

I hope you'll not think it graceless of me to say that I've not felt this apprehensive about a speech, since I spoke at the National Education Union's conference last year. And I'm hoping that this time, no-one will walk out in protest halfway through, but I should perhaps say, that if you do think Labour should be abolishing Ofsted, then to be clear, now is very much the time to leave.

More seriously, I want to say a big thank you to Seb and the team at Onward for hosting me today. One of the ways in which public life is rich in Britain, behind the headlines, is the breadth and quality of work in our think tanks.

Focusing on how a bigger change could happen; not just on making our current systems sing, but on looking around the world at how other societies solve similar problems, looking ahead to the challenges we face.

Now no party, no think tank, has a monopoly on good ideas. And parties, and politicians, who are confident in their values should have no fear of the voices, policies, ideas with which they may not always agree. So I enjoy reading Onward reports, just as I enjoy reading IPPR reports; I'll hear from the Centre for Social Justice as well as the Fabians.

Amid that cacophony, Onward has been an increasingly thoughtful voice, not least in education and not least on childcare. And like all of us, I like to hear a challenge made in familiar tones, so I'm grateful to Seb, as a fellow export from the North East, for giving me the opportunity to speak here today.

Reading Onward's work over recent months, there was a line in the foreword to your report on post-pandemic recovery, *The Good Life*, that caught my eye. It said, "Strengthening our social fabric is key to improving the lives of people across the country in a meaningful way."

I couldn't agree more, and that's why I'm here today. That line points at three problems. And after thirteen years, those are problems for which the Conservative government needs to take responsibility. The social fabric in our country is too weak. The lives of our people need to be made a lot better. And strengthening our social fabric is a key part of that improvement in living standards.

The missing word of course – not missing from Onward's report, but missing from the government's approach for the last thirteen years – is family.

As politicians, we often talk about schools, colleges, nurseries, universities. We often talk about children and young people as pupils, as students, as learners and as apprentices. It's a shorthand. Institutions are there to serve the people, but people should never be seen merely as the furniture of those institutions.

Even Mrs Thatcher knew, as she rejected the reality of society, that there are families. Children and young people are part of families. You'll not be surprised that I part company with both the Scottish National Party and the Conservative Party, on what families are.

I learnt as a kid what the Conservatives thought of families like mine. Because my mam brought me up on her own, at a time when the Conservative government saw its role, for families like mine, as one of judgement. Ministers like Peter Lilley went out of their way to attack us. To criticise us, not to support us. To demean us, not to empower us. To doubt us, not to believe in us.

I was lucky, because I had a family, and a school that believed differently: that believed in the value and worth of every one of us. Too many children didn't have both of those advantages. But that experience didn't make me think families are unimportant. Quite the opposite.

My mother might have been short of money, but never of care or love. She and her parents read with me, discussed ideas with me, taught me to question and to think. My grandfather sent me books all his life. What children need is a family, what government needs to do is ensure families have the chance to succeed and the time to thrive together.

My childhood taught me that what matters about families is not the shape they are, or the size they have, but the love they give. Sometimes, people on my own side, tell me that not everyone has a family. I reject that with every fibre of my being. It is a pernicious myth, one which gifts the concept of the family to those who draw its definition narrow and tight.

It excludes, and it demeans. Of course, people fall out of their families. Of course, people fall out with their families. For some people, families aren't always blood relations. But families are about love and time, not structure and legislation. And the government is failing families, when families have neither the time nor the energy to succeed, we fail them, we fail our children, and we fail our future.

Now, the last year has been a time of change for the ship of state. A summer of new ministers: the frantic political dynamism that comes from rearranging the deckchairs. Then a few heady of weeks of steering headlong into an iceberg. The left-wing economic establishment iceberg, that is: not the lettuce, which not only outlasted the last Prime Minister, but unlike many other vegetables, is still available in our shops.

But there's one thing I will say for Liz Truss. She knew that what holds this country back is thirteen years of Conservative failure on growth. And she recognised that part of that failure, is a failure to support families to deal with the cost of childcare. The world has changed, and childcare and family are the politics of the electoral battle ahead.

