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# Continuity and Change in Work-family Reconciliation Policy under the Coalition Government (2010-2015)

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## Introduction

- 1 According to Marshall, three types of rights may derive from citizenship: civil rights, political rights and social rights with social rights entailing “*the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security*” and “*the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in society*”.<sup>1</sup> The present article addresses the question of gender and social rights in the United Kingdom and focuses on one particular aspect of this question, namely the development of work-family reconciliation policy and parents’ rights and responsibilities as regards employment and child rearing. Work-family reconciliation policy is defined here as policy relating to the provision, subsidy or regulation of childcare by the state, provisions for parental leave and parental-leave benefits and rights for parents to request flexibility in their working arrangements to help with childcare. Given the centrality of employment in contemporary society, providing financial independence and security, social ties and meaning and identity, it could be argued that work-family reconciliation policy is in fact one of the principal ways in which the state may enable women if they become mothers to participate as full citizens in society.
- 2 In the post-war period both social and family policy across Europe supported the male breadwinner/female caregiver family model in which mothers had the responsibility of

looking after home and children whilst fathers had the responsibility of earning money for the family on the labour market. Social rights at this time therefore conformed to this model: in the majority of Western European countries men had rights to a replacement income for themselves and their dependents when not able to work whilst women derived direct social rights in their capacity as mothers and other indirect social rights through their spouse. Given this preferred family model, in the 1950s and 1960s nowhere in Europe was it thought to be the responsibility of the state to assist mothers of young children to combine child rearing and employment, least of all in the UK.<sup>2</sup>

- 3 This situation began to change in the 1970s and 1980s with some European countries (for example, the Scandinavian countries and indeed France) rolling out work-family reconciliation policies. From the beginning of the 1990s, reconciliation policy began to spread more widely across Europe within the framing of 'activation', that is, driving up the employment rate by 'activating' previously economically inactive groups such as mothers of young children as a response to the New Social Risks (increasing dependency ratio of the elderly to the working population; lone parenthood; employment instability; childhood poverty) and in order to develop early years' education as a form of social investment.<sup>3</sup> However, no such policies developed in the UK until the end of the 1990s. The Conservative governments of the 1980s and early 1990s had viewed parental employment as a matter to be managed within the family, this being an ideological opposition to extending the reach of the state in the private sphere.<sup>4</sup> It was only with the election of the New Labour government in 1997 which had very different normative assumptions about the respective work-care responsibilities of citizens and the state that the responsibility of the state to assist parents in this regard was recognised and policy in this field developed.
- 4 The UK can therefore be characterised as a 'latecomer' to work-family reconciliation policy in the European context. This 'latecomer' status has meant that the policy area was still in its infancy at the end of the first decade of the new millennium when it was dealt a double blow and fears for its future development were voiced: first, the budgetary crisis of 2008 put all government spending into question. And second, in 2010 the Conservative-led Coalition government came to power with the stated aim of rapidly cutting public expenditure and the welfare bill and of redefining the contours of the welfare state. The aim of this article is therefore to assess whether such fears have been warranted by seeking to describe and explain the degree of continuity and change in work-family reconciliation policy in the UK during the period of office of the Coalition government, that is, between 2010 and 2015. In order to undertake this analysis, the article will first outline the conceptual frameworks to be used; second, the article will trace the trajectories of the development of work-family policy in the UK and the accompanying policy discourses which have sought to frame and justify it from the 1980s onwards before moving on to assess the degree of continuity and change in these policy trajectories and discourses since 2010. Third, the article will review the possible drivers underlying the policy continuity and change between 2010 and 2015 so identified.

