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May 25, 2004

TODAY

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THE IRISH TIMES | BREAKING NEWS | NEWS IN FOCUS | SPORT | BUSINESS | WEATHER | TECHNOLOGY

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## In the Newspaper

### Daily

- ▶ Front Page
- ▶ Ireland
- ▶ World
- ▶ Finance
- ▶ Features
- ▶ Sport
- ▶ **Opinion**
- ▶ Letters
- ▶ Crossword
- ▶ Article Index

### Daily PDFs

- ▶ Front Page
- ▶ TV Listings

### Weekly Index

#### Tuesday

- ▶ Health
  - ▶ Education and Parenting
- #### Wednesday
- ▶ Motors
  - ▶ An Teanga Bheo
  - ▶ Commercial Property

#### Thursday

- ▶ Science Today
- ▶ Property
- ▶ The Ticket

#### Saturday

- ▶ Weekend
- ▶ News Features
- ▶ Obituaries
- ▶ Magazine

### Weekly Article Index

MON | TUE | WED  
THU | FRI | SAT

### Archive Search

## Opinion

Mon, May 24, 04

### Fathers' act was deeply responsible

**John Waters:** The widespread huffing and puffing about the "stunt" organised by the British organisation Fathers 4 Justice, in which two members gained access to a balcony in the House of Commons and lobbed a condom full of purple flour at the prime minister, has again demonstrated how little understanding our modern societies have of the significance of what the men were seeking to highlight.

Although, at worst, F4J has given Mr Blair a timely warning concerning his vulnerability to attack from more malevolent quarters, the general reaction has been misplaced outrage towards the perpetrators, together with a repeated denial of the validity of their cause on the basis of a mis-statement of what that cause is.

This, the all-too-familiar response went, was not the way to seek sympathy for their grievance. To attack the PM in the House of Commons was "disproportionate" and an "insult to democracy".

If F4J were looking for sympathy, it would be known as F4S. What it protests is not some special interest concern but a systematic denial of a fundamental human right which has already caused unconscionable damage to the psychic health of society. Reflect for a moment on the past denial of the human rights of the two men who carried out this attack, place it alongside the alleged insult to democracy and throw in Mr Blair's dry cleaning bill. Here you have indeed an instance of grotesque disproportion.

Tony Blair has sought, in various pronouncements, to imply that he has been unaware of a problem concerning fathers and the family courts. Well, if he is unaware of it, his ignorance is wilful, because I know at least one father has gone to some trouble to explain to him the corrupt nature of the UK's family law system and various institutions involved in its operation.

A typical complaint about the F4J action is that it was "irresponsible". How, one BBC radio interviewer asked me, can these men expect to be treated as responsible parents if they do such a thing? I regard their action as one of profound responsibility-taking. The parenting rights of fathers do not exist in a vacuum inhabited only by a minority of aggrieved men.

For a start, they are inseparable from the rights of children to know their fathers. For a century now, in the works of Freud, Jung and Mitscherlich, we have been provided with the starkest prophecies about the consequences of a fatherless society. Even if the evidence of our eyes and ears did not bear out their every sentence, a raft of research suggests that all three men understated the problem. We live in a society in which one-third of births occur outside marriage, with divorce contributing more to a situation whereby, soon, a majority of children will be at risk of having their fathers obliterated from their lives. We are bequeathing into the future a psychic nightmare that will cause our grandchildren to curse our

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ignorance and stupidity. One reason we cannot get close to comprehending this apocalypse is the constant mis-stating of the issues in the media so as to suggest that they amount to a marginal problem related to family dysfunction. This is invariably accompanied by statistics seeking to minimise the issue, as in a Guardian report on Saturday suggesting that the proportion of fathers "denied access" by the courts is "about 2 per cent". (This figure elides, for a start, those cases in which access orders are flouted and those in which the level of contact provided for is so parsimonious as to be actually destructive.)

Media reports describe F4J as "an organisation seeking better access for fathers to their children". This is not what F4J is. You may have "access" to your bank account by means of a plastic card or "access" to the internet on your computer. A farmer may access his land via a right-of-way. But what parents have with their children, by a mutual, inalienable right, is a sacred relationship ordained by God. To reduce such profound connections to the obscene technicality - "access" - is the primary metaphysical insult family law represents to humanity.

What F4J seeks is the restoration of the natural order of equality of parenthood, which would render it impossible for any parent to abuse children by acting as gatekeeper in the relationships between those children and the other parent.

But "access" is, in practice, an accurate term, for family law is a means of turning children into property, to be used and abused in pursuit of wealth, power and revenge. In the vast majority of instances, family law extends to mothers what amounts to "ownership" of children, and frequently participates in or colludes with the abuse of the human rights of children and fathers by conferring on fathers a form of default criminality by requiring them to "prove" that they are "fit" parents.

That any State would arrogate such authority to itself or others is a corruption beyond imagining by anyone who would take literally the principles of democracy and civilisation set down by their founding fathers.

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[back to top](#)