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Change in work-family reconciliation policy in France and the UK since 2008: the influence of economic crisis and austerity

Work-family reconciliation policy - understood here to include the provision or subsidy of childcare services, parental leaves and the right to request flexibility at work for care responsibilities – has been undergoing a process of convergence across Europe in the last twenty years with latecomer countries which had hitherto had little provision in this area, such as Germany, the UK and the Netherlands, “catching up” with early bird countries such as France and Scandinavia with their extensive provisions for childcare and parental leave (see for example Bonoli, 2013; O’Brien, 2013; Morgan, 2013). That said, significant divergences remain between countries due to their historical pathway legacies which establish how the state, market, culture and family interact (Kvist, 2013; O’Brien, 2013; Pfau-Effinger, 2004). In 2008, this convergence process confronted a “critical juncture” (Pierson, 2004) in the form of the sovereign debt crisis, consequent economic slowdown and ensuing austerity measures witnessed across Europe (Ollier-Malaterre, Valcour, Den Dulk & Kossek, 2013) which exacerbated pre-existing pressures on social policies, limiting their expansion and threatening their maintenance (Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2014). However, it appears that work-family reconciliation policy has emerged relatively unscathed from this process (Baird & O’Brien, 2015; Gornick, 2015; Moss & Deven, 2015), this resistance to austerity being accounted for by the fact that expenditure in this area is limited (in contrast with spending on health, pensions and social security benefits) in relation to the electoral benefit it can bring to parties in office (Bonoli, 2013). Furthermore, work-family reconciliation policy and the early-years’ education associated with it have been considered firmly as a social investment rather than a cost (Kvist, 2013). Indeed, promoting mothers’ employment may be seen as even more necessary in hard economic times as a protection against poverty and benefit dependency if the male breadwinner were to become unemployed.

All that said, even if post-2008 economic problems have not put a halt to the development of reconciliation policy or caused a reversal of the convergence trend, it is likely that these circumstances will have interacted with other policy drivers to influence the nature of change during this period in path-dependent ways. In order to evaluate such a supposition, this article will systematically review and compare changes in work-family reconciliation policy since 2008 in two contrasting case-study countries, namely the “early bird” country France and the “latecomer” country, the UK.¹ These two countries have traditionally had very different policy histories and normative assumptions about the respective work-care responsibilities of citizens and the state but had undergone a significant convergence up until 2008 (Milner, 2010).² Traditionally in all relevant typologies, France and the UK are placed in different categories: France has been labelled a conservative welfare regime (Esping-Anderson, 1999), a modified male-breadwinner state (Lewis, 1992) and an optional familialist state (Leitner, 2003). France developed measures in the 1970s to enable women to combine employment and motherhood, a policy framed by the need to increase

¹ These figures are derived from an analysis of data from EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) by Bradshaw et al, 2015.

² France has been visited on a number of occasions in the last few years by UK childcare ministers looking for best practice. For example, in September 2015 Sam Gyimah, on the occasion of one such visit to Paris announced “... in France high-quality childcare is central to efforts to support families to balance their work and home life. That’s why I’m keen to find out what works for them...” Department for Education and Sam Gyimah MP (2015) “Sam Gyimah visits Paris to share best practice in childcare”, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/sam-gyimah-visits-paris-to-share-best-practice-in-childcare>, [the UK Childcare Minister](#),

both the labour force and birth rate and embedded in a tradition of the state having a broad legitimacy for intervention in the family (Haut Conseil de la Famille, 2011). Meanwhile, the UK has been labelled a liberal welfare regime (Esping-Andersen, 1999), traditionally a male breadwinner state (Lewis, 1992) and an implicit defamilialising regime (Leitner, 2003). During the 1970s and 1980s the state did not intervene either to encourage or discourage mothers' participation in the labour market. It was not until 1997 that reconciliation policy began to develop in the country as part of the social-democratic project of New Labour, informed by gender equality considerations, but also firmly rooted in a third-way social investment and activation policy model. In terms of childcare coverage, significant differences remain between the two countries: in 2013 in full-time equivalent terms, childcare coverage for 3-5 year olds was only 50 per cent in the UK (headcount: 73 per cent) but 88 per cent in France (head count: 100 per cent). The FTE coverage rate for 0-2 years olds was only 15 per cent in the UK (headcount: 30 per cent) whereas it was 47 per cent in France (headcount: 52 per cent).³ These different policy landscapes have influenced women's labour market position in the two countries: the gender employment gap is lower in France (7 points) than in the UK (9.5 points) within a lower overall employment rate (65 per cent in France and 74 per cent in the UK). The overall gender earnings gap is also lower in France at 32.9 per cent compared with 47.6 per cent in the UK,⁴ explained in great part by the higher incidence of part-time work amongst women in the UK (41 per cent) than in France (30 per cent).⁵

Furthermore, the two countries have had opposing political trajectories since 2008: in France, the right-wing administration of Nicolas Sarkozy was in government in the first post-crisis years but lost power in 2012 to the Socialist administration of François Hollande. Conversely, the Labour Party was in power in the UK until 2010 when the Conservative-led Coalition government took office. The Conservatives have been governing alone since 2015. The two countries differ also in terms of the impact of the crisis and their response to it as concerns public spending. According to the World Bank⁶ in 2007 France and the UK had similar growth rates at 2.4 and 2.6 per cent of GDP respectively. However, although France fared better than the UK in terms of growth during the 2008-2011 period, between 2012 and 2014, UK GDP rose by between 1.2 and 2.9 per cent per annum whereas in France the increase in all three years was below 0.7 per cent. Austerity cuts to public spending have been more severe in the UK than in France. In 2008, France devoted 52.7 per cent of its GDP to public spending against 47.3 per cent in the UK. By 2014, this initial difference had grown significantly with France devoting 57.2 per cent of GDP to public spending against 44.4 per cent in the UK (INSEE, 2014; INSEE 2016). Up until 2014 the French government relied mostly on tax increases to control their budget deficit whereas the stated aim of the UK Coalition was to cut public expenditure rapidly and redefine the contours of the welfare state, this being portrayed as an "urgent truth" and justification for a residual welfare-state model (Farnsworth & Irving, 2011). However, in a change of tack in 2014 the French government announced the objective of reducing public spending by 50 billion euros by 2017.

