

Atkin, Margaret (REPS)

Subject: FCA Child Custody Inquiry - postal details for your submission?

House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Family and Community Affairs

Submission No: **1610**

Date Received: **5-8-03**

Secretary:

Dear Margaret Atkin,

I do apologise -

Julian Fitzgerald
56 Louis Street
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United Kingdom
tel: [REDACTED]
email: [REDACTED]

It was suggested that I contribute to your inquiry by members of the Shared Parenting Council of Australia. I have made two submissions to the Inquiry, one being the Langeac Declaration, an internationally applicable family rights declaration drawn up by a conference of activists from around the globe, in France, 1999. The other submission comprising a series of discussion articles in response to recent Australian newspaper coverage of the House of Representatives Inquiry into Shared Parenting.

By way of background, I stood as Equal Parenting Campaign candidate in the Leeds Central parliamentary by-election on 9th June 1999, helping to create the equal parenting movement in the UK. I now participate actively as a writer and thinker on a number of email groups for family rights activists who are campaigning for changes to laws governing children's access to both parents. I have not been allowed to see my own daughter for six years now under English family law.

Your sincerely,

Julian Fitzgerald

-----Original Message-----

From: Atkin, Margaret (REPS) [mailto:Margaret.Atkin.Reps@aph.gov.au]

Sent: 17 October 2003 08:43

To: fried@aesops.force9.co.uk

Subject: FCA Child Custody Inquiry - postal details for your submission?

Importance: High

Dear Sir/Madam

Thank you for your email of 5 August in relation to the abovementioned inquiry. In order for the committee to consider accepting your information as a submission to the inquiry, we require a postal address please? Shall look forward to hearing from you shortly. Thank you.

Margaret Atkin
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Child Custody Inquiry
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Atkin, Margaret (REPS)

From: fried [REDACTED]
Sent: Tuesday, 5 August 2003 9:40 PM
To: Committee, FCA (REPS)
Subject: Submission for Inquiry Into Child Custody Arrangements in the Event of Family Separation

Dear Sir / Madam,

I wish to submit the following and attached information for the Inquiry Into Child Custody Arrangements in the Event of Family Separation. The information and attachments are comprised of

1. a short introduction (below);
2. the Declaration of Langeac (pasted below);
3. the report of the Irish delegates attending the conference (attached pdf).

Declaration of Langeac

*drafted and signed at an international conference in Langeac, Auvergne, France, July 1999
(see below)*

web address for further information: <http://81.96.84.85/webpub/fr/main/en/faro/farfram2.htm>

It may be that a rebuttable presumptive equal custody law in Australia could use the concept of a "bill of family rights" like the Langeac Declaration, as a checklist for court and official interventions.

One feels that taking the bull by the horns in this way is what a radical and far-sighted government should be doing. The Langeac Declaration, by its structure of creating an interface between the presumption of equal shared parenting, and a reduced 10-point series of contextual circumstances within which this presumption has to be determined, achieves more than many books-worth of complex legal argument. A similar mechanism, the "welfare checklist" is in operation, as guidance to judges, under the 1989 UK Children's Act.

The distinguishing feature of the Langeac Declaration is that because of the depth of knowledge applied to it over a week of sustained debate, it actually covers with great discernment all the critical issues which may arise, very succinctly, including the issues of judicial discretion, distinguishing between criminal, civil and family law, child abduction, child abuse, parental agency in children's interests, respect for the individual, biological parenthood and extended family rights, life-work balance, mediation and financial issues.

The signatories represent a growing number of national parents' groups from all over the world.

It's short and still comprehensive and relatively well-drafted - the drafting group involved senior academics and civil servants from a number of different countries. It was created by a process of consensus and approval from people on the right and the left, from poor and rich countries, atheists and religionists, pro- and anti-marriage advocates, feminists and social conservatives.

It has formed the basis for extensive discussions and follow-up conferences in Holland, so is well-known there - and in Belgium. It has also formed the basis for discussion of pro-shared parenting law - again at the highest political level - in Chile and in Ireland.

It has been used and referred to in a number of other countries for the same purpose, and is translated into German, French, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese. Again, if you do a google search, you can follow up these references and read stories about how it has been used or republished.

