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Only marriage can mend broken Britain, says top judge in attack on 'pass the partner' society

By Tim Shipman

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Marriage should be promoted by the Government to end the 'social anarchy' of family breakdown, a senior judge said last night.

Mr Justice Coleridge accused mothers and fathers who fail to commit to each other of engaging in a game of 'pass the partner' that has left millions of children 'scarred for life'.

In a hard-hitting speech in Parliament, he called for a change of attitude that would attach a 'stigma' to those who destroy family life and said a National Commission should be established to devise solutions for the 'epidemic' of broken homes.

He said: 'The reaffirmation of marriage as the gold standard would be a start.'

Currently, one in three marriages ends in divorce. One in ten children lives with cohabiting parents and a quarter live with a single parent.

MR JUSTICE COLERIDGE'S VERDICT

Reaffirmation of marriage as the gold standard would be a start. It has proved to be the most enduring and the children of such relationships perform best. That is simple provable fact ... however unpalatable to its detractors.

■ (The BBC) the biggest and most highly regarded, publicly funded opinion former in the land regards these vitally important issues as 'too dark'. Yes, indeed it is dark, very dark, and sometimes disturbing, but we shall not throw any light on it if we refuse to acknowledge it and discuss it in a broad and sensible way.

■ Support for marriage makes pragmatic common sense because it is demonstrably in the public interest and ultimately saves money - like eating healthily.

■ **I'm drawing attention to the endless game of 'pass the partner', in which such a significant portion of the population is engaged... the endless and futile quest for a perfect relationship.**

■ **I am not suggesting that relationship breakdown can be avoided in all cases. Genuinely intolerable relationships have to be ended with as much dignity as the system can manage.**

Children from single-parent families are far more likely to do badly at school, suffer poor health, fall into crime, drug abuse, binge drinking and teenage pregnancy.

Sir Paul Coleridge, 60, who is married with three adult children, is a leading family judge, having presided over the divorce of Sir Paul McCartney and Heather Mills.

He also made the ruling in Britain's largest divorce settlement in which Beverley Charman received £48million when she divorced insurance magnate John Charman.

The judge's comments stopped short of condemning the Government or any other political party for the breakdown of family life.

But his support for marriage will be music to the ears of Conservative leader David Cameron, who has made clear that a Tory government would support marriage through the tax system.

By contrast, Labour ministers insist alternative family set-ups are equally valid.

In his speech to the Family Holiday Association charity of which he is a patron, Mr Justice Coleridge said: 'I am drawing attention to the endless game of "musical relationships", or "pass the partner", in which such a significant portion of the population is engaged.'

Single parent epidemic: One in three marriages ends in divorce, leaving children 'damaged, miserable and scarred for life'

Condemning the 'endless and futile quest for a perfect relationship', he said many parents were in 'a complete and uncontrolled free-for-all where being true to oneself and one's needs is the only yardstick for controlling behaviour'.

He added: 'The children are caught up in the conflict of their parents' unresolved relationship issues and it can leave them scarred, sometimes severely scarred, for life.'

The judge also said government should support 'those who chose not to marry but live a committed life with a partner', since they provide stability for children.

Calling for 'a fundamental change in individual attitude and behaviour', he said: 'What is a matter of private concern when it is on a small scale becomes a matter of public concern when it reaches epidemic proportions.

'I am not suggesting that all relationship breakdown and termination can be avoided in all cases. Of course it cannot.'

But he concluded: 'The time has come for a major examination of all the issues surrounding family life, its support and maintenance, and especially the mechanisms and laws for its termination.'

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