

INTRODUCTION - A POLITICS OF RELATIONSHIPS

There is one thing Bill Clinton understands which Gordon Brown simply doesn't get. Actually there are probably several things the former President has which the current Prime Minister doesn't enjoy. Including a record of winning elections. But there's one crucial concept that Bill Clinton understood instinctively which has eluded our own Prime Minister.

Ubuntu.

Ubuntu is a Bantu word which, broadly translated, means "I am because you are". President Clinton has made it something of a mantra, and deployed it to great effect in his speech to the 2006 Labour Party Conference.

It resonated because it spoke to a deep truth. Each of us is defined, and enriched, by our relationship to others. It's the strength of our relationships, the warmth of our friendships, the time we have with our partners, parents and children, the respect we're given in the workplace and by our peers, the achievements we forge collaboratively and collectively, which generate real happiness and fulfilment. We are fully ourselves because others believe in us.

One of the most profound, but under-appreciated, changes that David Cameron has brought to Conservative politics is a determination to put the strengthening of relationships at the heart of policy.

I say under-appreciated but one of the reasons why I'm delighted to be here today is that it's the IPPR, perhaps more than any other body, which has realised the scale, scope and subtlety of what David has been arguing for.

Writing for the IPPR last year, Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift argued that "intimate relationships are themselves both vital sources of well-being and crucial preconditions of other sources of well-being...The work being done by Cameron's Conservatives on the well-being agenda marks an important and welcome development in British politics. It puts the issues on that agenda at the centre of political argument, rightly, in our view and it marks a new seriousness and sophistication in Conservative thinking."

I want, in a moment, to explore just how he's done that and what that means for a future Conservative Government.

A GOVERNMENT THAT DOESN'T GET RELATIONSHIPS

But first I want to underline how badly the current Government fails to appreciate the importance of relationships – how poorly it understands Ubuntu.

Under Labour there is really only one relationship which matters. The relationship between the individual and the state.

The Labour conception of society is a thin, and impoverished, one in which there appear to be only two primary centres of decision-making, the central state organises and the individual is expected to respond appropriately.

Individuals are assessed by the State as economic units in need of upskilling, taxing, monitoring or redeploying as appropriate – according to priorities set, and policed, centrally.

The quality of the relationships we enjoy – with the teachers who might inspire us with the employers who might shape our career, with the partners who're helping us raise children, with friends and neighbours in the community we inhabit – are all neglected. Because they can't be measured, directed and controlled from the centre.

There are no public service agreements Labour can insist on to demonstrate improvements in these areas.

And therefore, unsurprisingly, if you ask people whether they feel that teachers are freer today than ever to inspire, whether they feel that employers are more attentive, responsive and considerate, whether they feel there is more time and space for family life or even if they feel their neighbourhoods are friendlier, then you'll find that the answer is a powerful no.

A GOVERNMENT DEPLETING OUR SOCIAL CAPITAL

Indeed, if you look at how Government policy is currently developing you can see how this neglect of relationships, this running down of social capital, is getting worse. The whole question of how we maintain and replenish social capital was the subject of a speech by David recently to the CPRE.

The Government's approach to the closure of post offices, with its narrow emphasis on economic costs without regard to social benefits, is an erosion of community resilience.

The determination to push ahead with the closure of small GP practices and their replacement by polyclinics is another move in the direction of narrow cost efficiency over enriching personal intimacy. It's a stripping from communities of a service which binds individuals together. And, as the BMA have pointed out, the potential gains in terms of increased efficiency are also engineered in such a way as to benefit most those who need help least – the fit active and working – while the closure of community based GP surgeries puts the greatest strain on those who need the NHS most – the old, infirm, chronically ill and those without the resources to travel easily.

More broadly, the web of autonomous institutions which help bind communities together have found their lives made more difficult in the last ten years. From scouting to child-minding, regulation has driven adults out of roles where they served their communities. School governance and charitable engagement have become much more time-consuming, legally fraught and bureaucratically complex.

And all this comes on top of a long-hours culture at work and increasingly protracted commuting journeys which shrink the time any of us can give to others.

A politics which took relationships seriously would want to tackle these problems - would put the replenishment of social capital at the heart of policy - would have a plan for removing what one might call the supply-side obstacles which prevent relationships forming and strengthening.

