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Little by little, the blue seeps through Cameron's silky skin

Scratch the surface of the Tory leader's dreamy vision of good parenting and his true colours become that bit clearer



Polly Toynbee

The Guardian, Monday 11 January 2010 18.00 EST

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He called it a "sit up and think" moment. For all those musing on what being David Cameron means, and who the Conservative leader is, this might indeed be a "eureka" day. Now we finally begin to get it.

In a [lecture](#) today at the thinktank Demos on how families build character, he said he had found the social science equivalent of $E=MC^2$. The research on which he will base his child poverty policy was "one of the most important findings for a generation". As used by him, [the research for Demos](#) was certainly a gem, a priceless pearl, a gift to conservatism beyond his wildest dreams. It proved, he claimed, that "the differences in child outcomes between a child born in poverty and a child born in wealth are no longer statistically significant when both have been raised by confident and able parents". What matters is not "the wealth of their upbringing but the warmth of their parenting". He challenged "the left who have always argued that the best way to tackle disadvantage is to redistribute money from the rich to the poor". Instead – eureka – what children from every background need is "strong and secure families, confident and able parents, an ethic of responsibility instilled from a young age". With one bound, he is free.

In the realm of the blindingly obvious, children brought up by loving parents do better than the unloved. Is it all about money? No, the beloved children of a curate as poor as a church mouse will do fine. Unloved children of rich but frosty parents may do badly (don't mention the Queen). But there is no escaping the fact that children of families poverty-stricken for generations stand least chance. No one ever said they only lack money – they lack nearly everything.

There was a wince at Cameron's interpretation from the Demos researcher who analysed the figures from the Millennium Cohort – a large group of children born in 2000. Jen Lexmond, co-author of Building Character, says poverty has an immense effect. Looking at what the report defines as the two key ingredients of good parenting – love and consistent boundary-setting – the authors found love scattered regardless of social class. But poor children had fewest rules imposed, because, she suggests of "more pressure, less support, a harder life". And Cameron's "no statistical significance" between poverty and bad parenting stands everything on its head – though it may suit him to imply

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they are all down there because they are bad characters. Lexmond, however, makes another telling point: "It may not be in the best interests of the child growing up in hostile surroundings to be trusting and full of empathy. It may be rational to be bad, aggressive and impulsive."

Cameron is a serial abuser of social research. He has form. This time he also turned upside down the work of Leon Feinstein, whose famous research found that after 23 months of age, the dim but rich child begins to make faster progress than the bright but poor child – until at the age of six their achievements cross over, the poor child sinking, probably for ever, as the dim but rich rises inexorably. Nurturing, conversation, stimulation, a good nursery and attention from educated parents push one upwards while the other falls prey to adversity.

In his [recent Hugo Young lecture on poverty](#), Cameron badly misused the ground-breaking work of [Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in The Spirit Level](#). He acknowledged their incontrovertible proof that "the more unequal countries do worse according to every quality of life indicator", but in the next breath he ignored the very foundation of their work when he said: "That doesn't mean we should be fixated only by a mechanistic objective like reducing the [Gini coefficient](#)" – the measurement of the inequality that causes social dysfunction, crime, drugs, drink and all the social evils that put Britain near the bottom of the league for civility. But no one could be a Conservative and want to narrow the gap between top and bottom. Instead Cameron said he would seek to "focus on the gap between the bottom and the middle". Leaving the rich untouched is, of course, exactly what his inheritance tax plans do.

But how lightly he treads, how delicately he picks his way among the prickles of the wicked issues, scattering a caveat here and there. Speaking on what builds "character", he was in his airy element yesterday, opining on family, parents and responsibility. But his dreamy vision of good parenting with two loving married parents sealed in matrimony by a tax allowance was blasted off the lectern by the reply to his speech from the magnificent [Camila Batmanghelidjh](#), the founder of Kids Company.

She takes no prisoners in her raw description of the 1.5 million children she estimates are profoundly neglected and abused by drunk, drugged,

aspirations

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mentally ill and incapable families. Two parents? If only they had one half-functioning carer. Baby P is just one that came to notice – but shortage of social workers means most are kept off the register and thrown off after a few short visits. Long queues for children's mental health services leave them unsupported. These children are often left bereft by state as well as parents, a world away from the moralistic finger-wagging of politicians. And, no, she told him, voluntary organisations can't do it all.

