

**Rt. Hon Theresa May MP - Speech to the Community Family Trusts**  
**9<sup>th</sup> February 2005**

I am sure I won't be the only one here who read in yesterday's newspapers about the growing new business in celebrating divorce. Rather than reflect on a marriage gone wrong or a relationship failed, there is now money to be made from people wanting to celebrate the release from their marriage with a 'divorce party' by arranging cakes reading "Delighted to be Divorced", or fireworks spelling out "Free at last".

As a born optimist, I hope this is evidence that the end of a marriage does not have to mean the end of happiness, and that many divorced or separated families continue to live happy lives apart thanks to a change in attitude and growing financial independence. On the other hand, I hope that this does not suggest that marriage is something better out of than in.

Because it is marriage, not divorce that people still aspire to. And be it marriage or living together, families still want to make those relationships work. However, today's families are under pressure like never before.

They are under pressure to work harder and longer, to pay more tax, to pay higher mortgage payments, to get to work on time, to struggle onboard overcrowded trains, to find an NHS dentist and to find affordable childcare.

Financial demands, particularly in the South East, mean that for most families, paying the bills on time means having both parents in work.

And the figures show the effects of those pressures. Incidents of heavy drinking are on the increase, the number of couples splitting up is rising and the incidents of domestic abuse are up.

The number of children living in single parent households is up. And tragically, we can see that it is children that are most affected by these pressures on family life. In order to help hold the family together, children are often forced to grow up far too fast. There are an estimated 104,000 children aged under 15 caring for a dependant family member and over 60,000 children living in the care of local authorities. And perhaps of most concern, children in care due to neglect and abuse has risen from 26% in 1998 to 62% last year.

More than 300,000 children in England alone are categorised as being 'in need', and nearly 100,000 children run away from home each year. One million children play truant every year.

Children are now increasingly faced with challenges that most adults would find distressing.

Since Labour came to power in 1997, the cases of Sexually Transmitted Diseases in young females, aged sixteen to nineteen, has almost doubled. In the last year that figures became available, there were more than 39,000 teenage pregnancies.

We don't need statistics to tell us that young people are increasingly prone to alcohol and drug abuse, increasingly vulnerable, and increasingly becoming more jaded and disillusioned with life. Drinking amongst teenagers, anti social behaviour and crimes against young people are all on the increase. We don't need statistics to understand that the pressures on family life have increased. We need action that begins to reverse the trend.

So, why is this happening?

It is happening because, as the norms of family life become eroded by the pressures of modern life, many children are no longer guaranteed the old support networks that used to be available.

As the bonds of family ties loosen, children become socialised by television and popular culture, as opposed to by their parents and extended family. They grow up without the guidance, skills and behavioural norms that you and I had passed down through our families.

As parents separate, and as uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents drift away, who is there to provide boundaries, and to educate about the values of family responsibilities?

Simply put, how can a young adult understand that relationships need to be worked upon, with patience and understanding, if he has experienced no patience or understanding in his own family life?

And what is the final result?

More broken marriages, more parental separation, more young adults without guidance, direction, or a willingness to take on responsibility for themselves or their dependants.

So the question remains, how can the spiral be brought under control? What can the Government do to help?

Well to begin with, it should not add fuel to the flames of family breakdown.

At a time when drunken behaviour and binge drinking has reached epidemic levels, it is indefensible to be encouraging people to stay in pubs later and longer.

When family debt is spiralling out of control, we must not preside over the largest expansion of mega casinos and gambling the country has seen.

And when 40% of all separated father's lose all contact with their children after 4 years, and as many as one in four children are living in a one-parent household, we must not condemn more young children to a life without access to both their mother and their father through a family justice system that fails them.

We know that families don't need to be preached at. What people want to know is what we as politicians can do to help them cope with life's demands, so that the burden is lifted just a little.

How can the Government make sure that people are able to take care of themselves, so that they are free to take care of their families?

There are ways in which we can help. To begin with, Government can do more to stop relationships breaking down in the first place.

Given the Prime Minister's commitment to help Britain's hardworking families, you would have thought that parenting and relationship support would be high on the Government agenda.

The Department for Education and Skills, responsible for the Marriage and Relationship support programme, allocated £4.9 million to projects in 2004/5, the largest by far being a grant to RELATE for £2.1 million.