## Frameworks for analysis

- 5 The first aim of this article is to describe the degree and nature of the continuities and changes which have taken place in work-family reconciliation policy under the Coalition government between 2010 and 2015. In order to do this, it will employ Hall's framework<sup>5</sup>

which differentiates between three levels of policy change: first-order change sees modifications in policy instrument settings only; second-order change sees the policy instruments themselves transformed; and lastly, third-order change entails the recasting of the goals and objectives of policy. The second aim of the article is to seek to assess the policy drivers of any changes identified and the reasons for any continuities. In order to do this, the article will make reference to a broad range of explanations based on socio-economic, political, institutional and cultural factors drawing on Mätzke and Ostner's analysis.<sup>6</sup> This operates on two levels: the first of these distinguishes between the relative influence of material as opposed to ideational factors influencing policy whilst the second addresses the question of policy actors, distinguishing between societal actors (public opinion, the electorate) and political actors (parties, interest groups, policy elites). In their account, material factors may combine to produce new social challenges and to provide a window of opportunity for societal actors and political actors to turn these policy opportunities into policy change to promote or undermine work-family reconciliation policy. These political and societal actors look in turn to overarching legitimating ideas (for example, the social investment approach to welfare or the gender-equality agenda) for justification of their approach.

## Overview of work-family reconciliation policy in the UK prior to 2010

- <sup>6</sup> In order to understand the continuities and changes in work-family reconciliation policy between 2010 and 2015 it is necessary to look at its history in the longer term. As O'Brien states, governments develop their work-family reconciliation policies in the context of historical pathway legacies and welfare state models regulating the relationship between the market, state and family.<sup>7</sup> Prior to 1997 the UK lagged behind other European countries in making work-family reconciliation provisions for its population<sup>8</sup> one of the reasons being that the UK has traditionally been a liberal welfare regime in which there is a reluctance on the part of the state to intervene in the private lives of citizens, particularly in the family; there is a reliance on the market to provide welfare solutions in conjunction with the state; and benefits and assistance are means-tested and targeted at those most in need in the population. Furthermore, during the 1960s and 1970s, there was a strong belief in the importance of maternal care for pre-school children shared by all the political parties and strongly defended by the civil service. Although a window of opportunity for the development of work-family reconciliation policy opened up in Europe in the late-1960s to mid-1970s brought about by the economic need for mothers to enter employment in response to labour demand and by ideological changes regarding gender equality having surfaced with the second-wave feminist movement, policy change did not occur in the UK as it did for example in France due to this political consensus against the employment of mothers of young children.<sup>9</sup> For the remainder of the 1970s, despite this political stance, mothers' employment started to increase and childcare solutions began to grow in the voluntary and private sectors.<sup>10</sup>
- <sup>7</sup> The New Right Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major from 1979 to 1997 did not actively support the traditional family 'male breadwinner' model through family policy as was the case in some conservative European states at the time, but did nothing to undermine it, justifying this lack of intervention by the idea that if both parents decided to go out to work, this was a lifestyle choice and therefore not

within the remit of the state.<sup>11</sup> Since the family was considered to be an exclusively private matter, policy intervention was restricted to targeting support for children in need.<sup>12</sup> During this period there were no subsidies for childcare, no public nursery or childcare provision for the under 4s or statutory parental leave, paid or unpaid. For example, the 1980 Education Act stipulated that local authorities had no duty to provide early years education<sup>13</sup> whilst in the late 1980s, the Health Department clearly stated that as far as childcare was concerned the role of central government was purely to regulate the quality of independent childcare services.<sup>14</sup> This inaction as far as family and reconciliation policy were concerned helped the Conservatives to circumvent an ambivalence and tension within the party about (married) mothers of young children going out to work.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, the economic liberals, advocating a free market and individual liberty, opposed the state provision of childcare, but not mothers' employment per se. In their view, if mothers found employment, this was the result of the function of the market. On the other hand, traditional conservatives placed more emphasis on a strong and authoritarian state to enforce law and social order and were of the opinion that the role of mothers lay in the home.<sup>16</sup>

