me tell you about a UK initiative already being run by the voluntary sector which would expand greatly with the government backing we propose. When couples talk about

the preparations they are making for marriage, they are probably referring to the dress fittings, the choice of hymns to be sung at the wedding, making arrangements to change the bride-to-be's name on her cheque book, ordering the flowers, the cake, the invitations - it can seem like an endless list. But as Katharine Hill, author of 'Rules of Engagement' says, "planning a wedding is one of the most exciting and potentially exhausting projects many people ever embark on but the wedding day is just the beginning..." She and her husband Richard have written a groundbreaking book which doesn't just offer practical advice on every aspect of the big day (research from internet bank Cahoot says the average British wedding now costs the equivalent of over 15,000 Maltese lira) but looks at what happens after the speeches, cutting the cake and the honeymoon. They say that "building a strong marriage is not just about marrying the right person, however much we love them. It involves choice and commitment. It means acquiring skills and developing habits that will lay strong foundations for the future."

The government has been advised to fund or at least endorse the provision of marriage preparation for more than a decade. For example, the 1998 consultation paper, Supporting Families, recommended that registrars signpost engaged couples towards marriage preparation, so it almost but did not quite become government policy. The voluntary sector, most notably the National Couple Support Network has stepped in and is aiming to provide 'coordinators' in every registration district through whom engaged couples can access marriage preparation services. At present however, a lack of government validation for marriage preparation and recognition of research that indicates its likely effectiveness (eg. Carroll & Doherty, 2003) is discouraging many registrars from engaging with these coordinators. Even if the voluntary sector is delivering incredible services, like Cana is on Malta, the impact will be limited without a significant level of resources and explicit government support, especially when something like marriage preparation or relationship education is a little bit culturally unacceptable.

People easily associate such services with personal inadequacy but if senior politicians said that they had learned something from marriage enrichment that would start to effect cultural change. We're on the leadership team of our local church and the whole team is

going to a marriage event next month so that when we recommend it to the rest of the church we are not saying “go along to this, we think you need it” but rather “like a car needs a service, all of our marriages need some input, so let’s go to this together”

If the church models good marriages that is a great advert for the institution. We who live under the grace of God and know how much difference his help makes should be those who are most able to live out the paradox that we do all we can to help people make their relationships work and we do all we can to help them pick up the pieces if it all goes wrong. Marriage itself is full of paradox and truths held in tension. Let me illustrate this point with a few more quotes from *The Mystery of Marriage*.

Mike Mason says,

The conflict which marriage uncovers is always this same one: it is always some version of this tension between the needs for dependence and for independence, between the urge toward loving cooperation and the opposite urge toward detachment, privacy, self sufficiency (p28) The central temptation which haunts every marriage [is] the lack of wholehearted commitment

p80 Love specialises in the destruction of the human ego (p167) If people understood the true depth of self-abnegation that marriage demands there would perhaps be far fewer weddings, for marriage would be seen as a form of suicide

(p169) Marriage cannot help being a furnace of conflict, a crucible in which these two wills must be melted down and purified and made to conform

Marriage is not for the faint-hearted – when I wrote the policy proposals I was very careful never to talk about incentivising or encouraging marriage, but always used the word ‘support’. People should not be incentivised to tether themselves for life to someone unless they are fully aware of what they are doing.

I know I am an academic and I will therefore always recommend that more research be done but another policy recommendation we made was the setting up of *A new Marriage and Relationships Institute (MRI)* To act as champion and administrator of a major **series of preventative initiatives**, most notably the ‘voucher’ schemes, and commissioner of a major research programme into what makes marriages and families work.

We recommended this because although we have an excellent Family and Parenting Institute in the UK, the current family policy emphasis always defaults to helping people with parenting. The rebuttal to policies supporting marriage is often “what matters is the quality of parenting. There can be good parenting in any family type – married couple, cohabiting couple, single parent etc.” Obvious this is true, but it ignores the fact that good parenting is more likely, and far easier to achieve, in some family types than others. Glenn and Sylvester say “we fail to see how denying that people in some kinds of families face greater difficulties than others is conducive to effective support of those people with the greater needs. If, as research indicates, divorce and unwed childbearing tend to disadvantage children, it does parents and their children a disservice to pretend that family structure is irrelevant or outside the bounds of appropriate research. One commentator put it like this “Whilst there is ample evidence that the quality of parental relationships is a critical social factor for children, politicians, policy makers and practitioners are wary of adult relationships. Current policy mainly addresses families as individuals, ignoring the defining feature of adult life, for good and ill, interdependence.”