Yours sincerely,

Julian Fitzgerald

18/10/2003

Julian Fitzgerald
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**The Langeac "Equal Parenting" Summer School
25-31 July 1999**

Declaration of LANGEAC

Principles

- 1. Fathers and mothers should be accorded equal status in a child's life, and consequently should have equal rights and equal responsibilities.**
- 2. Where the parents cannot agree, the children should spend equal time living with each parent.**
- 3. Parenthood must be based only on the child-parent relationship, not that between parents. Children have the right to know both parents and vice versa.**

1. The interests of the child

- a) The interests of the child will not be viewed as a pre-defined and separate entity from that of parents and family or as something to be defined by the public authorities or professionals. Parents will act as the medium for interpreting the interests of their children except in extreme cases of individual abuse or parental incapacity.**
- b) The public authorities and third parties can and should be encouraged to support families and individual family members when they need help and if necessary proactively. However in no case except that of severe abuse should they have the right to intervene where parents do not wish this.**
- c) The child has the right to communicate with his or her parents whatever the situation.**
- d) Biological parenthood should be established at birth by way of DNA testing. For any DNA test all material evidence and records should be destroyed immediately the conclusion of parenthood (or non-parenthood) is reached.**

2. Elective contracts between parents

- a) Parents will be able to sign legally valid contracts which may**

vary their individual rights in regard to their children, eg: in the case of a family split they may agree to make a non-equal division of time and salaries if both so wish, or incorporate clauses involving spousal maintenance. The governments bureaucracies involved in these areas are charged with creating suitable blank contracts and formulae in order to simplify the choices involved and the cost of such procedures.

b) Parents will have access to advice and structured agreements (contracts) which will in all cases, be it via mediation or judicial intervention, stand as valid instruments permitting the formalisation of such methods as division of residential time, etc.

3. Respect for the individual freedom of action of each parent

a)... will not be modified, except by the minimum requirements of parental cooperation.

b) Geographical dislocation: where one or both parents wishes to move somewhere far away, leading to potential problems of contact, transport costs and disruption to children, may require outside authorities to make decisions affecting the quantities of time spent with each parent. This is because the free adult choice of where to live may be in conflict with the compromises necessary to ensure parental residence. Decisions thus arrived at must take into account all factors, including the need to find a job by moving for instance, and the need to respect adult choices and decisions. Assumptions based on the dogma of stable residence should not be made.

4. Adoptive parents, extended family and significant others

Children should have the right of access to and information from members of the extended family on both sides and vice versa. The residential parent at any given time should have the right of final decision over children's contact with other parties excepting extended family, parents and adoptive parents. The child retains the right to know both natural parents, of both receiving and sending communications to them, with proof that this has arrived.

5. The Politico-legal Context

a) The politico-legal context within which family and gender issues are decided must be clear and fair between the sexes, with neither positive or negative discrimination. Relationships between men, women and children will be treated in such a way as to preclude the development of group competition and polarity between them. There should be no presumption that one

group's needs override the interests of others.

b) The interests of the child are defined by parents, together. In the case of separation they are to be defined by each parent in their residential time with the child. Only in the case where clear abuse against the child is established may other parties or public bodies acquire the right to override parental decisions in this respect in all other cases, their decision-making power should be limited to the ability to offer help and support to families in need.

6. Equality at work

a) Both sexes should have equal right to parental leave from work.

b) Work structures should be planned so that both parents are able to participate as fully as possible in the life of their children.

c) This indisputably requires the restructuring of employment so that in many ways it reflects the work patterns of primary and secondary school teachers. This proposal is made, of course, within the context of a global reduction in the requirements for workers and in the light of general awareness of the need to enrich the emotional and functional links between the generations.

7. Mediation, Judicial Discretion and Involvement of Professional Third Parties

a) Mediated cooperation through professional third parties may be preferable where children's welfare requires it. Residence should not be dependent on the assessment by professionals of parental cooperation or non-cooperation.

b) Certain decisions require joint consent. Structures should be put in place to enable this, whether through third parties or directly. Examples of such decisions: vaccinations (medical care), choice of school, residence timetables, etc.

c) Only in the case that parents are not able to arrive at a mutual agreement will the intervention of mediators in the first instance and of the court as a final resort become necessary.

d) In cases where parents simply do not or cannot reach agreement, either directly or through mediation, judges will have to make the decisions for them. This does not imply that these outside authorities have the right to decide the quantities of parental time, but only the distribution of the quantities of time agreed by both parents or the default of 50 / 50.

e) Justice should not only be done but be seen to be done. In camera proceedings should be avoided wherever possible. Where it is deemed necessary or desirable to protect the identity / ies of the parties, records of the proceedings and justification for the decision should be made publicly available. In order to achieve this, proper stenographed records of all proceedings must be kept.

f) Mediation should be available before, during and after divorce / separation. Mediation must be independent from the courts. It must always be a free public service, optional and gender neutral. Courts should respect mediation agreements and mediation intervention.

