

For the third time in six years, Virginia officials are trying to sneak through policies that will lead to more broken families and more fatherless children. They will also result in massive expropriations of Virginians without due process of law and the jailing of more law-abiding parents. As always in the Post-Clin-ton era, the cynical justification is "the children," but those who profit will be lawyers, judges and bureaucrats.

Yet another rigged government panel is groping for any justification to railroad through higher child support, though it already is at punitive levels. Under current guidelines, a father clearing \$2,100 monthly, pays \$1,137.50 and lives on less than \$1,000. Add-ons for health insurance can easily bring it to \$2,000. This is how Virginia officials subsidize divorce, plunder fathers and create instant criminals out of law-abiding citizens.

Twice their efforts failed when the chicanery was exposed in this newspaper in 1999 and 2001. Now Richard Byrd, a divorce lawyer, has devised a new excuse: Child support must be increased because of inflation. Never mind that child support adjusts automatically for inflation because it increases with income. This is like saying taxes must be raised due to inflation. Mr. Byrd hopes to the child support to the Gossamer Price Index, based largely on adult con-

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sumption of adult clothing, tobacco, alcohol, taxes and the like. His proposal is an admission child support is not really for children but more for the enrichment of grown-ups. Officials are in open violation of federal law, plus Section 20-108.2 of the state domestic relations code and Senate Joint Resolution 192 specifically requiring them to examine "the costs of raising children in Virginia." Officials claim that study "would cost millions" and have never done it, despite receiving federal funds to do so.

So government officials refuse to obey the law with the plea it would cost too much, when it is for precisely this reason they are jailing parents without trial: failure to obey the law — capricious court orders — because they cannot afford to do so.

The self-serving economics of child support has been harshly criticized by scholars. Yet the panel only consults "experts" who urge increases. They ignore scholars like Bryce Christensen, who notes "evidence of the linkage between aggressive child-support policies and the erosion of wedlock," and who writes in Society that "the advocates of ever-more-aggressive measures for collecting child support ... have moved us a dangerous step closer to a police state."

They ignore Kimberly Polse and Hugo Varela-Alvarez, who conclude child-support programs "lead to the unintended consequence of increasing the likelihood of divorce." The panel took no notice of W.S. Comanor's groundbreaking volume, "The Law and Economics of Child Support Payments," where leading scholars characterize the system as "an obvious sham," a "disaster," and "the most onerous form of debt collection practiced in the United States." Citizens who want to redress the balance with these less biased experts must pay for it out of their own pockets.

No public outcry has ever demanded that officials act on child support; the initiative throughout has come entirely from government officials, who indeed exhibit open contempt for the public. Though they promised a two-hour public hearing, officials adjourned it after only 50 minutes. Citizens were given 4 minutes to express their views. One gentleman was cut off as he tried to refute the panel's distorted economics.

Rigging the democratic process has become standard procedure in Virginia child support politics. Like previous panels, this one is stacked with divorce operatives. Every panel member but two has a pecuniary

interest in higher awards and more divorce. Yet even this meager representation is gagged. In 2001, I was removed from the panel when an article in this newspaper I pointed out similar biases. Officials made no attempt to disguise the fact the "opinions published in the June 17, 2001, Washington Times" were the reason. The then-Secretary of Health and Human Resources wrote: "I find it difficult to see how you could effectively participate along with representatives of other groups that very likely have different perspectives than yours." Yet the panel was required by law to include members with different viewpoints. Since all other panel members had a vested interest in higher child-support burdens, a willingness to increase child support effectively became a requirement for serving on the panel.

Other former members, Barry Koplen and Murray Steinberg, have charged the panel's procedures were rigged. No economist serves on Virginia's panel, an odd omission if the purpose is to determine child-rearing costs.

Meanwhile, enforcement agents stand poised to move in on parents who, quite predictably, will be unable to pay the in-

creased burdens. Last fall, officials published newspaper advertisements declaring guilty private citizens tried for no crime and who have no similar platform to defend themselves. Even the FBI, on its Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list, provides "allegations." But Virginia's "Ten Most Wanted" child-support list simply proclaims guilt (as a group) without trial.

The child support machine is a regime of breathtaking cynicism — forcibly removing children from their parents and then claiming the parents have "abandoned" them. It is mind-boggling that we allow our children to be exploited to justify such crimes against the Constitution.

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