This wariness reflects the fact that in this area, perhaps more than in any other, politicians, policy-makers and academics *inter alia*, are aware of their own frailty. Many of their own families have endured some form of family breakdown, and they are understandably determined not to moralise. They are also reluctant to support an institution which may not have served them well, either because their own parents parted or because their own marriages and partnerships have faltered. However, policy should not be made by anecdote or by the intrusion of therapeutic thinking into areas where it is not appropriate. When seeking to help an individual with serious personal or family

problems it is quite justified to say “people of your type can be successful.” The only alternative is to say “give up now.” However, the fact that something is appropriate in the context of therapy does not mean that it is appropriate in the context of government policy. It may be right to say to a single mother “someone like you can bring up your child well”. It does not follow that the government should be neutral between family types, or should provide support for single parents in such a way as to undermine marriage or stable couple relationships.

We need to send unambiguous messages to young people through *Relationship education in schools and* provide them with a specific opportunity to learn about, explore and discuss the nature of marriage, family and relationships, with the voluntary sector strongly encouraged to deliver many of these resources. They need to know about the differences between marriage and cohabitation for example. There is a very interesting strand of rigorous research being done in the States right now by a team of researchers from the University of Denver, to test what has been called Commitment Theory. This theory suggests that cohabitation is a bad deal for women because of the way the sexes view commitment. For women, it's to do with attachment (the day-to-day intimacy of shared life), so moving in together is a significant statement. For men, it's about a decision ("Will you marry me?"), so moving in together still leaves options agreeably open. Very simply put, women appear to commit and sacrifice when they move in with a man, whereas men seem to commit when they make a decision to marry. Women's commitment is therefore based on attachment whilst men's commitment, in contrast, appears to be based more on a decision. It might even have a basis in biology.

There is resistance to so-called ‘outsiders’ being involved in family life but in Britain we have found that the breakdown of the nuclear family has also been accompanied by even more pronounced breakdown of extended family links. In the absence of traditional sources of immediate wisdom and experience previously found amongst grandparents, uncles and aunts, all sorts of advisory services have emerged and become normalised. Families and individuals typically seek education and support from peri-natal services, friends, and an array of self-help books and magazines. We have perhaps never expected

quite so much from our marriages and families as we do today and yet the skills to realise those expectations often need to be imparted, especially where adults are unable to teach their children what they never learned themselves.

To conclude

I believe we are at a vital juncture in the lifecourse of Europe. Government policy, the voluntary sector and other modern institutions need to be willing to talk about marriage without at every juncture conflating it with other relationship forms which have statistically different outcomes. A tiny minority of cohabitations last a lifetime, a significant majority of marriages do. This is not about being smug, but about being realistic and research-based. We also have to talk about marriage in a way that is appropriate for the times we are living in. Professor Bill Doherty, family scholar at the University of Minnesota says

“Never use the term traditional marriage because you don't know what it means. It doesn't necessarily mean a certain gender arrangement with mothers at home and fathers in the workplace. Opponents of the 'traditional' family concept score easy hits by conflating marriage with the breadwinner father/at-home mother model. Lots of people are pro-marriage but don't buy into the gender stereotypes. They do not speak out explicitly for marriage because they don't like the package. Indeed nowadays it rarely fits every stage of life. I work and travel a lot now but before my children went to school I was full-time at home whilst my husband worked long hours and traveled the world.

Doherty continues, “Like many others I see a marriage renaissance coming, a movement towards something that has elements of the past (especially commitment and stability) but also some new features (such as gender equality) that weren't the strengths of the marriages of our forebears.”

Can I just pause there whilst that sinks in. We cannot, must not go back because I firmly believe the best days of marriage have yet to come. So we have to craft the message in such a way that emphasizes that there is nothing passé about an institution that looks after

adults and children so well. We need to talk about the need to synthesise the best of the old (or traditional) aspects of marriage (expectation of longevity, commitment, durability) with the best of the new aspects of relationships (equality, intimacy and companionship). **Essentially we need to re-envision or reconceptualise marriage for the 21st century.** It's about tempering narcissism, love of self, with a sense of the greater project which is what can be achieved by two people who both live by the principle "look after number 2" – because that willingness to sacrifice will pervade the rest of life and benefit society in countless way. That's ultimately why well-functioning marriage is good for society.

The Canadian pro-marriage academic Dan Cere puts it more elegantly than I ever will. He says "A vibrant postmodern conjugality needs to articulate the radicality of marriage, its edgy otherness, its dangerous life-giving intimacies, its passionate fidelities, its risky transgressivity, its sexual warfare, its endless sexual incomprehensibilities, its tragic comedies, its primordial generativity, its destiny shaping power in our lives, its ghostly ancestors, the strange descendents it missions forth into the future."

Ladies and gentlemen, this is a beautiful island, my husband and I are loving our time here, but I would urge you to maintain your reputation I mentioned earlier, of showing the greatest support for the institution of marriage among other European nations. Please do not allow the breakdown culture to pervade your thinking the way Euro notes will flood through society in January 2008. I discovered that the name Malta means 'harbour', that your strategically positioned harbour has at times been your most valuable resource. Please continue to be a safe harbour for the institution of marriage. I believe you are strategic in Europe for this purpose. Thank you again for inviting me to speak here.