8. Finances

a) If parents are financially capable, each parent is to be held financially responsible for half the costs of childcare. This cost may be pre-determined on the basis of minimum child maintenance and childcare costs, which will be the responsibility of parents in the first instance, and of the state or other responsible bodies where parents do not or cannot fulfil their obligations.

b) Any other agreements or contracts between the parents regarding financial maintenance and other childcare issues may be freely entered into by mutual accord between both parents. That is to say, both parents can mutually sign legally valid contracts varying their basic rights, for example, by giving more or less rights to money or residential time to one or the other parent.

9. Child abuse

- i) cruelty;**
- ii) negligence;**
- iii) violence;**
- iv) sexual abuse**

should be dealt with under the relevant criminal law, not the laws of residence and equal parenthood. The presumption of innocence until proven guilty should apply in all cases except those at b) below.

a) Evaluation of child abuse should be without prejudice. The four types of abuse will have no order of priority in judicial decisions. Unless accusations are of such gravity that they affect the immediate safety of the child, no decision to suspend residence with either parent should be made.

b) Where accusations exist and residence has been suspended, immediate provisional investigation to assess dangers of residence should take place, with a maximum of a two weeks' delay permitted before 50 / 50 or other agreed double residence

is restored. Separation should not be used as an opportunity for revising the residence rights to one of the parents.

c) False accusations or perjury should be severely dealt with under the criminal law.

d) As parental alienation damages the child-parent relationship, it is detrimental to the best interests of the child, and should be viewed as a form of child abuse. Actions by state authorities which damage child-parent relationships should also be viewed as a form of child abuse and carry corresponding penalties.

10. Cases which do not concern equal parenthood

EP does not directly address cases where one or both parents refuse or cannot take up their parental responsibilities in respect of their children, to care for and maintain them. It only addresses those cases where both parents want to look after and be responsible for both of their children. Within EP it is recognised that to force a parent to look after their child physically when they state they do not wish to is probably inadvisable. However, given that financial obligations to care for the child exist, the need to provide care for the child are available, either through the parents or the state. Equally, child abuse is under EP, regarded as a distinct and separate question.

Definitions

Parents

... are defined as the biological parents or in the case of severe abuse by biological parents or where children are orphaned, the adoptive parents.

Child

... is taken to mean a human being from birth to the age of emancipation or majority, whichever is the lower.

Family

...is a child and it's biological or adoptive parents.

Extended Family

... are the blood relatives of the child or his or her adoptive parents.

Clarification:

Each part of this declaration is integral to the whole and cannot be applied outside the context of the other clauses.

Signed on Friday 30 July 1999 by:

Name	email, url, phone, fax	Country	Group
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PARENTAL EQUALITY

Report of the International Conference on Shared Parenting held in Langeac, France from 25th to 30th July 1999.

INTRODUCTION

Four delegates from Parental Equality attended the International conference on shared parenting, which was held in Langeac in southern France. The conference consisted of intensive discussions, a series of workshops, presentations from groups and individuals, all related to shared parenting, as well as a variety of social activities. Parental Equality delegates found the conference to be educational and informative and helped to establish and strengthen contacts with similar organisations in other countries. Various issues of concern common to most or all countries were identified and a series of measures to promote shared parenting were agreed. Structures have now been established which will enable comparisons to be made between various States and facilitate co-operation between groups promoting shared parenting on an international basis.

Delegates from all countries gave presentations on family policies, laws and practices in their respective countries and the manner in which these affect the promotion of shared parenting and a report on the activities of parents groups. For comparative purposes all delegates were asked to deal with five topics in their presentations and respond to the following five direct questions;

QUESTIONS:

1. What is the most likely outcome of separation in your country – joint custody or sole custody?
2. Is there any difference in the status and treatment of married and unmarried fathers?
3. Are domestic violence laws and sex abuse allegations used as a tactic against fathers?
4. Is parental alienation syndrome (PAS) commonly used against fathers?
5. Do you have family courts or tribunals dealing exclusively with family law?

