

The State Versus THE BRITISH CHILD SUPP

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The Child Support Act, 1991, is one of the most controversial pieces of recent social policy legislation in Britain; indeed, it is already being referred to as the second poll tax, so widespread has been the opposition to it in some quarters.

In the two years since it was implemented in April 1993, the hostility the Act has aroused has resulted, allegedly, in at least four suicides of men facing considerable increases in the size of maintenance demands. There have been angry demonstrations outside the homes and offices of the Secretary of State for Social Security and the Chief Executive of the Child Support Agency and marches through several major cities on the anniversaries of the legislation. Hate mail, death threats and parcels of excrement have been sent to officials. And at a more measured official level, there have been two highly critical Select Committee reports in Parliament and a damning indictment of maladministration from the Parliamentary Ombudsman and other supervisory bodies.

This level of anger is all the more remarkable as the Act itself passed through Parliament with no significant divisions between the major political parties, and research (Clarke *et al.* 1993, 1994, 1995) has shown that very few lone mothers are hostile to the principle of parental maintenance. The legislation is also very complex, raising important issues about not only family policy but income maintenance, the relationship between work and the benefits system, the role of the state in relation to the family, and gender relations.

This article traces the origins and early history of the Act and its executive arm, the Child Support Agency (CSA), and raises some preliminary questions as to what the outcomes, as opposed to the stated objectives, of the legislation may be.

The CSA is one of the 'Next Steps' agencies, created by the government as semi-autonomous executive agencies, not directly answerable to parliament but responsible for the day-to-day management and administration of most social security tasks on behalf of the government. As the experience of the CSA has shown, the political and managerial 'distance' between these agencies and the government can be helpful in deflecting political criticism. Two years on from the operational introduction of the Act, it is too early to reach definitive conclusions on whether the aims of the Act can be retrieved, although there has been a growing lobby for its replacement by new legislation which may not be silenced by recent reforms announced by the government.

What the early history of the CSA shows, however, is that the government, in placing one objective – the reduction in benefits expenditure on lone parents – above all others, has not only seriously compromised the possibility of meeting any of the other objectives of the legislation but also, in the light of events, been forced to reveal the real ideological

agenda behind its claims to be concerned with the welfare of children.

The government contributed to its own political problems by the speed at which the legislation was introduced – a function of government's determination to begin to



Lone Parents?

PORT ACT IN PRACTICE



Picture: Rhonda Milner

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involved and the lessons of relevant experience both within the UK and elsewhere – notably in Australia, where the Child Support scheme had been operating for five years before the UK Child Support Act was introduced.

In the form in which the UK scheme was first introduced, there were significant differences between it and the corresponding scheme in Australia, differences which have been at the root of much of the opposition to UK child support arrangements over the past two years.

For example, in the UK, lone mothers on social assistance get no financial benefit from the payment of maintenance which is offset pound for pound from their benefit, whereas in Australia, lone mothers might receive almost 50 per cent of maintenance paid. UK lone mothers thus have no financial incentive to cooperate.

Further, the Australian scheme applied only to new maintenance arrangements whereas the UK scheme was retrospective and involved overturning both existing maintenance arrangements and established property and capital settlements made through the courts some years previously. This has been the cause of particularly bitter opposition from men.

Finally, the Australian child support maintenance formula does not include an element for the carer whereas the UK scheme does: this has caused ill-feeling amongst mothers wishing to remove any sense of financial dependency on male ex-partners (Whiteford 1994) and opposition from fathers too.

Demography of Lone Parents

The number of lone parents in the UK has risen rapidly in the last 20 years. Between 1971 and 1991, the number of lone-parent families more than doubled from 570,000 to

1.3 million (or 19 per cent of all families with children). It has been estimated that in 1991, 2.2 million children were living in families headed by lone parents, the vast majority of whom are women (Holtermann 1993). The level of lone parenthood in the UK is the third highest in OECD countries (Whiteford and Bradshaw 1994) and is about one-third as high again as in Australia.

The proportion of lone parents who are women has remained fairly constant over the past 20 years, at around 90 per cent. However, the population of lone mothers is not homogeneous and its composition has changed substantially in this period.