The need to put improved relationships at the heart of Government is borne in on me

every week, as I consider the problems with which I'm confronted as a constituency MP. I know from my own surgery, like almost all MPs, that within a few minutes I can take whatever action is within my power to resolve the problems I'm brought. Faced with a tax credit error or a CSA mix-up, a case of medical negligence or a housing demand, any MP can size up what can be done very quickly. We can send off the letter or make the call which will, hopefully, get action, in short order. But while I could send every constituent away after a brief appraisal of their position knowing that I had done everything possible to solve his or her problem I would still have failed them.

Because the reason constituents come to my surgery and other MPs surgeries is they want more than just a result- they want a relationship. In most cases they want a meaningful relationship with authority – or with those they see as representing authority. Frustrated by government bureaucracies which treat them as just a number, dismayed by automated helplines and unresponsive websites which deprive them of human contact and a sympathetic ear, they come to the surgery in search of someone who will listen, who will value them as humans not cases.

And yet, even as I, like almost all MPs, witness this growing demand for a more personal, responsive, human face to Government, this government is making public services more distant.

Local Government is no longer an autonomous centre of decision-making, with its primary responsibility the nurturing of community strength and its primary accountability to local people. Increasingly, councils are instruments for delivering on policies set and monitored centrally. Whether it's through the ever tighter rules of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment or any one of a series of national strategies, local councils are treated as simply branch offices of the central state.

NEW RELATIONSHIPS AND NEW POLITICS

Indeed, even at the level of national devolution, there is an inability on the part of the current government to recognise the real nature of the new relationships coming into play. I vividly remember talking to a member of the current Cabinet, a Scottish MP, about the opening of the Scottish Parliament and being taken aback by his disdain for the carefully orchestrated series of events - the procession, the ceremonial, the singing of A Man's a Man for a' that.

In his view this was all so much nationalist nonsense and all that was happening was a re-organisation of Government akin to the re-organisation a corporation like BP might undertake to ensure its operations were flatter, more efficient and more flexible.

This bloodless vision of politics, and indeed of belonging, seems to me fatally to misunderstand the importance of relationships in politics. People don't want government and authority to be like BP. They want a relationship which allows them to feel loyalty, to have their emotions stirred, sometimes to anger when authority fails them, but more often to pride at what has been achieved collaboratively by a collective of which they feel a meaningful part.

A politics which takes relationships seriously must work hard to respect distinctive Scottish, Welsh and English feeling on issues, it must recognise the strong local loyalties which make the exercise of authority accountable and meaningful, it must be aware that

citizens engage best with Government when Government reflects the sort of people they are.

There's a high level political argument for devolution and decentralisation - it creates different jurisdictions which are each free to pursue their own priorities and thus drive improvement in public policy through innovation and competition.

But, for me, there's a more satisfying argument in favour of devolving power downwards. It makes institutions friendlier. It allows us the sort of interaction with power which tempers politicians' tendency towards arrogance in office and makes citizens more understanding of the limitations of office. It encourages greater responsibility on the part of both politicians and people.

Yet this is an argument the current Government just doesn't get.

Its striking how little space this Government allows people to feel loyalty to institutions which it doesn't control - its attitude towards the Scottish Government under Alex Salmond or the London Mayoralty under Boris Johnson has been denial tinged with resentment.

And its interesting to note that when the Prime Minister does engage with questions about political loyalty - for citizens that is - its on an exclusive level. He thinks solely about Britishness - about the relationship of the individual to the state structure over which he presides.

I had thought that the Prime Minister's rhetorical emphasis on Britishness was a tactical move designed to deal with the political weakness he would face as a member for a Scottish constituency in post-devolution Westminster. But it has become clear that is not the whole story. Brown emphasises Britishness so much because the only relationship which counts for him is between the citizen and the state.

There is nothing in what this Government is doing to show it understands how to respect devolved government, that it appreciates the need for local government to go its own way, that it comprehends how its policies are reducing social capital, that it realises how the loss of local services weaken community relationships or that it even begins to appreciate how the demands of the centralised bureaucracy are eroding the civic, the local and the voluntary. And that's because, I fear, for Gordon Brown, there really is no such thing as society - only the individual and the State.

THE WRONG RELATIONSHIPS IN EDUCATION

One of the areas in which the balance of relationships is most wrong under this Government is policy towards schools.

In education, the capacity of local communities to set their own autonomous goals, to pilot their own strategies, to develop the relationships they want is constrained and curbed by central Government's nationally-set targets, challenges and protocols.

