

BISHOP OF PORTSMOUTH, Rt Rev Christopher Foster

House of Lords speech, 27 Jan 2016

My Lords I speak to amendments 35 and 36 in my name with gratitude to the noble Baronesses who have added their names to these amendments. The effect of these amendments would be to make further exemptions to the two child limit of the child element of Tax Credit and Universal Credit. The exemptions I propose are limited and specific.

At second reading and in committee I along with others in this House indicated our regret that these proposals as a whole might be seen as signalling that not every child is precious and deserves love and support not only of parents and families, but of community, society and nation. Nevertheless I recognise the intent of the Government. I do not intend now to rehearse the detailed arguments, numbers and costings used in committee. The Minister and your Lordships House are aware of them and the perspective of my and other faith traditions. Personally supportive or not of the Bill's provisions as a whole, my amendments do not challenge the main thrust of this part of the Bill that decisions about family size should be made with responsibility and care, and that any decision to have third or subsequent children should be made without expectation of Benefit support. The exceptions we propose now do not challenge that central plank of the policy which seeks to influence parental behaviour. Grateful for the opportunity the noble Lord the Minister gave me and others to meet with him last week, for his courtesy and candour, and for his understanding which I hope might be shown today in his response.

The Bill incorporates exceptions for multiple births and after rape, an exemption on which I hope he can provide clarity about the procedure, judicial or otherwise, to be used in relation to that. These further exemptions also, in the same way relate to specific circumstances or vulnerability. All relate to the common good of society, to an understanding of what is just, right and compassionate, and characteristics and behaviour that we wish to encourage and enable, sometimes in legislation.

The first three exemptions relate directly to unforeseen circumstances which could not have been planned for. When a decision was being made about family size, however carefully and responsibly consideration took place, these circumstances could not have been reasonably expected.

The death of a parent drastically changes family circumstances. Death may remove the principal source of income. Or increased child care demands may compel the surviving parent to reduce working hours or stop work. I hope the minister and Government can, as they have previously shown understanding and accommodated these distressing circumstances at least for a transitional period, make provision so that the deep sadness of bereavement is not exacerbated cruelly by financial penalty. Parental death is unforeseen when family size is decided.

A parent suffering domestic violence has often been driven as a last and desperate resort to flee the family home. Everything is left behind as parent and children lose home and

security and sometimes the main source of income. The Government has boosted refuge provision to support such vulnerable victims of violence and I hope the Minister can agree that it would be consistent to recognise the vulnerability of these children in relation to this Bill. The threat and danger of domestic violence is not chosen or sought. To penalise children taken out of a dangerous situation cannot be right and does not reflect well on the concern we all have for the security and protection of vulnerable young people.

No parent plans for a disabled child, yet we know that the impact on previously anticipated patterns of work and child care can be hugely significant. A realistic and rational decision to have a third child, for instance, can lead to a massive change of circumstance and situation if the child is disabled. I recognise, of course, that a disabled child will still attract some disability addition, albeit hugely reduced under Universal Credit, the impact on employment pattern, on child care priorities and costs, would be exacerbated by the two child limit.

Two of the exemptions I propose relate to the behaviour and decisions which I and I believe this Government wish to encourage, and which policy and legislation can enable through these amendments. Kinship carers and those fostering and adopting step in to care for children with love and commitment when many would otherwise be in the costly care system. Around and across your Lordships house there is a desire to welcome, enable and encourage such generosity which benefits the children themselves and our society. Surely when kinship carers, fostering and adopting families take third or subsequent children, often to keep siblings together, we should be supportive of that not really because it saves money from the public purse and from the exchequer as it does, but because it is the right and good thing to be welcomed by this House, Parliament and the Government.

Two single parent families, each with two children, will potentially both receive benefit for all four children. Should the parents make a commitment to form one family or marry they will be eligible for benefits for only two of the children. The policy driving this Bill is intended to change behaviour. I fear that, perversely, the result of these provisions at present is to discourage the formation of committed relationships and families which are good for children. The amendment gives substance to the words we speak about wanting what is good for children.

My Lords these amendments seek to build on the two welcome exemptions already in the Bill. They do not challenge the Government's policy which intends parents to take responsible decisions about family size. They recognise that unforeseen, tragic or life changing circumstances arise which cannot be predicted or planned. They further encourage not just by word but by policy and action, the sort of society and communities we surely want to be, where stable relationships and families are encouraged, generous parenting by kinship careers, foster and adoptive parents is valued, disabled children are not a source of regret, domestic abuse and violence is never tolerated, and where the wounds of untimely death are not deepened by financial anxiety. My Lords I beg to move these amendments.