The most significant demographic trends within the population of lone mothers as a whole are: the very rapid growth in the numbers of single ('never-married') mothers, roughly quadrupling from 1971 to 1989 (in 1989 single mothers constituted over one-third of all lone mothers); a doubling in the number of separated or divorced lone mothers (now more than one-half of all lone mothers); and a halving in the number of widowed mothers.

Simultaneously with the growth in the number of lone parents, there has been an increase in the proportion of lone parents dependent on benefits as their principal source of income, and a fall in the proportion of lone mothers in employment. In 1971, 37 per cent of lone parents were on Supplementary Benefit, the main means-tested social assistance benefit. In 1989, the proportion of those on Income Support, which replaced Supplementary Benefit in 1988, had risen to about 70 per cent (Bradshaw and Millar 1991). Even given the miserly level of social assistance benefits in the UK, the result has been a very substantial rise in real terms in public expenditure on income-related benefits for lone parents and their children, from £1.4Bn in 1981–82 to £3.2 Bn in 1988–89 (1990–91 prices) (DSS 1990, Vol. 1).

In 1988–90, the proportion of lone mothers working was 40 per cent, compared with 46 per cent a decade earlier. Therefore it seems that working at the current wage rate is not sufficient to keep a very considerable

recoup 'savings'. One consequence of this drive for benefit savings has been the abandonment of good administrative practice in an extremely sensitive area of policy. Further, the government failed to appreciate the extremely complex nature of the task

proportion of lone mothers off social security. Over the same period, the proportion of married women with dependent children in employment has risen from 52 per cent to 61 per cent (Holtermann 1993). The difference between the employment rates of married and lone mothers is accounted for by the very much lower proportion of lone mothers working part-time, and this must be seen at least partly as a consequence of the way in which the UK benefits system operates. Lone parents on Income Support can earn only £15 per week before their benefit is reduced on a pound for pound basis.

Before the Act was introduced, only 30 per cent of lone mothers received regular maintenance, but the proportion varied considerably between different groups of lone mothers; two-fifths of divorced lone mothers received regular maintenance payments, compared with only one in seven never-married mothers. The average weekly payment for divorced mothers receiving maintenance (£28) was almost twice that received on average by single mothers (£15) (Burghes 1993).

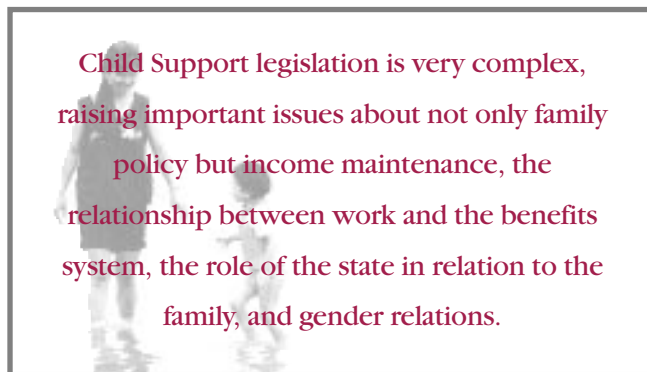
One of the consequences of a growing dependence on state benefits has been increasing poverty among lone-parent families. This group of families are over-represented in the poorest 10 per cent of the population, which has been shown to have lost both absolutely and relatively as a result of the cumulative taxation and benefit changes over the past 15 years (JRF 1995). Their position relative to two-parent families has also worsened in the last ten years (Holtermann 1993). Social security changes introduced in 1988 contributed further to the deteriorating position of lone parents. Families with children, and particularly the poorest families, were among the groups supposedly 'targeted' for extra help by the 1986 Social Security Act. In fact, as a detailed valuation of the Act demonstrated (Evans, Piachaud and Sutherland 1994), it failed to reach its targets. The consequence of, for example, requirements to contribute to the cost of water bills and the introduction of the social fund, which is a loan-based system of payments for Income Support claimants needing to finance large items of expenditure from their weekly benefit, has been that many lone parents now are obliged to exist as a matter of course at incomes well below the statutory means-tested social assistance level.