Analytical frameworks

In order to undertake this analysis, the article will first describe the changes which have taken place in work-family reconciliation policy in France and the UK since 2008 with the aid of Hall's (1993) framework which defines three levels of policy change: adjustments to the settings of policy

³ These figures are derived from an analysis of data from EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) by Bradshaw et al, 2015

⁴ Figures for 2015 (European Union, 2016).

⁵ Figures for 2015 (European Commission, 2016)

⁶ <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>,

instruments which represent first order change⁷; changes to or the introduction of new techniques or policy instruments which represents second-order change;⁸ and lastly, the recasting of the overarching goals that guide policy which represents third-order change, also referred to as paradigmatic change.⁹ Second, the article will assess the extent to and the ways in which the economic crisis and austerity in combination with other drivers have influenced work-family reconciliation policy in each national context since 2008. In order to do this, the article will refer to a range of socio-economic, political, institutional and cultural explanations organised within Mätzke and Ostner's (2010a; 2010b) framework for understanding change in family policy. This framework applies a twofold distinction, the first aspect of which differentiates between material as opposed to ideational explanations of policy change whilst the second distinguishes between the role of societal as opposed to political actors. This produces four categories of explanation. In the material / societal category, socio-economic changes and the new social challenges that they produce (mothers' employment; the ageing population; child poverty) often lie at the root of policy change. However, given that similar problems are addressed in different ways and at different times in particular countries, alone they cannot account for such change. Indeed, even the identification of a certain situation as problematic is not a neutral process. Important also in explaining policy change is the ability of particular social groups and organized interests (feminist groups; family associations; business lobby) to gain access to political influence to promote particular types of policy action. In the material / political category, policy change may be explained by a change of actors responsible for decision-making (political parties; bureaucratic elites) or by shifts in the composition and/or ideologies of political parties in power or opposition. Material factors alone, however, cannot explain policy change and it is necessary also to consider ideational explanations. In the ideational / societal category, individuals' changing attitudes and ideals about parenthood and employment are of course very important in determining what kind of change the public will tolerate or indeed militate for. However, these in turn are subject to influence by organized interests and politicians, and indeed the practical and symbolic effects of existing policy itself. In the ideational / political category is to be found the influence of "rhetoric action", a process whereby political actors espouse and promote ideas which appeal to the moral intuition of societal actors to convince them that certain policy changes are necessary (the "urgent truth" of austerity; "free choice" of childcare options). Furthermore, epistemic communities, transnational networks of professionals with a justified claim to policy knowledge (academics, policy experts) have an important ideational role to play in defining the problematic nature of a social phenomenon and advising on policy responses to it. In sum, therefore, we need to understand how this range of material and ideational factors and societal and political actors interact to allow new social challenges to be defined, policy proposals to address these challenges to be elaborated and such proposals to be enacted.

Work-family reconciliation policy in France and the UK prior to 2008

In order to understand how historical pathway legacies might have affected policy change since 2008, the development of work-family reconciliation policy in each country prior to 2008 will be discussed. Until the late 1990s there was a gulf separating France and the UK on this issue (Lewis,

⁷ For example, benefit levels, eligibility rules

⁸ Work-family reconciliation policy is constituted of a number of different types of policy instruments the principal ones of which are: provision of childcare places, subsidies for purchasing childcare, parental-leave rights and parental-leave benefits and rights to flexibility at work (Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser (2014)

⁹ For example, Mazur (2002) identifies three possible goals for work-family reconciliation policy: (i) to make stay-at-home mothers financially independent from their husbands' salaries; (ii) to ensure that women's primary parenting role does not prevent them participating in employment; (iii) to redefine gender roles, focusing policy on men's contribution to the family as well as women's participation in the labour market.

2013). On the one hand, the French state had enjoyed wide legitimacy to intervene in family life since the beginning of the welfare state (Fagnani & Math, 2011). From its inception, the social security system had organised a transfer of resources from the childless to families with children which gave a broad legitimacy to state support for mothers' employment. In 1972 the "allocation pour frais de garde"¹⁰ was introduced whilst local authorities ran means-tested and subsidised crèches for the under threes and children from three to school age could attend the "école maternelle"¹¹ for free. Such assistance was justified within a natalist framework which secured support for work-family reconciliation measures from across the political spectrum: the perceived demographic weakness of the country meant that the state needed to ensure that women both remained in the workforce and brought up children (Jenson, 1986). Gender equality as a frame of reference played a subordinate role only in this process and work-family reconciliation remained anchored in a notion of maternalism (Bonoli, 2013; Mazur, 2002; White, 2004). This longevity of state support for working mothers explains to a great extent the social acceptability of placing a child of under three in full-time childcare in France (Fagnani & Math, 2011). In similarity to France, the notion of maternalism has strongly influenced the UK welfare state but in contrast, the British liberal tradition has led to a reluctance to intervene in the family lives of citizens, whether to discourage or encourage mothers' employment (Fleckenstein & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011; Haux, 2011). In the UK work-family reconciliation policy did not develop until the late 1990s despite the fact that mothers' employment had grown strongly in the 1980s with over half of all mothers with children under five being economically active by the early 1990s (Sly, 1994). The Conservative administration in the 1980s had considered the family to be an exclusively private matter with policy intervention restricted to targeting support for children in need. The traditional family "male breadwinner" model was not actively supported, but neither was there any attempt to undermine it. Mothers' employment had to be managed within the resources of the household, often with recourse to part-time work and informal networks of family, friends and neighbours, the voluntary provision of pre-school education and private market childcare. Local authorities provided some part-time nursery education for pre-school children and through the decade the number of four-year olds in primary school reception classes grew (Lewis, 2013).

