

Speech by Trevor Phillips to the Family and Parenting Institute

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When we opened our doors for business last October we could not have anticipated quite how torrid the economic climate would become over the course of our first year. But one thing is clear - these times make what we do, as well as what the Family and Parenting Institute does, more important than ever.

As the financial meltdown starts to affect ordinary citizens, protecting equality and fighting disadvantage takes on a new urgency. People who didn't reap the benefits of the good times are finding themselves carrying the burden of the bad times.

And at the heart of all this is the family.

When the breadwinner loses their job, it wrecks the lives of the family at home. When job cuts loom on the horizon, the insecurity felt by parents percolates throughout the household. When parents are overworked and stressed, their relationships with each other as well as with the kids become strained. When family homes are repossessed, the disruption affects everyone. When people struggle to meet their personal debt obligations, alongside soaring food and fuel costs, the whole family faces stark choices over how to spend what little money there is.

These cold economic winds buffet family members in different ways. Women may have to cut short maternity leave or return to full-time working to make ends meet. Young adults will have to stay at home longer because they cannot afford to

move out, and many may find themselves choosing paid employment over higher education. Older relatives will rely more on family members for care and support. Our menu of choices constricts when belts tighten. And this puts families under incredible strain.

The oldest predictor of unequal life chances - class - is on its way back as a powerful driver of outcomes, and this is dramatically reinforced by the economic downturn. Redundant bankers coming out of the front door with cardboard boxes in their hands is headline news. Redundant janitors, cleaners and catering staff going out the back door with P60s in their hands is not, but that is where the human cost really adds up.

The current crisis comes hard on the heels of a generation of social change, which has its clearest expression in the changing face of the family. Once a mono-cultural institution, with two married parents, male breadwinner and a couple of kids, the family is today something so diverse and complex that it defies description. We need to find ways to help parents and their children thrive in these new environments, to make sure that these changes do not combine with financial upheaval to create a toxic cocktail of disadvantage that entrenches inequalities across our society.

And we need to act quickly.

Marriage rates are lower than ever; for every three weddings, there are now two divorces - the highest rate in Europe. The number of people co-habiting has risen 64% in a decade, and almost half of children are born out of wedlock. Today, almost a quarter of families are headed by a single mum - usually a young mother struggling on a low income. When we look at black and mixed ethnicity families, over 45% these families are headed by a lone parent.

There are greater numbers of disabled people than ever before, and the increase is most marked in people under the age of 16. Many lone parents have disabled children, because the all-pervasive caring responsibilities often lead to family breakdown. And let us not forget that one in three of children living in poverty in Britain today has a disabled parent.

As our population ages, by 2026 the demand for informal care will nearly double. Women who thought that 50 was the year they got rid of the kids and started to

live the lives that they choose, are now likely to find out that they will spend the middle third of their lives caring for their parents, who may be disabled.

And families face questions we weren't even able to articulate a generation ago. With the increase in mixed race families, more cultural questions abound about what language to speak at home and what religion the children should follow. The introduction of civil partnerships for gay and lesbian couples leads us to tread unexplored paths around conception and birth, and how to help these new families deal with the prejudices of the outside world.

Our job is to handle some of these issues, to offer leadership and to offer support. We need to use these times as an opportunity to embed equality and fairness so that when life becomes a little easier again, these values will have been hardwired into policy and practice. The danger is that we will fail to move with the speed and imagination required.

Both the Commission and the Family and Parenting Institute have an important role to play in this process.

Firstly, we both stimulate evidence-based policy change. By being the first port of call for practitioners working with families, the Family and Parenting Institute can truly be a representative voice with a distinct insight into the issues families face. At the Commission we too can use the intelligence we are picking up on our Helpline to paint the real picture faced by ordinary citizens across Britain. And this rich base of evidence, along with our broader, deeper remit, enables us to show that parenthood is all too often a driver of inequality.

Secondly, both of our organisations are working to bring the debate around flexible working and parental leave into the 21st century. Over the course of the past few months, the Working Better consultation we launched this summer has become increasingly pertinent. This will be a root and branch investigation into the future of work and the role of the workplace in people's lives; the different choices available to men and women; and barriers to the development of flexible working and work-life balance in the British economy in the decade ahead.

In the tough times, more widespread, better quality flexible working is anything but a naïve ideal. Flexible working brings with it a keener focus on output over process, and it responds to the increasingly diverse customer demand of today's 24/7 global economy. How else are employers going to drain every ounce of

productivity from their employees? How else are today's families going to cope with the multi-faceted demands on their times and their pockets? And this is not just about those of us lucky enough to have well-paid jobs, it is about men and women at the lower end of the labour market too, on the factory and shop floors across the country.

And finally, both the Family and Parenting Institute and the Commission have an important role to empower the public to secure fairness and equality for themselves. We need to engage young people, parents, families, schools and community organisations in a way that we haven't done previously. That's why the online panel 'Family Voice' being launched today is so important. It's by using new forums and new modes of engagement that we will help ordinary citizens to articulate their own needs and to challenge authority when it fails them.

And this is where we are asking the government to be more joined-up with the new Single Equality Bill. Because whilst one arm of government is going full-tilt to put more power in the hands of citizens, in the arena of equality where the voice of the people might be the most effective spur to action, we see little effort to unleash the power of the ordinary citizen's scrutiny and challenge.

That is how we - the family of the willing - can help to ensure that in these the worst of times we can get the best deal possible for families across the country, for this generation and for generations to come.

Thank you.