Origins of the Child Support Act

For a government preoccupied with finding ways to halt, and even reverse the growth of public expenditure, it is hardly surprising that its attention should be drawn to the increase in social security spending on lone parents. Thus, in Margaret Thatcher's speech to the National Children's Home in early 1990, which amounted to an announcement of the government's intention to legislate, passing references to the burden on 'abandoned' mothers and to issues of child care were overshadowed by an explicit

preoccupation with the financial dimension of child support:

'When one of the parents not only walks away from marriage but neither maintains nor shows any interest in the child, an enormous unfair burden is placed on the other. Nearly four out of five mothers claiming Income Support received no maintenance from the fathers. No



father should be able to escape from his responsibility and that is why the government is looking at ways of . . . making the arrangements for recovering maintenance more effective.'

Although the then Prime Minister chose to stress the issue of parental support for children, the Child Support Act can be viewed within a number of differing social policy contexts. For example, it could be seen as one of a wider range of measures put forward by the government to increase work incentives. Other moves in this direction included changes to the rules for eligibility for Family Credit, the means-tested benefit supplementing the incomes of those on low wages, and Income Support. In 1992, the hours threshold for eligibility for Family Credit was lowered from 24 to 16 hours per week. This meant that lone parents who worked 16 hours a week or more could no longer claim Income Support. It remains uncertain as to whether the take-up of Family Credit, which involves a complex and inflexible application procedure, will significantly be increased as a result.

Evidence from a number of studies (Burghes 1993; Holtermann 1993; Clarke *et al.* 1994) suggests that while many lone mothers wish to work, the obstacles – particularly a significant 'poverty trap' in moving from Income Support to Family Credit with an associated loss of many 'passported' benefits such as free school meals and dental and optical help – and a lack of adequate training and child care opportunities for prospective working mothers, are still considerable. Additionally, the abolition of the wages councils, which provided some wage level protection for low-paid women workers, has meant that the financial returns for women entering the labour market are increasingly unattractive. The government also introduced a child care disregard (a taxable allowance against income) in 1993 for those on Family Credit, which was worth up to £28 weekly to mothers able to make use of child care from registered childminders. However, early evidence again suggests that

the conditions attached to this disregard (which, for example, effectively rule out the use of family members as child carers, in contradiction to the government's stance in the arena of community care for older or disabled relatives) and its low level relative to the cost of quality child care, will considerably limit its usefulness to lone mothers (Clarke *et al.* 1996).

The instrument of child maintenance was, however, clearly seen by the government as the dominant vehicle for encouraging lone parents to move off Income Support and thus 'achieve greater independence through working', in line with its general argument that many of those on benefits needed to be helped out of a culture of dependency' on state benefits. This argument was supported by vigorously ideological attacks on lone parents in a succession of Ministerial statements in the early 1990s. The White Paper which preceded the Child Support Act

predicted that 'up to 200,000 more lone parents will receive maintenance regularly', roughly doubling the total numbers of those in receipt of maintenance, and that about '50,000 caring parents will no longer be dependent on Income Support', roughly 6 per cent of those then on Income Support (DSS 1990, Vol.1). Above all, however, the government claimed that the reforms would 'serve to advance the welfare of children', although it was somewhat coy as to the ways in which this would happen, other than by generally encouraging children to believe that financial involvement by parents brought with it other forms of involvement and support.

Objectives of the Act

The main provisions of the Act were as follows.

- The Act established a new body, the Child Support Agency, with responsibility for the assessment of all child maintenance payments, and their collection where requested.
- The Act set out a formula to be used to calculate the 'absent parent's' child maintenance liability. The formula was based on Income Support levels and did not take into account actual costs or expenses, other than some housing costs.
- All lone parents claiming Income Support, Family Credit or the means-tested disability working allowance were obliged to authorise the Secretary of State to take action to recover maintenance from the 'absent parent'. (The terms 'absent parent' and 'parent with care' are used in official documents and we follow that convention here without necessarily endorsing the terminology used.)
- Lone parents claiming these benefits were also required to cooperate with the CSA by providing the information needed to help trace any 'absent parent' and to assess and collect any maintenance owed.

