

# Parental leave is good for growth. And that includes fathers<sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Williams, Zoe

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## EXCERPTS:

It is unnerving to find something you agree with in a Queen's speech in the middle of a government that is as rebarbative as any you can remember, but there it is. I agree with the coalition policy on parental leave. Explained by the MP Liz Truss on ConservativeHome far better than she defended it on Newsnight last week, the new promotion of flexible leave involves taking the "maternity leave" pot of £2bn and awarding it as a lump sum, payable by instalments, to eligible families, who can then decide themselves whether the mother or the father takes the leave.

Truss seems to imply that the money, estimated at £5,000 per family, would be a universal benefit, not based on income. Katherine Rake, of the Family and Parenting Institute, says that at the moment, it's impossible to tell how it will be allocated. But let's say it is universal: before we even consider the gender ramifications, this seems to me to be both progressive and thrifty. At the moment mothers on low wages tend to return to work soonest, and mothers who earn £40,000-plus return last, so high-earning mothers, getting more for their first six weeks and getting statutory minimum for longer, reap most.

As for leave being split between the two parents, the sense of this is so self-evident it seems bizarre that a) it would take us so long to enshrine it in legislation and b) that we would even be discussing it. Yet we do discuss it, and in apparently ever decreasing circles, in which ever fewer principles are taken as understood. The aforementioned shambles on Newsnight involved Truss pitched against a "spokesperson for business", Lara Morgan.

The latter argued that the reason the US economy was recovering faster than ours was because they don't hamstring their smaller businesses with maternity regulation (I know; balance is enshrined in our broadcast rules, which is why you'd put a Tory up against a rabid possessive individualist. Obviously). What Truss should have said was that the reason the US economy was recovering faster than ours was because they weren't pursuing senseless austerity policies, but I have some sympathy with the fact that she didn't, given that austerity is the Conservatives' (only) policy.

Instead, she could have pointed out that the US is not a good role model in this area; that it is one of only four countries in the world (not the developed world; the world) with no national provision for protected parental leave; that this results in barbaric workplace practises (offices have breast-pumping stations that women book themselves into for 20-minute slots, trying to get their milk going by holding a photo of a baby they won't see awake until the weekend. I remember reading one woman's account of it: "I can never decide whether it's more boring or lonesome").

Truss could have pointed out that maternity leave is actually good for an economy, since without it women don't return to work or they return much later, and to different jobs at a lower skills level, wherein the gap itself or a lack of confidence has whittled away at their CV. This is a needless waste of the money we spent educating them in the first place. In Germany, from the start of this century, policy wonks made female workforce participation a core aim, not because the government had money it wanted to spend; it was because, as productive as that nation was, they were hamstrung by the gaps in their labour force.

Truss could have said any of that, without even having to break into the sweat of explaining why a business model that doesn't allow for employees to procreate is somewhat shortsighted. Good luck selling your wares when the species has died out. If you think this is an overstatement, consider that Sandra Gruescu, who did the research behind the German policy direction, found that poor maternity leave provision correlated with a low birth rate, and in 200 years (based on the birth rate in the 90s), Germans would be wiped out. "It's not such a long time, when you think about it", she said. From any conceivable angle, except possibly the angle that we'd do the world a favour with species suicide, paid maternity leave is a good idea, not just civilised and equitable, but also productive and prudent.

So by extension, unless you take an essentialist view that women are inherently better suited to childcare than men, all those arguments hold for fathers also. Ideas that come from people's guts are notoriously hard to shift. All I can say is, it is in the act of caring for children that you learn to care for them, and that holds for all of us. I should add that children can be quite annoying, and that holds for all of them. None of us is constitutionally suited to constant childcare, and none of us is constitutionally unsuited to any childcare.

The arguments, though, seem to be less about the abilities of fathers and more about whether or not we can afford it. Tim Montgomerie, also on ConservativeHome, called shared parental leave a "pre-crunch" idea. Steve Hilton, David Cameron's former director of strategy, famously suggested binning maternity leave to "stimulate" the economy. The opposite is true: we can't, from a commercial perspective, afford not to pay any leave. All there is to consider is whether or not to uphold a gender divide, and we should be able to dispatch that pretty quickly.

-reprinted from the Guardian

**Region:** Europe <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** maternity and parental leave <sup>[3]</sup>

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