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The abolition of maternity leave and "blue skies thinking"

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Management- speak, the identity language of upper-echelon, fast track career advance - has a phrase that's been heard by those amongst the humbler ranks of life - "blue skies thinking"

Its terrestrial equivalent is " horizon-shift thinking" and it's this that Steve Hilton, one of David Cameron's closest policy advisers at 10 Downing Street , was supposedly indulging in when he advocated that maternity leave should be abolished in order to help small businesses.

It's no good dismissing the proposed ending of maternity leave as just a thought, because before it is even considered publicly , it has to be measured against what we insist are the bedrock criteria of a responsible society , which includes maternity rights for working mothers.

In the UK maternity leave is 52 weeks.

In the European Union countries, the minimum is 14 weeks.

In thinly-populated Iceland it is 9 months in total , 3 of which is to be taken by the mother, 3 of which must be taken by the father and the remaining three months decided between them.

Even in the US where maternity rights lag extremely far behind our own, unpaid leave is the law of the land.

From a purely employment perspective, maternity leave allows the recruitment and retention of competent , highly-skilled experienced women, a necessary step for any successful business.

The TUC have welcomed figures published earlier this year showing that there is now virtually no difference between the percentage of women with and without dependent children in work (66 to 67 per cent)

The TUC described these figures thus : " The rising proportion of mothers in work over the last 15 years is a ringing endorsement of family-friendly working practices such as better parental leave and pay, and the right to request flexible working."

However, progress in maternity rights in one area have come at the same time as setbacks in others.

Late last year, the EU council of Ministers, lobbied by Tory MEPs, shelved plans passed by Euro MEPs to extend the maternity leave to a statutory 20 weeks on full pay throughout the EU.

New figures show that in the past 5 years, in Employment Tribunals verdicts in Scotland, only 1 case in 10 was successful on the grounds of dismissal from the job or disadvantage at work related to pregnancy, childbirth or maternity. Out of 660 cases only 51 were successful.

If maternity leave were to go, then by the same logic the cessation of paternity leave would surely follow , as ending a further "barrier" to the smooth running of small businesses.

So it is reassuring to know that this present UK Government is encouraging paternity leave.

Evidence from Europe of the benefits of paternity leave is that a mother's future earnings can rise by an average of 7 per cent for each month that the father takes paternity leave, and so helping to close the gender pay gap. (Swedish Institute of Labor Market Policy Evaluation, March 2010)

However the workplace remains an important area where women's hard-won rights have to be safeguarded and progressed and it is no place for a whimsical "thoughtshower", to quote management-speak, on abolishing maternity leave.

So do all of these outlandish outpourings mean anything more for us other than just the sound of a Tory eccentric winding back the clock?

Yes they do.

He may have already advocated the abolition of consumer rights, shutting down Job Centres, and, when the Tories were in opposition, using "cloud-bursting technology" to give us all more sunshine .

However, Steve Hilton is not just any old policy adviser of David Cameron.

Steve Hilton is the architect of David Cameron's Big Society.