Both countries saw considerable change to the reconciliation landscape through the 1990s which started the process of convergence between them. In France new reconciliation policy instruments were developed from the late 1980s as new policy goals were grafted on to existing ones. In the context of the unemployment crisis of the time and without a strong gender-egalitarian frame to protect it, reconciliation policy began to be dictated by employment policy which sought to deactivate certain sectors of the workforce, including mothers of young children in pursuit of the goal of "work-sharing" (Bonoli, 2013; Fagnani & Math, 2009; Martin, 2010). The principal change was the introduction of a parental leave benefit - the Allocation d'Education Parentale (APE)¹² - by the Socialists in 1985 to complement the right to parental leave. The benefit allowed for a long leave up to the third birthday of the child paid at a low flat rate, replacing less than 15 per cent of average earnings (OECD, 2014a). Initially the APE was only available for the third child. It was denounced by feminist groups as a "mothers' wage" in disguise but welcomed by Catholic-influenced family associations such as the Union Nationale des Associations Familiales (UNAF)¹³ (Fagnani, 2000). Once in power, the right-wing government developed around the APE what was to become the justificatory frame of reconciliation policy goals for the ensuing thirty years: the provision of

¹⁰ Benefit for childcare costs

¹¹ Nursery school which had existed since the late nineteenth century

¹² Education-by-Parents Benefit

¹³ Since 1945, the UNAF had been an institutional partner advising on all areas of family policy.

freedom of choice for families in terms of how to combine employment and child rearing (Martin, 2010). In terms of policy instruments, this meant that the state supported equally mothers who wanted to stay at home with their young children¹⁴ and those who wanted to remain in the workforce. The APE was extended to the second child in 1994 and offered on a part-time basis. In 2004 under a right-wing government, paid parental leave was extended to parents of one child, but only for one year and the reconciliation policy package as a whole was reconfigured and renamed to render explicit this notion of choice for families. For example, the APE became the *Complément de Libre Choix d'Activité (CLCA)*.¹⁵ Lastly, in 2002 two weeks' paternity leave was introduced. Amongst OECD countries, France has had the highest degree of diversification of work-family reconciliation policy instruments with parents benefiting from a "double free choice": not only between parental leave and childcare for the under threes, but also between a wide range of individualised or collective childcare options (Thévenon, 2011a). Alongside the introduction of the parental leave benefit and the continuing provision of nursery schools and local-authority run *crèches*, through the 1980s and 1990s France sought to increase the number of childcare places by supporting the use of individual and flexible forms of childcare - particularly childminding - through universal benefits for dual-earner parents and single-parent families and tax breaks rather than increasing investment in *crèche* provision which was more costly. In 1986 the *Allocation de garde d'un enfant à domicile (AGED)*¹⁶ was introduced followed by the *Aide à la famille pour l'emploi d'une assistante maternelle agréée (AFAEMA)*¹⁷ in 1990. These benefits were combined to become the *Complément de Libre Choix de Mode de Garde (CLCMG)*¹⁸ in 2004. Indeed, childminding has become the most used type of care for the under threes (Observatoire national de la petite enfance, 2016). All that said, from the early 2000s more cash was injected into nursery schools and *crèches* following increased demand for collective childcare with available places rising 2.9 per cent per year between 2003 and 2007 (Fagnani & Math, 2011).

In the UK, the New Labour government, elected in 1997, began the process of convergence with early-bird states such as France as the most radical changes to parental rights since the second world-war were enacted (Morgan, 2013), bringing about a paradigmatic change in the goals of policy and giving the state responsibility for work-family matters (Lewis & Campbell, 2007). The following policy instruments were introduced: Local Education Authorities were obliged to provide a free part-time place (12.5 hours per week) for 4 year olds extended to 3 year olds in 2004 with hours extended to 15 per week in 2008. The SureStart scheme provided collective childcare in targeted disadvantaged areas. Means-tested financial subsidies for childcare were also provided through a system of tax credits introduced in 1999 covering up to 70 per cent of childcare costs up to a ceiling per child which rose to 80 per cent in 2003. For families not entitled to tax credits, a tax efficient childcare voucher system was introduced in 2005 whereby employers could provide tax and National Insurance- free vouchers for childcare. Maternity leave was extended incrementally up to nine months' paid and three months' unpaid leave by 2006 whilst in similarity to France in 2002 two week's paid paternity leave was introduced. Lastly, in 2003 an employee "right to request" reduced or flexible hours to accommodate childcare and other responsibilities was enacted (Daly, 2010; Lewis, 2013). Despite the radical nature of these reforms, the path dependency of New Labour's approach of combining neoliberalism with responses to emerging social needs and relying on the

¹⁴ This is essentially the under-threes since all French children have the right to a place in nursery school from the age of three to school age with nearly all families sending their children to the *maternelle*.

