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The Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP, Deputy Prime Minister highlights the government's commitment to children and families

17 June 2010

Speech Transcript

In a major speech hosted by Barnardo's on Thursday 17 June 2010, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg set out his vision of how the Government can help give children the best start in life. The speech included an announcement about the establishment of a Ministerial Task Force to identify policies which will make a big difference to children and families. The full text of his speech is below.

“On Monday I set out the need to get Britain's public finances in order, so that our children don't pay the price for our mistakes. I argued that, without swift and decisive action to pay down our Budget deficit, we condemn the next generation to higher interest rates, poorer public services, and fewer jobs. So, this Government's first priority is pursuing sound fiscal policy for the sake of our children.

“But our commitment to the future of Britain's children doesn't end there. In fact, it's one of the biggest reasons I'm in politics. When you're a parent, your first thought is for your children, and what kind of life they're going to have. That's what being a parent is all about: your fundamental responsibility to those you brought into the world. I believe we have that responsibility not just as individuals but as a generation, too. We have to think about the world we are creating for those who will follow us. We have to think about the lives they will live as much – or even more than – we think about ourselves. And that's a responsibility I think this generation has neglected. We have built a Britain not fit for our children to grow up in.

“For too many British children, childhood has become a time of stress, anxiety and insecurity, when it should be a time of discovery, learning and adventure. My purpose in politics – and the job of this coalition government – is to change that. To live up to our responsibility, as a generation, to lay the foundations for better lives for our children. Paying off debts instead of racking them up is just a first step.

“So today, I'm going to set out this government's wider agenda for children and families to put this generational failure right. First I want to look at how childhood in this country has changed.

“Many British children now experience complex problems that undermine their self-confidence and their security. Then, I will explain how this government plans to help children and families overcome these problems, putting this agenda right at the heart of the Coalition.

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“Let me say at the outset: we will not be limited in our ambitions; I want us as a country to rediscover the spirit of childhood, so we can give every child the best chance to flourish. But we are realistic: it is not government’s job to create happy families. Our job is to dismantle the barriers that prevent families from giving their children the best start. We will empower you. This government will make your choices possible.

“So, let me start with the scale of the challenge.

“Across the country dedicated and committed professionals work tirelessly, and with great skill, to improve the life chances of vulnerable children. But their aspirations for the children and families they work with are regularly thwarted. Because they haven’t had the support or the freedom to do the job in the way they know it should be done. And because, frankly, there are just so many children who need their help.

“Out of every five children, one is currently living in poverty. 2 million live in poor housing – crowded rooms, squalid conditions, dangerous buildings too. These kinds of beginnings can hold a child back for his or her whole life. At just 22 months a poor child’s skills already trail behind those of better off toddlers. At age 5 that poor child, even if he or she is very bright, will have been overtaken at school by a less talented but more privileged classmate. By 16 he or she is just half as likely to get five good GCSEs, including English and maths. And, at the other end of their life, a child born today in England, in the poorest neighbourhoods will still die, on average, 7 years before a child born in the richest.

“Releasing these children from that trap, unleashing their potential, is critical if we are to create a society that is truly fair. That is why this government has committed to funding a pupil premium – money targeted specifically to disadvantaged pupils – despite the needs to make cuts elsewhere in public spending.

“It’s why we want to refocus Sure Start Children’s Centres on the most disadvantaged families, putting in place 4,200 new Sure Start Health Visitors to help achieve this. Because we recognise the importance of early intervention; the importance of helping families prevent problems, rather than just trying to pick up the pieces once it’s already too late

“And it is why we are determined to reform welfare to get people into work. Creating a new Work Programme to give the unemployed tailored support, as well as making work pay, by increasing the income tax personal allowance for working families on low and middle incomes. Yes, some of these plans will cost money at a time when money is tight. But if we are taking action to pay down our deficit for the sake of the next generation – and we are – it makes no moral sense to abandon poorer children along the way.

“Equally, we have to realise that this isn’t just about money. And it isn’t just about children from disadvantaged households – it’s much broader than that. We, as a country, have stopped celebrating the innocence of childhood. In 2007, UNICEF ranked Britain bottom of the world’s developed nations on child wellbeing. Last year, the OECD conducted similar research, and while we were not at the bottom of the table, the UK was still only middling compared to other countries.