- The only exception to the requirement to authorise or cooperate for parents on means-tested benefits is where a lone parent can show 'reasonable grounds' for believing this would cause the lone parent or any children living with her 'harm or undue distress' – for example, where there had been a history of domestic violence or abuse.
- Where a lone parent refused to cooperate without demonstrating 'good cause', a benefit penalty can be imposed – a reduction in the parent's Income Support of 20 per cent for six months and 10 per cent for a further 12 months. (For parents repaying social fund loans and other debts, the weekly benefit level might therefore be reduced by as much as 40–50 per cent).
- The CSA also took over responsibility for assessing the maintenance liability of the 'absent parent' for families where the lone parent was not on benefits, thus supplanting the former court-based procedures in relation to maintenance (but not property settlements).
- The legislation was to be phased in over three years, starting with all new claims for Family Credit and Income Support in April 1993, and gradually taking on all existing claimants up to March 1996.
- Non-claimants of state benefit would also be able to use the CSA to set maintenance levels on request, where there was no existing or requested court order.

The Act thus sought to introduce an essentially financial solution (epitomised by the formula for calculating the maintenance liability of the 'absent parent') to the complex social and economic problems faced by lone parents, a solution which provided essentially for the reallocation of private resources between parents through a state-sponsored mechanism. In its original form, however, the Act did nothing to address the issue of child poverty resulting from lone parents' long-term dependency on Income Support; it also failed effectively to address the issue of access to the labour market for the many lone parents wishing to work. In essence, it was attempting a purely social security solution to a much broader set of social policy issues by means of a rigid, highly regulated, formula-based administrative mechanism. This mechanism was soon under attack from a number of quarters.

As noted above, the passage of the Bill through Parliament was relatively uncontroversial and, by the standards of some legislation, rapid. This led to some concern about the ability of Parliament to debate detailed clauses and amendments. Perhaps of most significance, given later events, several members of the House of Lords expressed reservations about the extent to which the Act would allow the state to intervene in extremely intimate situations. One Peer

remarked, somewhat presciently and reflecting anxiety about the speed at which the Act was driven through Parliament: 'It may be as well for the government to reconsider their attitude, to withdraw the Bill and to set up a pre-legislative hearing before they get themselves into a great deal of trouble' (cited in Garnham and Knights 1994).

The government rejected these calls for further reflection and the Act received the Royal Assent only five months after the Bill had first been published. It was left to a consortium of national child care organisations to voice the considerable disquiet felt by many outside Parliament about some of the provisions of the Act, particularly as it impacted on lone mothers on benefit and their children. Again, none of this opposition was directed against the principle of parental maintenance which has continued to receive widespread support.

The concerns of the children's organisations were as follows:

- the *obligation* on all lone parents to seek maintenance from former partners, regardless of their history or personal circumstances;
- the power of the CSA, where such 'parents with care' refused to cooperate in seeking maintenance, to impose the benefit penalty, thus reducing weekly income to levels considerably below already inadequate benefit levels, and thus punishing the children in such families;

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- the exclusion of parents not on benefit from these provisions, thus reinforcing the sense of stigma felt by many lone parents on benefit;
- the narrowly fiscal approach adopted by the legislation to the problems of poverty and access to employment amongst lone-parent families;
- the failure generally to provide any maintenance disregards for lone parents on Income Support, who were to have maintenance deducted on a pound-for-pound basis and would thus not benefit financially from cooperation with the CSA.

Child care organisations also raised a number of other concerns: the failure of the formula to be sensitive enough to the needs of families who had children with a disability; the possible effects of the legislation on

relationships between children and their 'absent parent'; the impact of the operation of the Act on new families established by ex-partners (characterised by critics as 'the redistribution of poverty from first to second families'); the apparent incompatibility (except at the level of political rhetoric) of the Child Support Act with the Children Act, 1989, particularly in terms of the widely differing ways in which 'the welfare of the child' was to be interpreted; and the potentially differential impact of the legislation on families from different ethnic minority groups.

These child care organisations later sponsored a study which explored many of these issues in relation to lone mothers on means-tested benefits, and their children. The study (see, for example, Clarke *et al.* 1994) confirmed the validity of many of their initial reservations about the Act: but by then the public debate about the Act had moved on.