¹⁵ Benefit for the free choice of economic activity

¹⁶ Benefit for minding a child at home

¹⁷ Support for families employing a registered childminder

¹⁸ Supplement for the free choice of child care option

market to provide childcare, maintaining cash benefits at a low residual level and targeting help to lower income families through means-testing is evident (Daly, 2010). In terms of the justificatory frame of these developments, although gender equality was employed to a degree (Milner, 2010), in similarity to France, it was never the primary ideational frame. Whereas in France, natalism and the goal of work-sharing had helped shape reconciliation policy, increasingly over the course of the New Labour governments, policy was influenced by notions of increasing the active workforce as an anti-poverty strategy and in relation to the responsibilities of social citizenship (Lewis, 2013). By 2008 in comparison to France the UK still had far less generous childcare and leave provisions: there was no provision for paid parental leave for fathers other than the statutory two weeks' paternity leave; support for childcare for the under threes was limited as was state-funded early-years education, this being provided in the private rather than the state-education sector. Indeed, between 2005 and 2009 the average number of weekly hours spent in formal childcare for children under three was 28.9 in France but only 13.8 in the UK (Ciccia & Bleijenbergh, 2014).

Changes to work-family reconciliation policy in France and the UK since 2008

By 2008, material problems regarding two key areas of work-family reconciliation had been identified in France and the UK. First, both countries had a highly "gendered" system for childcare leave (Saxonberg, 2013): in France, the CLCA had neither a wage replacement rate high enough to encourage fathers to take it up (Moss & Deven, 2013), nor a "father quota" (the reservation of a certain proportion of the leave for "the other parent", a policy emanating from the Nordic countries in the 1990s) whilst in the UK only mothers had the right to extended leave. Second, both countries faced the question of affordability of and access to formal childcare principally for pre-school children¹⁹, a situation which was constituting a disincentive to labour force participation particularly among less educated and unskilled women (Evertsson et al, 2009). In France, geographical disparities in childcare coverage for the under threes and differential pricing of individual as opposed to collective care were contributing to a social bifurcation of the female labour market whilst in the UK the high cost of childcare was a problem for a wide-range of families. The identification of these situations as problematic can be seen as part of an ideational change which Orloff (2010) describes as the "farewell to maternalism", that is, the rejection of a model of work-family reconciliation which focuses on helping mothers alone to combine employment with their caregiving role in favour of promoting an "adult worker" model based on degendered and shorter parental leaves and extensive and affordable childcare. Such an approach can also be related to the development of the "post-industrial welfare state" (Matzke and Ostner, 2010b) in which the state recognizes and supports only economically active adults, providing them with help to undertake their care responsibilities where necessary, and targets spending on social investments.

Turning first to the question of parental leave and the case of France, a significant new policy was introduced: the Prestation partagée d'éducation de l'enfant (PreParE)²⁰ which came into effect for babies born from 1st January 2015. The PreParE continues to give parents of one child one year of full or part-time parental leave until the child's first birthday, but the "other" parent must take at least six months of the leave. For parents of two or more children, their previous entitlement to paid leave up to their child's third birthday has remained unchanged but each parent is now only entitled

¹⁹ In the UK statutory school age is five but children start school in reception classes normally in the September after their fourth birthday. In France, although the statutory school age is 6, almost all children attend the école maternelle from three years of age regardless of whether their parents work or not. Therefore in the UK there was a problem regarding both care for the under threes and as regards early-years education whereas in France the issue is with care of the under-threes.

²⁰ Shared benefit for raising children

to a maximum of twenty-four months of leave per child to include postnatal-maternity and paternity leave. The benefit is still paid at a low flat rate²¹ meaning that the likelihood of significant father take-up is reduced and the maximum leave available to mothers remains long at two years. However, despite its limitations, this second-order change of policy instrument may be construed as the beginnings of a third-order policy change in that it is the first work-family reconciliation policy instrument in France to target directly the behaviour of fathers and begin to move the country away from the implicit maternalism that had previously characterised work-family reconciliation policy (Mazur, 2002; White, 2004). How and why, therefore, did this policy change come about and what effect, if any, did the economic crisis and austerity have on its form and the process of policy change?

By the 2000s, the epistemic community of international academics and French policy experts had identified that the CLCA was contributing to two socio-economic problems: the lack of father involvement in child rearing and the distancing from the labour market of low-qualified and younger mothers (see for example, Afas, 1998; Algava et al, 2005; Fagnani 2000). Although in principle open to both parents and despite having a relatively long history, parental leave was highly gendered (Saxonberg, 2013). Around 97 per cent of those claiming the APE or later the CLCA were mothers (Boyer & Ceroux, 2012). Indeed, in 2013, the percentage of those taking up parental leave who were men in France was one of the lowest (15th out of 18) in the OECD (OECD, 2014a). The setting of the CLCA offering a low flat-rate payment was an important reason for this low father take-up: given the gender pay gap, families lose less money if the mother ceases to work. Furthermore, given that the leave has been mostly taken by mothers, and indeed by less qualified mothers, its length at up to three years for the second and subsequent children - one of the longest in the EU and OECD - came to be seen as problematic. Research identified that such an absence weakens a woman's position on the labour market for the rest of her career and has a detrimental effect on gender equality in the home (Afsas, 1998). Recognition of these problems gained momentum within the French welfare elite during the 2000s with reports published highlighting the need to review the existing parental leave policy.²²

