

**Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP**

**Speech for Britain Thinks, 14<sup>th</sup> September 2011**

I'm delighted to be able to speak with you this evening at the launch of new research from Britain Thinks on the modern British family.

This important work will help to inform Labour's Family Life Policy Review which I have been leading for the past year as part of Ed Miliband's wider policy review across our Shadow Cabinet teams.

It's been great to be working with Deborah Mattinson again. She's one of the most respected pollsters in the industry and I know understands the need to connect with the concerns of ordinary families. I look forward to her presentation later and the subsequent discussion.

This subject is a particular passion of mine - my experience of working with families first as a child care officer in the London borough of Lambeth and then as a psychiatric social worker at The Maudsley Hospital, was the driving force that made me want to go into

politics. I came to realise that it is only government that can remove the big obstacles to poverty.

As the Minister for Public Health, in the early years of Labour in Government, one of the programmes I was really proud of was the establishment of Sure Start which gives a lifeline to so many young mums. At the time it was the biggest investment any government had made to support mothers in bringing up their young children.

Many of the issues we are talking about address the big challenges facing the future of Britain.

How are we going to help the squeezed middle families who are facing a cost of living crisis, who worry about how they will make ends meet and feel the way this country is run does not work for them?

How are we going to support families so that the next generation, if they work hard, can do better than the last? Ed has spoken about the danger of national decline if the immense potential of this country is unfulfilled and that what he calls the Promise of Britain (that children do better than their parents) will be broken.

And finally, how do we ensure that values like responsibility are restored to heart of family life and the ties which bind our communities together are strengthened?

This review will look at each of those areas to ensure we arrive at answers comparable with the modern British family of today.

The struggles and the stresses which families experience today are clear for all to see in the workshops Britain Thinks conducted with mums and dads in Harlow.

“Our debt repayments make life stressful” says Mum.

“We’d be lucky to get a house by 2015”, says Dad.

“I felt really guilty when I had to go back to work”, says Mum.

“We don’t have time to go to the football”, says Dad.

Life has always been a struggle for parents – raising children is never easy – but the combination of demographic, financial and social pressures which parents face is a toxic mix.

The challenge for Labour is to identify the right solutions – within the state and the community - to

help relieve these pressures without over-nannying people or telling them how to run their families themselves.

Future governments will not have family policies or policy for the family, because the role of government is to support families to create their own fortunes and futures. To create the change which supports family life which the action of individual families can not alone achieve.

I am proud of what Labour achieved in Government. We were both the most feminist and the most family friendly government in British history.

Sure Start, tax credits, increased maternity and paternity leave, guaranteed paid holiday and flexible working rights, plus so many more tangible differences we made to people's lives didn't happen by accident.

They formed a raft of measures Labour pushed through Parliament to help make life easier for working parents in Britain. And there is evidence that we did make a difference.

The number of dads working long hours fell during the last government as did the overall number of people working long hours.

As a result of Labour's investment in childcare and in work credits, more women who want to work have been able to. In 1951, only one in six mothers were employed. In 2008, that changed to 2 in 3.

The other good news is that parents are spending more time with their kids than they used to. And although mums do the lions' share of the childcare, the time that dads spend on childcare has also increased.

But because of this Tory-led coalition we are in danger of moving backwards.

Don't take my word for it – take their words, leaked to the Guardian today.

“We are clear that there are a range of policies we have pursued as a government which are seen as having hit women” Number 10 says. It looks like what the rest of us have known from the beginning is finally starting to sink in!

Support for children is being slashed by £2.4bn including cuts to Sure Start, maternity grants, the wonderful health in pregnancy grant, child benefit and tax credits and this doesn't include the abolition of the Child Trust Fund.

Where Labour sought to give women a choice between working and caring for children, this Tory-led coalition has taken away that choice.

And the Tories know it, hence this volte face as they panic that their promise about making Britain the most family friendly country in Europe has been scuppered by their zealous embrace of radical spending cuts.

But if Labour is to have a viable answer to the Coalition's muddle, we must recognise that families are changing.

We need to make sure that we are supporting modern families in Britain today – in all shapes and forms. That means having an answer for the dads and grandparents who feel undervalued by the system and want to have more of a role in their children and grandchildren's lives – and for the mums who would like the flexibility of being able to rely on their own parents and partners more.

That's why in my review of family life I've started by looking at some of the new challenges facing the modern family.

For example, grandparents are now providing a large chunk of childcare -recently valued by Age Concern to be worth £3.9bn.

The grandparent of today, far from being the frail white-haired grandmother of many of our childhoods, is likely herself to be in work with an active social life and probably still worrying about her mortgage.

But what has changed is that she will be giving much more time than her own mother would have done, helping her grandchildren. Not as a treat, but absolutely integral to the pattern of her grandchildren's lives.

Too often we forget that grandparents face a juggling act of their own: half of grandparents are under the age of 65.