The Reality of the Child Support Act: The First Two Years

Hostility to the practice of the CSA emerged at a very early stage and the government was forced to make partial concessions to some 'parents with care' as early as six months after the Act became operational. In September 1993, lobbying over the question of lone parents wishing to claim 'harm and undue distress' led to changes in the way 'parents with care' provided information. These parents would now sign official Maintenance Application Forms in two separate places – once to confirm information provided as correct, the second to give (or refuse) permission to the CSA to pursue partners.

Much of the increased hostility between separated ex-partners derived (and continues to do so) from the misapprehension amongst (largely) men that their former partners had 'set the CSA onto them': this results from the wording on the maintenance assessment form which tells absent parents (usually falsely) that the CSA is acting at the request of the parent with care. However, most of the pressure on the government from that time

onwards originated from the effective campaigns organised by 'absent parents', particularly through pressure on MPs, many of them in marginal parliamentary constituencies.

From September 1993 onwards, as 'absent parents' began to receive their first maintenance demands, a major campaign developed around the allegation that these maintenance levels were 'punitively high' and had, amongst other effects, resulted in some absent parents giving up work. (Absent parents on Income Support were required only to pay £2.20 maintenance.)

The CSA was accused of pursuing easy targets – that is, 'middle class divorced parents already meeting their commitments rather than errant fathers contributing nothing to the upkeep of their children'. Although the Chief Executive of the Agency responded that it had no discretion in determining the composition of its caseload for the first year (a target of one million cases – half of them new cases and

half existing cases), a well-leaked memorandum from staff at the CSA, later confirmed as legitimate, suggested that Agency staff had been instructed to go for those cases which 'will make the biggest contribution to the £530M savings target for 1993-94'. The same memorandum went on: 'The name of the game is maximising the maintenance yield - don't waste a lot of time on non-profitable stuff.'

By the end of the first year, amidst growing administrative chaos, it was initially reported that the Agency had achieved benefit savings of £418M, including money paid under pre-existing maintenance arrangements. This figure was later revealed to be considerably inflated: the National Audit Office's first annual report on the CSA noted that a forecast of £110M revenue from the CSA for 1993-94 had translated into actual receipts of £5.7M. (The corresponding figures for its precursor organisations were £283M in 1991-92 and £313M in 1992-93.) Of the £530M initial savings target, it was estimated that about £450M would have been returned to the Treasury, the remaining £80M being directed towards the financial benefit of some lone parent families, particularly those entering the labour market.

Amidst this growing sense of administrative and managerial crisis, the government has managed to date to maintain the broad outlines of the Act. That it was able to do this was a result of three factors: first, the availability of an easy scapegoat, the Chief Executive of the Child Support Agency (a relatively inexperienced recruit from the voluntary sector), who fell on her sword 16 months after the CSA came into operation and was replaced by a senior career civil servant. This allowed both government and less critical members of the opposition to shelter behind the claim that the quality of service provided by the CSA was largely a product of managerial style and less to do with structural constraints on its operations, such as its legislative mandate, issues of resources and the dominant search for benefit savings.

The second factor was the unwillingness or inability of the Labour Party in Parliament to mount a coherent critique, doubtless in part a consequence of its almost complete silence as the Act originally became law.

The third factor was a series of relatively small changes to the legislation and to aspects of administrative practice being phased in over the period 1995-97 which may (they have yet to have any effect on the initial arrangements) have done enough to buy off the very many Conservative MPs whose mailbags had been filled with complaints from 'absent parents'.

There is not space enough here to detail either the huge volume of criticism made of the early administration of the Act by Parliamentary Select Committees, the Ombudsman or from other sources. Craig *et al.* (1995) provide a digest of the key criticisms, including long delays in processing assessments, inaccuracies, and incomplete collection of relevant evidence. Their research suggests some

of the ways in which the potential conflict between the drive for expenditure savings, and the interests of lone mothers and children (in the context of what are often difficult personal situations), are worked out in practice.

