



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CSA (CHILD SUPPORT AGENCY)

The beginnings of the Child Support Agency (CSA) was first proposed in a 1990 White Paper carrying the name aptly named Children Come First, the paper back then suggested the establishment of a formula-based calculation for assessment of child maintenance. This was in fact a new and huge break with the past, for previous to this all matters of child support had been a matter of family law, therefore had fallen under the jurisdiction of the family courts. Their administration had therefore been to the discretion of the individual court and was characteristically variable from case to case; there were as a result huge differences area to area. Under the 1990 white paper the calculation of child maintenance would in future be standardised and consistent, a one size fits all regime, whilst the administration of the calculation other words, the assessment its collection and the enforcement of child maintenance would be the responsibility of a bureaucratic newly formed agency of the Department of work and pensions: the CSA.

Reform of the child support system must have seemed magical to the then Conservative government lead by the "iron lady" in most part due to the fact that at the end of the 1980s. Lone parenthood accounted for one of the fastest growing areas of government spending. In 1980, there were 330,000 lone parents in receipt of Income Support (IS) and by 1989; this number had grown to 770,000. Public spending was inevitably massive, given the reliance of most lone parents on benefit. In 1989, 70 per cent of lone parents were in receipt of IS, and the cost to the benefit bill had risen from £1.3 billion in the year 1981-2 to £4.3 billion in the year 1990-1. This image of welfare dependent lone parents was further compounded by the seemingly failure of the existing legal and court systems to acquire a reasonable rate of child support. Maintenance orders were made with consent and at times privately between warring couples, without recourse to a court, or alternatively orders could be obtained through magistrates' and county courts. The Department of work and pensions (DWP) could if it chose to pursue a 'liable relative' for maintenance. In 1989, despite all this only 22 per cent of income support claimants were receiving any maintenance, and only 30 per cent of lone parents in total. Rates of maintenance were averaging around £18 per week for a single child.

Finding a means of reducing this welfare dependency had obvious attractions for a government that was ideologically committed to shrinking the state benefit bill. The White Paper's objective of ensuring that 'parents honour their responsibilities to their children whenever then can afford to do so' also struck a wider political and public chord. The 1980s had seen legal advances in the area of child welfare, with the 1989 Children's Act, for example, reaffirming the principle that the welfare of children was a top priority. The introduction of an agency dedicated to the enforcement of parental responsibility meant that the government could claim to be acting both in the best interests of the child, and the tax payer while its main concern was reducing the benefit bill. The child was in fact a smoke screen, and actually of little concern to the government. This was indicated by the fact in the early days the CSA were only interested in benefit cases, mothers who worked and were not on some sort of benefit were turned away and told to sort out arrangements privately. This situation was in place for three long years.

The long title of the 1991 Child Support Act was then 'to make provision for the assessment, collection and enforcement of periodical maintenance payable by certain parents with respect to children of theirs who are not in their care'. The CSA was brought into operation by April 1993. Most future cases of child maintenance fell under its responsibility and certainly all lone parents claiming income support or work top up benefits were obligated to make a claim for maintenance through the CSA, failure to agree resulted in penalties and reduction in benefits. The Agency could even take on responsibility for child support cases made prior to 1993. The basic operating principle was simple: child support obligations on non-resident parents would be calculated using a statutory, non-discretionary formula one glove fits all system. These maintenance payments would be assessed by caseworkers

employed by the CSA, thereby cutting out the variation and unpredictability of the discretionary court system. The CSA would also be made responsible for the collection and enforcement of maintenance assessed and owed by non-resident parents. More so when this maintenance was in favour of the secretary of state.

The seemingly simple principles of operating the new system formed a smoke screen to hide the radical and significant changes to the history of child support. The uncountable amount of mistakes coupled with the extremely troubled past of the CSA serves as overwhelming proof of this fact, the Agency's difficulties will be described elsewhere and at length. The CSA can be seen, however, to have failed in all the principal areas of its operation: the assessment, collection and enforcement of child support. Its rigid, non-discretionary formula for the assessment of child maintenance was almost immediately condemned as unfair and unjust towards non-resident parents (typically fathers) and legislation since 1993 has introduced a greater element of discretion and been amended many times. Meanwhile, the present backlog of unassessed cases reflects the failure of the CSA to clear applications and to collect maintenance, whilst the accumulation of debt (now in the order of £3.5 billion, much of it considered to be 'uncollectable') is evidence of the inability of the Agency to enforce its child-support orders. If the modern, bureaucratic welfare state has repeatedly failed to administer a simple and effective system of child support

