**Cameronite Conservatism and the politics of marriage under the Coalition**

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**Abstract**

Under the leadership of David Cameron, the Conservative Party has been keen to stress the value of marriage and stable families. However, in practice the policies of the government he has led since 2010 - particularly the emphasis on austerity - have arguably undermined family life. In addition, by offering financial support to those who are married and disadvantaging those who are not the Coalition may serve to reinforce the ‘marriage divide’ in the UK.

**Introduction**

Marriage has long been regarded as a vital and virtuous societal institution by British Conservatives. How and whether this broad agreement about the value of marriage should be translated into public policy has nonetheless been subject to extensive debate within the party over the past few decades. While family breakdown – particularly the rise in the divorce rate and the growth in single-parent families led to much Conservative hand-wringing in the 1980s and 1990s, ‘for all the rhetoric about support for the “traditional family” this was by no means a policy priority’ (Daniel, 2011: 204). On the contrary, ‘withdrawal of state support for the family was a consistent policy motif in the 1980s’ (Daniel, 2011: 205). This apparent contradiction reflected a key tension within Thatcherism, which sought to combine individualistic economic liberalism with a moralistic social authoritarianism which promoted certain forms of family life (particularly marriage) over others.

This ideological friction persisted beyond the Thatcher era, and the division between social liberals and traditionalists became a pronounced feature of the debate about the future direction of Conservative politics while in opposition from 1997 to 2010. Some Conservatives, particularly those on the ‘modernising’ wing of the party, argued that the logical progression from the liberalisation of the economic sphere in the Thatcher era was a similarly liberal approach to the lifestyle choices made by individuals in their social lives. Others were keen for the party to take a more traditionalist line, advocating that the party recover its willingness to discuss social and moral issues, something which it had largely lost following the ill-fated ‘Back to Basics’ campaign of 1993-94 (Hayton, 2012: 104-5). As leader of the opposition between 2005 and 2010, David Cameron enjoyed some success in cultivating an image as a ‘family man’ who would make the politics of the family one of his key priorities if elected, while also portraying himself as a liberal Conservative intent on modernising his party (Hayton, 2012: 113). His positive disposition to the gay rights movement and endorsement of civil partnerships and adoption rights for same-sex couples distanced the Conservative leader from the traditionalist wing of his party which had opposed these measures. Cameron’s reputation as a liberal moderniser was also important in securing the Coalition agreement with the Liberal Democrats following the 2010 general election, and this arrangement was widely seen as premised at least in part on ideological convergence between the two party leaders and other key figures (Beech, 2011).

Given the Coalition with the Liberal Democrats and Cameron’s reputation as a liberal moderniser, ‘it would seem surprising, and possibly foolhardy, for the Conservatives to have chosen marriage as a key social policy battleground’, especially given the difficulties it has caused for Conservative politicians previously (Daniel, 2011: 198). In explaining this, this article explores the development of Cameron’s position on marriage in opposition, before analysing some of the key policy changes under the Coalition that relate to marriage, primarily in terms of the welfare system and taxation. I argue that while the Conservatives under Cameron have articulated some strongly pro-marriage rhetoric, the policies of the Coalition government have served to entrench the marriage divide. This focus means that the debate about equal marriage for same-sex couples which divided the Conservative Party is not covered by this article, but it is discussed at length elsewhere (Hayton and McEnhill, 2015). Nonetheless the social and economic arguments advanced here apply equally to same-sex couples.

**Marriage and morality: mending the broken society?**

One effect of extended exile in opposition during the New Labour era was to convince many Conservatives that they needed to develop a more far-reaching and electorally appealing social policy agenda. On becoming party leader in 2005 Cameron initiated a broad-based policy review, which included the establishment of a Social Justice Policy Group (SJPG). In his leadership acceptance speech Cameron (2005) had identified the need to ‘mend our broken society’ as a central priority and identified ‘family breakdown’ as a key indicator of this societal malaise. The subsequent SJPG report tried to balance the tension between individual freedom and statist approaches to social issues, stating that while ‘people must take responsibility for their own choices’ government retained ‘a responsibility to help people make the right choices’ and to ‘value and support positive life choices’. Consequently, at ‘the heart of this approach is support for the role of marriage’ (SJPG, 2007a: 7), a principle that Cameron publicly welcomed (Hayton, 2012: 115).

