

Wednesday, 25 October, 2006

Review of child support needs a master-class from history

Sir David Henshaw's proposed redesign of the Child Support Agency is "a timid and short-sighted response to the challenge" according to a new paper by a Cambridge historian, published as the agency's latest performance statistics reveal the average case takes well over a year to deal with and absent parents' outstanding debts have reached £3.5 billion.

In a new *History & Policy* paper, Dr Thomas Nutt argues Henshaw's proposal that the state should only "get involved when parents cannot come to agreement themselves, or when one party tries to evade their responsibilities", is naïve. He demonstrates how previous attempts to reduce state involvement in child support have failed and been quickly reversed, because lone parents often lack the means to pursue child support themselves.

Dr Nutt's analysis reveals that in some areas, the Old Poor Law (1576-1834) operated more effectively than the Child Support Agency (CSA). In West Yorkshire for example, parishes succeeded in recouping up to 97% of their expenditure on support for unmarried mothers from absent fathers. This compares with the CSA's recent average of 70% overall, which has been as low as 40% following the introduction of new systems.

He shows how the Old Poor Law provides key lessons for a successful child support system:

- Administration devolved to the local level;
- Institutional determination to enforce paternal responsibility;
- Responsiveness to absent parents' ability to pay;
- Flexibility in the system to account for the individual circumstances.

Dr Nutt said:

“The fact that in the early 19th century, some parishes were more successful at collecting child support than the 21st century Child Support Agency, suggests there are lessons to be learned from history.

“Sir David Henshaw rightly identifies the current system of enforcement as needing urgent reform. But he risks falling into the same trap as 19th century reformers, assuming that the state system can roll back and act purely as a safety-net for parents’ efforts to claim maintenance themselves.

“The danger is that this creates scope for significant problems of assessment, collection and enforcement of maintenance, if it transpires that Henshaw has over-estimated lone parents’ ability to pursue child-support privately. History shows that the most effective systems were local, personal and flexible, as well as dogged in their pursuit of defaulting parents.”

In a companion paper examining 20th century attempts at reform, Dr Tanya Evans of the Centre for Contemporary British History argues that single parents have been persistently short-changed by successive governments. She shows how short-term political and financial concerns led governments to resist calls for a means-tested allowance for all lone parents, even though it could have proved more cost-effective than the CSA.

Dr Evans charts the fate of the 1974 Finer Committee, whose recommendation for a one-parent family benefit (means-tested and recouped from the absent parent), was rejected by the Labour government because of the estimated cost of £190 million a year. Given the sharp growth in lone-parents relying on benefits since then and now the estimated £1 billion cost of reforming the flawed CSA, Dr Evans argues an allowance would have saved public money in the long-term.

Dr Evans said:

“Many of the CSA’s problems have been caused by the state prioritising saving money, rather than providing for lone-parent families. If a one-parent family benefit had been implemented, state money would have been spent supporting families, rather than squandered on the failed implementation of the Child Support Agency.

“Recent history suggests that the state cannot entirely shift responsibility for the children of broken relationships onto fathers, because most are incapable of fulfilling it for financial or emotional reasons. Until the tensions surrounding paid and unpaid work for mothers of young children are resolved, it seems unlikely the state will be able to enforce the responsibilities of fathers to their families.”

Notes to editors

1. *The Child Support Agency and the Old Poor Law* by Dr Thomas Nutt is available at: <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/archive/policy-paper-47.html> Dr Nutt is a Research Fellow at Magdalene College, Cambridge, and a member of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure.
2. *Is it futile to try to get non-resident fathers to maintain their children?* By Dr Tanya Evans is available at: <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/archive/policy-paper-48.html> Dr Evans is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Contemporary British History, Institute of Historical Research, University of London.
3. *History & Policy* is an independent initiative working for better public policy through an understanding of history, see www.historyandpolicy.org for further details. *History & Policy* is funded through a charitable grant from the Philanthropic Collaborative.
4. The initiative was founded by historians in Cambridge and London and is based in the Centre for Contemporary British History, which is part of the Institute of Historical Research at the University of London.

To request an interview with a historian, please contact:

Mel Porter
History and Policy
Tel 020 7862 8768
Email mel.porter@sas.ac.uk