What would David Cameron do? Ominous threats were breezily implied, - leaving no fingerprints. How about this? "[We support tax credits but this exciting new evidence from Demos sets us a new challenge: to alleviate poverty of parenting, in the knowledge that it is the best way to help children escape material poverty.](#)" Will parenting classes compensate for tax credit cuts? He promises much needed extra health visitors – but Sure Start would face cuts, contracted out to voluntary groups in "a new spirit of enterprise" that would "pay by results". Here was his final homily: "Parenting is the coalface of creating character" – and who could disagree?

One deep character question remains: the nature of David Cameron, slippery as silk, smooth as his airbrushed cheeks, adept at allusion yet elusive on everything. But little by little the blue beneath the skin seeps out with each new speech. Compassionate Conservatism, let alone "Progressive Conservatism" is exposed as a head-swivellingly empty oxymoron. Day by day we may understand it a little less and condemn it a little more.

• This article was amended on Tuesday 12 January 2010. The co-author of Building Character is Jen Lexmond, not Luxford as we originally had it. This has been corrected.



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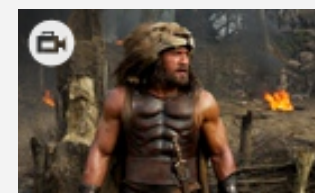
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53 comments



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lolzor

11 January 2010 11:04pm

87

Cameron in Tory is a Tory schocker!



pongothecat

11 January 2010 11:13pm

351

Toynbee's case would have rather more force if the gap between rich and poor hadn't widened hugely under 12 years of Labour, more, in fact, than it ever widened under the last Tory government.

Nice try, Pol but I'm afraid you'd just better resign yourself to kissing this worthless shower of Labour creeps goodbye. Surely, you must know, in your heart of hearts, that it's for the best?

wotever

11 January 2010 11:14pm

19



Cameron's softer view on 'different' parenting, simply reflects the decline of the Tory party blue rinse brigade - as they increasingly die off.

By the time of the election after this, he'll be able to admit Jesus wasn't even a white or middle class!



matteo80

11 January 2010 11:17pm

275

Cameron is a Tory, what do you expect?

What is Brown? Labour have had 12 years so far, what have they done to eradicate poverty? What have they done to create an egalitarian society?

Nothing, just a lot of rules, rules and regulations, fiddling at the edges and not tackling any of the problems.

At least Cameron believes in what he is doing, it may be wrong but at least he has a set of principles.



LabourStoleMyCash

11 January 2010 11:18pm

259

One deep character question remains: the nature of David Cameron, slippery as silk, smooth as his airbrushed cheeks, adept at allusion yet elusive on everything. But little by little the blue beneath the skin seeps out with each new speech

Little by little Brown oozes crap from beneath his skin. Slippery and elusive Cameron? Well I prefer him to outright barefaced liars like Labour.



guardianreeda

11 January 2010 11:23pm

216

Dear Polly. **Please** tell us why Labour deserve a 4th term in office.

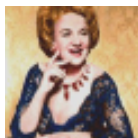
(That aside....)

The family is saved.

Mandelson, Balls, Brown and a laptop did a photo op with a 'disadvantaged' family.

Ah Mr. Brown... with these laptops you are spoiling us!

It just goes to show that even at this late hour, the 'dream team' are demonstrating how unfit they are to be in government.



hermionegingold

11 January 2010 11:23pm

246

as much as i dislike cameron, he lost a child, dealt with it in a magnificent & dignified manner as far as one can in public life & probably humanized him. pretty cheap shot polly.



tonyhart1

11 January 2010 11:23pm

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pvgold

11 January 2010 11:24pm

81

You're probably right about Cameron, but sometimes the devil you don't know is better than the devil you know.