The Chief Child Support Officer, responsible for adjudicating on the quality of service, obliquely commented on the consequences of the drive for financial savings: 'operational pressures have played a part [in the] understandable wish to clear cases quickly' (CAS 1994). However, although the government was forced to give some ground in late 1994 and early 1995 as a result of this chorus of criticism, it did so only far enough to buy off pressure from its own backbenches and, indirectly, their male constituents. The issue of the poverty of lone parents (largely women) remained effectively untouched. The experience of other schemes, which are rather more generous to lone parents and have been introduced with considerably less hostility, remains largely disregarded. And the British reputation, built up over several hundred years, of being especially punitive to 'undeserving' benefit claimants, has been maintained.

Recent Changes

The government made some concessions to the level of administrative difficulties faced by the CSA in December 1994 when it announced that it would be shelving indefinitely plans both to pursue 'parents-with-care' who had not responded to initial enquiries, and to take further pre-1993 claimants on to its caseload. Early in 1995, the government revealed that it was considerably downgrading financial targets for the CSA for the foreseeable future.

This was then followed by a further White Paper which proposed the introduction of phased amendments to the legislation and some administrative reforms. These included, with effect from April 1995: a maximum limit

will be paid as a lump sum when the recipient starts work at least 16 hours per week'.

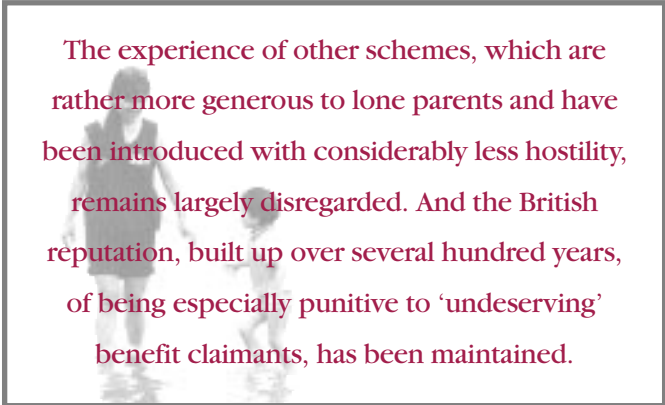
Only the last of these provisions is concerned with the situation of 'parents with care' and it consists of jam tomorrow: for reasons discussed earlier, it may offer little incentive in reality for lone mothers wishing to work now. Of the major differences between the Australian scheme and the original UK arrangements, only the issue of pre-existing capital settlements is addressed by these reforms. Lone 'parents with care' are still not able to benefit financially from the successful collection of maintenance from their ex-partners, unless and until they return to work. Many lone mothers argued with justification that there was little point in cooperating with the CSA as, after periods of intrusive questioning alternating with months of bureaucratic silence, at best they would be no better off. At worse, they might face both a deteriorating relationship with their ex-partner and the loss of informal gifts in cash or kind from ex-partners no longer able to afford them, with all parties ('parent with care', 'absent parent' and children of the relationship) thus ending up financially worse off.

The UK scheme remains able to overturn pre-existing maintenance arrangements, some of them, as our research demonstrates, constructed after years of difficult negotiations between ex-partners attempting to place the needs of their children at the centre of those negotiations; and the British maintenance formula also still contains a substantial element for the carer. Some argue that this only replaces dependence on the state with dependence on ex- (largely male) partners. Others recognise that some of the costs of children are indirect costs of time, energy and lost opportunities of the carer.

Policy on the Hoof: But to What End?

The UK government has, indeed, got itself into 'a great deal of trouble' and it is going to be some time before it is clear whether the original objectives of the Act can be met through the reforms which are currently being debated, or whether further reforms may be necessary to manage continuing opposition to its provisions.

If enacted, the 1995 White Paper will go some way to addressing some of the early criticisms of the 1991 Act by providing discretion to take account of previous property and capital settlements, introducing changes to the maintenance formula to allow for high travel-to-work-costs, and setting maximum limits to the level of maintenance payable by 'absent parents'. These provisions will benefit men (and, to a more limited extent, second families) rather than women, and the only concession to continuing criticism that the Act does not address the poverty of female lone parents is the proposed introduction of a small maintenance credit which will be payable as a lump sum once the lone parent starts work. The government may thus weather the storm by, in effect, buying off vocal, better-off male opposition at the



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expense, yet again, of poorer and politically less popular lone mothers.

