

1 **Polly Toynbee**

2 **Absent fathers doublethink**

3 original at:

4 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/jun/20/doublethink-on-absent-fathers>

5 Only the pen of George Orwell can do justice to the political style of David
6 Cameron. Here is Winston Smith in Nineteen Eighty-Four describing
7 doublethink: "To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete
8 truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously
9 two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and
10 believing in both of them, to use logic against logic."

11 Cameron's Father's Day admonition to men who refuse to pay for their
12 deserted children was the perfect example of his own brand of
13 doublethink. "It's high time runaway dads were stigmatised and the full
14 force of shame was heaped upon them. [...] Leaving single mothers, who
15 do a heroic job against all odds, to fend for themselves simply isn't
16 acceptable," wrote the Prime Minister. Fathers must support their children
17 "financially and emotionally", even if they are separated from them. Who
18 would disagree? All governments have tried hard to make absent fathers
19 pay. So far, so sensible.

20 But Cameron's words came only days after his own welfare reform bill
21 passed through the Commons with a section designed to do precisely the
22 opposite of what he said. The bill will make the Child Support Agency
23 charge mothers an upfront fee of £100 for pursuing won't-pay fathers,
24 and will then take a permanent commission of between 7% and 12% for
25 collecting the money.

26 The intention is to deter Cameron's "heroic" single parents, a high
27 proportion living below the poverty line, from chasing these fathers. The
28 government says it wants families to take responsibility for making
29 agreements without turning to the CSA.

30 This is part of the "big society" idea, to withdraw state provision from
31 sorting out family financial affairs. Apparently, Cameron's "force of
32 shame" is supposed to make society so "genuinely hostile" for non-paying
33 fathers that the state can stop pursuing them.

Questions

- 1) What is 'doublethink'?
- 2) Does the author of the text endorse the assertion that 'fathers must support their children financially and emotionally'?
- 3) Explain the sentence 'All governments have tried hard to make absent fathers pay' (line 18).
- 4) Explain 'the Commons' (line 21). The explanation of 'pass through' and 'bill' in the vocabulary section might help you.
- 5) What legislative steps has the British government taken as far as fathers' support for their separated kids is concerned? What is their practical impact?
- 6) What problem does the author have with David Cameron's Father's day admonition? Why does she think that it is a clear example of doublethink?
- 7) What does the government really want families to do?
- 8) What is the somewhat ironic reconciliation of the Cameron admonition and the provisions laid down by the welfare reform bill?
- 9) Do you think that the state should intervene into family life? When is such an intervention justified? Do you think that the state should, for instance, help mothers track down their ex-partners and force them to support their children?

Vocabulary

against all odds (line 15) – In spite of seeming very unlikely, despite a very small chance of a favourable outcome

bill (line 20) – a draft piece of legislation

passed through (line 21) – approve a bill, adopt a piece of legislation

commission (line 24) – a fee paid to an agent for transacting a piece of business or performing a service

You can find additional explanation and more examples to help you understand and use English words and phrases at <http://dictionary.reference.com>, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/> or <http://www.ldoceonline.com/>

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