Our children, in consequence, are now being educated in schools which aren't really community schools, in any meaningful sense of the word community, they're increasingly homogenised locations for delivering the same, centrally-agreed product, in the same,

centrally-directed, fashion. We don't have a good local school in every community, we have moved to something closer to a Starbucks-style outlet delivering pre-packaged learning.

The examinations offered, the targets pursued, the policies implemented, are increasingly driven by the need to satisfy goals set by the Secretary of State. The concerns parents have about teaching to the test, the worries universities and employers have about students pursuing softer courses, the exasperation teachers feel about the simultaneous narrowing of the curriculum and the expansion of bureaucracy, are all consequences of making schools accountable, primarily and overwhelmingly, to ministers.

Schools are told that its clearing a hurdle set by the Secretary of State which constitutes success, its by that criterion they'll be judged, on that basis the head will survive, money will flow, the school will flourish.

But after ten years of increasing centralisation, and a weakening of the ties which embed schools in a wider web of relationships, the result has not been improving academic performance or even a closing of the gap across the country between the opportunities offered to the most fortunate and the most disadvantaged.

As a nation, our educational performance has slipped behind other countries over the last ten years. We've dropped down the international league tables, from fourth to fourteenth in science, seventh to seventeenth in literacy and eight to twenty-fourth in mathematics. The most rigorous independent audits of our educational performance show us falling behind.

They also show that our children, as well as performing less well academically than those in comparable nations, are also less happy. Last year's UNICEF report memorably, and tragically, placed us bottom of OECD nations when it came to child well-being.

And as well as dropping behind academically and in terms of well-being, we're also becoming less equal. Schools should be engines of social mobility, the places where inherited disadvantages are overcome and individual talents can be nurtured to make opportunity more equal.

But the record of this Government has been of inequality growing, and the opportunity gap widening, between the fortunate and the forgotten.

In the last year for which we have figures the gap at GCSE between the performance of students in the 10 per cent of wealthiest areas and the 10 per cent of poorest areas doubled.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FORTUNATE AND THE FORGOTTEN IN OUR SCHOOLS

Those schools the Government has deemed to be failing, which secure 5 good GCSE passes for less than 30 per cent of their pupils, are overwhelmingly concentrated in our poorest areas. More than half of the schools in the most deprived 10 per cent of local authority areas are officially classified as failing.

For poorer children the system fails at every turn. Pupils eligible for free school meals fall behind their wealthier peers at every stage as they progress through school. And the gap has got worse under this Government.

In 2002 the gap between the performance of free school meal pupils and non free school meal pupils in maths at Key Stage 2 was 10 percentage points - its now 15. In science the gap was 16 points - its now 20.

And in the last year for which we have figures nearly half of all pupils eligible for free school meals didn't get a single GCSE at C grade or above. 47% of FSM pupils, that's 33,909 pupils, without a single qualification at the basic level the Government deems acceptable.

By contrast, the number of free school meal pupils at the other end of the achievement spectrum - the number getting 3 As at A-level - was just 176. That's less than one per cent of those getting 3 As.

The sad truth is that if you're eligible for free school meals you're almost 200 times more likely to leave school without a single GCSE pass above C than you are to get 3 As at A level.

Later this week we'll be publishing the results of our extensive investigation into the deepening inequality of our education system - part of our continuing campaign to improve state education - especially for the most disadvantaged - but today its enough simply to point out that the current alignment of our education system - with accountability as I've outlined going all one way - simply isn't delivering.

It's not delivering by international comparisons

It's not delivering on guaranteeing well-being

And it's not delivering on social justice.

A NEW RELATIONSHIP FOR SCHOOLS

That's why David Cameron has put schools reform at the heart of his plan for a future Conservative Government. And that's why the principle at the heart of our schools reform programme is changing the way we make schools accountable so that community relationships are strengthened.

We will make schools accountable to parents by allowing parents to choose the school they want for their child. We'll give every parent the right to take the money currently allocated to their child's education and then deploy it in accordance with their priorities, not the Government's.

We'll make it easier for new providers to enter the state system, reforming planning and other laws to increase choice and diversity. Parents will be empowered to choose the school with the pedagogy, the disciplinary approach, the ethos and the philosophy they believe in. Whether its the philosophy of Rudolph Steiner or Thomas Arnold, it will be parents who decide what's right for their children.

