

Running on empty: family life versus the long hours culture

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The workplace is taking more of our time than ever, says Peter Franklin. This may or may not be good for the economy, but what is it doing to our society? If time is money, then what price the family?

Despite everything, BBC Radio 4 remains one of our greatest national treasures. We may all have our bugbears - take your pick from Jim Naughtie, Jenni Murray or those wholly unconvincing American accents disgracing many a radio play - but the station still provides a wavelength for intelligence in a spectrum of inanity. Almost everything it broadcasts is of interest, no matter how obscure or abstract the subject matter. For instance, last year saw a whole series on the theme of the weekend. I can't quite recall who hosted it. It could have been Tony Hawkes, or perhaps Arthur Smith; anyway it was one of those working class comedians so gainfully employed by this most middle class and serious-minded of broadcasting institutions. Whoever it was, he made a most striking observation. It was ironic, he said, that Radio 4 should be celebrating the weekend just as it seems to be slipping away from us.

For anyone born from the sixties onward, it's easy to forget that the weekend is a comparatively recent invention. Certainly, my father's generation remembers Saturday as a working day or, at least, half-day. Sunday really was the day of rest. But now, as the weekend mentality takes hold of Fridays in France and Germany, the British weekend is open to a counter-attack from the working week. Only this time, no day is sacred - Saturday and Sunday alike are under siege. In part it is the great British weekend that is itself to blame. Not content to take it easy, we demand non-stop shopping and entertainment opportunities that others must labour to provide. But that is not the only reason. After all, weekend working is not just a feature of the leisure and retail sectors. Nor does the long-hours culture encroach upon our weekends alone; the threat extends to our scarce evening hours of weekday freedom too.

How did this come about? As working hours reduce across the continent, how did Britain, once the lazy man of Europe, transform itself into a nation of workaholics? We need to look to our recent history for the answers - to the economic stagnation of the third quarter of the twentieth century, followed by the mass unemployment of the fourth. Things had to change and, indeed, they did. The institutionalised malingering of the union days were swept aside by Margaret Thatcher, herself a workaholic who famously subsisted on five hours sleep a night. But have things gone too far the other way? Will the social consequences of the new culture be as ruinous as the economic consequences of the old?

Let me tell the story of a man who once worked in the City. There was a time when one could set one's watch by the ebb and flow of bowler hats and neatly furled umbrellas across London Bridge. But in recent years, regular office hours have gone the way of the hats. And so work in the City has become a matter of endurance. Certainly you earn well, but for that money they buy not just your day, but your life. Which is what happened to our friend, who at the end of a long day, left the office, not for his home, but, most nights, for a business dinner with a client, followed, of course, by drinks. And so tired and a little drunk, he would, at last, make his way home. By that time, the last train would have gone. So it would be on to an all-night airport express service and then cross-country by taxi to a wife who had fallen asleep and two boys who had been asleep for hours. They would still be asleep, just half a night later, when he got up to make it in for another day of the same punishing schedule. Everyday would be alike: the few short hours of sleep, the double shift, and a family life conducted in a darkened, silent house. In the end his mind and body rebelled and the result was a prolonged period of illness which ended his career, but after much suffering, gave him his life back.

This may be an extreme case, burnout being an occupational hazard for the highflying professional. But even in the lower ranks, I have seen trainees subjected to outrageous demands on their time, just so that the company could show-off to a client (and somehow justify its exorbitant, and otherwise unwarranted, consultancy fees). If such impositions were limited to the well-paid financial professions, one might be able to dismiss the issue as one of career choice. But the long-hours culture permeates all trades and professions. A recent survey conducted by the website justforteachers.co.uk showed that 95% of teachers said that work demands were damaging their families. A study by the School Teachers Review Body found that the average primary school teacher worked a 53 hour week. A report for the Keep Sunday Special Campaign showed that nine million men and women are now working 'usually or sometimes' on a Sunday, an increase of 16% since 1992. Other research indicates that 1 in 4 fathers are working at least fifty hours a week and 1 in 10 at least sixty hours.