- 8 Despite this lack of state support, mothers' employment continued to increase rapidly over this period: between 1984 and 1994, the percentage of mothers with children under five who were economically active rose from 37 to 52 per cent.<sup>17</sup> The lack of state support for reconciliation issues meant therefore that mothers' employment had to be managed within the financial resources of the household. This often resulted in recourse to market-driven flexibility in the shape of part-time work which was well developed but largely unregulated and as far as childcare was concerned reliance on informal networks of family, friends and neighbours, the voluntary provision of pre-school education and private market childcare, principally nurseries and child-minders which were growing rapidly at the time.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, successive Conservative governments sought actively to promote pre-school education and childcare provision by the voluntary and private sectors in response to demand from working mothers.<sup>19</sup> Pump-priming funds were given to voluntary-organization childcare initiatives<sup>20</sup> and also by the beginning of the 1990s the government was making efforts to encourage employers to provide childcare by offering them tax incentives.<sup>21</sup> Although under no central-government obligation to do so, local authorities did provide some part-time nursery education for pre-school children during this period with the number of four-year-olds in primary school reception classes continuing to grow.
- 9 By the mid-1990s John Major's government was facing increasing pressure to change its opposition to a central government strategy for early-years education and care: the increasing number of mothers in employment was changing the material conditions of the policy environment and presenting a new social need – for work-family reconciliation – which called for a government response. The government responded timidly by introducing a voucher system for part-time nursery care in 1994, the first time that such a demand-side form of funding had been used in public services. Vouchers were seen as a means of securing parental choice and more diverse provision but were not intended to expand public provision of nursery care. It should be noted, however, that at the same time as nursery vouchers were being introduced, John Major was blocking EU directives on parental leave.<sup>22</sup>
- 10 By the end of the 1990s, therefore, it is clear that new social challenges in the shape of mothers' employment were building up pressure for change but the Conservatives were

only giving ground on this matter very slowly due to their ideological opposition to state intervention in the family. In consequence, the UK had to wait for the election of the New Labour government in 1997 for the change in the ideological landscape necessary for the development of policy in this area. Work-family reconciliation policy was part of New Labour's social democratic project on two levels. First, it was part of its gender-equality agenda to increase significantly the participation of women in the workforce, considered a cornerstone of women's emancipation.<sup>23</sup> Second, work-family reconciliation policy was an integral part of New Labour's 'active social policy' according to which labour market participation should be a social responsibility for an increasing proportion of the population, including mothers of young children, in order to address a number of the challenges facing western welfare states: the increasing dependency ratio of old to young people; changing family forms which means that there is more often only one work-age adult in a household; child poverty which is seen to be ameliorated by dual-earning amongst parents; and children's development particularly in disadvantaged households which can be enhanced through early-years childcare. As Morgan notes, in the UK debates over work-family policy were bound up with concern about child poverty, welfare dependency, and the working poor as much as with gender issues since this was the way in which reform ideas could "*better accommodate political actors' requests, and hence, succeed in being selected and institutionalized.*"<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, it has been noted that 'late developers' of reconciliation policy, such as is the case for the UK, tend to deploy justificatory frameworks of protection against the new social risks and social investment from the point of view of children and as a means of economic growth rather than of gender equality.<sup>25</sup> New Labour was no exception in this regard.

- 11 Thus, a raft of new work-family policies was introduced from 1997 onwards. In terms of the provision and subsidy of childcare, New Labour made it a statutory requirement for Local Education Authorities (LEA) to provide a free part-time place for 12 hours per week for four-year-olds, this being extended to three-year-olds in 2004. Many of these places, although funded by the LEA, were provided by the private sector showing a continuity with previous practice of encouraging private and voluntary sector provision. Furthermore, schemes such as Sure Start provided collective childcare in targeted disadvantaged areas. Financial subsidies for childcare were also provided for low and middle income families through a system of means-tested tax credits introduced in 1999 covering initially 70% of childcare costs up to a ceiling per child which rose to 80% in 2003. For families not entitled to tax credits, a tax efficient childcare voucher system was introduced in 2005 whereby employers could provide tax and National Insurance-free vouchers for childcare. As regards leave arrangements, maternity leave was extended incrementally up to nine months' paid and three months' unpaid leave by 2006; in 2002 two week's paid paternity leave was introduced and in 1999 a gender-neutral entitlement of 13 weeks of unpaid parental leave was put in place. Lastly, in 2003 an employee 'right to request' reduced or flexible hours to accommodate childcare and other responsibilities was introduced even though take-up was limited by its subordination to business needs.<sup>26</sup>
- 12 There is no doubt that these reforms represented a radical departure from past non-interventionist policy which began to bring the UK more in line with its European neighbours<sup>27</sup> even though the reforms were more modest in nature than in many other countries.<sup>28</sup> For example, Lewis and Campbell argue that paradigmatic change in the goals of policy took place in that the responsibility of central government for work-family

