

# Tackle unemployment not single parents



## Agenda

Making lone parents a  
scapegoat is completely  
unjustified

**GERARD LYONS**

Slingshot came to Peckham last week. The result was a warning to single mothers, as if they were the cause of all evil.

Visiting a vast 1960s estate the Prime Minister identified many social problems which we should all be concerned about. The visit marks the start of an overhaul of the welfare state.

There will be two main aims. One is to remove the dependency culture, where a life on benefit becomes self-fulfilling, discouraging some from ever seeking work. This needs to change. The most important aim must be to get the unemployed a foot on the work ladder. This will require changes in the tax-and-benefit system, to give employers an incentive to take on the long-term unemployed and to force people away from dependency.

The other aim is to prevent the social security bill growing out of all proportion.

A safety net is essential for those who fall on hard times and those who will never be able to cope fully by themselves. Society has a moral obligation to look after the truly needy. Benefits to these should not be cut, as they need all the help they can get.

Yet it is also essential that those who don't need help don't get it. While benefits must not be cut, the number of benefit recipients must be reduced by getting rid of the hangers on.

It is presumably with this in mind that single mothers have been picked on. They have become an easy target as society has changed.

In 1961, 38% of all households were of the traditional type, a couple with dependent children. Now, this proportion is down to 24%, with childless couples more numerous. The two other big social changes are a rise in single men living alone and the growth in lone parent families. The last two are not by coincidence.

The vast majority, 80%, of children live in families where there are couples. About 20% live in lone parent families but this is rising steadily, because of divorce and as it is now socially acceptable for unmarried mothers to have children. Britain has the highest divorce rate in Europe. Thus many lone parents were actually married at some stage. It is important to stress not all lone parents are the unmarried mothers who many have no sympathy for.

Addressing this issue both economic and social problems must be overcome. Despite what the Prime Minister said, many lone parents actually do work.

According to International Labour Organisation data there are 843,000 long-term unemployed in Britain. This is people who have

been out of work for over one year. 634,000 of these are men, who account for two in five of unemployed males. 209,000 are women, which is one-quarter of the 811,000 female unemployed. Of this 209,000 just 74,000 are women with at least one dependent child.

So just 74,000 of Britain's long-term unemployed are women with children. In fact, of women with dependent children 309,000 are unemployed and more than 4 million are in work. Hardly surprisingly the bulk of these are in part-time jobs with only 1.5 million working full-time.

Economic activity rates rise for women as their children get older. This suggests already that many women go back to some form of work as their children grow up. For instance, 48% of women whose youngest dependent child is under four work; rising to 75% where the youngest is 11-15.

Despite the political comments and press coverage last week what we are actually talking about in terms of lone parents preferring life on the dole is actually a small number. Of course, this needs to be addressed but it must also be kept in proportion.

Unemployment is falling. As long as sensible economic policies are pursued this should continue.

Tax subsidies to single parents surged in the last five years as the Conservatives extended family credit and other benefits. It is expensive, but as the state has effectively taken over the role of husband it will be. The emphasis has to be on a healthy economy creating jobs and at the same time giving greater tax incentives for marriage so as to lessen the risk of financial problems tearing couples apart.

Looking after children should be seen for what it is, a valuable and important activity, not an opt-out or a life of leisure.

If more single parents are forced back to work someone will have to look after the children but surely the best person has to be the mother, father or a close carer and the tax system should help parents if they choose this. If not, then the Government will have to spend more money anyway providing good quality, affordable child care.

The figures show the emphasis should be to reduce male long-term unemployment. By singling out lone parents the Government will undermine the importance of parenting and motherhood.

Dr Gerard Lyons is Chief Economist of Daihchi Kangyo Bank (DKB) International