One of the ideas I would like the policy review to explore is how we support working grandparents.

At the moment, there is no specific support for the 35% of grandparents who are in work, but who also care for their grandchildren. Making life easier for grandparents to provide that care could help to relieve the burden on mum and dad.

In some European countries, grandparents have the right to parental leave under some circumstances when parents are unable to take it, for example in Germany and Portugal.

In Germany, grandparents can take up to 10 days of paid leave to care for a grandchild in a medical emergency, and in Portugal grandparents are allowed to take 30 days of paid leave a year to care for a sick grandchild if parents can't.

Some innovative companies already give flexible working options to employees who have grandkids. For example, employees who work for ASDA are entitled to 5 days' unpaid leave at the birth of a grandchild, or for a child's first day at school or religious festivals. They may also apply to take an extended period of leave of up to 12 weeks which is often used by grandparents looking after children during the summer hols.

Our policy review will be considering the lessons from these countries – how we can best recognise the role of working grandparents who are caring for their grandchildren and how we can encourage more businesses to do so too.

I also want us to think about those grandparents who don't just care for their grandchildren now and then, but are their primary carers.

Around 200,000 grandparents are raising their grandchildren full time, many in challenging circumstances and with limited support. 3 out of 5 grandparents find themselves financially hard-up because they either have to give up work or reduce their paid working hours in such situations.

Where grandparents have a formal role in raising a grandchild they usually have Special Guardianship orders or Resident orders, but while these give them responsibility for the kids, they do not necessarily come with all the support that they need.

We know that when grandparents and other family members are able to care for children full-time rather than children going into care, there are significant savings for the state. So there is a cost case for providing support for these grandparents, as well as a moral case.

Our policy review should look at whether better support for kinship carers would mean more grandparents would be able to care for their

grandchildren instead of them going into care – in many cases this will be better for the child involved as well as saving the state resource.

Turning now to another change in the modern family – that of the thousands of dads who are providing far more care than they traditionally have done. As progressives we should both celebrate the fact that more men want to be involved in the upbringing of their children, but we also need to make it easier for them to realise this.

But as the Britain Thinks research shows, many dads feel as though they have been pushed to one side in the debate about families.

It's great that Ed Miliband has asked David Lammy to follow up his leadership during the riots in August with a review of our party's approach to fatherhood.

We know many fathers feel their role is under-recognised by services like maternity and education services, and that there can be cultural barriers to fathers taking up shared parental leave.

Our policy review will consider how we can break down some of these cultural barriers and how to boost the role of dads in maternity and education services.

This isn't about telling Mums and Dads what to do - this is about removing the barriers which stop them from doing what they want to do in the first place.

The final area I want to touch on, is the need for not just the family, or the state to do the heavy-lifting in supporting families, but the need for the community to be involved too.

Many of the mums and dads in the Britain Thinks focus groups felt that the modern British family lacked respect and discipline. Their response was to come up with the notion of “communityship” – the idea that Government should do more to equip young people for life.

You might think this is some clunking term thought up by policy-wonks but, no I can assure you, it came from the mouths of mothers in the focus groups led by Britain Thinks!

Communityship should be a more localised version of citizenship where children learn to behave better at school, around their peers and in their community.

One example of how this has been tackled in practice can be seen in Kingsdale School where they have redesigned the school to change the nature of how

pupils approached the day. For example, redesigning the lockers so that they were safe to use; making sure pupils took their coats off to signal the start of the school day; and ensuring pupils were served at tables with proper cloths and cutlery and served by staff, so they developed greater respect at mealtimes. The school provided a relational space which encouraged conversation, listening, sharing – the essence of practising relationships.

We know that the nurturing of character capabilities such as self-direction, control of emotions, application and empathy are a combination of skills and virtues that will allow our children to have a better life.

Recent changes to our economy mean that these capabilities are far more predictive of life chances than they were several decades ago. The growth of the service and knowledge economy has meant that non-cognitive abilities such as initiative, creativity and enthusiasm are key if young people are to find fulfilling employment.

So if we are to create this notion of ‘communityship’ we will have to think differently about key interventions that can be made with parents during

their child's early years; with children and young people at school and with children and young people in their spare time.

'Communityship' is best learnt by doing and living – so the solutions that we should be looking to are ones that prize relationships with peers rather than delivery from professionals.

## **Conclusion**

Families work when everyone pulls together in the right direction. Labour's thinking must recognise the pressures the modern family faces, while understanding the new ways in which we should be supporting grandparents and dads to fulfil their responsibilities.

I hope that the very early stage ideas I have run through with you today has given you some food for thought and I look forward to developing them further with you after Deborah's presentation.

Our aspirations for the modern family should be no less than the vision of participants in Harlow – to create a modern family which has access to housing; which would be able to focus on the things that

matter; and would be able to enjoy watching their children growing up.