reconciliation was accepted and therefore childcare was no longer seen to be a solely private, family matter.<sup>29</sup>

- 13 Conversely, Rubery & Rafferty<sup>30</sup> and Daly<sup>31</sup> have argued that it is clear to see the path dependency of New Labour's approach to work-family reconciliation of combining neoliberalism with responses to emerging social needs: reliance on the market to provide childcare; maintenance of cash benefits at a low residual level; and targeting help to lower income families through means-testing. Furthermore, although great strides had been made in work-family reconciliation in the UK by 2010, a number of significant problems remained: first there was a shortfall of formal childcare provision for the under-threes; second, there existed no paid parental leave for men with the exception of the two weeks' paternity leave. And lastly, the cost of provision for pre-schoolers was very high, childcare costs having risen much faster than wages or inflation in the UK since 2001. Indeed, by 2012, the UK was second only to Switzerland amongst OECD countries as regards the cost of childcare as percentage of average earnings. The impacts of these problems were highlighted in a 2013 survey of 1,600 parents in which 70% of those currently without a job said that they would like to work and 47% of these cited the cost of childcare as one of their main barriers to entry to the job market.<sup>32</sup> Norman & Fagan note that according to the 2012 European Quality of Life Survey the cost of childcare is the main problem for 59% of parents on average in Europe who would like take up employment but cannot, whereas in the UK this is the case for 73%.<sup>33</sup> The Institute for Public Policy Research suggest that the UK should aim to reach childcare prices that are around 10% of net family income (they are currently 26.6%) in order to support maternal employment.<sup>34</sup>

## Work-family reconciliation in conditions of austerity under the Coalition government

- 14 Over the course of the 2000s, there had been a paradigmatic shift in attitudes amongst the political parties regarding work-family reconciliation. A consensus had emerged around the responsibility of the state to help parents to reconcile employment and family life, even if the exact nature and justificatory frames of such policies differed between the parties. All the main parties, including the Conservatives, featured pledges to develop work-family reconciliation policy in their manifestos in 2010. However, the election of the Coalition government, led by the Conservatives, made many suspect that at best work-family reconciliation policy would make no strides forward to bring about a greater degree of convergence with the UK's more progressive European neighbours and address some of the outstanding problems discussed above. At worst, it was feared that work-family reconciliation policy was in danger of suffering retrenchment as a result of the proposed cuts to public expenditure.
- 15 What, therefore, was the *bilan* of the Coalition government as far as work-family reconciliation is concerned? On the positive side, it must be said that the Coalition government repeatedly stated its commitment to work-family reconciliation measures within the justificatory framework of 'activating' parents in order to reduce poverty and increase living standards through making childcare accessible and affordable. In one of its last statements entitled 'Making Childcare Affordable', the Coalition promised to “*increase childcare support to improve work incentives to ensure that it is worthwhile for parents to*



*work up to full-time hours*", remarking that "*work is the most sustainable route out of poverty*".

