

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Meale. I congratulate most warmly my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Jessica Lee) on securing the debate and on her excellent introduction to this very important subject. I am pleased that so many hon. Members have come along this morning to take part.

We know that the country faces a very severe financial crisis and we are reminded almost daily of the huge challenges that we face internationally in the middle east and elsewhere. However, the crisis facing family life is the most serious of all the issues facing this country. I do not say that lightly, because the data on family breakdown are extremely alarming. The most recent analysis from the Office for National Statistics in the millennium cohort study shows that 48% of all children born today will not grow up with both parents. It is alarming that nearly one in two children born today will experience some form of family breakdown, because although single parents do heroic and fantastic work on many occasions, and I give them all the credit they deserve for performing a tough role, the data show that outcomes for children overall across the country—obviously, there are exceptions—are much less good than when two parents stay together.

There has been a view across academics, policy makers and journalists that Governments cannot really go near this issue and that although they can build schools, run a health service, maintain decent roads and try to promote economic growth, they cannot or should not get involved in the issue of family life, even though that is the most important to many of our constituents, as my hon. Friend said. I want to challenge that contention because if we go about this in the right way, we can make a significant contribution to preventing family breakdown and strengthening family life.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is elaborating on the severe problems that family breakdowns cause society. Does he share my concern that the financial cost of such breakdowns is in excess of £40 billion, according to statistics from last year? Whatever investment the Government put in is worth while if it can address that fundamental problem, which will otherwise be with society for generations to come.

Andrew Selous: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, and he is absolutely right. The recent study by the Relationships Foundation put the cost of family breakdown at £42 billion. In a recent speech, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions put it at between £20 billion and £40 billion per annum. Whatever the figure, we can all agree that it is massive, and if we can reduce it, there will be many better uses to which the money could be put in our constituencies; indeed, we could also reduce taxes. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for putting that point so firmly on the record.

As I said, success or failure in marriage and relationships is not merely a matter of luck. Nor do people in a troubled marriage or relationship have just two options—to stay together and be miserable or to split up. That is absolutely and emphatically not the case, and I want to spend the rest of my time explaining why. I also want to praise the Government for some of the things they have done recently and to commend the Minister on some of the excellent initiatives she has introduced. I will perhaps also outline some of the areas where we can go a little faster and a little further to match the scale of the problem.

I praise the recent funding from the Department for Education for a range of relationship support initiatives, from Relate to Care for the Family and its Let's Stick Together project, which I am particularly keen on. I commend the Minister on that excellent start, which is an early down-payment on the coalition's promise to take this issue seriously. I also commend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who has committed his Department to recognising marriage in its data and analysis. Under the previous Government, the issue was just wiped off the piece, and we could not look at the data on it. I am not talking about tax, which the Minister and I will disagree on as far as marriage is concerned, but about having an honest analysis of the data. Such an analysis is a good thing, and we should just see what the data say. That is a significant issue.

I want to comment a little on the funding that the Minister has given Care for the Family to roll out the Let's Stick Together course. People ask what we can do about family breakdown, and this course is really practical. It is run by health visitors up and down the country for new parents, whatever type of relationship they are in. It takes an hour or so. Often, it is run by new parents who have recently done the course. It gives some of the basics about how to have a healthy, strong and happy relationship or marriage that will last. The early feedback is very positive and suggests that the course is well received. Surely, it is better to give people the tools, support and skills to make a success of their relationships than to come round and sort things out afterwards, when everything has gone wrong. In Bristol, where the course has been trialled, it now reaches nearly 30% of new mothers, and there has been very positive feedback. I commend Harry Benson of the Bristol community family trust, in particular, for the pioneering work that the trust has done. I also commend Bristol health visitors for the enthusiasm with which they have picked up the course. If that can be done in Bristol, why can it not be done in every other great city, and in every market town, village and rural area, in our country, because this really matters?

I hope that we will see a little more support from registrars for marriage preparation. Two thirds of all weddings take place in registry offices, but registrars do not offer good enough signposting towards the marriage preparation that is available from local and community groups. That is an obvious thing we could do, it would not cost any money and it would lead to better outcomes. What do we have to fear? What is there to prevent us from doing that? I hope that we can go further and faster on that.

At the moment, all our local authorities are preparing local child poverty strategies. I welcome that exciting development, which is taking place alongside the Government's excellent work nationally to reduce child poverty. We can see different and pioneering initiatives at the local level, and I hope that strengthening families will be a key part of what local authorities look at. From the early evidence I have seen of some child poverty strategies, however, I am not convinced that that is yet the case. I know that we are all localists now, and that we are not really in the business of telling our local authorities what to do, but an emphasis on strengthening families would be enormously helpful and useful, given that a child who grows up with one parent rather than two is twice as likely to grow up in poverty as one whose parents stay together. I therefore hope that strengthening families will be an aspect of local child poverty strategies and that authorities will work with the community and voluntary sector. There is a community family trust in my constituency, which could do this work very well with my local authority, and that would be helpful.

My hon. Friend talked about the importance of parenting courses, and I completely agree with her. The additional point I would make is that internationally peer-reviewed academic work, particularly from Professors Cowan and Cowan at the university of Berkeley in California, shows that parenting work is even more successful if the relationship between the two parents can be enhanced at the same time. Where parenting work is being done and there are two parents, let us also strengthen the couple's relationship. We could usefully do that, and it would not cost us any more money where parenting work was already being done. That would lead to better results.

We can also do more in our schools. I recognise that our school curriculum is completely packed, and whenever anyone tells me that they want to add something to it, I ask them what they want to take out. However we do have assemblies in our schools, and teachers and head teachers are often looking for material to present. There is very good material around. Care for the Family has its evaluation material. There is also an excellent charity called Explore, which is based in Hampshire. I have met both, and they have really excellent material, which is welcomed by students in schools. It speaks to children in a language they understand and tries to give them some of the skills and support they need to make a success of adult relationships when they leave school. We could do more work on that.

My final suggestion to the Minister before I sit down, as many colleagues want to speak, is not to ignore what we can do in prisons. That might seem an odd area to mention; however, strengthening the relationships of prisoners is important. It is not a fuzzy thing to do, akin to giving prisoners televisions in their cells. The academic evidence tells us that prisoners who have a strong relationship to return to after they leave prison are 35% less likely to reoffend when they come out. If their relationship breaks down while they are in prison, they are 40% more likely to reoffend. Why does that matter? Because you and I, Mr Meale, are less likely to have our back door kicked in on a Saturday night, or our car radio stolen, if we can support the relationships of prisoners. We might not immediately think of that when we discuss family policy, but it is important.

Once again, I congratulate my hon. Friend. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response; I commend her on the excellent start her Department has made. However, I would say it is a massive challenge. If we are to make Britain the country we all want to see, we need to go a little further and faster in this area.