The following is a synopsis of the answers;

1. What is the most likely outcome of separation in your country – joint custody or sole custody?

Sole custody is the norm in all countries with a strong bias in favour of mothers. While in all but one country the legislation is worded in gender-neutral terms there is a gender bias in practice. Chile is the exception as far as gender neutral legislation is concerned - Chilean law states that mothers must get custody. Legislation introduced in Holland in 1978 gives preference to joint custody. However, despite this, sole custody is still awarded to mothers in most cases. The Dutch delegates said that this was due in part to the Judiciary emphasising their independence of the legislature. Difficulties in retaining joint custody were similar in most countries. Many delegates expressed the view that for a man to get joint custody he must prove that the mother is totally dysfunctional as a parent. Fathers in some States in the USA and in Scandinavian countries appear to have less difficulty in retaining joint custody.

2. Is there any difference in the status and treatment of married and unmarried fathers?

The majority of delegates said that unmarried fathers had greater difficulties than married fathers in terms of their parental status and their parental roles. As in Ireland mothers can have a decisive influence, or sometimes a veto, in deciding whether or not an unmarried father and his child can have meaningful relationships with each other. Delegates from a number of North European and South American countries said that marriage had declined so much that the question was irrelevant - both unmarried and married fathers were treated equally badly. In general mothers, married or unmarried, are automatically deemed to be parents but unmarried fathers are required to prove their credentials.

3. Are domestic violence laws and sex abuse allegations used as a tactic against fathers?

Delegates from all countries said that domestic violence laws and false allegations of child abuse were regularly used as a means of cutting fathers off from their children. In many countries, including Ireland, allegations of domestic violence need not be supported by any proofs - in fact the principle

of 'innocent until proven guilty' is reversed. Powerful feminist groups have created a climate where men are always presumed to be guilty and women always innocent. False allegations of child abuse are also common in most countries although in most cases less common than false allegations of domestic violence. Fault-based divorce in some countries, such as Spain, generated these problems. In France persons accused of sex abuse can be imprisoned on the basis of allegations alone.

4. Is Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) commonly used against fathers?

Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) is a common practice in all countries however there is a wide divergence in the manner in which it is dealt with. Because it is such a difficult problem to deal with the authorities in some countries deny its existence - Ireland falls into this category. In France parents are afraid to raise the issue in courts because if they do it usually backfires on them. In certain US States the problem is very efficiently dealt with by removing children from the guilty parent and only re-establishing contact in a gradual and monitored manner. Despite the fact that this practice has proven to be very effective authorities in other countries haven't yet adopted it. In Germany many psychologists are now recognising this syndrome but, unfortunately, the judiciary are stubbornly refusing to deal with it or in some cases even to recognise it. PAS was regarded by the conference as one of the most difficult barriers to shared parenting.

5. Do you have family courts or tribunals dealing exclusively with family law?

Approximately 70% of the delegates reported that specialist family courts dealing exclusively with family law existed in their countries. Spain has a dual system with specialist family courts in cities and large towns but not in smaller towns and rural areas. Many of the delegates felt that family courts had low status in their judicial systems and would not be regarded as attractive postings for judges. In some countries the less competent judges, i.e. too old or too young, were assigned to family courts and overall female judges were in the majority in family courts.

BARRIERS TO SHARED PARENTING:

Following extensive deliberations and discussion a number of barriers to shared parenting, common to all or most countries were identified, including:

- World wide, parenting is still viewed primarily as a women's job, effectively placing the responsibility of childcare on women only.
- There still exists a view that men's nurturing and relational abilities are inferior to those of women.
- State and social reluctance to practice shared parenting is tied up with an entrenched, complicated, interdependent web of socio-economic activities based on traditional and outmoded gender roles.
- Hurdles stopping full implementation of shared parenting range from outright sex discrimination against fathers in family law courts to more subtle forms of discrimination.
- Failure to recognise that children's best interests are served by a high level parenting input from both parents regardless of the relationship between the parents.
- Failure to recognise the destructive impact on children, fathers, mothers and society of pursuing a dysfunctional sole parenting model.
- Adversarial legal systems dictate that there should be a winner and a loser in all cases, which is not conducive to shared parenting.
- The lack of transparency, accountability and public reporting in the family law system due to the rigid In-Camera rules.
- Family law is a major mega-buck industry world-wide, which thrives on hostility between parents.
- Vested interests of powerful professional groups, such as the legal profession, psychologists, social workers in perpetuating hostility and adversarialism rather than being solution focussed.
- Strong pro-mother and anti-father bias in the judiciary and political establishment due to a combination of traditional prejudices, personal conditioning and deference to the gender divisive elements within the feminist movement.
- A strong aversion by a conservative judiciary to recognise social change and reflect it in their decisions.
- Failure of judiciary and state institutions to enforce access/contact orders.
- Pressures on parents to delegate their parental responsibilities to judges, psychologists, social workers and other professionals.

