

Commitment, wedded or not

Yvonne Roberts

- 1 Psychologist John Gottman is a world-renowned expert on what makes marriages work. He advocates avoiding the four horsemen¹⁾ of the relationship apocalypse: criticism, contempt, stonewalling and defensiveness.
- 2 Try a daily dose of validation and, if you can stretch to it, a bit of positive chat and affection. In truth, they are exactly the same ingredients that consolidate long-term commitment, with or without the wedding rings. Commitment is commitment. Interestingly, nowhere in 40 years of research on matrimony has Mr Gottman mentioned the aphrodisiac of tax breaks. Has the guru missed a trick?
- 3 Certainly, David Cameron appears to think so. At the Conservative party conference this week, he will announce a perk of £3.85 a week for 4 million married couples. The government, a month before the 2015 general election, will introduce a £1,000 transferable marriage tax allowance.
- 4 Cameron said on Friday: "The values of marriage are give and take, support and sacrifice – values we need more of in this country." Cabinet Office minister Francis Maude explained yesterday that fiscal support was a recognition that marriage is one of the institutions that "creates glue in society".
- 5 Mr Cameron is a patriarch who thinks his Burberry man bag can persuade us otherwise, so his views on marriage are hardly surprising. Mr Maude, however, is his party's moderniser. How reprehensible that he talks such claptrap about a policy that is divisive, illogical, illiberal, hypocritical and intended as Valium for the Tory shires hyperventilating over cohabitation with the Liberal-Democrats.
- 6 The policy is 9a. It is intended as status enhancing, so why are couples earning more than £42,285 excluded? It is 9b and 9c because it implies the commitment of those who live together – a well-established trend – is inferior. It is 9d because if this government were really concerned about supporting the solidity of families it would properly invest in the likes of housing and childcare.
- 7 As for "glue", the glue of matrimony not many decades ago could also be highly toxic. A couple stayed together often in spite of indifference and cruelty because of the shame, stigma – and for women – the economic impossibility of doing otherwise; a fragile foundation for any society.
- 8 A relationship is about more than love and a marriage certificate. It also involves a common goal; extended families; a story that a couple weave together and believe in for enough of the time. In all this, children should come first. So, if politicians really want to bolster institutions, then

long-term cohabitation should be recognised in law (Sweden hasn't fallen apart as a result). While a spouse pays no inheritance tax on the death of a partner, a cohabitee does.

- 9 A cohabitee, even with children, may have no financial claim against an ex-partner's house, no matter how long they have been together. It's absurd that many long-term couples marry not because they are investing in the institution but for reasons of finance and property. Isn't that where it all began somewhere in the Middle Ages?

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noot 1 The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are mentioned in the Bible. They represent War, Famine, Pestilence and Death, said to come about when the world ends.