



Marriage Foundation

Press Release from Marriage Foundation

Release Date: EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 Wednesday 23rd August 2023

“Cowardly” politicians must stand-up for marriage and embrace radical pro-family reforms, says new report

- **Marriage consistently associated with more stable families**
- **UK welfare policy penalise poor couples who marry**
- **Marriage in England and Wales since 2010 down 13 per cent before lockdown and by two thirds down after lockdown**
- **No cabinet minister has spoken out about marriage since 2014**

Cowardly politicians should stop ignoring the evidence and stand-up for marriage by ditching anti-family policies that penalise poor couples who tie the knot and embrace radical “Hungarian style” reforms to boost marriage rates, says a major new study from Marriage Foundation.

The study, Family Unfriendly Britain, argues that the Government should actively seek to bring in measures that would boost rates and cut family breakdown. They highlight how Hungary has dramatically reversed the decline in couples marrying over the last decade with a slew of measures aimed at boosting marriage and fertility rates.

“If the UK has any kind of family policy, it revolves around childcare and getting parents into work. Aside from regulatory changes, government almost entirely avoids distinguishing marriage, the family form most closely associated with couple stability and beneficial child outcomes. It is nine years since any cabinet minister gave a serious speech discussing marriage”, it says.

“The UK government’s ambivalent attitude towards marriage couldn’t be more obvious than when comparing with the enthusiastically ‘family friendly’ Hungary.

“In 2010, the Hungarian government implemented a series of financial incentives aimed at addressing a national fertility rate well below the EU average. Several of these incentives – tax breaks for newlyweds, up to £93,000 in loans that can be written off – were explicitly linked to whether couples are married.

“The consequence was that from 2010 the number of marriages in Hungary rose by 84 per cent before lockdown in 2019 and 89 per cent by 2020. Hungary was the only country in Europe to see an increase in new marriages during the first year of lockdown, rising 3 per cent against the previous year.

“In sharp contrast, for decades UK government policy has failed to distinguish between married and cohabiting couples in both tax and benefits systems. Although married couples have greater protections in the event of death, retirement or separation, the only current financial advantage in getting married is a £252 tax allowance for low-income couples introduced in 2015. However there remains a substantial ‘couple penalty’ for low-income couples who stand to lose £’000s in welfare payments if they move in together or marry. This is a serious barrier to marriage among the poorest that has been completely neglected by politicians. Marriage is increasingly the preserve of the better off.”

The report goes on to detail the considerable package of incentives offered to couples in Hungary to marry.

Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation’s Research Director commented: “The contrasting fortunes of marriage in Hungary and the UK, are a direct result of years of government policy. While Hungary has passed a slew of pro-family, pro-marriage policies, policymakers in the UK have not. Indeed, governments of all colours have maintained the couple penalty in the benefits and tax system. The pernicious effect of this is to actively dissuade people from marrying especially those on the lowest incomes, where the penalty is most acutely felt. This is why the big decline in marriage has been among those in the bottom socio-economic groups, while the vast majority of richer couples, including eight in 10 senior politicians are married.”

Mr Benson continued: “At the same time no senior politician from the Prime Minister down has talked about marriage or its benefits for nearly a decade, the last one was by Iain Duncan Smith in 2014. Given all the evidence about the benefits of marrying, failing to acknowledge or even talk about would seem cowardly and frit.”

The report makes clear that Marriage Foundation is not endorsing all of Hungary’s policies, or its government, but it argues that shouldn’t stop UK policymakers from looking at the reasons why Hungary has seen a spectacular rise marriage rates, a decline in divorce and an improvement in fertility rates.

It goes on: “Family breakdown also has huge consequences for children. Whether through the drop in income, loss of contact with one parent, or psychological impact of parental divorce, children living in lone parent families tend to fare worse on almost any negative social indicator.

“Marriage is associated with higher rates of parental stability. Some researchers claim that this higher stability is mostly due to a selection effect of the kind of people who marry. However, our own research using two different UK datasets finds consistent additional

differences in stability between married and cohabiting parents, even after taking into account selection factors such as age, education, income and happiness.

“Moreover, we have also demonstrated direct links between both marriage and family breakdown with child outcomes. Teenagers with married parents are more likely to have higher self-esteem, fewer mental health problems, to achieve GCSE passes in both Maths and English, attend university, avoid the need for benefits, and eventually get married themselves.”

The report concludes: “Marriage is good for couples, their children and wider society. Hungary recognises this. The UK does not.

“While Hungary has actively encouraged marriage via financial incentives since 2010, the UK has actively discouraged marriage via financial disincentives in the welfare system.

“The consequence is that marriages in Hungary have doubled, rising even during the year of worldwide lockdown restrictions, while marriages in England & Wales have steadily declined with a particular collapse during 2020.

“Even if marriages in England & Wales are shown to rebound dramatically in the 2021 and 2022 data, when they are finally published, it remains the case that public policy values marriage very differently in the two countries and family household formation has responded accordingly...

“The new DWP report on ‘Living together as a married couple’ is a welcome step in the direction of acknowledging how the couple penalty influences couple formation and that the issues are complex.

“However, with the notable exception of Iain Duncan Smith in his speech at our conference in 2014, we have yet to hear a single politician, let alone cabinet minister, recognise the scale of the ‘couple penalty’ problem or how it affects couple formation.”

Sir Paul Coleridge, founder of Marriage Foundation added: “The million-dollar question is why governments and political parties of all shades of opinion have such an aversion to marriage when this research shows yet again that it is the single most powerful antidote to family breakdown. Is it just that they are all afraid of being accused of hypocrisy when they almost universally embrace it in their own private lives but don’t support it openly for the less well-off who would benefit mostly from making such an open and explicit commitment? In the last poll 80 per cent of young people aspire to achieve it too so any pro marriage policies would be popular yet the “couple penalty” stands like a roadblock in the way of the fulfilment of their aspiration. There are aspects of the social policies of Hungary which many countries do not support, but their incentivisation of marriage over more than ten years surely at least deserves serious examination when it has been demonstrably effective in promoting family stability and an increase in childbearing. Unless and until governments tackle family breakdown (with its attendant £50bn cost ticket) they will never successfully tackle all the familiar teenage mental health issues. Which one will be the first to grasp this nettle and put it centre stage in their policy agenda?”

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Notes to editors

About Marriage Foundation

Marriage Foundation was founded in 2012 by Sir Paul Coleridge, a High Court judge who was moved by his personal experience in 40 years as a barrister and judge specialising in family law. The think tank seeks to improve public understanding of marriage and to reduce the numbers of people drawn into the family justice system – some 500,000 children and adults each year. It has established itself as a leading voice on marriage issues in the UK.

Sir Paul Coleridge, Harry Benson and Michaela Hyde from the Marriage Foundation are available for comment and for interviews linked to these new findings.

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