The relationships between schools, teachers, parents and pupils will change - and in

everyone's interest. Heads will recruit, and teachers will apply, on the basis of belief in a particular school's distinctive ethos. Schools will seek to attract, and retain, parents and pupils by pro-actively selling themselves on their special qualities. Instead of pursuing just one, centrally-dictated, measure of quality and accountability schools will be able to make their pitch to parents on the basis of a wider, and dare I say it, more comprehensive range of virtues.

HEALING THE BREACH BETWEEN THOSE AT THE TOP AND BOTTOM OF SOCIETY - THE NEW CONSERVATIVE CHALLENGE

There is one specific intervention, however, the central State will make which is different from now, and which goes to the heart of one aspect of David Cameron's thinking on relationships which has been under-appreciated.

We're explicitly committed to the creation of a premium to be added to the per pupil funding children from disadvantaged backgrounds receive. We want to ensure educational resources are targeted more effectively on those in need. And we want to create a dynamic by which schools are incentivised to take children from more challenging backgrounds and new providers are explicitly incentivised to locate in areas of greater disadvantage.

That's not just because we believe that would improve the relationship between schools and children from disadvantaged backgrounds to the benefit of both - it's also because under David Cameron the Conservatives believe explicitly in addressing a breach in one of society's central relationships - the relationship between the top and bottom, the rich and poor.

My colleague Greg Clark has previously outlined how important it is for us to see society as a caravan moving through the desert - as we all make progress its important that none are left too far behind. The relationship between those at society's head and those less fortunately placed is important to us all - and there is a duty to ensure that the relationship between those at the top and bottom of society does not become too distant. We must not become strangers to each other in the same country.

This - vertical - relationship between top and bottom in society is something Conservatives have always instinctively understood. The whole philosophy of One Nation was predicated on the vital importance of addressing the estrangement between rich and poor in Victorian England - healing the breach in that society. And when we talk of a broken society today one of the fractures we are concerned about is the growing breach between richer and poorer.

That's why its important that we all learn from those institutions which have invested time and care in nurturing a healthy relationship between those at the top and the bottom.

Like the John Lewis partnership.

I know that, in the current climate, an MP praising John Lewis is a bit like Ronnie Biggs praising trains – of course we love the institutions we plunder so freely.

But the reason I want to talk about John Lewis is not because my kitchen needs refitting but because our ideas on relationships need updating.

The John Lewis partnership applies a principle to its personnel relationships which it borrowed from the Armed Forces. The Navy specifically.

Both those institutions work to keep the relationships between those at the top and the bottom of their organisations healthy and respectful. That means both have rules about how senior management are rewarded and the relationship between that and the rewards given to those at the bottom of the hierarchy. There is an explicit recognition that the guy at the bottom has a right to a proportionate share of reward enjoyed by whoever's at the top in the same way as the guy at the top takes his share of the risk along with those at the bottom.

And these organisations work because care is taken to nurture those - vertical - up and down - relationships.

Now, I'm a huge fan of open market economies, growth, dynamism, entrepreneurship and success. I would never want to impede economic growth, indeed I'm anxious to remove many of the barriers which currently stand in the way of dynamism and ambition.

But I do believe that we need to ensure that with a culture which encourages, facilitates and celebrates success there's also a parallel culture of responsibility, reciprocity and respect. Of those to whom much is given, much is expected

That's why we as a party have devoted so much time to exploring how we can encourage philanthropy, in every area from investment in education to culture and environmental enhancement. That's why David Cameron has emphasised the vital importance of corporate social responsibility. That's why our social policy is so explicitly redistributive.

Not least in education through our pupil premium, in health through our approach to strengthening primary care for those most in need and improving public health where outcomes are weakest and in welfare policy by targeting resources on getting those most in need into work.

But there's another area of social policy where I believe the approach of the Conservative party under David Cameron has something distinctive to offer when it comes to healing the breach between the most fortunate and the worst off. And that's in our approach towards personal commitment and strengthening family relationships.

STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS - GOOD IN ITSELF, GOOD FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

David has made it clear that the Conservative party is aligning policy to reward committed relationships, to help parents in the increasingly difficult, but hugely rewarding, task of raising children and to make family life easier to sustain and protect.

We are determined to support family life, and to encourage and reward commitment, because we believe that strengthening these intimate relationships generate benefits which are simply unavailable elsewhere. The security, affection, interest in our welfare,

respect for our needs, tolerance of our weaknesses and pride in our achievements which families feel is simply not replicable anywhere else. There are real social goods which families generate which are worth championing, protecting and extending wherever possible.