LabourStoleMyCash

11 January 2010 11:28pm

126

She takes no prisoners in her raw description of the 1.5 million children she estimates are profoundly neglected and abused by drunk, drugged, mentally ill and incapable families. Two parents? If only they had one half-functioning carer. Baby P is just one that came to notice ? but shortage of social workers means most are kept off the register and thrown off after a few short visits. Long queues for children's mental health services leave them unsupported. These children are often left bereft by state as well as

parents, a world away from the moralistic finger-wagging of politicians.

This is after 12 years of Labour. Its something that we're stuck with and is very difficult to change. You can tinker with the edges, but the underlying problem is an endemic one.



Bilachi

11 January 2010 11:31pm

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Keysie

11 January 2010 11:31pm

172

Sure Start would face cuts

Good. It has been the millenium dome of social policy schemes. Ask any of us that have had anything to do with it.

To think what that money could have done.



Burntoak

11 January 2010 11:32pm

28

Poor Polly still thinks the old political system is still working and under the sad dillusion that us the great unwashed actually give a damn about Cameron.



ardennespate

11 January 2010 11:34pm

216

So many contortions, Polly, to avoid admitting the obvious: that children are generally better off brought up in a household of two caring parents. And, hence, Cameron's marriage-tax-concession plans will probably be much cheaper than Labour's plans to tax everyone greater and greater amounts to give to single-parents, anchored on a cornucopia of benefits.



Omnigod

11 January 2010 11:34pm

107

What is this with the laptops????

I gave my old Dell to Oxfam last week.

This was my choice!!

Who the hell dares spend my money on IT equipment on randoms I've never met??

MJTValfather

11 January 2010 11:34pm

228

Cameron is a serial abuser of social research

And the Labour party isn't.

Of course not - your Labour party would never dream of using fake statistics and lies to justify an illegal war, pretend our army in afghan is well funded, building dabatases to track the whole population, or squeeze more money out of any middle class person (that is who earns more than £20k pa) than they do already.

No. Of course not.

MJTValfather

11 January 2010 11:36pm

134

Question for you Polly - on the subject of honesty and transparency.

Rather than be a commentator who is the Labour Party In Print - why don't you just stand as a Labour MP? At least it would be honest and transparent thing to do



Omnigod

11 January 2010 11:37pm

114

LETTER FDRON GORDON BROWN

Dear Unemployed,

Welcome to the World of Warcraft.

Yours sincerely,

Gordon Brown

PS: Vote Labour.



deamon

11 January 2010 11:38pm

76

Seriously if this was Germany in 1946 Polly Toynbe would be telling us to vote for Hitler, "come on the Nazis might have made a few mistakes but they just need another chance"

That's a bit harsh on Polly, she wouldn't have done that. Hitler was dead by then.



ibelieveicanfly

11 January 2010 11:39pm

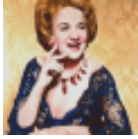
129

Good grief - the first few comments are appalling. Why should an intelligent decent journalist have her column subjected to such moronic statements? The Guardian should edit this rubbish. Like calling Labour politicians "liars". What are you - a slightly below average sixth former with pretensions of intellect? Only somebody with little knowledge of the 18 years of Tory rule 1979-97 would make such a banal and pathetic statement. Oooh Labour are liars. Tories are trustworthy. GROW UP!

Did Thatcher lie about sinking the Belgrano? About plans for the miners' strike? Did Major lie about having sex with Edwina Currie?

If we are going to elect the Tories then it is worth at least trying to understand Cameron's politics since he will hold most of the political power. I accept the argument forwarded by PT that Cameron is bad news for the poor and yet presents himself as the acceptable face of Toryism. That is not to say Labour has come close to finding acceptable solutions to the problems created by a welfare state in a class ridden society with an enormous, mostly feckless and vile underclass. However, I think that things are better now than they would have been if the Tories had been in power. Inequality has grown but it would have been even worse under the Tories. Britain would have still been in Afghanistan and Iraq. The economic crash would have happened all the same but the Tories would have made a worse job of trying to

lessen its effect. If you don't agree with me then don't start calling me a liar. It is pathetic and childish.



hermionegingold

11 January 2010 11:41pm

28

i should add gordon brown was never more effective than when replying to the death of cameron's son ivan in the house of commons.

heartfelt, genuine & sincere. why does it take a catastrophe to get honesty from our 'betters'

baffling



Lista

11 January 2010 11:41pm

78

I don't know maybe I'm old fashioned. But a bit of responsibility commitment and common sense would go further than treating grown adults as if they've just landed from the sky. Less state interference in day to day life would improve the situation no end.



guardianreeda

11 January 2010 11:41pm

230

My last comment before bed, but who, exactly, is to blame for the burgeoning underclass in our country?

