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Women and children first?

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At this season's annual party conferences, the race has been on to court the all-important female vote. Labour's promise of an extension of free childcare is a challenge to the coalition, but only if it can deliver

Over the past five years of the economic downturn, women have been on the front line of the struggle to stay financially afloat. They have borne the brunt of public sector job cuts and pay freezes. Too many have seen their employment rights eroded, and yet they are still the ones, in the majority of households, who have to balance the household budget in the face of falling wages, rising costs and reduced support from government.

But now the economy has begun to recover, women will be looking for reassurance from each of the three main parties that they and their families will benefit from growth. At their annual conferences, each party has been tailoring its message to appeal to women voters, and so stand a chance of victory in 2015. No single issue has become more of a battleground for the female vote than childcare. UK parents spend more on childcare than those in most other developed economies. With more families needing to have two people in work just to get by, the exorbitant costs of childcare are frequently cited as a major barrier to women seeking employment.

In an attempt to woo working women, the government announced nearly £1bn for childcare at this year's Budget. The bulk of that money – £750m – will pay for a new system of childcare vouchers for better-off parents who are not eligible for Universal Credit. The intention is to target support towards those families that currently receive limited help from the state and for whom childcare costs can feel like a second mortgage. From 2015, these parents will be able to claim up to £1,200 a year in childcare support.

But a policy that was intended to build bridges between Conservatives and female voters, and to partially compensate those who had lost child benefit, backfired because traditional Tory supporters rejected it. The new childcare voucher is only available if both parents work, fuelling accusations that the government is pushing women out to work and does not value stay-at-home mothers. Arguably, the policy does the reverse: it gives those parents who would like to work but cannot afford to because of the high costs of childcare the same choices about whether to stay at home or go to work as parents who are more affluent. But the policy provoked more of a row about the appropriate role of women than it achieved in terms of voter support for the Tories.

In response, the party quickly announced its plans to introduce a married person's tax allowance in this year's Autumn Statement. While this may satisfy those the party has angered the most, it will put off many of the working women it seeks to reach, as they will likely consider it out of touch with the reality of today's diverse families.

When it comes to child- and female-friendly policies, the Liberal Democrats have generally fared better. Although it was a policy initiated by the previous government, they have claimed as their own the introduction of free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds, and have won the support of parents and the childcare sector for quashing childcare minister Liz Truss's proposal to loosen ratios of nurseries and childminders.

As part of the Budget deal, the LibDems secured £250m of childcare support for less-well-off families who would otherwise have been overlooked – although the way that money will be targeted is perverse, as it tends to favour the higher earners within the group over those on the minimum wage. The LibDems have also pinned their colours to the extension of flexible working and the introduction of shared parental leave, both popular policies with women. However, with a significant number of new jobs still only part-time or temporary, it will be some time before employees are willing to exercise these rights in the workplace without fear of repercussions.

Until this week, both sides of the coalition had been let off lightly because Labour had failed to make the running on childcare. Despite being an area where Labour should expect to lead the polls, they had so far said very little about what they would actually do regarding childcare if they were to win in 2015, or identified it as one of their top policy priorities.

However, this week in Brighton, Labour came back with force, announcing an extension of free early years childcare by 10 hours for families with working parents, and pledging 'wrap-around' childcare for primary age children.

These are attractive policies. But while the gender divide among voters is greatest for the Tories, Labour cannot take the female vote for granted. Childcare for one-year-olds is expensive and needs skilled carers, but that is the critical year where women become disconnected from work – and all too often, struggle to ever get back.

The pledge of some enhanced support for less-well off parents at least makes it clear that politicians really understood the challenges facing working mothers. But there are long standing problems with access to the existing 15 hours childcare entitlement because it is underfunded, so Labour will have to demonstrate that its 'guarantees' and new entitlements can be delivered.

This conference season shows there is a lot to play for, as all parties are no doubt aware. As well as childcare, there are other opportunities to court the female vote: social care, low pay, uncertain employment, and a solution to high rents and insecure tenancies are all issues that affect both women and families, and that need to be addressed. The race to win over women's votes in the the run-up to 2015 has only just begun.

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