“Despite the best efforts of parents, teachers, and children’s charities too, nearly half of English children report having been bullied; teenage obesity is on the rise; and one in ten children suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder. There are surveys that show that at age 11, a fifth of boys and a quarter of girls think they’re fat – at age 11. And the number of children contacting Childline has shot up; twice as many boys compared to 1997, that’s tens of thousands more.

“These children are being subjected to the kind of stress we associate with adulthood. When it is introduced into a child’s world so early on, it takes seed and it does damage. And when growing up becomes so much harder, it is inevitable that being a grown up becomes harder too.

“There’s no single explanation; childhood has evolved because of a number of trends that have shaped our society over time. One is the pace of modern life, and the difficulties it creates for parents seeking to juggle work and home. Children have also lost the support that in the past came from traditional community networks, where friends, relatives and neighbours played a much more hands on role in their upbringing. And the explosion in advertising and marketing has meant that children see themselves as consumers – and are treated that way by companies – at an extraordinarily young age.

“Government can’t undo all these changes. And it’s not up to us to tell people how to live their lives. But we can empower parents so that they can better navigate this less forgiving, less supportive world, recognising that what happens in the home has a profound affect on a child’s outcomes.

“I know there are many parents already doing a fantastic job at raising their children - and we should be proud of that success. But I also know the anxieties as well as the joys of parenthood.

“There has been far too much regulation, far too many central targets. And while many parents and frontline staff do enormously well at working around these constraints, aren’t we better off giving them the freedom to get on with the job in the first place?

“And we need to recognise that it isn’t just parents who raise children – it’s the whole family, the whole street, the whole community. That’s why the government has this week halted the vetting and barring scheme, allowing us to scale the scheme back to common sense levels. Yes, we need to protect our children, but we need to maintain a sense of proportion too.

“And, crucially, we need to reverse the trend of making families ever more dependent on the state. Take tax credits. Around nine out of ten families with children are eligible for child tax credits. That’s madness. Instead we should be giving families their independence, giving them much more control over how they live their lives. That’s why this government is going to raise the income tax personal allowance so that families can keep more of the money they earn. And on tax credits, we have also said that we are going to scale back tax credits for higher earners. In light of the giant black hole in the public finances, there is simply no other choice.

“So, independent but supported families. That is this government’s approach. And it’s one that the Coalition arrived at very naturally. We believe that we strengthen our society by giving people the power to make choices over their own lives. We place great value on the informal networks that can be such a tremendous source of support, as well as the strong sense of community identity that helps make children feel secure.

“Both the Prime Minister and I have made the welfare of the next generation central to our individual political identities. He has talked many times about making Britain more family-friendly; I have always made it clear that I believe a society must be judged on how it treats its children. And one of our very first acts in office together was to declare an end to child detention for immigration purposes. So it should come as no surprise that this agenda is being driven right from the heart of government.

“I can announce today that we are setting up a Childhood and Families Task Force, chaired by the Prime Minister, and made up of senior Ministers from across government departments, including myself. The role of this group will be to identify and prioritise a small number of specific policy proposals that will make the biggest difference to children and families: the everyday bottlenecks that frustrate family life. That will include proposals that have already been put forward in the Coalition Programme for Government. We will work out how to take these forward, as quickly as possible, and as effectively as possible, in order to deliver practical help for families. And the group will also explore new thinking on how we can empower families in a meaningful way. That work will be completed over the autumn, and the proposals will be developed in the context of the upcoming Spending Review.

“Without wanting to prejudge the action that will be taken by the Task Force, I would like to set out some of the areas we are going to be looking at. It’s not an exhaustive list, by any means. But these are the problem areas we can already identify, where we know that we can help.

“The first is parental leave. The Coalition is committed to encouraging shared parenting from the earliest stages of pregnancy – including through the promotion of a system of flexible parental leave. The Task Force is going to look at how we now put that commitment in to practice.

“Many couples find it enormously difficult to strike the right balance between work and home. And traditional arrangements that see mothers take the lion’s share of leave simply don’t suit everyone’s needs. I know from my own experience – my own measly two weeks off following the birth of my third son last year – how frustrating it is for fathers who want to spend more time with their young children. Breaking down the old, outdated attitude to who-should-give-up-work-when is hugely important for men, hugely important for women, but most importantly, children benefit enormously from having both parents actively involved from day one.

“We’re also going to extend the right to request flexible working to all employees, consulting with business on the best way to do that. By encouraging more people to work flexibly, we make it more commonplace, and that in turn will help eliminate the stigma that still discourages men from asking for these arrangements.