The SJPG sought to present an evidence-based case for supporting marriage, highlighting the apparent superiority of marriage over other family structures, particularly for the raising of children. It pointed to the higher separation rate amongst unmarried couples, and correlated family breakdown with social problems such as crime and drug abuse (SJPG, 2007b). In comparing married and cohabiting couples in this way, the SJPG report failed to distinguish between correlation and causation. The report implies that positive social indicators that correlate with marriage occur because of the presence of marriage, and concludes that marriage should therefore be encouraged to spread these benefits. The analytical flaw is that the causal effect might be operating in the other direction: couples already benefiting from the more propitious circumstances associated with marriage are the ones most likely to marry precisely because they are in such a position. In short, the report fails to acknowledge the marriage divide that can be seen in the UK and elsewhere, where marriage is increasingly the preserve of higher income groups.

The most eye catching policy recommendations contained in the report were for a transferable tax allowance for all married couples, at a cost of £3.2bn and benefiting eligible couples to the tune of £1000 per year; and a ‘reduction in the couple penalty by enhancing the couple element in Working Tax Credit’ to the tune of £32 per week for 1.8m couples with children, at a cost of a further £3bn per annum (SJPG: 2007b: 11). In addition *Breakthrough Britain* proposed some further more minor changes to welfare benefits, and advocated the ‘reinstatement and full public use’ of vocabulary such as ‘marital status’ in official paperwork, which the report authors believed would send ‘a clear and unambiguous signal about marriage’ (SJPG, 2007b: 11).

Written as it was before the financial crash, the SJPG can perhaps be forgiven the scale of its ambition in terms of the cost of its proposed measures to the public purse. Less specific versions of these policies did nonetheless work their way into the 2010 Conservative Party manifesto, which pledged to ‘end the couple penalty’ in the tax credits system, and to ‘recognise marriage and civil partnerships in the tax system’ in order to ‘send an important signal that we value couples and the commitment that people make when they get married’ (Conservative Party, 2010: 41). This latter pledge in particular was closely associated with Cameron personally, as he had first made it during his bid for the party leadership, and continued to repeat it throughout his tenure as leader of the opposition. While the manifesto itself did not detail definite numbers, the Conservatives indicated that their initial ambition would allow an individual who had a partly or wholly unused personal allowance to transfer up to £750 of this to their spouse, saving them £150 per year in tax (Daniel, 2011: 213). It was clear from the positions taken in the election campaign that this would be an area where the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats would struggle to find common-ground, as the future Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, had described the proposals as a ‘throwback to the Edwardian era’ and ‘patronising drivel’ (quoted in Sawar, 2010). The Coalition agreement signed in May 2010 by Clegg and Cameron consequently included the provision that Liberal Democrats MPs could abstain from voting on this issue.

Cameron’s attachment to the idea of a married couple’s tax allowance to benefit families with a non-working parent derived primarily from its symbolic nature, rather than its practical effect. The former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey welcomed the plan for the message it would send, rather than on the basis of its practical effect, calling it ‘a long overdue restatement of the centrality of this institution to the common good of our society’ (quoted in Sawar, 2010). The Conservative leader similarly conceded that: ‘what matters is the message more than the money’ (*ibid*.). This admission gives credence to Labour’s charge that the policy amounted to gesture politics, particularly given Conservative plans to restrict other benefits for families with children.

**Marriage and the tax and benefits system**

This section outlines some of the main alterations to the tax and benefit system since 2010. Due to the complexity of the system not all of these can be explored in detail, but key changes relating to married couples and other families with children are highlighted. I argue that the overall effect of the government’s reforms has not been to support family life, but that measures to reduce the welfare bill have particularly hit lower income families with children. The Coalition’s policies may therefore serve to entrench inequality and the marriage divide.

It is important to acknowledge the context within which these decisions were taken. A cross-party consensus existed on the need to tackle the record deficit in the public finances, although dispute existed over how this should be done. During the election campaign Labour and the Liberal Democrats had cautioned that cutting spending too quickly and/or too early risked stifling economic growth and compounding the deficit problem. The Conservatives wanted to eliminate the deficit more rapidly, and their position came to dominate the Coalition agreement. This stated that tackling the deficit would be the number one priority of the new government and, crucially, that spending cuts rather than tax rises would bear the brunt of the fiscal adjustment required. By embedding this position at the heart of the government’s programme the Conservatives effectively secured their dominance of the Coalition’s agenda more generally (Hayton, 2014). Given the scale of the deficit and the size of the welfare budget, unsurprisingly benefits and tax credits were in the Chancellor’s sights. In his emergency budget in June 2010 he announced a number of welfare cuts, including a three year freeze on child benefit and cuts to child tax credits for better-off families. In addition, welfare benefits would no longer be uprated in line with the retail price index (RPI), but would instead be linked to the (lower) consumer price index (CPI). In 2012 further welfare cuts were announced, including restricting the uprating of benefits paid to working age people to 1 per cent annually (rather than in line with inflation), and ending the universal payment of child benefit.

