Reviving domestic service could revolutionise childcare

A modern version of domestic service could give meaningful work to millions Domestic service – words redolent of Upstairs Downstairs, quietly unruffled butlers and The Forsyte Saga. But this image, embedded in the national consciousness through years of Sunday night dramas, gives a skewed picture of domestic service as it really was in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Oxford historian Sian Pooley researcheded domestic service in Lancaster between 1880 and 1914. What she found was that the help often came from a similar social background to the employer. “There were considerable similarities between the backgrounds… of both servants and employers”, says Pooley.

Families of all classes were aided by the easy availability of help at the most stressful times of their lives. The burden for caring fell disproportionately then (as it does now) on the mothers of the household, who might have been caring for several children, as well as sick and elderly relatives. But those mothers could rely on the relatively inexpensive help of young women and men who could come into their home, learn useful household skills, and earn themselves a living.

This model – domestic help not as a luxury only for the very wealthy but a regular part of life for the majority – is something we could learn from today. It could provide a decent solution to two serious modern problems.

The first problem is that childcare has not evolved properly to support new social structures. Today, there are increasing numbers of households where both partners go out to work, earning roughly equal salaries. When they have children, they often both choose to carry on working. If they are middle-income earners, the childcare system that is affordable to them is often woefully unsupportive. Unlike the 19th century model of in-home help, where someone was present in the home at all times, modern family life is often pervaded by chaos.
The second problem is the vast numbers of young people who are currently denied meaningful work. There are 848,000 16-24 year olds who are not in education, employment or training, part of a whole pool of young people who aren’t best served by college or university.

So what if we could marry these two problems to make a solution? What if there was a revived culture of domestic service, in which young people gained meaningful qualifications in child-rearing, and in which families could more easily and affordably have help in the home?

In public policy terms, this could mean a couple of things. There could be a well-known, nationally-respected route into the childcare profession to replace many of the overlapping qualifications that exist today. This qualification could provide a route into skilled, useful work for many of those young people who currently have nowhere else to go.

But the real key in public policy terms would be to make domestic employment more affordable. If you run a small business and employ people, you pay their wages out of the turnover of the company, then pay tax on the rest. But if you employ someone in your home to look after your children, you pay them out of your post-tax income.

This seems, to the dispassionate eye, a rather unfair situation. But of course, when it comes to taxes – and to issues that rub up against the old British sore of class – we tend to be anything but dispassionate.

There is no doubt that tax deductions on hiring home help would be politically difficult. But brave politicians might be able to make the case that it could end up saving the state money. If it worked properly, the tax deduction for the middle class should be balanced out by more people in work and paying taxes.

Reviving a culture of domestic services is about much more than narrow financial concerns. It would provide families across most of the income scale the support to live their lives, not struggle through them. For the young people involved, there would be money, motivation, and a route into fulfilling work. If we could slough off the negative connotations of domestic service we could see that most rare thing: a public policy that not only costs nothing, but makes people happier too.