

# Don't build roads, open schools<sup>[1]</sup>

The idea of child care as women's (unpaid) work holds the issue back in political discussions.

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**Source:** The Atlantic

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 30 Jun 2020

## AVAILABILITY

Access online<sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

Boris Johnson loves to dress up—admittedly not an unusual pastime among alumni of Britain's most exclusive schools. But his specific kink is looking like a builder, in a hard hat and bright high-visibility jacket. Yesterday, the British prime minister filmed a wobbly video that featured himself decked out in Day-Glo yellow at a London school, laying the groundwork for his "new deal" on infrastructure. For a set-piece speech today, his lectern was positioned in front of a clothes rack full of neon work wear.

Johnson loves this stuff. He regularly poses in hard hats on visits to tea factories, engineering firms, and tramlines. During last year's election campaign, he even drove an excavator through a foam-brick wall in front of a crowd of journalists. Its scoop carried his winning campaign slogan: get brexit done. He—like many politicians in Britain—enjoys the construction industry's association with dynamism, new starts, and fixing things up.

His announcement today of £5 billion in infrastructure spending is designed to soften the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic. His aides have likened the plan to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Never mind that grandiose comparison, or the fact that much of the fund is earmarked for maintenance of crumbling roads and schools, tattered by a decade of austerity orchestrated by his Conservative Party. What is most noteworthy about the announcement is its extremely limited idea of infrastructure. After all, Johnson could invest in one thing right now that would help millions of people get to work just as surely as any road or bridge: child care.

Affordable, high-quality child care is good for gender equality, good for parents' household budgets and stress levels, and good for the economy. Any investment in care would produce 2.7 times as many jobs as an equivalent investment in construction, according to the Women's Budget Group, an independent think tank. Nurseries, day-care centers, and kindergartens have been badly hit by pandemic closures, but so have primary and secondary schools, which we should also count as child care. These are not just sites for learning, or places where children go to make friends and develop social skills. Schools are also what allow parents to go to work, earn wages, generate tax income, and contribute to economic growth.

**Related link:**

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