What sort of country is this where it is literally better for families - often whole estates of them - often reaching across the generations - not to work, and to bring their kids up expecting the same?

This makes people ill. Mentally and physically. The kids they have are worse off, and more likely themselves - in turn - to grow up leading the same lives.

Gordon Brown talks about 'aspiration', but Prescott found out the hard way what his government did for aspiration - smothered it under the cossetting blanket of the state, when all they should have been thrown was a lifeline.

Until this society starts to reward hard work, starts to pay decent wages for the shit jobs, starts to sort out the horrific housing price problem, you're going to continue to breed this growing underclass - stuck firmly forever on state support from cradle to grave, and passing on their hopelessness to the next generation.

I read a statistic the other day which says that we have more people on incapacity benefit today than at the end of world war 2.

This is not what the post war generation envisaged would be the role of the welfare state in the future. It was supposed to be there as a safety net, not something that sucks the life out of millions of people.



tonyhart1

11 January 2010 11:45pm

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UKFunParty

11 January 2010 11:46pm

36

So, pretty much what we have always known with regard to policies concerning social conscience.

New Labour could have done it and should have done it, but didn't.

New Tory will make vague promises, then cavil, then won't.

For the actual, real, large-as-life people, nothing will change, unless for the worse.

We need to forget the idea that governments and political parties have any care or concern for ordinary people or for radical change or for moral decency.

They want you to work in order to take your tax money and to spend in order to keep their plutocratic buddies sweet.

Cameron is as much filth as Blair.

Do **NOT** vote New Labour.

Do **NOT** vote New Tory.

Vote them all out and party.

PS. Ms Toynbee - could you please squeeze at least one more of your lovely "New Labour Has One Last Chance To Win If..." series before the election.

It could just swing it.



salmonberry

11 January 2010 11:51pm

45

Camerons habitual misuse of substantial social research suggests he either is too blinkered to see he is putting ideology and dogma efore rational balanced conclusions, hes dim or he doesnt really care but has to finesse it.

Excellent article that chips away at the tory charade.



Brit47

11 January 2010 11:52pm

62

BLUE IS BETTER THAN RED ANY DAY!!



HowardD

11 January 2010 11:52pm

191

Frankly, Polly, you have a bloody nerve lecturing Cameron when it was your buddies who created this mess in the first place.



bagsos

11 January 2010 11:53pm

20

Polly

whose famous research found that after 23 months of age, the dim but rich child begins to make faster progress than the bright but poor child ? until at the age of six their achievements cross over, the poor child sinking, probably for ever, as the dim but rich rises inexorably.

Have I somehow misread this? Because if the dim but rich brat is making faster

progress than the bright but poor one from 23 months, by the age of six the dim but rich would be so far ahead of the bright but poor that the chances of their achievements crossing over would be zero.....



TheGreatGigInTheSky

11 January 2010 11:57pm

19

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/console/b00psv2q>

Cameron on 5live with Richard Bacon

Proving Polly RIGHT.



JonathanBW

11 January 2010 11:58pm

109

But of course '...the 1.5 million children profoundly neglected and abused by drunk, drugged, mentally ill and incapable families' that Camila Batmanghelidjh identifies have not benefited from 12 years of New Labour government to anything like the extent we hoped in 1997.

In fact there are more of them, because New Labour has allowed the gap between rich and poor to grow; it has failed to tackle alcohol and instead chose to 'liberalise' the licensing laws; it has indulged in academic debates about the decriminalisation of illegal drugs and given up on cutting off their supply; it has established lots of parenting initiatives, without accepting that there is 'good' parenting and 'bad' parenting because it is so fearful of any suggestion of a moral judgement. In short, by combining neo-liberal economics with the worst kind of liberal social policy it has given us the worst of all worlds.

