

The childcare conundrum ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The proposals on universal childcare from both political parties are interesting and in some ways divergent. They are generous and clearly aimed at embracing young families and their need to have the freedom to work 'unburdened' by childcare at home, while encouraging more women, traditionally the rearing parent, to join the labour market.

It is unclear how successful both parties have been at communicating their view on children: the PN wants this to be universal, while Labour insists that free childcare should be conditional on parents having gainful employment. Anti-poverty campaigners insist free childcare should also be available to the poor and the unemployed.

There is little doubt that free childcare has offered families and women the possibility to return to the work-place, giving women not only a steady income but also the much needed personal fulfillment that gainful employment bestows on every member of society.

The costings of free childcare and its burden on the taxpayer no doubt will be lost in the melee of government handouts, and the real heart of the question here is not just cost, but also having an educational infrastructure of safe childcare centres, well trained child-carers, as well as good salaries for these workers.

Universal, free childcare suggests the creation of a new system akin to that of Malta's free healthcare system, a costly NHS-style coverage that does not come without its faults. By removing the condition that a working parent only can benefit from state-funded free childcare, it allows non-working women to benefit from the children, and have 'the State raise their children' without the return to society of the parent being in employment.

We understand that extending universal childcare might fail to appreciate the original intention of free childcare, to push non-working mothers into gainful employment, and to justify a State subsidy for participating childcare centres with the return of taxation generated from the incomes of these returning workers.

It is also a reality that many mothers still choose to leave their place of work because they want to dedicate more time and energy to their children and in most cases, the decision for one of the spouses to work and the other not to is taken by both partners.

Some parents also feel that free childcare may not necessarily offer a benefit to their situation, other than freeing up time for the caring parent, allowing them to focus on other matters and giving their child the early socialization they might lack by staying at home. They might rightly feel that a child at this very crucial time needs all the attention one can give.

The absence of means-testing to gauge whether certain individuals should be provided with a free service has always been an unpopular way of ascertaining the right of someone to receive a government benefit, especially in such multi-faceted social issues as childcare is.

But the question voters should put to themselves is whether a government-funded service that is aimed at fostering work participation, should have this latter condition removed. What is abundantly clear is that the public are generally amused with the volume of proposals and promises by both political parties. Their tendency to promise everything as if nothing had a price. Somehow, somewhere someone is forgetting that it is the taxpayer who will end up footing the bill.

There are also models in very advanced societies which award families who choose to raise their child at home, the French model comes to mind for raising kids at home. So where in a continent where the demographic shift is abundantly clear, where younger people are marrying later and having less children, and working populations depend on immigration to sustain generous pensions and healthcare systems, politicians are incentivizing larger families by providing fiscal models to sustain large families. Akin to a universal income, it would also be a controversial proposal to put forward: paying a generous subsidy to families who have more than two children and who bring up their children without using State-subsidised childcare. Indeed it may not be entirely different to the tax rebates for parents who send their children to private, independent schools.

Ultimately voters should consider such a proposal not for its allure as 'yet another freebie', but for the social purpose it serves for the wider society and how it will help families to bring up their children better.

-reprinted from Malta Today

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