Arising from these reports was the introduction of a new policy instrument in 2006 which was, however limited in its reach: the Complément optionnel de libre choix d'activité (COLCA)²³ – a one-year better remunerated leave which parents of three or more children could choose instead of the CLCA (Milner, 2010). One explanation of why more extensive change did not happen at that time is that although there had been partisan consensus in favour of the overarching policy goal of enabling mothers of dependent children to remain in the workforce since the 1970s in France, from the 1980s until the mid- to late-2000s, there had been a growing division of political opinion concerning the length of parental leave. Politicians on the right and centre and the powerful Union Nationale des Associations Familiales framed their support for maintaining long parental leaves in terms of “choice” for families to stay at home until children go to nursery school. This frame was very popular with the public. Politicians on the left and feminist lobby groups such as the Laboratoire d'Égalité were in principle in favour of a shorter, better paid and better shared parental leave for all (White, 2004) although left-wing governments to date had not made such changes. However, in 2009 a partisan convergence first on shortening and then on sharing of parental leave came about (Morgan,

²¹In 2016 this was 390 euros per month which is 34 per cent of the net full-time (35 hour) minimum wage of 1144 euros <http://www.wageindicator.org/main/salary/minimum-wage/france>

²² See for example a report by Michel Laroque, the General Inspector of Social Affairs in 2006: Congé parental fractionnable indemnisé, rapport no. 2006-97, <http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/var/storage/rapports-publics/064000687.pdf>

²³ The optional supplement for the free choice of activity

2013) when President Sarkozy proposed the reduction of parental-leave benefit for all parents to one year to be paid as a percentage of former income: he did not mention a father quota at that time. This reduction of parental leave was part of Sarkozy's paradigmatic change regarding employment policy which renounced the previous strategy of work-sharing to reduce unemployment and adopted an active labour market strategy designed to increase the employment rate of the working-age population (Windebank, 2012), employment policy having been a strong influence on work-family reconciliation policy since the late 1980s. Tasked with making policy proposals, in 2011 the Inspection Générale des Affaires Sociales (IGAS) published recommendations which endorsed the reduction of the CLCA to one year and suggested a benefit of 60 per cent of previous salary. It added that two months of this leave should be reserved for the "other" parent. In the interim, the Council of the European Union had issued a directive in 2010 to all member states to put into place at least one month of a "father quota". This father quota was accepted by the government which promised a white paper promoting "equal sharing of parental responsibilities within the couple" by December 2011 (Ministère des Solidarités et de la Cohésion Sociale, 2011). However, before action could be taken, President Sarkozy lost the 2012 presidential elections. It was left to the Socialist administration of President Hollande to reform parental leave.

As has been seen, the eventual policy was not as radical a change as that proposed in the IGAS report although the enactment of these proposals remains the longer-term aim of the Socialist government. The stated reason for not doing so was the cost of such a change in the light of the economic and budgetary situation: in 2011 it was estimated that the cost of implementing the IGAS plan and providing childcare places to compensate for this shortening of leave would have increased expenditure on the under threes from 0.7 to 1.2 per cent of GDP (Thévenon, 2011b). In contrast, if father take-up of the PreParE remains at previous low levels,²⁴ this change of policy instrument has the potential of saving 70 million euros by 2017 by reducing mothers' entitlement to leave.²⁵ This would be welcome as the Hollande government is looking to save up to 800 million euros from its family budget as part of its objective to cut spending by 50 billion euros between 2014 and 2017. Furthermore, due to the economic situation, there has been difficulty in developing enough childcare places for the under-threes to offset a more radical reduction in parental leave (see discussion below). Although these material constraints are very important, the decision not to enact a more far-reaching reform of parental leave must also be viewed in the light of the attachment of public opinion to the notion of free choice in work-family reconciliation as shown in opinion surveys²⁶ and reactions to change or proposals for change on social media, opinion reinforced by groups such as the UNAF. This has made parties in office hesitant to make radical changes to parental level benefits.

In the UK, parental leave policy in 2008 was still undeveloped in comparison to early-bird states such as France and indeed some latecomer countries such as Germany and highly gendered in that there was no extended paid leave open to fathers above the two weeks' statutory paternity leave. Plans, however, were in hand to address this lacuna. The Labour government had outlined the Additional

²⁴ In the latest figures for December 2014 to December 2015, the first year of operation of the PreParE, there was an increase of 1.8 points in terms of fathers taking up parental leave : from 3.3 to 5.1 per cent. La lettre de L'Observatoire national de la petite enfance, no.1 September 2016, p.4.
<https://www.caf.fr/sites/default/files/cnaf/LettreOnpeN1.pdf>

²⁵ Congé parental: les députés PS proposent un compromis, Les Echos, 14 October 2014
http://www.lesechos.fr/14/10/2014/lesechos.fr/0203856834751_conge-parental---les-deputes-ps-proposent-un-compromis.htm

²⁶ Opinion surveys have showed that strong support for long parental leaves for mothers, for example, Kesteman (2009).

Paternity Leave (APL) Regulations and Additional Statutory Paternity Pay (ASPPL) before leaving office, and the Coalition implemented these on election in 2010. Fathers and partners were not given individual entitlements to additional paternity leave but instead allowed access to mothers' leave and pay where applicable (nine months' paid leave and three months' unpaid leave) when mothers returned to work during the maternity leave period. No gender-neutral parental leave as such was introduced. In 2013-14 only 1.4 per cent of eligible fathers took up this option. However, this policy was further enhanced with the introduction of Shared Parental Leave (SPL) and Statutory Shared Parental Pay (SPPL) for children born since April 2015 which allows parents to share the 52 weeks' leave and 39 weeks payments (at £139 per week²⁷ or 90 per cent of previous income whichever is lower this is much more highly remunerated than its French equivalent) however they see fit. Mothers only have to take two weeks' maternity leave before SPL and SPPL can be obtained rather than the twenty weeks which was the case under the ALL / ASPPL. However there is an incentive for higher-paid mothers to take the first six weeks of leave as this is paid to them at 90 per cent of previous income without the £139 ceiling and organisations can of course enhance SPL benefits. Although a full review of the policy will not be made until 2018, indications are that father take-up remains low: data from HMRC shows that in the first quarter of 2016 only 2 per cent of those taking leave for childcare were men which is at the lower end of the government's forecast of an uptake of between 2 and 8 per cent (Allen, 2016). Leave cannot be taken on a part-time basis. Given that parental leave as such did not exist in the UK before 2010, and although a father quota or part-time option has not been introduced, the combined introduction of these two sets of policies can be viewed as the beginnings of a paradigmatic shift away from maternalism and towards an adult worker model of work-family reconciliation. But why did this change come long after many of the other changes enacted by New Labour? And why was the leave not more radically degendered?