But we are also committed to supporting family life, and stability and commitment in relationships, precisely because the secure start in life a stable family background provides is the best guarantee of maximising opportunity.

Helping adults commit and stay committed not only opens the door to a depth of emotional enrichment which a series of shallow and hedonistic encounters can never generate, it also provides the best possible start in life for children. Helping families under pressure, especially those under economic pressure, to commit and stay committed, is one of the most effective anti-poverty, pro-opportunity, pro-equality steps one could take.

As Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift argued in their work for the IPPR, "children have developmental and non-developmental (or immediate) interests and no institution other than the family seems to serve these interests sufficiently well".

Strengthening family life has a demonstrable effect on child welfare. Children whose parents have split up are twice as likely to live in poverty and seventy-five per cent more likely to experience educational failure. According to research undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation children brought up by two birth parents have higher levels of life satisfaction and fewer psychological problems.

Recent research by James Heckman of the University of Chicago, which has been influential in Barack Obama, reinforces the importance of the family environment in generating opportunity. Heckman has pointed out that diverging levels of educational attainment are already clearly discernible by the age of five, before formal schooling begins. Some children are "bathed in an atmosphere that promotes human capital development" and others, tragically, are not. Heckman argues that the traits which encourage future development - high motivation levels, emotional stability, self-control and sociability - spring from nurturing and stable family environments. The decline in the stability of family arrangements in America, Heckman shows, is related to educational underperformance and growing inequality.

It's because we're concerned about growing inequality, because we recognise that educational attainment is key to increasing opportunity, that we want to support stable family structures as a route to greater equality and opportunity.

FAMILY POLICY - OUT OF THE TRENCHES

Now, traditionally, the right has tried to support the family by offering financial incentives and fighting a cultural battle against those who don't conform.

I think it is important that we look at the financial, and cultural, signals that Government sends. And that's why I believe David Cameron's commitment to back marriage in the tax system and end the couple penalty is right. But I also think we need to be clear about where we've gone wrong in the past.

I think that the Right was wrong to get hung up on homosexuality. I think we indulged prejudice in the eighties and missed the point. Its not gay men who're abusing women and abandoning children - its straight men. And the demand for civil partnerships, proper inheritance rights and equality in adoption rights from gay couples is not a rejection of commitment but a desire to see commitment celebrated and publicly embraced. It is right and moral.

I also think the Right was wrong in its rhetoric about single mothers. We need to recognise that its those fathers who've abandoned their responsibilities, not mothers left holding the baby, who should be challenged about their behaviour.

A NEW APPROACH TO FATHERS

Indeed, I think that we need to do much more to ensure that fathers play their full part in the lives of their children.

That's why I support the idea put forward by the IPPR, and now being taken forward by the Government, that we should record the father's identity on children's birth certificates,

That's why I think our strategies for dealing with teenage pregnancy need to be focussed more on young men and their responsibilities,

That's why I believe we need to ask tough questions about the instant-hit hedonism celebrated by the modern men's magazines targetted at younger males. Titles such as Nuts and Zoo paint a picture of women as permanently, lasciviously, uncomplicatedly available. The images they use and project reinforce a very narrow conception of beauty and a shallow approach towards women. They celebrate thrill-seeking and instant gratification without ever allowing any thought of responsibility towards others, or commitment, to intrude.

The contrast with the work done by women's magazines, and their publishers, to address their readers in a mature and responsible fashion, is striking.

We should ask those who make profits out of revelling in, or encouraging, selfish irresponsibility among young men what they think they're doing. The relationship between these titles ad their readers is a relationship in which the rest of us have an interest.

Because, as David Cameron has pointed out, cultural signals and social norms do influence behaviour. And the costs of relationship breakdown, of children left fatherless, of men behaving badly, are borne by us all.

But alongside a new emphasis on making sure the small minority of fathers who don't live up to their responsibilities are properly challenged, there must also be greater support to help the overwhelming majority of men, who are doing a brilliant job for their children.

That's why I'm so glad that the approach to flexible working and parental leave pioneered by my colleague Theresa May explicitly accords new rights to fathers.

It's important that we see parenting as a shared responsibility, with fathers playing an equal and complementary role, to mothers. Those societies which help fathers play their full, and equal, role enjoy greater family stability as a result. In Sweden, the introduction of flexible parental leave helped increase the amount of time fathers spent with their young children and helped the divorce rate fall by 30%.

