

The Westminster Debate for Fathers 2010

Last night, together with Only Dads' Bob Greig and DadsHouse's Billy McGranaghan, Researching Reform hosted the Westminster Debate for Fathers. Although the agenda had been set and posted both in the online brochure and press release, it became clear throughout the run up to the debate that the issues would extend far beyond the ambit of the debate's mandate and not only was this a welcome evolution but an important one, which made for an insightful discussion on the wide range of issues affecting single fathers in Britain today.

The debate was divided into two halves, with the first session focusing on targeting the problems single fathers face in relation to being able to access services and support to bolster single dads, much like the kind of support single mothers currently can access and the second half was dedicated towards problems solving, with both the panel and the audience discussing possible solutions that already existed and thinking on developing new ones too.

Each session started with a presentation from each panel member, followed by a question and answer session, where the guests were able to ask questions and share their thoughts with the panel. Our panel members were: Lord Listowel, John Hemming MP, Rob Williams of the Fatherhood Institute, Bob Greig of Only Dads and Billy McGranaghan of Dadshouse.

Bob Greig spoke first and gave a vivid and compelling illustration of the day to day obstacles both emotional and financial, single fathers faced whether through traumatic events taking place like divorce, separation or bereavement and how those events shaped and more of ten than not, dictated the routine of family life. Bob spoke about the emotional phases single fathers go through and the need for organisations to be able to spot the signs of stress and reach out to fathers, who are less likely to seek help than mothers. Bob also went on to explain that the government's reluctance to allow organisations that actively want to help to do so, was holding back valuable services that were not only budget friendly but also able to make a big difference to the welfare and general wellbeing of single dads. One example given was the government's reluctance to share information, whether by allowing organisations to signpost their services (both the government's and their own) and having a culture that was exclusive rather than inclusive, thereby shutting out potentially useful and progressive solutions to the problems single fathers face today.

Billy McGranaghan went on to talk about DadsHouse and the many benefits of having localised support services for fathers; Billy further explained that DadsHouse offers free cookery classes and football nights and hopes to be able to offer single fathers accommodation too, a much needed service during difficult periods in a family's life. Billy's emphasis was on offering a social, relaxed and organic environment where fathers can meet and talk and get involved in activities that boost self esteem and have an inspirational feel, without the overly laborious bureaucratic alternatives that currently leave single fathers disinterested in seeking out support.

Following on from Billy, The Fatherhood Institute's CEO Rob Williams re-iterated the notion that information relating to single fathers was limited, a point which I touched upon during the opening speech, and that poverty was the driving factor in destabilising families, regardless of structure. Rob spoke also about the need to break down stereotypes in a world where parenting styles have become more fluid and where fathers are more keen to take on active roles as carers, not just breadwinners; this ranged from challenging notions like the current period for paternity leave as

opposed to maternity leave, which is considerably longer and getting organisations to actively involve fathers by using inclusive language. One example he gave was removing the term playgroups for “Mums and toddlers” and replacing it with something that would include fathers and make them feel less isolated.

Lord Listowel spoke next and illustrated through the use of statistics that information relating to fathers was both ambiguous and a sign that the demographic needed to be further explored. With wide ranging statistics on the actual number of single fathers and research suggesting that this group was four times more likely to suffer from mental illness, Lord Listowel described the ever increasing need to support single fathers.

John Hemming MP, who has extensive experience working with family policy issues opened his presentation with the story of families fleeing overseas because family policy had failed them and noted the need to for government to rethink its ‘Top Down’ approach by favouring a more grass roots process, where those groups and organisations not at the heart of central government were able to get involved in policy decisions and have immediate contact with those politicians who set the agenda both in terms of budget and policy. John’s presentation focused on the need for government to embrace outside groups and be more open about its working practice.