The presence in Cameron's audience of Camila Batmanghelidjh and Frank Field, who understands these matters better than most in the Labour Party, suggests that they know that, for better or worse, he's the future.



lbanc1

11 January 2010 11:58pm

105

Polly, in a week that has seen the reputation of this tyrant in downing sheet shot to pieces yet again... accounts of a million pounds blown on an election campaign he

botched, raging tantrums, cabinet ministers tearing how much they blame their own leader, the very shambles of this government. I would be very interested to read an article by you (no blindfold, fingers removed from ears) which begins "scratch the surface of the Labour Leader..." what would you find? The most dispecable incompetent prime minister of modern times perhaps? This election will be a simple choice. Maybe if Gordon Brown decides to bleach his hair blonde, burn down Downing street, run naked through London selling off what remains of the nations gold reserves for a penny and then announces he is our saviour, maybe just maybe some of the labour die hards would wake-up from their electoral spell and get the right side of that choice. Anything less than that then I fear we will continue to read articles in the guardian about David Cameron getting a parking ticket in a very very posh area, with a very expensive suit on the same stlye of which happens to be the favoured choice of an Etonian who graduated in 1883 called John, who was found guilty of fraud, conservative party spokesman refused to comment. NOTHING AND NO ONE can represent a worst choice than this Prime Minister.



RapidEddie

11 January 2010 11:59pm

173

Polly, there's a basic problem that you, your researcher chums, politicians and the rest of the commentariat have been signally ignoring for years. Manual and/or unskilled labour is in large part surplus to requirements. Or at the very least, British people are unwilling to do it any more.

In the 40s and 50s, the working class were the backbone of the country. Wealth was possible only because of them. Manufacturing needed them.

Events and technology have overtaken that need. Push a button and out comes the widgets. Meanwhile, the hundred men and women that were once needed for the process are signed on the dole and watching the Jeremy Kyle Show.

Until you - or Cameron or Brown or Demos or whoever - address that fundamental problem of 'what do we do with the working class?' all this quality of life, strong families, nurturing stuff etc etc is just ear-wash. Strong families have a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Strong families have a sense of purpose and feel that they have value.

The working class has been ignored by New Labour. Industrial towns and mining villages have been left to rot as Gordon went off to exchange saliva with the financial services industry, where, according to New Labour thinking, the 'real money' is.

It's tripe. When the UK comes out of recession - which it will, since every other major economy is the world has already - banking and financial services will again be flavour of the month. And nobody, journalists and politicians alike, will give a damn

about inequality or social distress.

Of course a social democracy would have addressed this issue a generation ago. But then, despite your weekly protestations to the contrary, neither New Labour nor the Tories are social democrats are they? They're two cheeks of the same neoliberal arse.



Jadaly

11 January 2010 11:59pm

15

Cameron is showing the carrot of subsidies for those whose private lives he approves of, but the next Government will be one of cuts. When will we hear of the stick for those who displease him?



bagsos

11 January 2010 11:59pm

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Jadaly

12 January 2010 12:04am

8

@TheGreatGigInTheSky:

Cameron on 5live with Richard Bacon

Proving Polly RIGHT.

Can you be a bit more specific - it's a 2 hour show!



Chesney9

12 January 2010 12:06am

82

Polly Toynbee
But there is no escaping the fact that children of families poverty-stricken for generations stand least chance.

And genetics plays no part in this?

**

Polly

Cameron is a serial abuser of social research. He has form.

**

As do you Polly, your interpretations astound me at times.



TheotherWay

12 January 2010 12:15am

121

A very touching piece if one ignores that this is lazy compassion and a political posturing.

The way the benefit system works is such that it pays for father and mother to not get married and unless a person with many children by Mr Fields view can has an income of a professional person it pays for the parents to not work and live on benefit. The result is poorer families are encouraged to have a larger family and poverty and benefit dependence is passed down the generation.