The answer to these questions cannot be solely that the UK was a latecomer to work-family reconciliation: Germany, another latecomer country, has a scheme with both a father quota and a benefit paid at a high wage-replacement rate (Fleckenstein and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011). When the policy was announced, the government stressed that the time was not right for more radical change given the economic situation (Baird & O'Brien, 2015), but whilst not committing to further change as the French government has, neither was it ruled out. However, including a father quota would not necessarily have had cost implications, as we have seen in the French case. More important to take into account in explaining this lack of a father quota is that there was resistance from a range of political and societal actors to more radical change. First, such a coercive policy goes against the grain of Conservative ideas of freedom of choice for families. Indeed, the SPL was a project championed by the Liberal Democrat Nick Clegg. Now governing alone, when asked about the possibility of introducing a father quota after the 2018 policy review, the Conservative Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan, stated that choice should be privileged over compulsion and that the state should "respect individual parents' choices on the way they want to structure the leave".²⁸ Second, the business lobby, which has a privileged position vis-à-vis influence on parties in office in the UK and on Conservative-party thinking in particular (see for example Fleckenstein and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011), has been in full agreement with state support for paid childcare, but has not been favourable to flexible parental leave. The Confederation for British Industry (CBI) strongly opposed both the APL and SPL, in both cases invoking the dangers of putting more pressure on businesses in the context of economic fragility when the need to protect employment is great. This is

²⁷ This payment is 60 per cent with the net minimum wage per week (based on a 35-hour week) of £232 in the UK

²⁸ The Women's and Equalities Committee inquiry into the gender pay gap which reported in March 2016 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmwomeq/584/58403.htm#>

a view shared by the Conservatives and an argument that is more easily made in tough economic times. Lastly, the fact that the omitting of a father quota in the SPL passed with little to no significant public or press response is evidence that there is insufficient pressure from the electorate to bring about this sort of change quickly.

The second set of problems which had come to the fore by the mid-2000s concerned the affordability of and access to formal childcare, with these problems taking different forms in France and the UK due to their differing policy legacies. Both countries were, however, working within the same institutional context of the EU targets on employment rates and childcare coverage. In France, academic studies and reports from the Caisse des Allocations Familiales (CAF) were highlighting the existence of a social bifurcation of the female labour market (Algava et al, 2005; Boyer & Ceroux, 2012) whereby more highly qualified mothers tend to work on a full time or long-hours part time and continuous basis whereas lower qualified and younger mothers tend to take long parental leaves and risk becoming distanced from the labour market leading to future job insecurity and increased poverty risk. In 2010 amongst the poorest 20 per cent of families with a child under three 91 per cent of children were looked after principally by their parents whereas this was the case for only 31 per cent of children in the 20 per cent of richest households (Boyer & Ceroux, 2012). The policy instruments and settings surrounding formal childcare support and provision contribute significantly to this problem: more highly qualified women have more childcare options: if municipal crèches are unavailable or unsuitable due to location or lack of flexibility, they can use their higher salaries combined with the subsidies offered by the CLCMG to pay for individualised childcare which is more expensive, but more flexible and often in greater supply than crèches. For lower-paid women, individualised care is often still too expensive, despite the CLCMG, and crèche places, for which fees are means-tested, are either not available as availability varies dramatically across France, or do not correspond to their potential working hours.²⁹ The identification of these problems has led to first order change in the form of investment in collective crèche facilities, particularly in more deprived areas. Indeed, investment in collective facilities, after having been reduced in favour of subsidising individual care arrangements in the 1990s underwent a resurgence in the new millennium (Fagnani, 2012) and from 2009 onwards, the reform of parental leave has been dependent on the expansion of formal childcare. Both the Sarkozy and Hollande administrations have had ambitious objectives for increasing the overall supply of childcare places, both collective and individual, despite the economic crisis. The Plan Petite Enfance 2007-2012 aimed to generate an extra 100 000 childcare places by 2012, half collective and half individual, in part by loosening regulations regarding child-carer ratios and ensuring full occupancy of crèches but by 2011, only 13 160 had been created. The Plan Crèches Espoir Banlieues also aimed to create 10 000 childcare places in deprived estates with extended opening of over ten hours per day to cater for those working a-typical hours (Boyer & Ceroux, 2012). The Hollande administration has had plans to create 275,000 extra places for the under threes between 2013 and 2017 split equally between individual care (100 000), collective care (100 000) and to provide more places for the under threes in nursery schools (75 000 places) in order to increase the childcare coverage rate for this age group from 54 per cent to 65 per cent. The aim has also been to correct the territorial inequalities in childcare coverage which in 2012 ranged from nine to 80 per cent in different departments and to work in tandem with urban regeneration policy to improve cover for the most deprived areas (Haut Conseil de la Famille, 2014). However, progress has again been slow with only 19 per cent of the hoped-for increase having materialised by 2015 (Haut Conseil de la Famille, 2015). Chiefly to blame for these shortfalls has been the economic situation. The Haut Conseil de la Famille (HFC) has reported that

²⁹ The low qualified are more likely to be obliged to work irregular and non-standard hours than those who are more highly qualified (Haut Conseil de la Famille, 2011).

demand for individual care has fallen due to the recession since more parents and grandparents are unemployed and available for childcare within the family limiting the expansion of childminding services; reductions in standards of living have meant that families have had to reduce their childcare expenditure; and local authorities who are in charge of implementing the improvements in collective care have suffered budget cuts (Haut Conseil de la Famille, 2015).

