



Findings from the Economic and Research Council's



Research Programme on *Devolution and Constitutional Change*

Devolution Briefings

Learning from devolution: Making Childcare Labour's 'Big Idea'

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Key Points

- Labour is looking for a 'Big Idea' with broad public appeal to give purpose and direction to the latter part of its second term. An integrated policy for young children and families, centred on a new approach to childcare would promote equality and enhance efficiency, appealing to both traditional Labour voters and 'middle England'.
- As a 'Big Idea' childcare needs to be based on a clear vision of childhood, child development and the diverse realities of family life. Ideally it should integrate aspects of childcare, education, health and parental and family learning, and be available universally to all families with young children.
- In 1998 the 'National Childcare Strategy' massively enhanced the status of childcare across the UK. Before 1998 childcare and early years education had been largely ignored by government and provision here lagged behind most of Europe.
- Paradoxically, the government that first introduced a 'National Strategy' seems to have lacked a strategic policy vision despite - or perhaps reflected in - a large array of important initiatives (Early Excellence Centres, Sure Start, Neighbourhood Nursery Initiative, Children's Centres, Extended Schools).
- The Westminster government seems yet to recognise fully that because of devolution most children's policy it develops applies *only* to England. Equally, it has not yet recognised that devolution has provided a testing ground for policy innovation *outside* England.
- In Scotland and Wales new childcare policies have a sharper strategic focus.
- In Scotland an ambitious 'Integrated Strategy for the Early Years' spanning Health, Social Services, Education and Childcare is being developed and free half-time nursery places have existed since 2002 for all 3 and 4 year olds whose parents want one (two years ahead of the target dates for England and Wales).
- The Welsh Assembly Government is re-thinking policy for infants and children in the context of its framework for 'The Learning Country', including treating children aged 3-7 years as a distinct 'stage' in education and development, with a fundamental re-thinking the curriculum for children up to seven.
- In other words, Labour can learn a great deal from on-going policy development in Scotland and Wales. There may be a 'Big Idea' waiting on Westminster's doorstep.

Introduction: Whatever happened to the Labour vision?

Universal childcare provision is a leading candidate for the UK government's much sought after 'Big Idea' for domestic policy. An effective 'Big Idea' would have to give direction to the latter half of Labour's second term and revitalise its political appeal. Conceived broadly as a core element of policy for children and families – perhaps in the form of integrated children's centres - childcare has considerable potential to bring education, health, social services and basic skills together into a coherent package. Westminster – usually the *English* government for children's policy – could learn a great deal from the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales. Each has sought to develop its own strategic vision for children and childcare, both emphasise the integration of universal and targeted services. The right policy package appeal to Labour's traditional supporters *and* 'middle England'.

The Labour government under Tony Blair has radically enhanced the status of childcare and 'early years' policy, yet their core purpose in this area remains muddled. The government tried to move policy in a new direction, but without a clear vision. So far, despite significant investment through the National Childcare Strategy launched in 1998, the potential of these changes is being lost in a confusion of muddled priorities and a bewildering array of initiatives providing fragments of funding, that must be pieced together from below by providers and parents. Some of this funding is also short-term, which makes provision insecure. Yet today this mixed record offers Labour a political opportunity: to put childcare at the heart of a political strategy to revitalise the government's electoral coalition. Childcare policy is already a mix of universal and targeted elements which, as well as being a sound mix in policy terms, potentially creates this political dividend for the government. But to earn it, Labour must articulate a new approach to the 'early years'.

Box 1 The Political Case for Childcare

- Childcare has wide appeal, tying together traditional Labour supporters with middle England
- Powerful 'efficiency' case for 'early' intervention in terms of maximising individual and collective capabilities and minimising individual and social costs later on
- Strong equality arguments which link outcomes to opportunities - breaking cycles of deprivation and allowing all individuals to fulfil their potential
- In the US the Right has turned to 'popularisation' of genetic determinism – 'natural differences' – are used to justify growing inequality; Labour could pre-empt this argument by articulating the case for the contribution of 'nurture' through an integrated approach to the early years including a comprehensive childcare policy.