THE BIRTH OF THE HATED CSA

The Child Support Agency (CSA) in its current form was born in 1993 there was no big fanfare and some claim it was sneaked through parliament following the Child Support Act, 1991. It was set up in such a way it reports directly to the Department of Work and Pensions (formerly the Department of Social Security). Its purpose and instruction were four-fold; to trace the non-resident parent (NRP), to assess how much s/he should pay in maintenance, to provide a collection service if required and to enforce payment if necessary the NRP fails to comply

By the time 1992 arrived it was clear that the issue of child support was becoming a prominent issue as it had developed into a huge expenditure burden for the government, which was frustrating the countries tax payers. During Thatcher's era the child support bill had trebled to approx £6.6 billion, and thus was a massive and increasing tax burden for the country. The number of children born to unmarried mothers had risen to 31% by 1990 (10% in 1970), the number of lone parents claiming benefits had risen to 70% by 1989 (37% in 1971), yet the numbers receiving from the non-resident partner had dropped to 23% in 1989 (50% in 1979). All these statistics placed pressure on the government which was growing massively. A way to overcome these problems the establishment of a new body or reform which had been proposed in a 1990 white paper. In response to taxpayer unrest the government rapidly put in place a replacement for the court based system of maintenance provision which would be implemented by the Department of work and pensions (DWP). It was named the CSA (child support agency). Sadly it had little to do with children

1991 saw the passing of the Child Support Act, Which was passed with very little opposition or discussion. This suggests that this was a huge error and led to many difficulties in the early years. There was no suggestion of a pilot program this meant employees was untrained and untried, and systems and technologies were not in place to support the activities of the organisation. However the agencies formation went ahead and it was born in 1993

Mrs Ros Hepplewhite was the first Chief Executive, appointed in 1993. She was recruited from the voluntary sector and had no previous experience of working in a public service environment. Around half of the 5000+ staff were recruited from the agencies predecessor the "liable relatives unit" of the DWP, and thus had worked under the inefficient and ineffective organisation that preceded the CSA. Other staff were recruited from the private sector and thus brought little public sector experience to the table.

The birth of the CSA brought many massive and unwelcome changes. One of the key arguments that support this negative outlook on the CSA was that the CSA had been formed as a tax alleviating measure rather than attempt to rid the country of child poverty. This view was supported in the early days' for the first few years of operation only benefit claimant mothers could use the agency, working mothers were turned away This raises questions about the exact purpose of the creation of the new agency. Does it support children at all?

January 1995 saw the publishing of a government White Paper promising changes to the CSA. This in due course occurred with the introduction of the Child Support Act 1995. This was partly prompted by a report from the Select Committee on Social Security (SSC) in the years 1993-4. In their first report on the CSA they found there were flaws at both policy and operational levels, as they saw targets of relieving the tax burden as highly unrealistic. They also criticised the agencies seeming preoccupation with middle class NRPs as a way of, maximising the maintenance yield. The Second Report published by the same body ended up in compromise, as the chair of the SSC had been

outvoted in proposing radical changes to CSA. A more conservative approach was 'agreed'. Measures, such as provisions for relatively greater flexibility, were put in place to dispel the growing press coverage reporting that the CSA was incompetent and unable to fulfil its objectives. However despite the various bills the Agency remained inept. It appears that the Conservative Party were considering changes up to the 1997 general election, however their imminent expulsion from government meant that the Labour Party entered office and immediately started the reform process, Ms Hepplewhite was promptly 'replaced' by Ann Chant as the new CEO of the CSA. The new minister put in place to oversee the change was Baroness Hollis.