Once the panel members had each given their presentations, the floor was opened to the audience, who were very keen to share their work with the panel and other guests. A representative from Res Publica described how she and her colleagues were launching a major research project in relation to single fathers, covering all aspects from stereotype issues to services needed and Rebecca, a researcher for Gingerbread also explained that Gingerbread would be collaborating with Res Publica to pull this research together. Rebecca was very interested in finding out just what it was that single fathers needed and to better understand how those services could be provided, given that it was already understood that fathers access services in a very different way to mothers in the main, which re-iterated Billy’s view on how fathers respond when thinking about looking for support.

Birgit Cunningham who founded Babies for Justice and is also a journalist, spoke too and asked for further information on single fathers who may have had difficulty obtaining financial support from relatively wealthier mothers and Greg Downing from Families Need Fathers and Pa-Pa was interested to know how the government proposed to deal with domestic violence issues as suffered by men.

As we were beginning to run out of time for the first session, the debate was closed for what was supposed to be a short break (5 minutes) but the room suddenly lit up with conversation, as guests poured over to the panel and began chatting avidly with panel members. Guests also spoke with animation amongst themselves and the short break turned into a buzzing twenty five minute mingle, with organisations all talking with one another and not a shout or accusatory finger in sight (well, maybe one, but he was very sweet with it)!

Once the second session was underway, the panel members began to talk about solutions. Bob Greig started off with some wonderful suggestions: easier access to government signposting, better communication between single fathers and government and a more inclusive approach to outside organisations who continually try to enter into dialog with government funded charities but who are consistently ignored. Billy hoped that the government would change their culture surrounding

progressive organisations by being more open minded about including them and supporting them and making funding faster and more efficient. Rob focused on breaking down perceptions of single fathers and getting the government to adapt to the changing environment both in the workplace and at home and that fathers' services need to be recognised by government, fully.

Lord Listowel wanted to see more information made available in relation to single fathers and welcomed the idea that they needed to be supported and acknowledged. John Hemming urged the government to rethink how it spends its budget on family policy and to focus on understanding how the court system and other processes affect families so that professionals working in the system can offer their support efficiently and compassionately.

The audience's solutions were equally enticing and they did indeed, spur on some fantastically proactive pledges from our panel: Kingsley Miller, a guest, suggested having more media centered attention, with things like programmes and talk shows for single fathers. He mentioned the BBC and getting in touch with them. Without hesitation, John Hemming suggested to him that he write to the BBC and if he received a negative response to let him know as he would then chase up the BBC himself. Another audience member thought it might be helpful to identify any single fathers currently working in government, in either The House of Lords or The House of Commons and see if they were interested in taking part in the ongoing debate and research relating to single fathers. Lord Listowel immediately offered to investigate on their behalf and assured the guest that he would try and locate any such candidates if they were present.

As envisaged, the debate incorporated issues that went far beyond the initial outline detailed but with hugely interesting consequences: a guest who was a supporter of Fathers for Justice spoke passionately about the need to address the issue of shared parenting and felt very strongly that this was the only way to solve the inequalities he perceived in the family justice system. A lady solicitor from Seddons also spoke and warned of the need to remember the welfare of the child as paramount consideration over and above any rights relating to parents as stated in The Children Act 1989 and that children were not commodities, to be divided at the will of warring parents.

With only two hours to discuss the many issues surrounding single fatherhood in Britain today, it was with some reluctance that the meeting was brought to close. As Chair, I thanked the audience for attending, as well as the panel and went on to give special thanks to John Hemming MP who made the use of the Committee Room in Westminster possible, as well as Martin Shapland, his colleague who was superbly efficient. Thanks also to Westminster Sound for all their fabulous technology and to Nexus, the IT company who put together our online brochure at no charge. I went on to thank Lord Listowel for his continued support of The Westminster Debates, who has as he himself explained, attended all of the events thus far and shared his invaluable insight on each and every occasion.

With the capacity to seat one hundred people and with the room almost full, it was a real privilege to be able to have this debate and as I explained in the opening speech, these debates are designed to bring immediate dialog with the government, so that families have a voice. I hope very much that such dialog can continue and with that in mind, I wish every father a happy Father's Day and a future where our government truly puts family first.