

**Minutes for the Equal Parenting Alliance AGM,
Marple Methodist Church, 11.00am, Saturday 10 March 2007.**

MINUTES

1. COFFEE AND INTRODUCTION

Time was taken prior to the beginning of the AGM to allow those present to meet the Party Committee and talk informally with them, and each other, and to allow the airing of any questions or concerns which could then be dealt with during the AGM.

This session proved valuable and allowed those who did not know each other to feel more comfortable within the AGM itself.

Phil gave the health and safety information regarding the building and then Steve proceeded to introduce the Committee members and the day's Agenda.

2. PARTY ACTIVITIES AND PROGRESS – PHIL ELSE

Phil gave those present an overview of what we have done in the past year and our plans for the future.

Despite a fairly low profile until now, the EPA Committee have been working quietly in the background to build the Party's structure and foundations to help it to achieve its aims.

This has included building up contacts within the equal parenting movement, and has included us advertising our aims and activities wherever possible on other group's websites and forums and requesting suggestions and advice from others within the movement. Some groups have been hostile to this but we have agreed to continue with this practice whilst concentrating on building a policy base to be ready in time for our first elections, which will be the Scottish MSP Elections on 3 May 2007.

The EPA do not have a short term plan since many of those already affected by the inadequacies of the Family Law systems in the UK may not benefit from changes in the Law. We are working for those new cases which will come before the Family Courts and for the future of our children, especially those who have already had their lives destroyed by the current system.

Media Exposure

Steve took part in a Radio 5 broadcast on Mother's Day last year on the Father's Rights Movement. This led directly to invitations to take part in a formal debate on 'This House Supports The Father's Rights Movement at Durham University' (a debate which was won by arguments from Steve and Mike Kelly of RFFJ who found themselves arguing against a debating professor and the European debating champion of 2005).

Ray Barry has been asked to comment on issues for the politics.co.uk website and the EPA has now been officially upgraded to Opinion Formers on the site.

The Party has adopted a policy of issuing press releases on family law/parenting issues onto the politics.co.uk website as well as sending them out to newspapers via the media megaphone. This is helping to raise the Party's profile and some of our statements and comments have appeared in national newspapers.

Presentations

In order to raise the Party's profile and to raise awareness of the current family law system and the EPA's aims, Phil has made presentations to both the Methodist Church and the United Equal Parenting Conference, 2006 which hoped to form a solid front for the equal parenting/fathers rights movement.

Further presentations are to take place this year, and all faith groups, Probus and the Town's Women's Guilds will be approached first in this regard.

The EPA are also scheduled to speak at this years United Equal parenting Conference on 16/17 June 2007.

We also hope to make a presentation DVD for showing at regional activities.

Political Platform

The EPA are currently building towards election campaigns, firstly the Scottish MSP elections, followed if possible by fighting a by-election towards the end of this year, followed by the General Election. This will help us to gain valuable election experience prior to the General Election.

We also hope to produce an election pack prior to the General election to help others who may wish to stand under the EPA umbrella run their own campaigns more efficiently. We will also offer website and ground support for these campaigns.

Steve has spoken at a Labour Party Fringe Meeting at the Labour Party Conference in Manchester on 26 September 2006. Mike Kelly of RFFJ was also speaking at the event and it should be noted that the Labour Party appeared so disinterested in the event on equal parenting that no Labour MP's were in attendance.

Ray Barry also attended the European Parliament in on a fact finding mission and discovered that the vast majority of laws coming onto the statute book are in fact European directives deriving from laws produced by the EC's unelected commissioners (including the British Commissioner, Peter Mandelson)

Steve pre-released a Family Law Survey onto the website which we hope will provide valuable research results on the experiences those who have accessed the Family Law system. The survey is currently being updated

and we hope it will expand to incorporate a section for those who have been affected by the Family Law system as children. It is our intention to use the research information to back the need for a change in the current family law system in the UK.