In addition to the plans to expand the availability of means-tested collective childcare places in order to reduce the social bifurcation of the female labour force, both administrations have made tentative moves away from the universality of the CLCMG and towards selectivity both by curtailing the entitlement of higher earners and increasing support for lower earners: in 2010 the Sarkozy administration increased the CLCMG by 10 per cent for those working atypical hours (Haut Conseil de la Famille, 2011) and in 2014 the Hollande administration reduced the CLCMG for those earning above an income ceiling leading to 6.1 per cent of claimants for childminders and 1.9 per cent of claimants for nannies experiencing a reduction in their benefits (Boisnaud & Fichen, 2015). Under discussion at the time of writing are plans to reduce the difference in cost to families of using childminders as opposed to crèches in order to address the problem of affordability of individual care for the lower paid. The HCF is proposing a unified system of financial aid for families without increasing the overall cost to the exchequer by making payments for childminders means-tested in the same way as are fees for crèches (Boisnaud & Fichen, 2015).

To the fore of the public agenda in the UK has been the very high cost of childcare which affects the vast majority of families, not just the poorest as is the case in France. Indeed, childcare costs have risen much faster than wages or inflation in the UK since 2001 (Waldgrave, 2013). In difference to France, the vast majority of pre-school nursery provision for three and four year olds is in the private sector in the UK and only 15 hours per week of this provision is currently paid by the state. Indeed, by 2012, the UK was second only to Switzerland amongst OECD countries as regards the cost of childcare as percentage of average earnings (France ranked 18th in this exercise). Fagan & Norman (2014) note that according to the 2012 European Quality of Life Survey the cost of childcare was the main problem for 59 per cent of parents on average in Europe who would like take up employment but cannot, whereas in the UK this was the case for 73 per cent. In a bid to address this issue of affordability, a range of changes to policy settings and policy instruments have been enacted since 2008 with the overall aim of lowering the cost of childcare to families, and particularly low-income families, by increasing government subsidy. First, free nursery provision for three and four year olds was extended to the poorest 20 per cent of two year olds in 2013 and again in 2014 to the poorest 40 per cent. Furthermore, the Conservative government is from 2017 onwards adding a further 15 hours of free childcare for three and four year olds to the universal entitlement of 15 hours to families where the parent / both parents work(s) (Department for Education, 2015). Other policy instrument changes have also come about but it is far from clear at this stage what the financial advantages of these will be for particular types of family. For example, the Childcare Payments Act 2014³⁰ will replace the employer voucher system with childcare tax subsidies in 2017 for those earning up to £150 000 per annum, one of the main stated objectives of which is to reduce childcare costs to working parents. There is a limit on payment of £2000 per child but no limit on the number of children under 12 who can be claimed for. For those on lower to middle incomes, there has been some vacillation in policy settings: in April 2011 there was in fact a reduction in the percentage of costs covered by child tax credits from the previous 80 back to the original 70 per cent. However, following pressure from societal actors - opinion polls showed that this decision was particularly unpopular with low- to middle- income women voters - this was offset by extending access to

³⁰ <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2014-15/childcarepayments.html>

childcare tax credits to parents working less than 16 hours a week who had not been eligible before. Furthermore, from April 2016 the childcare element of Universal Credit which will eventually replace child tax credits for the whole population, was raised to cover 85 per cent of costs for families where both parents earn enough to reach the tax threshold. However, there has been an area of work-family reconciliation provision which has suffered cutbacks in the UK since 2008, namely, direct provision of nursery and childcare services by local authorities since failure to ring-fence expenditure on nurseries, after-school or holiday clubs by local authorities in the context of budget cuts has had a deleterious effect on provision. A study released in June 2013 by the 4 Children and Daycare Trust shows that cuts to the Sure Start programme had led to a loss of 250 community nurseries whilst a parliamentary answer from then Childcare Minister Liz Truss conceded that the number of children's centres providing full day care fell from 800 in 2010 to 550 in 2011.

It is clear, therefore, that childcare support in the UK largely survived the stringent austerity measures implemented in other areas of social spending by the Coalition and Conservative governments despite this area of provision not having the long-standing history that it does in France with steps taken to improve affordability particularly of early-years education for three and four year olds and some improvements targeted at lower-income families for younger children. That said, austerity has also served to reinforce a liberal policy model based on market-provided care. The question begs of why childcare provision was not more adversely affected given the severity of the austerity cuts in other areas? A number of factors come into play in answer to this question: very importantly, the UK had witnessed partisan convergence as regards childcare provision since 2005. In contrast to France, the very existence of work-family reconciliation policy had been a politically divisive issue until the 2005 general election when the Conservatives became "consenters" to New Labour's work-family policy (Macleavy, 2011). The Conservatives could easily frame investment in childcare within their thinking on reducing welfare dependency and poverty through an active labour market strategy, a point illustrated in David Cameron's announcement that the new 15 hours extra childcare for working parents of three and four year olds aimed to "[help] hardworking families and giv[e] people the opportunity to get into work."³¹ However, a further key reason for this change of heart was that work-family reconciliation was one of a number of policy areas that the Conservatives in opposition had needed to address to become electable as socio-economic changes in the form of growing female labour-force participation and changing social attitudes around motherhood and employment had contributed to a reversal of the gender gap in voting and rising partisan competition over female voters (Morgan, 2013). Indeed, quite dramatic changes in public opinion surrounding mothers' employment had taken place over the period: whereas in 1989, 64 per cent of respondents to the British Household Attitudes Survey thought that women should stay at home when a child is under school age only 33 per cent were of this opinion by 2012 (Park et al, 2012). Lastly, as mentioned earlier, the business lobby has been strongly in favour of childcare investment since mothers' employment is a means of coping with anticipated labour shortages associated with demographic change and makes a contribution to the competitiveness of UK businesses as women constitute a significant pool of labour for low-skill occupations and are more prepared to work flexibly than men (Fleckenstein and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011). In 2015 all major parties proposed to increase free childcare for working parents within the overarching legitimating ideas of increasing the active labour force to address poverty, particularly child poverty and of improving life chances through early education rather than gender equality. These legitimating ideas had in fact been given new impetus by the economic crisis and austerity and the ensuing reshaping of the welfare state that the Coalition and Conservatives undertook.