And it's important also that we ensure fathers play the fullest possible role in those circumstances where relationships do founder. It breaks my heart to think of some of the cases I've dealt with as a constituency MP when loving fathers haven't had the access to their children which would benefit all sides.

While we believe we should do everything to support commitment, it is often right that people should separate and when that does occur there's a need to ensure that the relationships between former partners and their children are as healthy and supportive as possible.

Which is why my colleague Maria Miller has been looking at the Australian experience of family relationship centres and my colleague Tim Loughton has been exploring what we can do to encourage and facilitate co-parenting in the event of separation.

Fathers matter hugely – their role in family life is vital – and we need to do everything we can to secure, enhance and support the role of fathers in modern society.

And the balanced approach that we want to take towards fatherhood, encouraging commitment and making it easier to do the right thing, is the approach we propose to take to family life overall.

NEW SUPPORT FOR THE FAMILY

I mentioned that the traditional approach of the Right towards family policy had been a mix of financial incentives and cultural exhortation.

On the Left the traditional approach, from those prepared to engage, has been to envisage a larger role for the State - in providing childcare or adding to the range of collective services available for particular individuals.

I believe there have been problems with aspects of the Left's approach. But I also think it's right that we should acknowledge the importance of making high quality childcare more available and affordable to all as central to any mature family policy.

It is impossible for modern families to negotiate all the strains and pressures placed on them, with extended families more dispersed, grandparents more distant, working patterns less forgiving and community relationships weaker unless there is quality childcare near at hand.

That's why I am a supporter of the Surestart programme this Government has driven forward.

The establishment of children's centres and the growth in provision of childcare, alongside parenting support, in communities with historically weak levels of formal

provision is to be welcomed. And that's why we're committed to supporting the existing programme.

But we have to acknowledge that there is further still to go. We need to ensure that Surestart does better at reaching those in the most disadvantaged circumstances. Fewer families from the most deprived backgrounds are using formal childcare and independent audit confirms that the Surestart programme hasn't targetted the poorest most effectively. Its important that we ensure the resources already invested reach those most in need, not least to ensure that the childcare provision is there for those whom we wish to benefit from our welfare to work programmes.

It's because we want to see Surestart targeted better that we're worried that the government is cutting its outreach budget for Surestart by a third. And it's because we want to nudge those who would benefit towards the services that Surestart provides that we're prepared to invest in an enhanced universal health visitor service to provide families with stronger, personal, support and guidance in the crucial early months.

We believe in doing more to support health visiting because we want to ensure there is professional help there, when parents want it, to give them the support, advice and non-judgemental expertise they need, when they need it. Yes, this is an intervention which is state-funded and state-provided. The idea, put forward by Labour, as a piece of wishful thinking, that we are straightforwardly against state provision in the early years couldn't be more wrong. But we want state help to be as personal, intimate, human and responsive as possible, reinforcing relationships and working with the grain of human nature. There when you need it, not when it suits the Government. Freely available mentoring, not on-your-case monitoring.

And as well as planning to extend health visiting we're also looking at how we can implement the Dutch kraamzorg, or maternity nurse, service to ensure that families who need it, especially the poorest, have an extra pair of hands to help out in the days after childbirth. We know that relationships come under greatest strain in the year after a child is born. Just at the moment that couples should be experiencing their greatest joy they are coming under the greatest pressure. Its because we're serious about helping strengthen relationships that we want to intervene, and direct state resources, to support relationships at the times of greatest need, for those most in need.

Childcare is provided overwhelmingly, however, not by the state but by the private and voluntary sector and exploring how we can improve quality, accessibility and affordability is central to the work George Osborne and I are currently carrying forward

And what drives our work in the area of childcare is what drives our approach to social policy overall - the need to see everything through the prism of stronger, healthier, relationships.

A politics which makes enriching relationships its mission will be more human, responsive and effective.

A politics which concentrates on nurturing relationships at every level will most effectively address the central relationship in society between those at the bottom and the top. The cause of social justice and the drive to make opportunity more equal are best served by close attention to the relationships which give children the best start in life

And a politics which values the commitment, affection and respect embedded in our closest human relationships will help us all escape from the fatalism, drift and negativity which characterise modern Britain.

In short, it is Conservative social reform in all its breadth, which will best help us a nation achieve progressive social goals, in all their nobility.