

NOVEMBER INTERVIEW: JOHN HEMMING MP

John Hemming is the Liberal Democrat MP for Birmingham Yardley and tirelessly campaigns for increased accountability in government. With extensive experience in family law, John chairs the innovative organisation Justice For Families which aims to reduce the number of injustices in public family law. John is also involved with several other areas of politics including the government's energy policies.

Labelled “eccentric” by The Times in 2006, John, a former Scholar in Natural Sciences at Magdalen College, Oxford specialising in Theoretical, Atomic and Nuclear Physics, shares with us his acute insight into the failings of the family courts and why exposure is the only way forward:

How did you come to work as a politician for the Liberal Democrats?

I joined the Liberals when I was 16 (in 1976) because I wanted a fairer society and when I assisted a candidate a couple of years later I felt I could do a better job so offered over time to be a candidate. I stood in 6 general elections winning on the 6th time.

You do a great deal of work within the public family law sector; could you tell us a little about the different aspects of the system you focus on?

I look at the system from end to end. There are so many injustices it is shocking. The worst thing is the results for the children both those wrongly removed and those left to face abuse.

There is a strong feeling amongst the British public that their government is infringing on their fundamental rights in relation to the way family law operates: why do you think this is?

The secrecy prevents accountability which allows corruption to seep in.

The recent debate over media reporting in the family courts has had a mixed reaction; with judicial discretion as a suggested preliminary hurdle to getting a case ‘opened up’ to media scrutiny, will media exposure make a difference?

It doesn't work with judicial discretion. Judges won't admit they are mad. If people really knew what was going on they would not tolerate it.

The very sad story of Baby P has caused a national outcry and the media has clearly made a difference by exposing this particular case, but there are many other issues that indicate a severe fall in competence levels within the system: what, in your opinion, is at the heart of these symptoms?

The Self-serving nature of the system. I have jointly written an [article](#) with two social workers that is available on the net.

Damaging instances of oversight like the now scrapped, incentivisation process in relation to adoption are also worrying: do these policies come about due to poor judgment or is

there something more to the irrational policy making decisions that is not immediately obvious?

Parliament is out of touch because ministers are able to avoid answering written questions properly.

Another area that you are passionate about is the legitimacy of medical expert evidence: what safeguards would you suggest in order to prevent misplaced trust in untested medical theory?

The use of the system of a judicial expert and permitting second opinions. The family division conflates the two roles and has the judge responsible for making the judgment.

What other weaknesses do you observe in the system?

I could write a book, but a few examples are: lawyers dragging out cases to make money for fees; experts making misleading statements for fees; Social Workers “advocating for the child” and pressurising people to mislead the court.

Are there any strengths that you note?

There are some people doing a really good job. James Munby is making a difference as well as the volunteers who work for various organisations aimed at reforming the system.

If there was one thing you could change, what would it be?

Secrecy because people would not tolerate the reality of family injustice.