- Power of women's groups to monopolise the social agenda with women's issues to the total exclusion of men's groups and men's issues.
- Success of women's groups in annexing children's welfare and interests.
- Lack of recognition for men's groups and men's issues.
- Lack of financial and other supports for men's and fathers' support groups.

GROUPS:

Each group was asked to give an account of its history, its objectives, modus operandi and significant achievements. The majority of the groups represented were 'fathers only' groups but there were a number of groups open to both fathers and mothers including Parental Equality from Ireland, the Federation of Parenthood of France and the Association of Separated Fathers and Mothers from Spain. Most of the groups have been in existence for over twenty years but some were established more recently such as Papas por Siempre (Fathers Forever), the youngest group, which was set up in Chile in 1994. In some countries such as Germany and the USA, there are numerous groups dealing with the issue of Shared Parenting. Ireland is one of the few countries where there is the only one national group, Parental Equality, dealing specifically with Shared Parenting issues from a gender-neutral perspective.

The methods used by the various groups were broadly similar i.e. media exposure, lobbying politicians and government institutions, and protests. In relation to the type of protests, there was some divergence with some groups favouring the peaceful picket approach, some opting for peaceful but spectacular demonstrations and others choosing more robust actions such as occupying public buildings.

In addition to political activities the majority of groups provide a help and support service for parents experiencing difficulties with custody and access to their children. Few groups are in a position to provide any sort of financial support, due to lack of funding, though the Association of Separated Fathers and Mothers from Spain assists with the costs of consultations with psychologists and has negotiated a discount deal with lawyers. The Spanish and French groups strongly favour a more decisive role for mediators and psychologists rather than judges. The German and Dutch delegations expressed strong reservations about the value of intervention by psychologists and other so called 'expert' third parties and their lack of impartiality. The U.K. delegation argued strongly for statutory limitations on judicial discretion. The

Irish proposal for compulsory DNA testing at birth, for medical purposes and birth certification, was supported by a majority of the delegates.

Achievements to date in most cases are limited. The USA and Scandinavian countries seem to be the most progressive as far as the promotion of Shared Parenting is concerned. As with most social issues, there are indications that a progressive approach to Shared Parenting is filtering through to other countries. Countries with a strong tradition of Catholic church domination, such as Spain, Ireland and some South American countries have particular problems which inhibit socially progressive developments such as Shared Parenting. Countries with a strong machismo and paternalistic ethos, such as those where the Napoleonic Code prevails, also have problems which militate against Shared Parenting. Ironically, in countries which are regarded as otherwise socially progressive, the gender divisive elements within the feminist movement have created a regressive culture of inequality and one parent families.

RECOMMENDATIONS;

In the interests of children, parents and society in general it was agreed that the various groups represented at the conference should co-operate in promoting shared parenting. To this end agreement was reached on the following points:

- ✓ As a fundamental principle fathers and mothers should be accorded equal status in a child's life and this principle should be reflected in all Government policies.
- ✓ Parenthood should be based only on the child-parent relationship and not on the relationship between the parents.
- ✓ A child's right to a meaningful relationship with both parents is sacrosanct and of paramount importance and should take precedence over all others issues of contention between parents.
- ✓ The child should have the right to communicate with his or her parents whatever the situation.
- ✓ Establish an international committee for the promotion of shared parenting, for married and unmarried parents and following marriage/relationship breakdown, to encourage a strong spirit of co-operation and solidarity internationally through direct contact between Shared Parenting groups and individuals.
- ✓ The International Committee should clarify and agree the basic principles of shared parenting and develop a coherent set of international policies to promote respect for family rights.