<sup>35</sup> We saw the enactment of a number of measures to this end. First, policy instrument settings as regards nursery education were changed in order to facilitate parental employment and also to target help more towards lower income families: in 2010 there was an increase in the hours of free nursery education from 12.5 to 15 hours per week with parents being given more flexibility in how to spread this across the week to fit with employment hours. This nursery provision was extended to 20% of the poorest two-year-olds in 2013 and then to the poorest 40% in 2014. Second, in 2012 a reform to the policy instrument which subsidises childcare for those not eligible for childcare tax credits was announced. The Childcare Payments Act 2014 replaces the employer voucher system with childcare tax subsidies, one of the main stated objectives of which is to reduce childcare costs to working parents. There is a limit on payment of £2000 per child but no limit on the number of children under 12 who can be claimed for. Neither parent can have an annual income of more than £150,000 to be eligible for this tax break. Third, for those receiving childcare tax credits, the government announced its intention to increase payments to improve work incentives to make it worthwhile to work up to full-time hours for low and middle income parents. Fourth, there was a change to enable the transfer of unused maternity leave to fathers.<sup>36</sup> The previous Labour government had outlined the Additional Paternity Leave (APL) Regulations and Additional Statutory Paternity Pay which the Coalition implemented for parents of infants due on or after April 2011. This allows fathers to take up to six months' APL during the child's first year if the mother returns to work before the end of her maternity leave. Furthermore, in November 2013, it was announced that increased flexibility would be given to mothers and fathers in how to share this leave with mothers only having to take two weeks of the leave. Lastly, the Children and Families' Act 2014 extended the right to request flexible working to all employees with 6 months service under the same conditions as rights previously available to parents of children under 6 (or disabled children under 18).

- 16 Critics would point out that these policies have not really driven work-family reconciliation policy forward or represent any kind of significant convergence with the more progressive European states. Free nursery education remains on a short-hours part-time basis, far short of sufficient hours to allow for significant employment on the part of both parents. In the 2015 general elections, only the Labour Party promised to increase this to 25 hours per week. In the European Union, in general, childcare systems that support high levels of maternal employment provide at least 30 hours a week of subsidised childcare. Extensions of nursery education for two-year-olds are being means-tested, within the liberal welfare tradition. As far as the introduction of the childcare tax subsidy is concerned, there is scant evidence as yet as to who will be the winners and losers in this change of policy instrument. Although the introduction of paid parental leave to include fathers is a positive step, no provision has been made in this for a 'daddy month' as is the case in many European countries now (most recently in France) in which parents are obliged to share the leave if they do not want to lose entitlement to a proportion of it. Recent figures suggest that only around 1% of eligible fathers have taken up this opportunity since its introduction in 2011.
- 17 Not only has scant progress been made in terms of UK work-family policy 'catching up' with that of some of its more progressive neighbours, there have also been some policy changes which represent a withdrawal of state support and encouragement for working mothers. First, for families on benefits, the introduction of Universal Credit, whilst



strengthening the incentive for lone parents, and those in couples without a partner in paid work, to undertake employment, only provides for one allowed earnings disregard thereby weakening the incentive for both members of a couple to take a job.<sup>37</sup> Bennett and Sung, reviewing the gender implications of Universal Credit, argue that the Coalition government has given such prominence to the problem of getting one person in each household into employment that it has ignored the problem that the new system will create for 'second earners' who will face higher losses from each additional pound of wages than they do under the current system.<sup>38</sup> This is very problematic if we consider that previous research has demonstrated that 'second earners' are in general more influenced by disincentives to move out of, or reduce their employment than primary earners. However, in an attempt to offset to some extent this clear disincentive to employment amongst poorer families which contradicts the aim of the government to activate as large a proportion of the workforce as possible as an anti-poverty strategy, an extra £200 million has been promised to support lower-income families from April 2016 with the childcare element of Universal Credit being raised to 85% of costs for families where both parents earn enough to reach the tax threshold. Second, the employer-supported childcare voucher scheme, being phased out after 2015, has been restricted for higher-earner tax payers, part of a liberal welfare strategy to target state support more tightly. Third, in April 2011 there was a reduction in the percentage of costs covered by child tax credits from 80% to 70%. However, following opinion polls showing that this decision was particularly unpopular with low- to middle- income women voters, the Coalition unveiled plans to extend access to childcare tax credits to parents working less than 16 hours who had not previously been able to access these tax credits at a cost of £300 million.<sup>39</sup> Fourth, failure to ring-fence expenditure on nurseries, after-school or holiday clubs by local authorities has had a deleterious effect on provision. A study released in June 2013 by the 4 Children and Daycare Trust shows that cuts to the Sure Start programme have led to a loss of 250 community nurseries.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, a parliamentary answer from then Childcare minister Liz Truss in 2013 conceded that the number of children's centres providing full day care fell from 800 in 2010 to 550 in 2011.<sup>41</sup>