This latter proposal caused some consternation amongst Conservative backbenchers and the right-wing press who feared that it would discriminate against families including a stay-at-home parent and a single earner. The plan first announced at the 2010 Conservative Party conference was for a household to lose its child benefit entirely if it included a higher rate taxpayer. This cliff-edge effect was criticised as it would create the anomaly whereby a household with two parents each earning just below the higher-tax threshold would continue to receive the benefit, while a household with a single-earner just over the higher rate tax threshold would lose it entirely, even though the latter’s total household income would be considerably less. The finalised policy, contained in the March 2012 budget, saw these concerns partially addressed through the introduction of a taper, whereby the benefit would be gradually withdrawn for earners between £50,000 and £60,000 per year (with those above this level losing it completely). Inevitably this compromise significantly reduced the scale of the saving to the Treasury (estimated at £1.5bn for 2013-14), and it also failed to address the unequal treatment between single and dual income families, but simply shifted this up the income scale (IFS, 2013).

In terms of taxation, the Coalition’s flagship policy has been to incrementally raise the personal tax allowance to £10,000 (from £6,475 in 2010). This policy objective was reached in April 2014. It has reduced the income tax bill of a basic rate taxpayer by £705 per year, with a further uplift in the personal allowance to £10,600 scheduled for April 2015. Much of the gain for higher rate taxpayers was clawed back, so the largest gainers have been households with two earners both paying basic rate tax. In 2013 the Chancellor George Osborne announced that a transferable tax allowance for married couples and civil partners will be introduced from April 2015, broadly in line with the plans outlined by the Conservatives before the 2010 general election. The amount will be fixed at 10 percent of the personal allowance – so £1,060 for the 2015-16 tax year – representing a tax saving of £210 per eligible couple. This allowance will only be available to basic rate taxpayers. HMRC estimate that a third of the beneficiaries will be above the state pension age, and that 84 percent of the individual beneficiaries will be male (HMRC, 2013: 3). The measure was criticised by Labour on the grounds that most children would not see their parents receive a tax cut as a result of the proposal (BBC News, 2013). This criticism reflects the fact lone parents, unmarried cohabiting parents, married parents who both work and earn in excess of the personal allowance, and married parents where one pays higher-rate tax, would all be ineligible. This policy will therefore have a very limited impact on the government’s child poverty target.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has modelled the impact of the government’s personal taxation and welfare measures across the income distribution. According to their estimates, all income earners? are worse off, by an average of around 3 percent. The richest ten percent of the population are the biggest losers, by nearly 7 percent. However, with the exception of this wealthiest group it is those in lower income deciles who have been hit hardest in percentage terms, with the poorest decile being almost 5 percent worse off (Phillips, 2014). Their analysis across household type has also found that families with children have been hardest hit by the government’s measures, largely due to the cuts to tax credits and benefit restrictions. Couples with children but only one earner are about 9 percent worse off, compared to those with children and two earners (minus 4 percent); lone parents in work (minus 5.7 percent) and two earner couples without children (minus 1 percent) (IFS, 2013: 20). Consequently, although the Conservatives have technically fulfilled their pledge to recognise marriage through the introduction of a transferable tax allowance for married couples, their policies have in fact made the vast majority of couples worse off, and have disproportionately hit the ‘traditional’ family unit (single-earner couples with children) that they purport to value.

**Conclusion: modernising marriage?**

Rhetorically at least, marriage has been a central plank of Cameronite conservatism, marking a juncture between its liberal and conservative elements. The Conservatives under Cameron have made a consistent moral argument for the virtue of marriage, even though at times they have preferred to couch this case in evidence-based language. In stressing the value he places on marriage Cameron has sought to appeal to traditional Conservative voters and articulate a broader social vision, linked to his claim that Britain has a broken society in need of repair. Before the 2010 election this emphasis on marriage was, as Paul Daniel noted, ‘the striking point of departure’ between the Conservatives and Labour in the area of family policy (2011: 212). However, writing soon after the new government was formed, Daniel predicted that it ‘seems unlikely that the broad direction of family policy will change under the Coalition’ (2011: 212). By contrast this article has argued that the consequences of the Coalition’s actions are more far-reaching. The dominance of the politics of austerity and the drive to make savings from the welfare budget has impacted particularly on the least well off and families with children. As such, it seems that the government’s policies will serve to further entrench inequality and with it the economic and social marriage divide.

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