In Britain, Google searches for childcare went up more than one hundred percent in the six years leading up to 1 January this year. And in the 100 most marginal Conservative seats in England, across those seats, the parents of children under eleven, make up more than a quarter

of the population. So in Britain next year, as in Australia last year, childcare will be central. Family is the fight ahead.

Yet while she identified these problems, the solutions Liz Truss pushed, are not the right solutions. Because the changes she wanted were about tinkering with the system we have, not reforming it to face the challenges ahead. What we need is not tinkering, but a bold and ambitious vision of how things can be better. Not just a change on hours, on ratios, on thresholds, none of that measures up.

What this government suffers from, is a mode of reform that looks backward, not forward. Of course, it's not wrong to start by looking at what's broken. And my god this government has broken a lot. Support for childcare is at once inadequate and delivered through too many systems: complex and confused. The cost of childcare is pricing parents out of jobs they love, when it is available at all. Childcare itself, is too often, not of the quality our children deserve or that staff want to provide.

And all of this, in a funding system which makes the problems worse. Worse because the government knows how much it costs to fund their model, and yet gives providers less. The Conservatives offer parents so-called free hours then pay providers below the going rate to deliver them. The market that this underfunded hours system has created is one where providers go bust too often, where parents pay extortionate costs for extra hours, where managers cannot find the staff they need, and where staff cannot get either the pay or the progression they deserve.

Now, even I am old enough to remember a time when Conservatives liked market solutions. But this isn't a market. It's a mess. And don't be fooled: it won't be made better by relaxing ratios: that will simply drive down quality with minimal impact on costs. I am also old enough to remember a time when the Conservatives listened to business. When listening to what employers said, was something they prided themselves on. But when a trade association tells you that 98%, ninety eight percent, of its members say a change won't cut costs And still the Tories float that they will do it.

That is when you know, that ideology hasn't simply guided the Conservatives. It's worse. It has rotted them. And adding a few hours here and there is not going to work either. More "free hours" for parents, means more underfunded hours for nurseries, more costs piled on to providers struggling to deliver services as they are now, and more need for cross-subsidy.

The model they have built fails everyone. Rigid. Inflexible. Inadequate. Adding in more free hours could see the Conservatives crash the childcare market, just like they crashed the economy. The model they have built is broken for providers, just as it is broken for children, broken for staff, and broken for parents. But there's something else, something wider, that's wrong with childcare in this country, which goes to the heart of what family is about.

Last autumn our Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves asked families a very simple, very direct question: Are you better off, after thirteen years of Conservative government? Our schools, our NHS and, yes, our childcare system, should be vehicles for enabling the aspirations of families across this country. Aspirations as families, aspirations for their communities, aspirations for our shared future. But too many children are let down by stuck schools which fail them year after year. Too many adults are not in work because instead they're in an endless queue for NHS treatment. And too many parents are denied the opportunity to work the jobs they'd like, to give their children the opportunities they'd like, because again and again they are let down by the high cost, and low availability of childcare.

The challenge for Labour is to define afresh the role for government, the role for parents the role for families, and how those roles work together. When schools aren't supported, when standards slip or safeguarding isn't there, we know it's rarely individual heads or teachers, who are failing our children.

It is a wider failure. It is a failure by government. When families can't afford to take their kids out for the day, can't afford an ice-cream in the park or a ride at the fair, children are being failed. When mams and dads don't see their kids in evenings, or at the weekend, because they have to work extra hours to pay the bills, children are being failed.

When parents skimp on food themselves, find themselves exhausted and tired, without time or energy to spend with their kids, children are being failed. But in each and every one of those cases, we know it isn't individual mams or dads, individual families, who are failing our children.

It is, again, government. Parents have responsibilities. Families have responsibilities. But government cannot hide behind them. Governments have responsibilities too. When support from families and support from government works together, we can ensure every child succeeds. And when that fails, as today it fails, for too many families, across too much of this country, too much of the time. It is our children who are failed, our children who suffer, and all of us, children and adults alike, whose futures will be poorer. Affordable, available childcare is what enables parents to earn, to succeed, and to have time to enjoy being with their children.