“And, on the role of men more generally, I also believe we need more men in childcare. Men currently make up just 2% of the childcare workforce. That’s not good enough. We need a diverse range of providers, with a greater gender balance, surrounding children with a range of role models – different people to learn from and relate to.

“Secondly, the Task force is going to look at how we can provide greater support to disabled children. So many of these families are under enormous pressure. That’s why the government agreed very early on that we would find a way of using direct payments to carers and better community-based care to give them more support. And it’s why we have since announced that we will invest in respite care for these families, an additional £20m a year, starting in 2011-12.

“That money will be recycled from the ending of the government’s contributions to Child Trust Funds. While our towering deficit means we can no longer afford these payments across the board, it is right that we make special provision for disabled children. For them and their families, respite care can be a lifeline.

“Third, we need to look at how we can protect children in the event of family breakdown. Preventing breakdown where we can, making it as painless as possible where we can’t. Separation and divorce can be deeply traumatic for any family. Healthy, loving relationships are the cornerstone of any happy childhood. And we know that family breakdown plays a big part in cycles of disadvantage.

“Families, of course, come in all shapes and sizes. And when couples come up against difficult times, only they can ever know what is right for them. But every couple also knows how tough it can be to get through those difficult times. So where government can help, it should. That’s why we want to improve the access families have to help and advice.

“Across the country there are organisations – charities and faith based groups – who provide counselling and support for couples and families whose relationships are under stress. But they don’t manage to reach everyone who could benefit from their help. This is partly a cultural problem. People feel, rightly, that relationships are private and personal. So if things begin to go wrong, they don’t like to ask for outside help. They wait until their relationship has completely broken down. As a society we need to say that it’s ok to ask for help sooner.

“And many of the organisations that could help don’t have a secure funding basis. They have to spend a lot of time fundraising and often have to charge for their services. That means it’s especially difficult for poorer families to use them. So we have committed to putting funding for relationship support on a stable, long-term footing. And we also want to foster greater networks of support, valuing the role that all the people who don’t necessarily live inside the family home – grandparents, neighbours, friends, community organisations, charities – the role they play in keeping that family strong. There is also already a comprehensive review of family law underway, looking at how we can increase the use of mediation when couples do break up, and how best to provide greater access rights to non-resident parents, and grandparents too.

“Fourth, every parent understands the importance of a secure environment for their children. Spaces where they can play, where they can feel completely free, where they can safely push at the boundaries, learning and experimenting. Places where different generations can meet, binding the community together. We mustn’t accept our playing fields being concreted over and our parks always being tucked out of public view. But if you ask adults if they used to play near their homes as children, 71% will tell you they did. Every single day. That compares to just 21% of children now. It’s not right, and it has to change.

“But, despite how obvious that is, I do appreciate that there’s no easy answer. It isn’t up to central government to start handpicking the areas where children across the country should play. Given the lack of money in the Treasury’s coffers, we wouldn’t now be able to do that, even if we wanted to. But isn’t that even more reason to get the Task Force looking at this? There’s no more money to throw at these problems. So we have to be innovative, we have to find new solutions.

“We need to work out how we can empower people to deliver these changes in their own neighbourhoods, by giving councils more power over how they spend their money, by giving communities more control over what gets built in their neighbourhoods, and by making it easier for volunteers and charities to get involved.

“Finally, we need to take steps to help children avoid the adult pressures that force them to grow up too quickly. Like the irresponsible advertising that sexualises children, that makes them anxious about how they look, that encourages them to place too much value on brands. I see it for myself when my own children remember the adverts better than they remember the programme. And I know lots of other parents will know exactly what I mean.

“We are committed to cracking down on irresponsible advertising and marketing, drawing on previous reviews, including Professor Tanya Byron’s review on internet safety and Professor Buckingham’s review of commercialisation. If we are really going to restore and protect the innocence of childhood, action here is absolutely key.

“So, these are the areas we’ll begin with. But I don’t want to present the Task Force’s agenda as in any way limited. This is about practical help, in whatever way we can deliver it.

“Because, in five years time, I want us to be able to turn around and say that Britain is a place every family wants their children to grow up in. I want us to be able to look back and say: we tackled the deficit, we protected our children’s future, and we rediscovered childhood, so that every child gets the best start. These are big ambitions. But if we’re not in government to do this, what are we here to do?”