- 18 In sum, there was much continuity of work-family reconciliation policy during the Coalition government at the level of policy objectives. As Daniel notes, the Labour governments "*moved the goalposts in relation to a range of issues including tackling child poverty, the provision of early-years services and family-friendly employment*" leading to a cementing of work-family reconciliation policy within the UK policy landscape which has been able to withstand both the budgetary crisis and the change of government.<sup>42</sup> However, there was a degree of change in policy settings and policy instruments, the reductions in provision having affected in particular low- and middle income groups and unemployed mothers adversely. Where change in policy instruments or instrument settings has occurred it has often been in the direction of strengthening the liberal welfare model: for example, extending the targeting and means-testing of provision (extending free nursery to only the poorest two-year-olds); the undermining of direct state provision of childcare services (e.g. Sure Start nurseries and Local Authority childcare centres); and the reluctance to intervene too strongly in family matters by not introducing measures to encourage fathers to take up parental leave.

## Discussion: Policy drivers

- 19 How, therefore, do we explain this continuity of policy goals and the continuities and changes to policy instruments and settings that we have identified with reference to Matzke and Ostner's framework?<sup>43</sup> First and foremost it must be emphasised that the material conditions – that is, the rise in mothers' employment and the demands of the new social risks against the background of which New Labour introduced a raft of work-family reconciliation policies – did not change after 2010 and thus still confronted the Coalition government. Indeed it could be argued that these new social risks – particularly the dependency ratio and child poverty – became more acute in this period, demanding enhanced policy responses. Furthermore, the fact that New Labour's work-family reconciliation reforms were rooted very much in the country's liberal welfare tradition, adding new reconciliation policy instruments to address the new post-industrial social risks, meant that, in ideational terms, it was not too difficult for the Coalition to continue with many of these policies and support their overall objectives albeit in the role of policy "consenters", rather than "protagonists".<sup>44</sup> That said, there is one material factor that did change and which might have been expected to lead to more retrenchment of work-family reconciliation policy: namely, the budgetary crisis brought about by the banking collapse of 2008. As Farnsworth and Irving suggest, the impact of economic crisis on particular aspects of social policy depends on ideological dimensions which concern the ways in which the crisis should be defined, understood and responded to.<sup>45</sup> Responding to the budgetary crisis, the Coalition decided to pursue a series of public spending cuts, rather than increasing taxation, this decision being portrayed as an "urgent truth", designed to lead to a more textbook model of a liberal market economy with a residual welfare state.<sup>46</sup> The cuts to direct provision of childcare by local authorities and to the Sure Start programme as well as the changes to Universal Credit which discourage second earners can be viewed as collateral damage within this strategy. But how, then, did other aspects of work-family reconciliation policy avoid more stringent reductions and indeed in some cases, were actually enhanced. The answer to this question is complex and is based in part on ideational changes within the Conservative Party as regards work-family reconciliation which must be understood in relation to the influences of societal actors – namely the electorate and public opinion – and policy actors (namely the business community).
- 20 Although the Conservatives were still holding out against work-family reconciliation policy in their 2001 election manifesto, by the 2005 general election in the UK all three parties were scrambling to show their commitment to working parents, the Conservatives having undergone a policy U-turn in the meantime.<sup>47</sup> The idea of using work-family reconciliation policy as an activation measure fitted with Conservative thinking on reducing welfare dependency – work-family reconciliation policy helps in particular hard-working low- to middle-income families – and on breaking the cycle of deprivation with social investment in early years education. For example, on becoming leader of the Conservatives David Cameron argued vigorously that increasing the numbers of working-class women in employment would increase the number of children receiving 'professional' nursery care rather than home care, a situation which he viewed as socially and educationally beneficial.<sup>48</sup> What political pressures had led, therefore, to the Conservatives' acceptance of the need for work-family reconciliation policy? A key actor