Some of the Committee will be interviewed by Professor Richard Collier of Newcastle University for his forthcoming book on Father's Rights and they will take the opportunity to discuss the Family Law Survey with him in order to gain his advice and ideas on it and to ascertain how we can get the survey research undertaken by a university.

The EPA have also produced consultation responses for the DCA's proposals for 'Openness in the Family Courts, and also for the proposed changes to CSA maintenance payments.

The committee will continue to promote the EPA within political circles and within the equal parenting movement.

3. WHAT SORT OF POLICIES SHOULD THE EPA PURSUE?

Paul Rubert presented this section of the Agenda and highlighted that the current list of Policies which will be put forward for adoption by the Party membership can be found on the EPA website. The core principle for these policies is that there should be a legal presumption of reasonable parenting time and the remainder of the policies support this principle. These policies are, we believe uncontroversial and have been unanimously agreed for presentation to the AGM by the committee. Voting results on all these policies will be found at the end of these Minutes.

Listening to the Voice of the Child

Paul raised the issue of the Listening to the Voice of the Child, upon which there is not as yet committee agreement. The Committee would like to bring this issue before the membership for their opinions on whether it should be adopted as a policy, whether it should not be adopted as a policy or whether we should put forward the Party's view on the issue but not list it as a policy.

In summary Paul stated that children are not asked prior to separation if they wish to live with both parents and if not who would they like to live with and would they like to see the other parent at all, and have overnight contact, so why should they be forced to make such choices after separation.

Paul said that in view of recent moves in child-welfare and family law circles to give weight to the views of children, often with consequences detrimental to relationships between children and their non-resident parents, it was important for the EPA to adopt a policy on this issue. He said that there are 2 strong reasons why that policy should be, that the views of the child will not influence the court. First, if the courts let it be known that they will be so influenced, then they give an incentive to the resident parents, which those parents would otherwise not have, to brainwash and in effect emotionally abuse their own children against the non-resident parent. Secondly, if the courts listen to a child who says

that he never wants to see his non-resident parent, but ignore his wishes if he runs away from his resident parent's home (to live rough, for example), then they discriminate between the two parents in exact contradiction to the EPA's fundamental policy that the two parents are equally important to the child. Since nobody would suggest that children should be allowed to run away from home, then neither should children be asked to decide whether they are to see their non-resident parent.

In discussion, the following points were made by Richard B, by Tracey W, by Wendy T. and others:

Do children fully understand the choices they are forced to make regarding contact, are they pressurised into their choices by one of their parents, directly or indirectly, is one parent alienating them against the other, are they reacting from pressure, stress, hurt or anger or revenge all of which may be temporary normal feelings that would calm given time but can not be altered once stated to a psychologist or Cafcass officer? Is any recognition of the damaging aspect of such choices to the mental health of these children assessed or even considered by psychologists or judges when determining the 'best interests of the child'? Who helps the child with their guilt over such choices and is that guilt and pain acknowledged by the 'winning' parent?

Do so called experts realise how let down, stressed or worried a child may be when they write the child's confidences into their report, or that the child is being denied its right to a childhood when it is forced into such a choice. Furthermore, do they realise the long term damage that their demands for a child to make such a decision cause that child?

The overriding principle should be that a child's best interests are served when they are parented by both parents, unless there is a good reason that this should not be. Paul suggested that the proposed policy could be expressed by simply saying that the stated views of a child will not alone count as a good reason to determine contact with a non-resident parent.

It was decided that members should have time to think about the issue and discuss it during the policy adoption debate at the end of the session.

4. LUNCH

Lunch was provided by the committee at their own expense and provided a further opportunity for informal discussion between all those present which again ensured that all present were comfortable during the AGM and felt able to air their views.

5. SCOTTISH ELECTIONS

Original plans for the EPA were to fight their first by-election in England this spring, and then a second at some time towards the end of the year in order that we could gain experience of elections prior to the General Election. We had decided not to campaign in Glasgow because of the legal system differences between England and Scotland. however, timing of by-elections are unpredictable so when Gary Strachan contacted us regarding his plans to stand in the Scottish elections in his local Caithness,

Sutherland and Easter Ross constituency, we decided to back him. We also decided to stand a second candidate in the elections, in a constituency closer to Glasgow. Ray Barry, Media Spokesman for the EPA will stand in this seat.

