

1. Stop fining faithful people

The first thing governments should do is make sure people who have stable long term partnerships are not "fined" by the tax system as they have been in Britain. Until recently unmarried individuals buying a house together got £60,000 of mortgage allowable for full tax relief on interest, compared to only £30,000 for a couple.

Today there are still positive financial benefits in favour of single parenting in Britain and America and the value of the British married couple allowance is being steadily eroded.

Marriage needs redefining. It has sunk to become a minimally binding two year contract. Not surprisingly many cannot see the point. We need to recreate a definition of marriage as a long term monogamous commitment, with a particular aim of providing a place of stability for conceiving and parenting children.

2. Wedding anniversary presents

A step beyond that would be to encourage marriage survival by giving a significant tax benefit, not for marriage itself, but in proportion to the length of marriage which is far more important, with an additional benefit for a stable marriage with children at home. Thus a couple married for one year would get a small allowance, with an addition at five years, increasing in steps in ten year intervals up to - say - forty years of marriage.

Every marriage that survives saves the government a small fortune. We should be rewarding people for staying together, especially in the crucial years with young children.

The current flat rate allowance on marriage is pointless when people can be married and divorced ten times in twenty years, yet enjoying the tax benefit almost throughout that time. It should be reviewed.

3. Minister for the family - with a budget

Governments should recognise the central importance of the family by creating a Minister for the Family, and a government department. The UK government has done this recently - but only by loading an additional title on an already overworked minister.

A new government department should monitor and advise on all aspects of government policy as they relate to family life. One budget item in such a minister's brief should be research into relationship choices and maintenance, feeding results into regional centres offering relationship advice before marriage, preferably before engagement, as well as marriage guidance counselling.

4. Teach people how to love

The school syllabus should also contain education on how long term relationships work, as a broader component of what is still quite narrow and mechanistic sex education. If we believe long term relationship stability is important for child development, then we should provide education and training just as we would for driving a car or any other activity affecting other people's lives.

It goes without saying that sex education including AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases must continue to be a major priority, using community groups that have already pioneered successful work.

5. Reform of legal system for relationships

Governments need to look again urgently at the legal system for human relationships. Law Courts are not the best place to work these things out. Measures which encourage informal communication and reconciliation should be encouraged. The perspectives of children should be clearly heard throughout.

By weakening the law so much on marriage we have created in effect a sort of one year marriage contract, because a marriage can be legally declared over so quickly. It is difficult in such a situation to see what "marriage" means legally any more.

It should be made more difficult to get married, and more difficult to cease being married. The aim should be to encourage thought and care in those embarking on relationships, and to give them help.

Compulsory pre-marriage counselling costing perhaps £250 per couple would be a far better investment than paying out large contributions towards the £20,000 average total costs of a divorce. There should also be a longer period required between marriage and beginning proceedings, with compulsory arbitration. marriage must be seen as more than a one or two year agreement to cohabit, or there will be another broken generation.

6. Higher value taxable child allowance

The issue of government policy on single parent families is extremely sensitive. On the one hand, in the light of the evidence we have seen of the price paid by children who are raised by just one adult, we might wish to ensure there are no tax benefits or service benefits of single parenting.

On the other hand, we do not want to return to the stigmatising and rejection seen in previous decades, which will cause suffering and encourage a further rise in abortions. There are burdens enough for a child in a single parent family to bear without piling any more on.

A higher value child allowance taxed as income would sort out many problems, helping the most vulnerable families to survive, regardless of their parenting situations. Such an approach would also help meet requests for help with child care costs by single parent mothers who wish to work.

As we have seen, providing vouchers which can only be used to purchase child care will penalise those mothers who would like to pay themselves the same money to look after their own children at home.

Means testing of child benefit is very easy to administer. The number of children could be entered on the annual tax return and an appropriate addition of taxable income calculated. That would allow benefit to continue to arrive at Post Offices or in Bank accounts on a weekly or monthly basis.