The Conservatives have forgotten the principle that all families hold dear: People do not live, so that they can spend their time working. We work; in order to have a richer life. It is Labour that knows that. It is in our name. Labour is the party of working people. Not just workers. People. And it is because of that, Labour is the party of the family.

I said earlier that what matters about families is not the shape they have, but the love they give. Let me spell that out a little. I want not just parents, but grandparents, aunts and uncles, to regard children as a blessing, never a chore. To look forward to spending time with their grandchildren, their nieces and nephews, every little bairn in the family not as a stop-gap so parents can get to work and get on at work.

I want strong families where the bonds are of love, and the foundation of that love is time spent happily together. Because those strong families, rooted and grounded in love, are the basis of strong societies, the society Labour exists to build, where opportunity is for everyone and where no-one is left behind.

And let me tell you, it isn't just this government, that misunderstands family. Sometimes organisations tell me. Organisations that should know better, that childcare isn't a big problem, pointing only at the money spent on formal childcare, I tell them: You have not understood.

Family is more than finance. And childcare is not just formal costs. Childcare is informal obligations, duties, expectations. Expectations shaped by sex and age, not just pounds and pence. Expectations that fall more heavily on grandmothers, than grandfathers. On mothers, before fathers. Only a party that understands families, can understand that the challenge of childcare, is a problem for the shape of our society, not just its finances.

I get that. Rachel gets that. Keir gets that. The Conservatives have not, do not, and clearly, will not. Again, it is Labour that today is the party of the family.

If the Conservatives ever wanted to say the same, let me set out some of the tests they have to meet. At the start of the year, the Prime Minister set out his five priorities. They do not mention children, and they do not mention childcare. So, the first test is whether this features in government thinking at all, whether they recognise there is a problem and there is a need for change. The second test is whether they have listened to parents.

Whether Ministers recognise that simply bolting more hours onto a failing system, will not tackle the problem of availability and will not tackle the problem of affordability. The third test is whether they are delivering what children need: high quality early education and care. Weakening quality by reducing ratios, the very last thing that parents want, simply cannot meet this test. The ongoing failure to deliver a proper workforce strategy cannot meet this test. We must go beyond tinkering with a broken system.

The real challenge isn't what this government stumbles through next. It's what the next government will have to do. In the Britain the Tories will leave behind, tweaking the system we have, will not deliver the ambition or scale of reform we are going to need.

Of course, every government needs to understand the system it inherits. But real reform is more than looking backwards and building a better yesterday. It means looking ahead, at the challenges which will face us tomorrow, looking at the trends which have driven change for decades and the trends that are driving it now.

For childcare, the biggest change is one Labour gets, which some Conservatives, but sadly neither Rishi Sunak or Jeremy Hunt, seem to understand. It's about the different shape of families today.

Because the peacetime story of Britain, over three generations, has been many things, but in particular, it has been a story of the changing roles of women, driving through successive generations, the changing shape of families. Not of women entering the workforce: women have always worked. But of women entering the paid labour market. Women being economically active outside the home. In Britain, women's economic activity increased by nearly two and a half times in the last 70 years. Labour gets that, because in large part, these are the changes Labour wrought. Our grandmothers. Our mothers. Us. One adult, one vote. Requiring equal pay.

Outlawing sex discrimination, ending sacking for pregnancy Civil partnerships. Adoptions in every family with love to give. Labour doesn't just understand modern families. Labour changed the law to enable them to thrive. And three generations of progress have narrowed inequality within families. There is still a long way to go, but we have come a long way. So Labour looks ahead, and we see the case for reform. As Labour has done in each previous generation, our generation will rise to the challenge of the age.

The next Labour government will build the social infrastructure long overdue after thirteen wasted years that modern families of every size and description need. A modern childcare system that gives families choices, enables parents to work and delivers the best start for every child.