2 constituencies are the frontrunners in this choice. First is the Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley seat of Justice Minister, Cathy Jamieson and second is the Paisley South seat of, former Deputy Justice Minister and current education Minister Hugh Henry.

After discussion on the positive and negative aspect of each seat a decision was made to stand against Cathy Jamieson providing members of Grandparents Apart are not standing in the constituency.

Wendy Turner will contact Jimmy Deuchars of Grandparents apart to check this with him.

CAMPAIGN

£1400 will be required to cover the deposit and leaflet costs and to provide Gary Strachan with a donation towards his campaign. A request for assistance is to be made on our website and other forums. Wendy Turner will contact businesses, eg SC Johnson, to request donations, either financial or raffle prizes etc for fund-raising.

A Scottish agent will be preferable for the campaign. Phil will contact the constituency member Davie Clark to have an informal chat with him and see if he would be suitable and willing to be an agent. Once the seat is confirmed committee to get in touch with Scottish contacts for Agent suggestions.

The EPA will get radio, tv and newspaper interviews where possible, Ray and Steve will travel up for these interviews, along with party members where possible, and leaflet the constituency whilst up there.

Volunteers are to be asked to phone local radio stations during the election to promote the EPA.

If enough volunteers can be found to help with leafleting this could be extended to cover weekends during the campaign. Accommodation is available. Mike Wiffen and Mike McDonagh volunteered to help with this.

Work to begin on designing an A5 double sided leaflet as soon as possible. A draft must be available for Royal Mail approval by 13 April at the latest. A gender neutral campaign is to be run, but we must be ready to counter any claims that we are anti-feminist.

Keith Halliwell has a friend who may be able to help us with printing.

A separate handout is to be designed for leafleting purposes. We can print this out ourselves.

Political Parties are entitled to the use of school halls etc for free during the 4 weeks prior to the election date. Depending upon the number of volunteers and response to our standing this is something to consider.

4. TREASURERS REPORT

Current net worth is £98.27, however many of the Party's start up expenses have not been taken out of the accounts.

At least £1400 is required for the election campaign.

Membership fees were dropped from the original £20 to £5 in order to gain more members but this has made no significant difference to membership figures. It is hoped that this situation will change with the publicity generated by the election campaign.

5. POLICY VOTING

As per the EPA constituency members were asked to formally vote on whether to adopt the Parties Policies as advertised on our website and shown on the EPA Policy Summary Document they were given at the beginning of the meeting. Only Party members at the meeting were allowed to vote and non-members were offered the opportunity to join. Paul Turner, Keith Halliwell and Raymond Cuttill all chose to join the Party and were then able to join in the voting procedure.

Policy discussion was held and some policies were as a result of improved suggestions being made. The finalised policies and voting results are shown below.

1. Legal Presumption of Reasonable Parenting Time

We call for a legal presumption of reasonable parenting time for children and both parents, in the event of parental separation.

Agreed Unanimously.

2. Shared Residence should be 'Normal'

A Shared Residence arrangement should be the normal arrangement when there are two fit, capable parents; not the rare exception it is now.

Agreed Unanimously.

3. Good Reason Principle

All contact and parenting time arrangements will be governed by the *Good Reason Principle*: they will apply in ALL cases where there is no *good reason* to do otherwise.

Agreed Unanimously.

4. Introduction of Early Interventions Pilot Project

We call for the immediate introduction of the Early Interventions Pilot Project, to replace the failed and discredited Family Resolutions Project

Agreed Unanimously.

5. Compulsory Mediation

Mediation is to be compulsory for both parents after separation and before entering into the court system. Any parent refusing to attend may be so

ordered by the court and on subsequent refusal will be charged with contempt of court.