The other way of doing it would be to run it all from the tax return so that children become a tax benefit. Then those not paying tax would receive the same in cash through income support.

The recent suggestions of "workfare" for single parents or similar measures to get such mothers into the job market are totally inappropriate if they are to be applied to parents with children under school age.

It is quite a different matter perhaps if a mother or father has just one teenager living at home, than three under the age of seven. Paid employment may be possible in one situation, unwise in the other. Anyway, at a time of high unemployment, what is the point of pushing single mothers to get jobs, preventing others from working who do not have such heavy parenting responsibilities? We are then paying the wrong people to stay at home. Parents at home are doing jobs too: working quite literally to build the nation's future.

7. Campaign to promote adoption process

Government measures should be introduced to encourage pregnant women to remain pregnant if they wish, rather than having abortions, so that the babies they do not want or cannot care for can be offered to couples desperate to adopt. Tax incentives may be contentious - because they might be seen as indirectly paying people to conceive and deliver babies for others who want them.

However advertising campaigns could be used to help create a positive and responsible image of a woman who has an unwanted pregnancy, yet is deciding to let it continue so some other couple can adopt her baby.

8. Urgent review of policy on absent fathers

Policy on absent fathers needs urgent review. Few would fault the general principle that in a society that is seeking to provide women with equal status, to dump responsibilities for parenting on women and then almost bankrupt them at the same time by allowing the men to walk away without a second thought seems madness.

It divides a nation into two groups: women who have had (sometimes as teenagers) to throw away two decades or more of freedom, and men with no ties, no responsibilities and a lot of time and disposable income. That can hardly be right or fair.

One of the biggest problems is the large numbers involved. If the number of single parents drawing benefit stayed low, it would be a cost of civilised society gladly borne.

However numbers are already too large for a Treasury bank account to be able to keep pace without significant extra taxation, or expenditure cuts elsewhere. If fathers do not help support their children then every tax-paying adult in the country will have to pay out instead. Growing resentment could lead to a backlash against the single parents we are trying to protect.

The process of sorting out maintenance is complex and traumatic for both parties. Whatever new steps are introduced need to be done with great care and flexibility, allowing time for measures to settle down. The British Child Support Agency is in need of radical reform.

It was highly unfortunate that the entire effort at first went into chasing fathers who were already paying some maintenance, forcing them merely to reimburse the state for income support. The only beneficiary for all the anguish and conflict was the Treasury.

9. Extension of age rating on pornographic material

Governments should also seek to regulate sales of pornographic magazines and other printed materials in the same way as the hire or sale of videos, helping prevent access by the young. That would mean a degree of self regulation by the magazine industry for example, with printed guideline symbols for 18, 15, 12 and PG. Serious breaches could then result in a fine.

10. Alcohol and drug abuse programme expansion

Alcohol abuse is a major factor in many family problems. Governments should look carefully at ways to combat this growing problem. It is unfortunate that the price of beer and wine has fallen in real terms over the last two decades, encouraging over consumption. Membership of the EC has made raising taxes on alcohol a controversial issue. Deregulation of licensing hours also has a similar effect. Awareness campaigns, school education and more treatment centres are necessary.

In addition there is a real shortage of rehabilitation centres for those addicted to drugs, an increasing problem affecting many families. The long term results are excellent in well run units. Legalisation is not the answer to any aspect of the drugs problem except policing. It will increase consumption and almost certainly the number of wrecked lives.

So then....

So then, there are a wide variety of measures that governments can make, in line with the cultural sensitivities of each nation, looking to encourage sexual relationships which are physically and emotionally healthy not only for the participants, but also for their children,

relationships which will have a positive benefit to society as a whole.

As we have seen, the costs of continuing with the current situation are immense and the benefits of change are enormous.

It will require great courage by governments to take decisive action, courage they are unlikely to have until prompted by escalating expenditure and public pressure.

Major changes in government policy are likely in the early years of the next century, because parties without marriage and the family as items high on their agenda will risk not getting elected.

* Rising Price of Love - book by Patrick Dixon - published 1995