Green and White Papers followed in years 1998 and 1999 respectively unfortunately becoming less radical in development, and more towards a tool of welfare relief. Diverting its attention in the process away from the interests of the children the agency was meant to support. This reform process culminated in the publishing of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act in early 2000. June 2001 saw the creation of a new Department that the CSA had to report to; The Department of Work and Pensions. This department was a merger between the former departments of Social Security and Education and Employment. Alistair Darling became the Secretary of State for the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) from June 2001 to May 2002, having previously been the DWP Predecessor, the Secretary of State for Social Security between July 1998 and June 2001. The new system was set to be introduced by the end of 2003, this change was implemented in March 2003 The application of this act came in to place slowly with the new formula for support assessments

So what went wrong? Early indications pointed to the system being a success, but this was short lived. Millions of families already on original assessments were denied the right to move to the simpler version, this was extremely unfair. The Labour government and its ministers have given various excuses for this failure (all to date discredited) examples being

- A) The computer/software is unable to cope~ why is it then both systems are working well on a broken computer? A computer that can cope with two systems would surely be more efficient with one
- B) The human rights act is none compatible with a move~ what about the human rights of the non resident parents paying far too much or the parent with care not getting their £10 top up. Do their human rights not matter?

The CSA has seen many changes to its management, both internally within its own corridors and externally in the DWP. None of these changes have made it any fairer or more efficient. It has always found problems with collecting child support from non-compliant NRPs whilst finding its self used as a weapon for a bitter PWC. Both are unacceptable, for various, but obvious reasons.

The whole system was seen as bias from the beginning, but this was to become so obvious it hurt on the introduction of then Chancellor Gordon Brown's tax credit system. There is a separate section explaining why tax credit and child support are simply contradictions of one another, so in this part we have just one question..... Why is tax credit protected as a benefit for a PWC family, but unprotected and subject to being used as income in a NRP family? Such bias is never ever going to work, and really never should. If it's a benefit it's a benefit..... An income an income, but there needs to be equality both ways. Tax credit is as previously mentioned dealt with more in-depth in another section, it was used here simply to highlight the bias of the agency and its legislations.

Tony Blair the then prime minister stood up in the house of parliament in 2006 and said, and we quote "the CSA (child support agency) is unfit for purpose". Yes Tony mate we agree, but why did it take you more than a decade to realise it, or were you like the rest of your government, and governments before you, burying your head in the sand? And while we are in a questioning mood, why is it that more than five years after introducing the new and simpler system, we still have 800,000 non resident parents on the unwanted pre 2003 rules? Is that the workings of a fair and balanced government? In 2005 the CSA was again to replace its CEO, the top job given to Stephen Geraghty, who has subsequently been named commissioner of the next generation CSA aptly named child maintenance and enforcement commission(C-mec), is it really a new horizon? Watch this space. DWP also has a new minister James Plaskitt, not the first to try and run this office and certainly not the last..... And James just thought we would let you in on a little secret us and our members have. YOU HAVE NO IDEA.

This leads us to 2007 Gordon Brown is our new Prime Minister, and our country this great country is on the brink of bankruptcy. So does it surprise anyone that the poor old non resident parent is a target again? Mid 2007 the CSA made an announcement of a new internal improvement plan, bet you can guess what's coming by now.....

All arrears on any account owed by any non resident parent must be paid in two years, remember 84% of arrears were caused by CSA delays and maladministration, but that matters not. If the NRP is

employed then 40% of his income will be taken from his wage packet whether he is compliant or not, to be honest the compliant NRPs are more likely to be affected, even those with ongoing and fully paid agreements in place. If 40% will not pay the full amount in 24 months then bailiffs will be instructed and parallel action will be taken. Now we are either very naive, or missing something, but who can afford to lose 40% of their income and not fall into poverty? Let me tell you most NRP have moved onto new lives and have families to keep and mortgages to pay. This is a disgusting way to treat our citizens, and more to the point our children!!!!

FACT ~ this government run agency is placing second and subsequent families including any CHILDREN into poverty. Be honest with yourself could you manage if 40% of your Nett income was taken away.

FACT~ this government run agency is causing family homes to be repossessed, mortgages, rent and council tax are less important than child support, I would agree, but think about it 40%

FACT~ this government run agencies are causing family breakdown on a daily basis, ask yourself if your husband was a parent paying 40% of his income and your tax credit would you stay

FACT~ this government does not care about working PWC, check out our forums working Parents with care are all but ignored.

FACT~ this government agency makes DISABLED CHILDREN pay towards their step-siblings child support by taking money from disability elements of tax credit, nobody should benefit from a Childs disability this is vile, and the more disabled the child is the more the first family gains.....VILE..... VILE.....