Agreed Unanimously

6. Open Family Courts

All Family Court cases involving children are to be transparent, open and accountable, and all reporting is to be anonymised to protect children from publicity.

Agreed Unanimously.

7. Enforcement of Court Orders

Court orders for contact, parenting time and shared or joint residence, must be enforced by the courts unless there is good reason to do otherwise.

Breach of Contact Orders is to be a criminal offence.

Agreed Unanimously.

8. Allegations in Family Courts Made Under Oath

All allegations of domestic violence or child abuse made by one party against the other during a child contact case, should be made under oath, and dealt with quickly by a criminal court capable of delivering a clear verdict.

Agreed Unanimously

9. Treat Maliciously False Allegations as Perjury

Those making maliciously false allegations should face the charge of perjury. All maliciously false allegations made in family court should be prosecuted in a criminal court.

Agreed unanimously

10. Recognition of Parental Alienation

Any Individual, or organisation, deliberately harming a child's relationship with either parent will be treated as being guilty of the emotional and psychological abuse of the child. Furthermore, Parental Alienation of the Child will be recognised as emotional abuse of the Child.

Agreed Unanimously

11. Automatic Parental Responsibility for Both Parents

All fathers, regardless of their marital status, or whether they are named on the birth certificate of their natural child, are to be given parental responsibility. Where paternity is in doubt, a DNA test must be used to decide the issue.

Agreed Unanimously

12. Parental Responsibility to have Legal Backing

All parents are to be treated equally in Law, and to have full access to all records pertaining to their child until the age of 18.

All parents are to have full recognition and involvement in their child's school and educational activities, and medical welfare, regardless of their residence status.

Agreed Unanimously

13. Grandparents given Improved Rights

All family members should have a legal right to apply for contact with the child.

Agreed Unanimously

Two Further policies were unanimously agreed in principle but the wording has as yet to be finalised.

14. All parties involved in the Family Law Proceedings, including the Judge, Barristers and lawyers, are to sign a declaration of interests which will be used in criminal proceedings if falsely completed.
15. Children not to be consulted regarding which parent they wish to live with or what contact they wish to have with the other parent.

6. ELECTION OF COMMITTEE

Prior to the AGM Daryl Irwin stepped down from his position as Party Chairman, he does however still remain a member of the EPA.

Our thanks to Daryl for all he has done in helping to set up the Party and bring it to where it is today.

The remainder of the committee agreed to stand for re-election by the Party Members in their current positions.

Mike McDonagh proposed that the existing Committee be re-elected. Mike Wiffen seconded the proposal which was carried unanimously.

Steve then proposed that Wendy Turner be co-opted onto the committee into an as yet to be decided role. Phil Else seconded the proposal and it was carried unanimously.

7. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

UNITED EQUAL PARENTING CONFERENCE

Raymond Cuttill announced that the second United Equal Parenting Conference would be held in Reading on the weekend of the 16 and 17 June. This year's theme will be 'The Best Interests of The Child.'

The EPA have once again been invited to speak at the conference.

To get onto the mailing list email: join@unitedconference.com

Steve is to add a link to the Conference site once we have the website details.

TOWN'S WOMEN'S GUILD

Wendy has some links with the Town's Women's Guilds and would like to continue these links on behalf of the EPA. These links may allow us to give the presentations we have hoped to make to the Town's Women's Guild.

DOCTOR LOWENSTEIN

Wendy is to write an official review on behalf of the EPA for Dr Lowenstein's book on Parental Alienation.

Steve is to put a link to Dr Lowenstein's website on the EPA website.

COMMUNITY CARE CONFERENCE 29 MARCH 2007

Anthony Douglas and Women's Aid will be attending the conference on making contact work and what is safe contact. Oliver Cyriax may be speaking at the event.

Wendy to attend the conference on behalf of the EPA and put forward the service user's views.

GENERAL ELECTION

Wendy is to stand for the EPA in the Crawley constituency.

MEETING ENDED 17.10 PM