in this regard is the business community which has a privileged position in the policy-making process under governments of all political persuasions but particularly for right-wing governments.<sup>49</sup> Much of the power-resources approach to social policy has assumed that business organisations are antagonists or at most consenters with regards to the introduction and expansion of social policies.<sup>50</sup> However, Fleckenstein and Seeleib-Kaiser show that the business community in the UK has for some time been a protagonist for some aspects of work-family reconciliation policies, particularly the state provision of and subsidy for childcare. For example, in the early 1990s, the group Employers for Childcare called for a national strategy aimed at the provision of accessible, available, affordable and quality childcare whilst the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) also called for a coordinating role for central government at this time in the face of labour shortages.<sup>51</sup> Similarly in more recent times, the CBI has been an advocate of an expansion of affordable childcare with calls for childcare being explicitly linked to anticipated labour shortages associated with demographic change which is considered to undermine the competitiveness of British businesses.<sup>52</sup> This is first and foremost because British women are likely to be employed in low-skill occupations and be prepared to work flexibly. Thus business is keen for the state to provide childcare to liberate their labour power. However, the CBI has strongly opposed the extension of the duration and the splitting of leave between mothers and fathers as well as the entitlement to flexible working hours proposed by the government.

- 21 Furthermore, electoral influences have also been at work on all parties, including the Conservatives. Morgan suggests that the development of work-family reconciliation policy must be viewed within the context of shifting voter alliances and intensified electoral competition which in recent years resulted in competition between parties over the issue of helping working families. She argues that in the UK, growing female labour-force participation and changing social attitudes contributed to a reversal of the gender gap in voting and rising partisan competition over female voters. As a result, political parties began to promote women in political office and adopt new programmatic agendas in the area of work and family, culminating in important shifts in social policies.<sup>53</sup> It is interesting in this regard to consider the latest British Social Attitudes Survey which shows quite dramatic changes in public opinion surrounding mothers' employment since 1989. Whereas in 1989, 26% of respondents thought that a woman's job was to look after home and family, this had fallen to 13% by 2012. Similarly the percentage of those thinking that women should stay at home when a child is under school age fell from 64% in 1989 to 33% in 2012.<sup>54</sup> Lastly whereas 11% of respondents thought that women should remain at home when the youngest child was above school age in 1989, this had dropped to just 2% in 2012. Bonoli asserts that work-family reconciliation policy is not only a vote-winner amongst women but is generally popular amongst the electorate since it has all the features necessary for "*credit claiming*" for parties in power at a relatively limited cost for the public purse: these policies have both a relatively broad constituency – parents – based on a common interest and furthermore they have a presumed win-win quality in that they provide help to the population and at the same time they promise to produce income and reduce benefit claims for the taxpayer.<sup>55</sup> There is therefore reduced room for manoeuvre as regards cutting back spending on work-family reconciliation policy in the UK since the onset of the crisis because even in tough times of budgetary consolidation governments must pay attention to public opinion. An example here is the fact that the government needed to offset the unpopularity of the reduction in the percentage of costs

covered by child tax credits from 80% to 70% by extending access to childcare tax credits to parents working less than 16 hours at a cost of £300 million.

