

Childcare must be protected not cut ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

One imaginative leap that the right always finds challenging is envisioning money as a solution to poverty. A shortage of dough might make you poor, but for conservatives it is simply unthinkable that giving you more of it might help -- the root cause, they say, must be something else, whether that be divorce, irreligion or the lack of respect of the young.

They, therefore, leapt on one finding of the Doing Better for Families report that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) issued last week, namely that the UK spends more on cash benefits for families than some other nations that enjoy lower child poverty rates. Much of this expenditure, however, is the super-size sticking plaster required to heal the great social wounds inflicted by the vast disparities in British wages. The same logic was at work in the 1980s, when the social security bill rocketed even as poverty soared -- pricey but inadequate compensation for unemployment and low pay.

Inadequate compensation is much better than nothing, and indeed the OECD -- no leftish thinktank but a club of the world's richest countries -- found striking evidence that the money the current government accuses the Labour administration of having "thrown at the problem" did in fact make a real difference. By the end of the noughties, the UK had above-average employment and enrolment in childcare, and had shuffled down from the top flight of the child poverty league towards the relative respectability of the mid-table. The poor remained poor, but the decline in their numbers was more marked than virtually anywhere else in the world. The Centre for Social Justice created by Iain Duncan Smith, now the work and pensions secretary, last week took to the airwaves to protest that people had been shunted just over an arbitrary breadline. But, in fact, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has long since established that Labour's progress on poverty is evident irrespective of where precisely the poverty line is drawn.

True, the OECD said that services that can help parents work can do even more than cash transfers, and yet here too the UK was, until recently, setting an example. Making up for the vast class gap in education that besets British parenting is not easy, but Sure Start centres were singled out for a special mention as a way of bringing together the range of support that families need to raise healthy children and hold down work. A shame, then, that hundreds of these centres are closing their doors.

Health in pregnancy payments, which ease the financial path through pregnancy, Sure Start maternity grants for the poorest, and baby bonds have all been cut, while child benefit is being frozen and eaten up by resurgent inflation. Depending on your view of the deficit, you might regard some of this as necessary, but what is surely barmy -- and barmier still in the wake of the OECD's verdict -- are cutbacks that mean work will not pay for parents. The assault on childcare is being made simultaneously on direct provision, such as Sure Start centres, and on contributions towards footing the bills.

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With its impeccably orthodox credentials, the OECD acknowledges that some cuts will be needed, but urges restraint to protect the neediest and those programmes that help parents to work, observing that expenditure on these things should be seen as an "investment for the future". While the coalition makes much of the burden of debt on the next generation, it is silent about the consequences of chronic underinvestment in them.

- reprinted from the Guardian

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