But to do change well, you don't just look at how you might do better, reasoning from the weaknesses of where you are. No. When parents in this country spend more on childcare than in almost any other OECD country, you have to imagine, that not just some others, but many others, might be doing it better. We have to look not just around these islands, but around the world.

That's why I was pleased to visit Estonia in the autumn, to see how they have made high quality childcare, a part of every childhood, a support for every family, and integral to the education system all our young people deserve.

That's why I visited Australia, to see a system on the move, where the salience of a general election, and a new government hungry for change, is delivering for families at pace. That's why I am planning to visit Singapore, to see what Britain can learn from their childcare and skills systems. And it's why I plan to visit Ireland, to see a new funding model and a new sectoral deal for childcare. Because the reform agenda of the next Labour government will be lit up with the achievements of successful, future facing governments from right around the world.

But you all know that even that is not enough. You can take bright ideas from around the world, but you have to make them work here. The state of England's school system since 2010 is a monument to what happens when politicians simply copy policy off a Scandinavian postcard. A system not merely fragmented but fractured, where the slow rot of focusing on structures over standards fails a fresh generation of children. When ambition is untethered from the hard realities of fiscal policy and workforce availability.

Reform means change for good – change for the better, change that endures, change that is planned and change that delivers.

And we know it can be done well. Because the last Labour government did do better. We delivered change across our country. But I want to issue a warning. If I had a pound for every time I was told, that what Labour needs to do, is to bring back SureStart, I'd be solving the fiscal challenges in our public services right now. SureStart was an amazing achievement. One of which I and our Labour movement are deeply proud. It delivered a better start for so many children. Better outcomes for so many families. Family Hubs are a pale shadow of what Labour achieved.

Leave aside the bitter irony of a Conservative government introducing a new social programme to fix the problems they spent a decade creating. Focus on what is missing. Universality. Labour started with Sure Start targeted, piloted; and slowly rolled it out. There is little sign of that ambition today. And education.

Family Hubs may support the public health aspects of early childhood, for those who live near one. I want to go further for our families. The programme guide for Family Hubs and Start for Life mentions education or similar 32 times. But the only direction is that families should be educated about breastfeeding. I know the Family Hubs project was inspired by the work of Andrea Leadsom.

And I know – actually, looking around, I think we all know – that Andrea Leadsom is a mother. And I want every mother to feel confident breastfeeding if that's what works for her and her child. But I mean no disrespect to Andrea, or to the many people who work to support proper infant nutrition, if I say my ambition for early years education, for our children must stretch beyond how they are fed. And I will not judge Family Hubs simply by the standard of Sure Start, because the failure is greater than being a hollow imitation of the past.

Because there were issues with SureStart too. It's best that we are honest about them. A Labour Party that wins elections, learns from what didn't work as well as what did. The first issue is that the case for SureStart was made only from government. SureStart was never tested in the fire of an election campaign, never given salience in public debate. In 1945, we promised that the best health services should be free at the point of need.

We delivered, within three years, a National Health Service that has, through thick and thin, and despite the best efforts of successive Conservative governments, endured to this day. We promised, in 1963 and again in 1966, a "University of the Air": to "give everyone the opportunity to study for a full degree". We delivered the Open University, and again it endures.

In 1997, we promised education, education, education; we promised a “national minimum wage to tackle low pay”. Our schools were transformed, because Labour’s ambition for our schools never sleeps.

And as for the minimum wage, no-one serious now argues against it. The Tories have rebadged it, but they will not run from it. These are reforms that are effective, and these are reforms that last. And I believe that to last, reforms need not merely to be right, but also to have won.

That is the test to which SureStart was never put, and which has, I believe, been part of the reason for its slow crumbling, under the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. I am determined that change in childcare and early years is a change that endures. That is why I am proud that Labour’s mission to break down barriers to opportunity, which Keir spoke so powerfully about last month, includes reform of education and of childcare.