³¹ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/free-childcare-working-parents-david-cameron?forceNoSplash=true>

Conclusions

In the preceding discussions, it has been shown that work-family reconciliation policy in both France and the UK showed resilience in the face of the economic and budgetary problems encountered post-2008 confirming results of previous research. There have been significant first-, second- and arguably third-order changes in policy over this time period which have begun to degender parental leave and improve affordability of and access to childcare services in France and the UK, albeit in path-dependent ways. As regards parental leave, the UK introduced the SPL offering extended leave to fathers for the first time and France included a father quota into the PreParE, the first family policy targeting directly the choices of fathers. Although neither country yet fulfils Saxonberg's (2013) criteria for a fully degendered parental leave policy of having a father quota and a benefit paid at percentage of previous income, both made progress in this direction and it can be suggested that these policy changes represent the beginnings of third-order change in both countries, indicative of a move away from a maternalist objective of helping mothers to combine child rearing and employment and towards one of promoting father involvement in childcare and more gender-equal sharing of earning and caring roles (Mazur, 2002). As regards formal childcare provision, France continued with ambitious plans to improve childcare coverage for the under threes in the country, particularly for deprived areas, and to cater for the low paid by providing more local-authority run crèche places which are means-tested and therefore more affordable for low-income families. However, the economic and budgetary situation has slowed progress in achieving these goals. The country already enjoyed 100 per cent child care coverage for the early-years education of 3-5 year olds. The UK again started from a lower base line of provision but has introduced free hours of nursery care for poorer two-year olds and from 2017 will double those available for dual-earner or single employed parents of three- and four-year olds whilst a new system for tax relief for childcare costs is also coming into force. Provision, however, is now more firmly rooted than before in the private sector as local-authority run facilities have experienced cut backs. Applying Matzke and Ostner's (2010a; 2011b) framework to explain this resistance of work-family reconciliation policy to the economic crisis and austerity, in the case of France we can point to the long history of provision in the country which has adapted to changing socio-economic circumstances and been embedded in the high degree of legitimacy given to state intervention in the family. Increasing formal childcare provision has had a wide support base: there is partisan consensus on this issue and support from the bureaucratic family policy-making elite, organised interests such as family associations and women's groups, and indeed from the general public. Reform of parental leave has been more contested, as will be discussed below. Furthermore, the shift in employment policy under Sarkozy from work-sharing to increasing the active labour force have reinforced the need for more childcare coverage and parental leave reform. In the UK, despite the relative novelty of work-family reconciliation policy, again there is now wide societal and political espousal of a role for the state in supporting a secure position for mothers in the labour force and providing early-years education as aspects of a social-investment and activation approach to work and welfare. There is partisan consensus on this issue, support from the important business community for formal childcare if not for parental leave and changed public attitudes backing maternal employment. Very important has been the ideological change in the Conservative party which was in turn heavily influenced by the need to attract women's vote for which work-family provisions are key.

All that said, the economic crisis and recession have affected work-family policy in both countries in differing ways and to differing degrees. In the UK, the economic crisis was used by the Coalition government as the frame to justify remodelling welfare provision along more liberal lines. The shape of work-family reconciliation policy which has emerged from these post-2010 changes reflects this more general trend with childcare now based more exclusively on market rather than state

provision, the extension of nursery vouchers to two-year olds targeted only at the lower paid, all of this justified within a discourse of business need and activation rather than gender equality. Furthermore, the Conservative government is showing a reluctance to intervene in family life in a coercive way in the name of gender equality. In France, the economic and budgetary situation has had a more direct impact on policy. From 2011 onwards, there has been a wide consensus in France across a range of actors in favour of reducing parental leave to one year, remunerating it at a percentage of previous income as well as having a father quota, this reduction in entitlement compensated for by extra childcare provision for the under threes. This policy proposal enjoyed partisan consensus and was supported by the powerful bureaucratic family-policy elite. However, a major obstacles to these changes being implemented has been lack of finance. That said, spending choices are not made in a vacuum and also important in constraining policy change in this regard has been public approval of the “double free choice” which has characterised French work-family reconciliation policy since the 1990s based on long parental leaves which is reinforced by the intervention of powerful interest groups such as the UNAF , meaning that governments run electoral risks if they act to curtail this choice, especially when the economic situation itself renders their electoral chances fragile.

In sum, therefore, by looking at these contrasting case studies in detail, it has been possible to see how the economic crisis and austerity have combined with a variety of other policy drivers in path-dependent ways to shape reconciliation policy in each country, acting as a context influencing the definition of policy goals and proposals; contributing to the degree of influence of particular societal and political actors; as well as being direct material constraints on the enactment of policy.

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