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Our political elites know marriage works – they should stop denigrating it

We must try to ensure more British children experience the lifelong advantages of growing up with both parents

MIRIAM CATES

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On the list of tricky topics for politicians to talk about in public, family and marriage come close to the top. When discussing such emotive issues, tripwires abound; it is all but impossible to avoid accusations of being insensitive, judgemental or worse.

Of course, politicians have no business interfering in the private lives of individuals. But policy makers should be concerned with social trends at the macro level, especially when they concern the welfare of children.

One such trend is the decline – and amongst low-income groups the collapse – of marriage rates in this country.

Marriage rates in England and Wales have halved since 1990. In the 1970s, nine in ten babies were born to married couples; in 2021, the majority of babies were born to unmarried parents.

Many will rightly ask why this matters; there's certainly nothing magic about a marriage certificate. But what does seem to be magic about marriage is its impact on children, because of the remarkable protective effect that marriage provides against family breakdown.

As marriage rates have declined, parental separation rates have increased. The UK has become the family breakdown capital of the West with nearly half of British children now not living with both parents by the age of 14. A child whose parents are married at birth is three times less likely to experience parental separation.

Children who grow up living with both parents are more likely to fare well on every level including educational outcomes, future income and mental health. From [an economic perspective](#), family breakdown costs the UK over £50bn a year. It drives income inequality – half of single parent families live in relative poverty – and puts pressure on housing, the NHS and schools.

Given the overwhelming evidence for the social and economic benefits of marriage, it is striking that the political class does so little to extol its virtues. The elites themselves seem fully aware of the advantages of marriage with 83% of high-income couples being married compared to just 55% of low-income couples. It seems the political class, keen to polish their liberal credentials by denigrating the importance of marriage, do not practise what they preach.

What is it about marriage that makes relationships so much more likely to last? Perhaps it provides the line in the sand that requires partners to discuss and resolve the “big issues” such as money and children. Perhaps it's the public nature of the commitment that directly invites family and friends to support the relationship. But whatever the reasons, the evidence is indisputable: marriage often protects children from the harmful effects of family breakdown.

It is not for politicians to tell individuals how to live their lives. There are many instances where parental separation is inevitable, even preferable. But it is the role of government to create the conditions that enable families to flourish.

So the question politicians should be asking is how can we repopularise marriage? We should certainly reform the tax system to make marriage and family life more affordable. The cost of a wedding is also a barrier and in a speech at Conservative Party Conference I quipped that this is where the Church of England could step in by offering [free marriage ceremonies to young people](#).

Too often Bishops seem preoccupied with fighting climate change or opposing the democratically elected Government; it could lead to a wonderful revitalisation of the Parish system if instead the Church focused its efforts on helping to rebuild family life, with all the social, emotional and spiritual benefits that could bring.

I suppose it is inevitable that the things that are most difficult to talk about are the things that matter the most, and debates about family life and relationships must of course be conducted with great sensitivity. It is frustrating that public discussions about family are so often derailed by some who disingenuously suggest that politicians who care about strong families somehow don't value single parents. Nothing could be further from the truth.

But declines in marriage and family stability are increasing inequality and this should be of concern to policy makers on the left and right. Despite the political landmines, we must be prepared to talk – and act – to try to ensure more British children experience the lifelong advantages of growing up with both parents.

Miriam Cates is the Conservative MP for Penistone and Stocksbridge

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