And the DfEs also administers the new £15 million Parenting Fund to help Britain's families. A combined budget of £20 million.

The government spent £20 million pounds on parental support, yet spent £10 million last year on magazines such as Homes and Gardens for Whitehall offices.

Given that the cost of relationship breakdown is estimated at anywhere between £5 and £30 billion, can this really be a government that is so determined to support "Britain's hard working families"?

I am pleased to announce that the Conservative Party priorities will be parents and relationships not "Homes and Gardens". Oliver Letwin, then Shadow Home Secretary in his publication "Conveyor belt to crime" spelt out how helping vulnerable families through relationship support and parental education helped to prevent children starting the spiral to criminality. But relationship support is about more than that. By helping people to stay together and provide a stable family background for their children we help those children achieve their best and in turn, provide stable homes. That is good for us all, and that is why a Conservative government will support the proposed expansion of the Community Family Trust pilots. In the coming weeks, I will spell out exactly how we support more parents and families through projects such as these. And for any press present, I will be doing this from existing budgets!

A vast industry is devoted to helping couples plan a successful wedding day: the dress, the car, the reception and the honeymoon. But little advice and support is available for them after the ceremony. An incoming Conservative government will invest in healthy marriages and healthy relationships by supporting relationship and parenting education programmes. Parenting advice can help everyone from school aged children to married adults understand the skills and attitudes needed for a successful marriage.

Couples should be able to access reconciliation services to help a relationship that is going through difficulty. By doing this a Conservative government would be supporting marriages before they got to the stage of breaking down, thus reducing divorce and its consequences.

Married or not, courses should be designed to help couples survive the inevitable difficulties that occur in married and family life. Focused on making marriages better to be in rather, than making marriages more difficult to get out of. We should support marriages for what they can do for people, rather than marriage for its own sake.

As Dr Wade Horn, the American Assistant Secretary of State for Health and Human Services said in Britain recently, "when faced with a troubled marriage, people believe you have two options: get divorced or stay married and be miserable." This is not inevitability. That should not be the case.

But it isn't just about spending money to solve the problem, there are little things that we can do to help.

At the times when families come under the most pressure; in the preparation for marriage, on the big day, at the birth of a child or the death of a family member, the Registrar is the person who we all must notify of these events. And so it is they who are ideally placed to provide information and act as a gateway for support and help. It is not their role to give counsel, but they can act as the key to unlock the help that can make such a difference to families under pressure. Given that 62% of all marriages take place in registry offices, there is a huge scope to collate marriage support and provide information on where help can be found. We know this is already working in a small number of cases, and expanding it could help prevent more relationship breakdown.

It is for that reason that we would like to see our registrars actively displaying and promoting the services of groups like the Community Family Trust. The handing over of a leaflet or the picking up of a telephone can be the catalyst for helping couples through difficult times. And by doing this, they can stop a few of those couples from divorcing or separating.

And we can begin by recognising marriage properly. We will bring back the term "spouse" as well as partner on government forms. Having a husband or wife is different from a partner, and it does mean something. We should not let political correctness force us to hide it!

Public opinion would not forgive the politician who was seen to be mean spirited or unforgiving about families and individuals that have made difficult life choices on divorce or single parenthood.

The Conservative party must never shy away from recognising this and cherishing those loving relationships. At our best we are a party that is inclusive and understanding of the needs of everyday Britain. That means

embracing family in all its different forms. We will not say that marriage is right, and lone parents are wrong. The days of a Tory war on single mothers are dead and buried.

However as Conservatives we also recognise that Marriage works. Not for all, but for many. Most young people want to marry at some point in their lives and marriage remains an aspiration for most couples. In this the Conservatives are in step with modern Britain.

Conservatives believe in marriage and understand most Britons value marriage, get married and want their marriages to succeed. However public attitudes are rightly disdainful of any party that is seen to be interfering or ungracious. We do not know best, but we want to help you do the best for your family.

Can I end by paying tribute to the Work of the Community family Trust and all those other organisations that work so hard, day in, day out to help parents and children. Work that I see in my own constituency for example, Woodley Baptist church. We all recognise that the need to help is more pressing than ever before. We recognise the price of failure, but are inspired by the difference success can make to peoples lives and the future for our children.

ENDS