

Universal children's centres could be a Labour beacon: The government has the chance to launch a great social programme [GB] ^[1]

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As the comprehensive spending review deadline approaches, campaigns of all kinds are fighting right down to the line. Region vies with region, old against young, quick-hit versus long-term, keeping the middle classes on side versus targeting all on the neediest. Who offers most social justice bang for the buck?

Clapham Park Estate, one of Lambeth's worst, is a New Deal for Communities regeneration area whose progress I have been following step by step, watching how Labour's plans work out on the ground. One of its greatest needs - childcare - was laid bare last week, when Dawn Primarolo, paymaster general and former single mother, came to visit.

She spoke at the new Thresholds Centre, set up by the Peabody Trust. It is a perfect New Labour project with tough targets for getting local people trained and into work: 50 people into jobs in the first year, 200 qualifications gained and 96 good new childcare places. This is ideal joined-up thinking, set in the only bright, shiny new building here as yet, designed to entice people into daily adult IT classes and homework clubs for children, with keep-fit and beauty sessions.

Mothers come for company and are drawn into training. But all this works only because it makes high-class, permanent childcare the essential ingredient for getting mothers back into mainstream life.

That day was the launch of a drive to recruit and train childminders on the estate. A survey had found there are none at all here among the 3,700 inhabitants. Many have joined the national mass exodus: there are a quarter fewer childminders than three years ago.

Recruiting new ones is not easy: it now takes up to 18 months to be registered with Ofsted.

There is a shortage of hundreds of childcare places just on this estate, preventing many mothers from working. The scale of this need is breathtaking, but that is the way it is in most poor areas. Without childcare the government's target of getting 70% of single mothers into work will never be met. So far only 51% work, a bare 4% more than in 1997.

It seems grudging to complain when before Labour there was virtually nothing: the Tories denied childcare was a government function at all. Prodded by women ministers and MPs, Gordon Brown was persuaded that welfare to work would fail without it, so there are child care credits for poorer families and a national strategy promising places for a million children by 2004 and Sure Start for a third of poor pre-school children. How is it all going? Not brilliantly. New neighbourhood nurseries have taken longer to set up than expected, waiting for planning consent, with a shortage of trained staff.

But the alarming figures are these. Nearly a million children have been found new childcare already, but that is only half the story. The Day Care Trust, the main lobby group, reckons that the government is double counting: it is more than 900,000 children doubled up part-time in 497,000 places. Many mothers would work longer if they had full-time childcare.

Worse still, as fast as new places are being created, old ones are closing down. (I spoke to the distraught leader of one out-of-school club closing in Birmingham, leaving no local holiday scheme this summer, nothing next term and parents giving up their jobs.) Counting those going out of business, the net gain has only been about only half as many, just 291,000 extra places.

Why so many closures when new money is pouring in? The story has a familiar ring: the government is determined to use the private and voluntary sector, instead of creating new council nurseries. Poorer families are paid child care credits to buy private or voluntary childcare, but nurseries cannot break even, let alone make a profit on the money the credits pay - on average 163;39 a week. Low paid women still have to find at least 63;40 for one child and they are sunk if they have two.

As a result, most new nurseries are in richer areas. Even government funding for special neighbourhood nurseries in the poorer areas turns out to be only "pump-priming" insecure money, which tapers away to zero after the third year.

Getting money out of the government is anyway a nightmare trawl through 45 separate streams of funding from multiple regeneration

funds and zones. Childcare falls between the cracks and, since the departure of Margaret Hodge, it no longer has a special minister in the Commons but only a share of the Lords' education minister busy with schools and universities.

The answer is simple, though expensive. Every area needs its own local children's centre, pulling together everything families need from health visitors, day care, parenting support, skills training and employment help, after-school and homework club for all-comers, rich and poor.

The vigorous campaign for children's centres has a great groundswell of support. So far the government has spent a fair amount on children, but has had scant popular credit for what it has done. As ever, services just aimed at the poor will always be politically invisible.

A government review from the performance and innovation unit has been trying to make sense of all this confusion, and will report in time for the CSR. But I hear its proposals are likely to be modest: there will be no universal children's centres, not even promised for the far future.

There will more neighbourhood nurseries in the most deprived 20% of wards by 2010. But only 60% of poor families live in poor wards. There will be solid ongoing subsidies for nurseries in the poorest places. There will be a more unified, coherent system for delivering the childcare that is promised. Sure Start has been phenomenally popular and will also roll out to most poor areas. There may be more money for child care credits.

All this is good, but what an opportunity will be missed. Universal children's centres could be Labour's beacon, including all parents in a great social programme, paying according to means, reviving the idea of the welfare state in new centres so resoundingly popular and necessary that no future Tory government would dare dismantle them.

British parents pay for more than 75% of their childcare when in the rest of Europe pays under 30% - hitting all income groups, since paying for childcare cripples family budgets quite high up the social scale. Lack of it keeps women at all levels in lower paid, part-time work, keeping the gender pay gap wide.

The mentality that restricts state childcare to a safety net to shift the poor off welfare and into work is the same political timidity that keeps this a low tax country with low expectations of what the public purse can do to improve the quality of life. Children's centres would deliver a mighty political dividend, breathing enthusiasm into a new generation of parents about what the state and collective burden-sharing taxation can do. There is still time - just.

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