Labour's record on childcare

In 1998 Labour made childcare a major item on the UK's political agenda for the first time. Since then, its record in England has been mixed. A range of pilot schemes and targeted initiatives, including 'Early Excellence Centres', 'Sure Start' and 'Neighbourhood Nurseries' has produced some outstanding provision. Moreover, in England successive initiatives - almost at the rate a new initiative each year - have revolutionised the role of government. The 1998 Green Paper heralded only 24 Early Excellence Centres for the whole of England, current plans will create Children's Centres in 136 English Local Authorities - many with

several individual centres. Yet the sheer variety of initiatives itself indicates an overall lack of clarity, purpose or agreed strategy. Paradoxically, the government that first made childcare a matter of national strategy seems to have lacked strategic vision:

- It has been unwilling to face the full cost of comprehensive childcare policy (estimates of immediate exchequer costs range from £3 billion to £7.5 billion a year – but baseline estimates rate the policy's net present economic value at about £40 billion).
- Although 'joined-up' efforts have increased (culminating in the cross-departmental Sure Start Unit), it has failed to make childcare a sufficiently high policy priority across the relevant Whitehall departments – Health, Education and Skills, Home Office, Work and Pensions.
- It has failed to make clear how various initiatives – Early Excellence Centres, Sure Start, Neighbourhood Nurseries, Children's Centres, free part-time pre-school, Children's Trusts and Extended Schools – fit together.
- The overall purpose of the policy remains obscure – what is the relationship between helping parents (particularly mothers) to work, targeting vulnerable and disadvantaged children, improving general child development for all, care and education for children?

Today only a minority of families can rely on a single 'family wage' - only one in four is supported by a male breadwinner. High rates of divorce may reflect the increasing independence of women, but they certainly make it more important that women remain connected to the labour market. Although the UK reached relatively high levels of maternal employment even without a supportive childcare policy, women's employment prospects - and hence the payoff for the exchequer - would be powerfully enhanced by strong and dependable childcare provision. Moreover, mobility within the UK has broken up some of the traditional networks of 'kith and kin' on which many mothers have historically relied.

Box 2 Why getting the 'early years' right matters

- Patterns throughout life are heavily influenced by experiences in early childhood, according to compelling evidence from a wide range of disciplines
- Irrespective of socio-economic background, high quality early years education and childcare raises cognitive and social/behavioural outcomes and ability to learn
- Propensity to engage in criminal activity can be significantly reduced by some forms of early years provision
- Health outcomes (heart disease, depression) into middle age and beyond are heavily influenced by well-being in infancy
- Patterns of physical activity in early childhood become ingrained for life
- Early problems, if not addressed, tend to become entrenched and bring about long-term damage and disadvantage – conversely getting the early years right can help tackle inequalities in health, education and economic prospects

Whatever the reason, there is mounting evidence that young children are getting a raw deal. Child poverty rates are high especially, but not only, in 'workless' households. David Bell, the Chief Inspector of Schools, recently revealed the shocking news that significant numbers of children - more than ever before - are unprepared to start school at age five. Many are unable to speak properly. A properly organised and resourced system of childcare could help to improve the 'disrupted and dishevelled lives' of the children about whom Bell is concerned.

To play its full role, however, childcare should be the central part of a comprehensive new understanding of and policy approach to (early) childhood and family life. In addition, where possible, a variety of services relevant to children and parents should be integrated, or at least to maintaining clear links between them.

The 'Every Child Matters' Green Paper seeks to enhance provision and co-ordination across universal and targeted services. Its proposals for Children's Trusts are worthy of close consideration. After Victoria Climbié's death, a new approach to vulnerable children is necessary. However, the Green paper's potentially valuable proposals need to be matched by a clear vision for all children (and their families) through universal services. Moreover, in order to maintain the quality of provision, growth of services will need to be carefully planned and staged, including plans to expand the trained workforce. Adding new initiatives to the already diverse range of (individually excellent) schemes does not amount to a strategic vision, and is unlikely to yield an electoral dividend.