Be in no doubt: childcare reform will be my first priority. To deliver that Mission, to break down barriers, to give every child, and every family the best start in life. The second issue with SureStart is more subtle, but just as important. Go back twenty five years, Gordon Brown was clear what the purpose of SureStart should be: to bring together high quality services for young families. To boost children’s healthcare and prepare them for school.

In truth, that isn’t quite what happened. The government slowly moved the goalposts. By 2000, the expansion of Sure Start was to advance the government’s objectives on single parents’ employment. By 2005, officials openly described SureStart’s “capture” by the employability agenda. These things happen to many programmes, in many governments. But I contend they happen more easily, when these things are plans from within government, rather than missions carried into government.

Because SureStart was many great things, but too often the educational and healthcare component, fell down the priority list. That’s why when people tell me we need to bring back SureStart, I know they have a set of policy priorities with which I am deeply sympathetic. A set of values I share. But an approach to reform, with which I differ. The better future our children need will not come simply from winding back the clock.

Labour in power will be different. The Missions we will take into government will shape the priorities and the principles for the change we deliver. Our focus around childcare is, and will remain, threefold: better for parents, better for children, and better for families together. We are the party of the family, of every shape and every size, and that reality will be a thread through all our policy.

We have said childcare needs to be more available, more affordable, and better quality. But it also needs to be better linked to educational priorities, better geared to closing attainment gaps, and better at enabling all our children to succeed at school, at college, at university, and all through their lives.

And it needs to have at its heart the knowledge that good childcare right throughout childhood – is about enabling and supporting families, to spend time together, to enjoy time together, to grow up together.

These are principles.

Because the Missions are about setting principles, and giving direction.

- Children coming to school ready to learn,
- Parents given choices in the workplace
- Families with the time to spend together

And all of this, supporting and enabling a growing economy. Because I tell you now. Labour will not invest in a broken system of childcare provision that doesn't deliver for families, for children or our economy.

The Conservatives' failure on growth means we do not know what the fiscal inheritance of the next Labour government will be.

But we will not be straitjacketed by the piecemeal jerry-built system left to us by the Conservatives. Our focus will be on reform.

Our plan will build a broader coalition for the reforms our children, parents, and families need. Of course there will be places where not everyone's interests align. Of course people will disagree with each other. But the politics that will carry our plan through, will be about looking ahead, about giving people reasons to embrace reform, not reasons to resist it.

Crucially, the costs of childcare don't go away as children clear the early years.

The next Labour government will build a modern childcare system. One that supports families from the end of parental leave, right through to the end of primary school. One that gives every child the best start in life. Because the evidence couldn't be clearer: gaps in learning and development, gaps in opportunities, open up early.

So our plan must start early too. We started, last autumn, with a costed, funded plan for breakfast clubs. These clubs will be better for children. Better standards, as the Education Endowment Foundation evidence makes very clear. Better behaviour, and better attendance. Because it's about the club, as well as the breakfast. Better for parents, and better for their employers. And better for families, tackling the costs and needs they face.

That plan is the first step on the road, an ambitious route we will chart over the months and years ahead, from opposition and through missions into government. That is the mission for our children, our young people, and all our futures.

Because the ambition that in my work, day after day, week after week, and month after month, always impresses me most, inspires me most. Is that of our children. Determined to succeed, after years of disruption from Covid. Preparing, and campaigning, for a better world in the era of the climate emergency. Raising money for refugees from Ukraine. Giving of themselves to help others, imagining a world not just better for them, but better for everyone. After more than a dozen years of Conservative rule, Britain is a weaker and poorer country in so many ways.

But my politics are about hope. I am determined that our best days lie ahead of us. I am determined that the ambition Labour had in the 1940s to build a better society, fit for our values and the time, the ambition we had in the sixties, to deliver social justice in the white heat of industrial change, the ambition we had in the 1990s to rebuild and renew our country, above all, the ambition of our children and young people, is the ambition Labour matches today.

Our children are born into a country with a proud history, but they deserve a bright future too.

It will be my mission, my privilege, to deliver it.

Thank you.