

Rosamund Urwin: If we want women to work, we need cheaper childcare ^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

Mothers can't win. Go to work or stay home and you get judged. If you're in the office, who's looking after the children? Don't you miss them? Won't they miss you? No wonder working-mother guilt is so deep-felt — you're encouraged to self-flagellate more than St Jerome, who used to beat his own chest with a rock.

But if you're at home with the children, there's a feeling you're letting the side down, not making enough of a sacrifice to the altar of economic growth. A common response of stay-at-home mothers when asked what they do is a muttered, "Oh, I'm just a Mum."

It's not "just", though. You're raising the next generation! The future is in your hands! No one — mother or father — should feel embarrassed by that. The problem is, for some, it isn't a choice but a necessity, because childcare costs are so exorbitant.

The Women's Business Council estimates that there are 2.3 million British women who want to work but don't — and a further 1.3 million who work part-time and want to increase their hours. A major hurdle is that the UK has the second most expensive childcare in the world, after Switzerland.

A report by the Family and Childcare Trust found parents were spending more than £7,500 a year for care for two children, around 4.7 per cent more than the average mortgage bill.

So this week's call by the European Council for the UK to do more to help mothers back into work was welcome. Women here are twice as likely as those in the rest of Europe not to have a paid job in order to care for children and relatives. Not that the EU-loathing parts of the press saw it like that. Desperate to stick the knife in, they claimed Brussels bureaucrats were bullying women into work. Oh yes, those bullying calls for more subsidised childcare!

Childcare is often treated as an exclusively female concern, yet more and more fathers want to be heavily involved. A solution for couples could be for both to go part-time when children are young. It doesn't happen much here, yet it seems normal to my friends living in parts of Europe. While 42.6 per cent of women work parttime, just 13.2 per cent of men do — that's one of the biggest gender gaps in the EU. Closing that gap requires fathers to feel their role is just as much as a carer as a provider.

There is a quick fix for government, though. Hire a chauffeur and their wages are tax deductible, yet a nanny's aren't.

The hit to the national coffers from making childcare as least partially tax deductible would be offset by higher receipts from mothers staying in work.

"The English are not very spiritual people," said George Bernard Shaw. "So they invented cricket to give them some idea of eternity."

I'm pretty sure Transport for London has imposed the queues at Brixton station for the same reason, whatever they claim about "fixing the escalators". I've seen a man get through a thousand Tinder swipes before we're even at the stairs. Just as you're raging at the delay, though, you see the smile of TfL's best staff member, Leon. His job is to stand at the bottom of the working escalator, encouraging us all to walk down. Somehow, he does this with humour every morning, in the style of a charming Mr Motivator. Leon for London Mayor?

There are just too many Toms today

A 19-year-old British actor called Tom Holland is the new Spider-Man. Great for him, but imagine being the other Tom Holland — historian, champion tweeter and elite cricketer. Yesterday, historian Holland faced an onslaught of tweets about his leading role, which he wisely used to draw attention to his new book, *Dynasty*: a bit of light reading for Spidey fans as they wait for the film to come out.

Historian Holland has already had years of being confused with the actor Tom Hollander, including at university where Holland was often offered parts in plays: "The disappointment on directors' faces as it dawned on them that I was rubbish was always a joy."

So a request for Marvel: please cast Hollander as Uncle Ben, and historian Holland as the film's supervillain — just to stump fans completely.

The Tories are abandoning poor children

It's strange the limits the Government is willing to impose on itself. Before the election, David Cameron pledged there would be no rises in VAT, national insurance or income tax for the next five years, vowing to put that promise in law.

But what about legislation that sets binding targets to reduce child poverty? That, apparently, is "absurd".

The PM is planning to repeal the Child Poverty Act, intended to ensure fewer than a 10th of children live in relative poverty by 2020. Because of the definition of relative poverty — any household with an income below 60 per cent of the median — Cameron says increases in the state pension push more under-18s under the line. But his Government may cut child tax credits, which could knock another 300,000 or so into comparative privation.

Cameron is enabling the transfer of wealth upwards: ring-fence pensioners' prizes but raid kiddies' piggy banks! And how odd that a Government wants to rescind its ability to set taxes, yet thinks giving children a fairer start is "absurd".

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