However, it is more surprising that the present government managed to get itself into such a tight political corner at all. For one thing, as we have noted, the UK government had the experience of the Australian scheme before it when it drafted the legislation (and a party of senior UK civil servants spent some time examining the Australian scheme before returning to advise the government on its own legislation). While the uproar against the Australian scheme was relatively (at least by British standards) muted, it should have given at least some clue as to where the most likely difficulties might have arisen (CSEAG 1992) and the 1995 White Paper is an implicit acknowledgement of the failure of the government to take account of this fact. Second, the recent experience of the British poll tax should have warned of the kind of political backlash that the government might expect from legislation which impinged negatively on the lives of so many of their own 'natural' supporters.

Child support legislation has been another example of short-term financial expediency overruling longer-term political judgment. And in terms simply of the management of complex new policy arrangements, the too-rapid introduction of the new disability benefits scheme shortly before the CSA came into force (which led to administrative chaos and widespread claims for financial compensation) should have counselled the government against over-reaching itself with the rapid and wholesale introduction of such a complex and contentious piece of further legislation.

The stated objectives of the White Paper, endorsed in the Act, were 'enhancing parental responsibility' (by which clearly was meant financial responsibility); a 'fair balance' between the responsibilities of different parents; maintenance payments to reflect changing circumstances; a reduction of dependence on Income Support; encouragement of parents to work; and a fair, consistent and efficient service from the CSA.

In reality, the government has been driven most of all not by the claim that 'Children Come First', the hypocritical title of the White Paper, but by the need to cut into benefit expenditure – in turn impelled, it increasingly becomes clear, by the imperative of offering tax cuts in the face of record levels of hostility to the government as a general election approaches. As some retrenchment became inevitable to buy off opposition both within its own parliamentary ranks, and amongst some of its 'natural supporters' in the country at large, the government appears to have sought a new settlement particularly as between its political inclination to reduce public expenditure on the one hand, and its ideological opposition to a particular form of the 'family' on the other. To date, it has relieved the financial burden on 'absent parents' to some degree and slowing the phasing-in of the Act's provisions (thus considerably reducing its likely financial 'take'

from the Act) while giving very little ground to the needs of lone parents.

Whether this new accommodation represents a 'fair balance' between the responsibilities of different parents is debatable, at the very least. Certainly a fair and efficient service has not been delivered to date and the ideal of consistency may be further away following the introduction of greater discretion. There may be a marginal reduction in dependence on Income Support but the work incentive effect is clearly failing and will continue to do so until wider obstacles to work are addressed. The aim of adjusting maintenance payments to reflect changing circumstances is one of the areas where continuing debate is likely as between the needs of first and second families, and the latest reforms have begun to respond to pressure, albeit again almost entirely from the 'absent parent/ second family' lobby.

The irony is that, in attempting to create a context where the consequences of 'normal' family breakdown are seen to be financially unattractive, the state has been led to intervene – in the most clumsy and politically damaging way – into the most private areas of family life.

Given the failure to achieve most of these objectives to any degree to date, and particularly the government's abandonment of its targets for benefit savings, little seems to have been achieved in terms of policy outcomes.

What, therefore, does the experience of the Act so far tell us about the real agenda of the government? The Child Support Act remains as an instrument of family policy, reflecting moreover the government's support for 'normal' families. This has been articulated both by the previous Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher ('family breakdown strikes at the very heart of society, therefore policies must be directed at strengthening the family') and by the present Secretary of State for Social Security, Peter Lilley ('we Conservatives believe in the family – it is the most important institution in society . . . the left . . . hate it because it is a bastion against the state').

The irony is that, in attempting to create a context where the consequences of 'normal' family breakdown are seen to be financially unattractive, the state has been led to intervene – in the most clumsy and politically damaging way – into the most private areas of family life. The consequences of this new relationship between state and family have yet fully to be explored.

However, as the dust settles around the latest set of reforms, and hostile 'absent parents' are at least partially placated, the Child Support Act is increasingly revealed not as a mechanism for enhancing the welfare of vulnerable and poor children but as yet

another ideologically-inspired brutalisation of the life of lone parents, *pour encourager les autres*.

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