Long, or, to use the euphemism, flexible, hours are defended on the grounds of economic efficiency. But who is paying the price? Experts in the science of chronobiology, who study the functioning of our 'biological clocks', warn that work outside of normal hours is resulting in an increase in sleep disruption, gastro-intestinal disorders and heart disease. Writing in the *Lancet* last year, Professor Josephine Arendt of the University of Surrey warned that "biological time is not only scientifically important, but it also greatly affects the productivity and health of a nation. The cost to the nation's health of working out of phase with our biological clocks is probably incalculable at present."

But the greatest price is being paid by those who aren't actually doing the work - the children of those who do. Every additional hour working on the shopfloor or in the office, or commuting on the train or in the car, is an hour less that parents can spend with their children. According to the charity Young Voice, almost one quarter of 14 to 18 year olds said that their parents were too stressed to have any time for them. At the other end of the age spectrum, compelling evidence is emerging from America and elsewhere that relying on workplace childcare damages the emotional development of babies and infants. And in case this is perceived as a dig at working mothers, I'll also mention the work of the University College London psychologist, Dr Howard Steele, who found that babies deprived of quality time with their fathers in the first year of life were also likely to suffer emotional damage. Though quality time is an ill-defined concept, Dr Steele used an easily understood indicator: whether or not dads were there to help at bathtime. He found that the children of those that weren't were ten times more likely to suffer from psychological problems in later life than the children of those that were.

So, what's the answer? The Left favours legislation to limit working hours. Indeed, legislation is presented as the only option, which is why the work-life balance is such a touchy subject for the Conservative Party. Yet, under Iain Duncan Smith, we are now pledged to talk about the issues that really matter in the everyday lives of ordinary people. Well, if ever there was an everyday issue, it is this one. Now, it is important that we don't just enter into a regulatory horse race with Labour, with each Party egging the other on to impose yet further burdens on business. Employment laws can be counter-productive, providing employers with disincentives to take on more workers and perverse incentives to get more out of their existing workforce.

This is not a problem that Government can just legislate out of existence. The changes required to our economy and society go much, much deeper than that. First of all we must not forget the flipside of the long-hours culture - the no-hours culture. This encompasses the long-term unemployed, including the hundreds of thousands on long-term sickness benefits, whose numbers have swelled out of all proportion to medical reality. Then there are those in low paid, unskilled jobs, who could and should be trained to relieve those in industries where skills are in short supply. And passing over the swelling army of students, a fraction of whom have much to contribute to academic life, let us look to the yet greater multitude of retirees. Why is that those in later years, but in good health, are compelled to inactivity? Why must retirement be a matter of complete cessation, rather than a gradual transfer from one way of life to another?

We are a busy nation. There is much work to be done. But our education and welfare systems

conspire to frustrate any sensible apportionment of the rewards and responsibilities. This must change and here the state must take the lead. But there is another aspect to all of this where the onus is on the employer and the employee. For the long hours culture is just that, a culture. It cannot be legislated out of existence, as the existing legislation on Sunday trading makes all too clear. We must overturn the worldview that recognises no duties from one individual to another, save those defined by legal contract. On this issue, as with so many other everyday issues, the libertarian wing of the Conservative Party has nothing to offer. We cannot reduce human existence to free markets and free choices. There are some duties in which we have no choice, to people who, in any case, are unable to enter into legally binding contracts with us. These people are the children of this country. Whether or not the long-hours worked by their parents have been entered into in accordance with the law, this is stolen time that rightfully belongs to the family.

If legislation does have a role, then it is in the passing of symbolic laws that send out the message that family time is sacred. Just such a law is being proposed by the *Keep Sunday Special Campaign* (see below). For that matter, our Members of Parliament could send out a message without so much as moving an amendment. They could end the absurd practice of all-night sittings, get to work at a sensible time in the morning and, then, in the evening, go home to their families. Let us hope that modern Conservatives place themselves in the vanguard of parliamentary reform, instead of clinging to outdated nocturnal habits.

Libertarians and reactionaries alike must give way to true conservatism. They must understand that society is not just an atomised sum of individuals, ordered only by market and state. As human beings we associate with one another in patterns shaped by nature, and, if I may be so bold, by God Himself. The most important of these patterns is the family, as it is the means by which every other human association is maintained and perpetuated. In this world of limited resources, there is none so limited as time. And so let us give the first share to the family and to the children to whom our time belongs.