Box 3 A Case for (some) Universal Provision

- Some aspects of early years policy (including existing provisions for nursery education) should be universal because all children benefit from them.
- Area based strategies will miss many poor and otherwise deprived children, as most do not live in deprived areas.
- 'Targeting within universalism' can reach particularly vulnerable children partly by reducing stigma.
- Changes to family structures (including divorce) and other new social risks can make apparently secure children unexpectedly vulnerable.
- Universal provision can sustain a broad and articulate coalition supporting the provision, ensuring its quality (and possibly also rewarding the government that introduces it).

Which nation, what strategy? Learning from the devolved governments

There are good reasons for childcare to be Downing Street's candidate as the 'Big Idea' for domestic policy, building links across government departments and local service provision. A more sustained and integrated approach, may be difficult, but is not impossible. Scotland and Wales have each developed distinctive and coherent strategies for childcare, and might provide some of the necessary pointers from which Westminster can learn. Labour already seems to be doing so in the case of the new Children's Commissioner to be appointed in the wake of the inquiry into Victoria Climbié's death, borrowing from a Welsh innovation that was subsequently copied in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The devolved governments in Scotland and Wales have each developed more purposeful strategies for children in general. Appropriately enough, these strategies were shaped by local conditions and pressures, as well as reflecting the ambitions to make something of the new institutions in Cardiff and Edinburgh. No doubt they also owe something to Westminster government's enhancement of the status of childcare policy. But from an English perspective it might seem ironic that, to date, Scotland and Wales may have made more of the opportunities afforded by the new focus on and resources devoted to the early years.

The ambitious scale of these re-orientations of policy in Wales and Scotland means that they are still at a relatively early stage of development. Questions remain about the ability of the devolved governments to match resources to their strategic visions. Nonetheless, in their different ways, each shows the importance of a clear strategic objective to the process of policy reform. Although perhaps lacking the deep research capacity of Whitehall, the smaller scale of the administrations in Edinburgh and Cardiff may have made working across departments easier.

So far policy differences on higher education and care for the elderly have generated headlines about tensions provoked by devolution, which may increase after the Government had to rely on the votes of Scottish Labour MPs to win the Commons' vote on variable fees. But devolution also creates potential for positive lessons to be learnt across the countries of the UK. The Joint Ministerial Committee might provide the overarching context for UK wide policy discussions. But for such an approach to work Westminster would need to recognise that, for the most part, it makes policy for children in *England*, not the UK. Across the UK education and care services for families with children have expanded substantially. Converting this expansion of into a comprehensive policy will be expensive. Nonetheless, after the furore over higher education a policy for England that helps to equalise both *opportunities* and *outcomes*, while generating widespread popular support might help to repair divisions in Labour Party ranks. Through the Barnett formula, expanding funding in England would also help to release the resources necessary for the Welsh and Scots to realise their visions fully.

Scotland

The Scottish government chose to focus more on the rolling out of general provision, rather than focusing on 'beacons' which might lead to a diffusion of good practice. They accelerated the implementation of broader aspects of the Childcare Strategy. The extension of free half-time nursery education to all 3 and 4 year olds was achieved in 2002, two years before the 2004 target for England. This achievement was all the more striking given that Scottish Primary Schools do not provide a 'reception' year for children of four. Scotland also took the lead in extending the role of schools – the New Community Schools help to deliver a wide range of provision for families. The Scottish Executive is currently preparing an 'Integrated Strategy for the Early Years' (ISEY), covering health, social services and education, following a well received consultation document, from which Westminster could learn a good deal.