- ✓ Where parents cannot agree on the division of Parenting Time, courts should be obliged to apply a 50/50 division unless there are specific compelling reasons for not doing so and such reasons clearly set out in legislation.
- ✓ A document to be drawn up setting out the basic principles of shared parenting (to be entitled 'the Declaration of Langeac').
- ✓ The promotion of shared parenting should be a key priority in Government policy which should be supported by Government institutions and Government incentives.
- ✓ Based on information from the various national groups and other sources the International Committee on Shared Parenting should identify best practice in the promotion of shared parenting and make recommendations to State authorities and International bodies on a transnational basis.
- ✓ Barriers to the promotion of shared parenting should be identified and measures taken to remove them (especially those listed above).
- ✓ Parental status, responsibilities and rights should be strengthened in law.
- ✓ Parental status of either parent should not be modified or diminished just because a marriage or relationship breaks down.
- ✓ The value of the marriage contract and its impact on parenting and the legal status of parents should be the subject of debate, research and analysis.
- ✓ Both parents should be responsible for the financial support of their children.
- ✓ Biological parenthood should be established at birth by way of DNA testing. All DNA evidence should be destroyed immediately parenthood has been established.
- ✓ Legislation should establish shared parenting and joint custody as the norm unless otherwise justified by extreme circumstances such as abuse or negligence.
- ✓ Governments and State Institutions should take measures to encourage and support parents in taking responsibility for decisions on parenting matters rather than delegating such responsibilities to third parties.
- ✓ All states should adopt and incorporate into domestic legislation the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in its totality.
- ✓ Legislative measures should be introduced to limit judicial discretion in deciding on parenting and children's issues.

- ✓ Relaxation of In-Camera rule in countries where it exists to allow for public reporting and public scrutiny of cases respecting the anonymity of parties.
- ✓ Legislation should be enacted to incorporate the principle of 'equality' into family law.
- ✓ Parental discretion in relation to the parenting of their children should be respected where both parents can reach agreement.
- ✓ Work and the organisation of work should accommodate and defer to parenting and family life.
- ✓ Measures should be taken by Governments to reduce adversarialism in Family Law and promote and strengthen mediation services.
- ✓ Severe penalties should be provided for and imposed on parents who indulge in parental alienation and take other actions designed to diminish the other parent's status and role as a parent.
- ✓ Financial and other incentives should be provided for separating parents who agree and co-operate with each other in continuing shared parenting arrangements.
- ✓ Governments should provide all necessary supports to assist parents in fulfilling their parental obligations and carrying out their parental functions.
- ✓ Access/contact orders should be strictly enforced and penalties imposed on parents who break them.
- ✓ All social welfare and other parental support payments should be divided equally between parents.
- ✓ All Government policies should be vetted for their impact on shared parenting and amended where necessary.
- ✓ Equal representation of the interests of fathers and mothers on all statutory and non-statutory bodies dealing with parenting, children's issues etc.
- ✓ A list of politicians, judges, psychologists, sociologists, social workers and other main players in social formulation should be created and each individuals stance on 50/50 Shared Parenting should be identified to establish (a) who is supportive (b) who is against and (c) the reasons given for their stance.
- ✓ Groups and individuals should be facilitated to sign up to the Declaration of Langeac when finalised.

ISSUE OF MAJOR CONCERN:

The development of the concept of the 'social parent' in Holland as reported by the Dutch delegation was regarded by all delegations as an issue of major concern. This concept is also taking root in the USA where there is currently a case going through the courts in which a lesbian woman is seeking access to her female ex-partner's child even though she has no biological links with the child. The Dutch delegates explained that, because of the manner in which social parents are being recognised in Holland, there is a real danger that 'social fathers' will displace biological fathers. Giving legal status to 'social parents' could lead to a situation where a child's legal father could change every time its mother changes partners. While there are limited circumstances where non-biological parents are rightly given legal parental status e.g. death of biological parent, this should not happen where a biological parent is available. The granting of parental status to non-biological parents should be extremely restricted and should never be used to displace a biological parent.

NEW MILLENNIUM INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SHARED PARENTING

Next year's international conference on Shared Parenting, the first of the new millennium, will be a landmark conference.

It will set the agenda for the promotion of Shared Parenting both within intact relationships and after relationship breakdown on a transnational basis.

The work which is currently being done in identifying and agreeing principles and strategies to which all can subscribe will come to a conclusion at this conference. The conclusions will have a far reaching impact on social and family policy both nationally and internationally in the new millennium. Prominent international experts will speak on a range of topics relating to Shared Parenting. Attendance will include representatives of men's, women's and parents groups and other organisations interested in parenting and children's issues. Government representatives, policy makers, professionals, academics and other experts in social, family, children's, medical, psychological and legal matters will also attend. Arrangements for the conference will be family-friendly and will include the provision of creche facilities, play areas and a range of family activities.

The Irish delegation put forward a strong case for hosting next year's conference and received a positive response from most delegates. Subject to securing Government support, a provisional decision was taken to hold the conference in Ireland.