

Proposed Memorial to Conference on Separated Families 3

Reading and Silchester Circuit Meeting 21 February 2013

There are serious problems concerning the financial situation of the parents on low incomes who, after the breakup of a relationship, are not the main carer of the children. These parents have been given the label 'non-resident parent' (NRP) although this term carries unhelpful connotations. I was made aware early in 2011, through the case of a particular individual, that some NRPs were being asked by the CSA to pay maintenance amounts that could not possibly be met. My understanding has progressed since then and continues to develop.

There are two main factors contributing to the problem:

- ill-founded maintenance calculation regulations,
- inappropriate welfare support.

A summary of some essential facts is given overleaf.

I have worked through my MP, Rob Wilson (Reading East) and with Families Need Fathers to try to get the situation put right but without apparent success. The human consequences of the situation are extremely damaging so my efforts will continue.

It is acknowledged that there are some non-resident parents who want nothing to do with their children after separation, just as there are parents with care who abuse or neglect the children. But neither of these should be taken as the norm. It is also acknowledged that there are some non-resident parents who can afford to pay maintenance but try to avoid doing so, just as there are people who use tax avoidance schemes to reduce their liabilities to the state. Again, this should not be taken as the norm.

In most families both parents love their children; the children in turn love both their mother and their father. In most cases, after separation, both parents want to continue to be involved in the lives of their children. The courts bear witness to this, in the struggles for custody and for access. In the majority of cases, custody is granted to the mother and it is a sad fact that many of these mothers seek to deny the father access and to exclude him from their children's lives.

The Government is keen that both parents should continue to be involved in their children's lives after separation. For this to be a practicality the problems referred to above need to be addressed. The NRP must be able to afford that involvement and, of course, must be able to support himself. The Government's current work on welfare reform and support for separating families provides a unique opportunity to put the situation right. Welfare support for the two parents needs to be allocated fairly. Errors in legislation need to be corrected. This would be for the good of all concerned, children, parents and society in general.

Separated Families – Essential Facts

- It is estimated that a third of children (over four million) now live in separated families. (Government press release 29 November 2012.)
- It is widely accepted that children do better if both parents continue to play an active role in their children's lives; shared parenting should be accepted as the norm.
- There are over a million parents on the CSA books.
- The majority of these have few qualifications and over 800,000 are either unemployed or in low paid work. Those with better qualifications and higher paid jobs usually come to their own maintenance arrangements.
- Mistakes **were** made in the formulation of the 2003 Maintenance Calculation Regulations. In particular the thresholds for flat rate and reduced payments which were included to protect low earners were given **fixed** values; the values of £100 and £200 assigned in 1998 are still in place today. As a result, calculated payments are unaffordable for those on low income. Higher income parents also talk of being financially ruined.
- The same errors have been retained in the 2012 Regulations.
- Furthermore, non resident parents are regarded as single adults as regard tax credit entitlement even though they pay maintenance and may care for the children for some of the week. For low income parents this is a serious problem.
- A non-resident parent with a net income of just £200 a week is liable under 2003 regulations to pay 15, 20 or 25% of this in child support maintenance, according as there are 1, 2 or 3+ children.
- If arrears have accumulated the parent can be asked to pay up to 40% of their net income. This applies even to those on Job Seekers Allowance.
- The facts are incontrovertible.
- The flaws in regulations and inappropriate welfare provision mean that non-resident parents on low income are placed in an impossible situation. They cannot fulfil their parenting role; indeed, they cannot support themselves. They have no good future.
- The children are also losers. The non-resident parent cannot afford to maintain a proper relationship with them; indeed contact may be lost entirely.

Christine Dugdale, Caversham Heights Methodist Church (amended 1 March 2013)