## Conclusion

- 22 In conclusion, therefore, we can say that the continuities of work-family reconciliation policy, even under recession and the Coalition government, is on closer inspection not that surprising. From whichever theoretical angle we consider the question – the material conditions of high maternal employment, the demands of the new social risks and for social investment in early education that a structuralist-functionalist approach would favour or explanations based more on a power-resources approach which gives prominence to the nexus of interests supporting work-family reconciliation from the business community and the electorate and that have influenced all political parties in the UK including the Conservatives – all routes lead to the acceptance for a role for central government in managing work-family reconciliation. The explanations for the retrenchment and reductions in support for working parents which have been identified as well as the lack of progress in developing work-family reconciliation policies further are twofold. The first is that the policy areas which have seen retrenchment – direct provision of childcare services by government and benefits for poorer families – do not fit with the new more residual welfare-state model constructed by the Coalition. The second factor to be taken into account is that the justificatory framework of gender equality for work-family reconciliation has been increasingly obscured within policy discourse in the UK. This began with New Labour for whom in their initial phase of policy development gender equality was very important but increasingly ceded ground to the activation and anti-poverty agendas over the course of the 2000s.<sup>56</sup> This means that policy developments such as the introduction of a ‘daddy quota’ in parental leave which is missing from UK policy will be difficult to implement within current justificatory framings which leave open the door for policy changes that undermine women’s employment opportunities.
- 23 Jan Windebank is Professor of French and European Societies and member of the Centre for European Gender Studies at the University of Sheffield. She has written widely on questions of gender divisions of domestic and care work, work-family reconciliation, the outsourcing of household services and undeclared employment in European comparative perspective.

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## ABSTRACTS

The aim of this article is to explain the degree of continuity and change in work-family reconciliation policy under the UK Coalition government (2010 to 2015). The article first traces the development of work-family policy in the UK and its accompanying policy discourses from the 1980s onwards before moving on to assess the degree of continuity and change in this policy area since 2010. The article then reviews the policy drivers underlying this policy continuity and change so identified. It concludes that in general, work-family reconciliation policy has been resistant to the degree of austerity cuts suffered in other areas. This resistance is explained by the material conditions which demand investment in work-family reconciliation (continuing high maternal employment, the demands of the new social risks and the need for social investment in early education) coupled with a political environment which supports the policy (from the business community and the electorate, influencing in particular Conservative party policy). The areas which have seen retrenchment – namely, the direct provision of childcare services by government and benefits for poorer families – are those which do not fit with the new more residual welfare-state model constructed by the Coalition.

Cet article propose d'expliquer l'évolution de la politique de conciliation de la vie professionnelle et familiale sous la 'Coalition' (2010-2015) au Royaume-Uni. L'article trace le développement de la politique de conciliation de la vie active et familiale dès les années 1980 avant d'évaluer les continuités et les changements dans cette politique qui se sont produits depuis 2010. Ensuite, les facteurs qui expliquent ces continuités et changements sont analysés. L'article conclut qu'en général la politique de conciliation a bien résisté à la politique de rigueur qui a affecté toute une gamme d'autres domaines. Cette résistance s'explique par les conditions matérielles qui persistent à demander de l'investissement dans la politique de conciliation (niveaux élevés

d'emploi des mères de famille ; exigences des 'nouveaux risques sociaux' et besoin d'investissements dans l'éducation précoce) associées à un environnement politique qui favorise la politique de conciliation (pression de la part des associations d'employeurs et d'entrepreneurs et de l'électorat, ce qui exerce de l'influence, en particulier, sur les conservateurs). Les aspects de la politique qui ont subi un repli – à savoir les modes de garde offerts par les municipalités et les allocations pour les familles défavorisées – sont ceux qui ne correspondent pas au modèle de l'état-providence 'résiduel' construit par la 'Coalition'.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** politique de conciliation famille-emploi, gouvernement de coalition, austérité

**Keywords:** work-family reconciliation, Coalition government, austerity

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