The ISEY is aimed those in the statutory, voluntary and private sector who plan or provide early years services in childcare, pre-school, health and social services. It builds on existing commitments to free part-time pre-school places, policies to make affordable high quality childcare universally accessible as well as an early assessment of healthcare, advice and continuing support for every family with a new-born infant. Further it targets vulnerable children, aiming for at least 15,000 children under five to have an integrated package of health, care and education support with further targeted support for vulnerable children aged 0-3 from deprived families. ISEY aims to: align Scottish Executive policies across Departments; create greater coherence in relevant Executive funding; propose a set of clear outcomes for local partners; support joint planning, commissioning and a single system service delivery of early years services in local authorities and NHS boards and Trusts; and provide a framework to monitor and evaluate policy impact.

Box 4 – What Can Labour Learn?

- The relationship between early years provision and primary school is crucial. Welsh policy points the way forward for developing an integrated approach to the ‘curriculum’ for ages 3-7.
- The Scottish Executive’s ISEY provides a model for cross-departmental integration – it shows a high-level commitment across departments, will integrate local actors from private and voluntary sectors as well as government, and indicates how targeted policies for vulnerable and deprived children can be developed within a universal framework.
- Developing Welsh policy points to the importance of ‘play’ in early education and then throughout children’s lives. The creation of safe play-areas, within which ‘light touch’ supervision is possible, should yield lessons relevant for other parts of the UK.
- The Welsh accent on education and the focusing of cross-departmental attention on children in Scotland each giving childcare a high priority with a clear set of objectives showing how dynamic policy development can be produced. Each is distinctive, both are innovative.

Wales

In Wales, the focus has been somewhat different. The Assembly Government's 'Learning Country' strategy is having a profound impact on the orientation of child-care and early years education in Wales. The result of a re-consideration of the purpose of early years education and care has been an on-going reorientation of the entire curriculum, even within Primary Schools, up to age seven. In other words, for education and other public policies, the period to age seven is considered as a distinct stage of life. This new approach, heavily influenced by international experience, is based on the idea of learning through play. This approach clearly represents a radical departure from the increasingly formal, test-oriented approach to which Labour appears committed in England, where a formal approach may increasingly influence pre-school education. In contrast, the Welsh experiment involves changing primary education to bring it into line with an 'early years' philosophy of learning.

'Integrated children's centres' (similar to the pilot 'Early Excellence Centres' in England) are an important institutional focus for Welsh early years policy. Currently, the Assembly Government is committed to providing one such centre in each local authority. These provide a context which can provide, and co-ordinate outside provision, of childcare, including 'wraparound' care, aspects of health care and nutrition, support for parents, including parenting education, 'family learning' and other adult basic skills education.

The combination of the emphasis on 'play' in the 3-7 curriculum and the role envisaged for ICCs meant that Wales has developed a distinct reaction to a new Westminster initiative to create new 'play' facilities across the UK. While one consultation was held for England and Scotland, a distinct Welsh process developed, despite what the weaker powers of the Welsh Assembly government might have led us to believe. In Wales ICCs are a possible site for play facilities for children up to the age of sixteen.

If Labour wants to make a permanent progressive change in the welfare state, it could learn useful lessons from the on-going development of the developing strategies for the early years in Scotland and Wales, as well its own pilot projects in England. The creation of a national network of integrated children centres - one in each community - would cost the exchequer

between £3 and £7.5 billion a year, but with economic benefits estimated at about £40 billion. The prospect of an unambiguously radical legacy must be tempting for a government caught between an unpopular foreign policy and bewilderingly complex welfare state reforms which are unlikely to produce positive results quickly or clearly enough to win mass support from a cynical public.

This *Devolution Briefing* was written by Daniel Wincott, Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Birmingham. It draws on research carried out in his project in the ESRC research programme on Devolution and Constitutional Change, entitled Devolution and the Comparative Territorial Analysis of the Welfare State.

The Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme was set up by ESRC in 2000 to explore the series of devolution reforms which have established new political institutions in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, London and the other English regions since 1997. It has commissioned 35 projects around the UK to carry out top-class academic research and to contribute to the policy debates surrounding devolution.

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