

The hidden toll we all pay [GB] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A dozen people sat down in a Nottingham hotel last week to work out what the government should be doing to ease the strain between working and caring. Over three days, experts from the TUC, CBI, Small Business Association and Working Families presented evidence to them. The format - known as a citizens' jury - has become popular with Labour as a way to thrash out policy with ordinary people outside the wonkish brains of Whitehall and thinktanks. It was curiously inspiring in its quiet way, as a coherent voice emerged from an enormously disparate group - in age, ethnicity, life experience - which was sensible and yet vibrant with ideals of compassion and justice.

After listening to the experts, the jury members unanimously (albeit with the odd grumble) agreed they would be prepared to pay more in taxes to fund the formidable shopping list they wanted in the next Labour manifesto. More childcare, more paid maternity and paternity leave, and the right to request flexible work extended to all parents of under 16s (it currently covers only those with children under six). But the issue that dominated all their deliberations was the pitiful, neglected plight of carers. They were horrified at the story of Tim, one of their number, who'd had to give up his nursing career to care for his elderly mother. Because she wasn't classified as disabled, he wasn't eligible for the meagre £43-a-week carer's allowance - the lowest state benefit. He, along with the rest of the 6 million who care for the elderly and disabled in this country, is saving the state £57bn a year - the cost of another NHS.

Add up the jury's shopping list and the total cost heads into dizzying numbers. This is the care economy - the nurturing of life from cradle to grave - and because, historically, it's been unpaid and almost entirely the responsibility of women, it's been taken for granted. The Office of National Statistics has recently worked out a price on this unpaid care of a staggering £929bn a year, 104% of GDP. But as women transfer their labour from the care economy to the waged economy, a care deficit is emerging, exacerbated by a state that is reluctant to step in.

At every point of the life course, this deficit is apparent. Who cares for small children as maternal employment rates soar? Who cares for the convalescent as they are turfed out of the needed hospital bed indecently early? Who cares for the growing number of elderly? Increasingly we will have to face two related issues: who's going to pay, and who's actually going to do the caring? The cost to the state of providing or subsidising the new needs for care will be astronomical, and the government is flinching from spelling out the implications to the taxpayer. And finding people prepared to do these chronically low-paid jobs is a headache. Importing carers is a short-term solution as they, in turn, age and need care. Technology offers a bleak prospect of CCTV on the elderly and webcams in nurseries. Even the professions of caring such as nursing predict shortages, let alone the infamous recruitment problems for childcare.

We work the longest hours in Europe and have the shortest holidays. This means British full-time workers put in eight weeks more a year than those in France or Germany. More than a third of British workers say they are so exhausted when they get home that they can only slump on a sofa. Work-related stress is soaring. We urgently need a debate about the quality of our working lives - the time it exacts, the energy it monopolises and the stress it engenders. But an embattled trade union movement struggles to get these issues on to the public agenda. There's no reason that we can't organise a working culture in which it is possible to combine both work and care.

The cost of turbo-capitalism, with its relentless demands on people to work harder, longer and more flexibly in a bid to achieve greater competitiveness and efficiency, is in human sustainability. Just as we slowly developed an understanding in the 60s and 70s of the concept of environmental sustainability, so we are now beginning to grasp the human equivalent. The quality of our lives is an externality to the market - it doesn't appear in the balance sheet - and we are just beginning to glimpse that this is where we pay the cost of the overwork culture.

- reprinted from the Guardian

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