This observation came first not from any blue blooded Tory but from one of the remarkable and wise MPs from the Labour sides- Mr Frank Field. For his pains Mr Field was banished to the back benches in the early millennium. It seems that Mr Brown and majority of Labour MPs were piqued with the views of Mr Field as it would cut down the breeding of future captive Labour voters.



monnie

12 January 2010 12:17am

96

Two parents? If only they had one half-functioning carer. Baby P is just one that came to notice

Isn't that case an example of the failure of New Labour's policies?

There are now more people working in the public sector than ever before and earning more money.

Yet Labour's bloated public sector couldn't help Baby P.

Oldeenglish



12 January 2010 12:07am

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cuddyduck

45

12 January 2010 12:46am

What do we want?
Old Etonian plutocracy!
When do we want it?
Now!



AmberStar

54

12 January 2010 12:48am

600 000 out of 60 000 000 is 1%; *only 1%* & the Tory trolls are too tight fisted to help them.

Do you really think their parents are all welfare scroungers? What if half of their parents have genuine health problems? That leaves 0.5 of 1% whose parents *may* be 'feckless scroungers'. David Cameron has £30M in the bank & he wants to add to the poverty faced by deprived children because it might win him a few votes.

Sometimes I despair, I really do.



GZeus

48

12 January 2010 12:49am

Compassionate Conservatism, let alone "Progressive Conservatism" is exposed as a head-swivelling empty oxymoron. Day by day we may understand it a little less and condemn it a little more.

Ahh, right at home with *New Labour* then.

The house of cards is a-tumbling Polly. British politics has debased itself so much that we are a global laughing stock and something to pity with equal measure.

But Gordon Brown is something far beyond any parody that can be described with this humble tongue. He is exactly the type of person that should never have achieved

the position of controlling the fate and destiny of others because the man has little ability to know in which direction he should be heading and at what speed, nor does the decision of destination come quickly or lightly to one whose first, last and every action is corpse-like immobility.

Anyone but Gordon, and if Labour will not field a new candidate then the only *real* alternative is Cameron, warts'n'all.



Natacha

12 January 2010 12:50am

43

Hermione;

"as much as i dislike cameron, he lost a child, dealt with it in a magnificent & dignified manner as far as one can in public life & probably humanized him.
pretty cheap shot polly."

I assume this was a touch of amateur irony. If you remember Gordon Brown lost a child as well and dealt with it with a whole lot less publicity than Cameron. In fact it felt to me distinctly that Cameron, or at least the Tories, were trying to make political capital out of his child's death...

Cheap shots... you should know.



YaBasta

12 January 2010 12:52am

88

And Cameron's "no statistical significance" between poverty and bad parenting stands everything on its head ? though it may suit him to imply they are all down there because they are bad characters.

I know nothing of Cameron's remarks except what your article tells me, yet even on that basis I can tell that this statement is a non-sequitur. He does not say there's little difference between poverty and bad parenting, or that poor people deserve to be poor. He says that having good parents makes far more difference to a child's welfare than having rich parents. In other words, poor people can be good parents and rich people bad ones. To which I would add that when people are bad parents, shovelling endless amounts of money that others have earned at them doesn't make them any better, indeed it probably makes them worse.



bagsos

12 January 2010 12:54am

56

Amberstar

David Cameron has £30M in the bank

How do you know that?. Come to think of it how do I know that you don't have £30m in the bank? I rather suspect you have.....

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12 January 2010 12:57am

19

Isn't the point that Labour have not solved the problem of the wealth divide in 12 years. (apart from enriching themselves)

And the Torys never will. We have no choice. We new a new party and a new system of government.



stelmosfire

12 January 2010 1:02am

18

Brilliant - thank you, Polly.



ResoluteSteve

12 January 2010 1:05am

10

Will you sit in the committee that determines who can spend my earnings more wisely than I can?

markets don't work because agents in it, us plebs with our money, act on incomplete information. our decisions are never particularly good.

our nation has serious problems, so we need to pool our resources better, and that means more focused public spending. the luxury of low taxes that was never a good idea is utterly untenable now.



ngavc

12 January 2010 1:05am

12

Polly - Would you favor legislation banning two parent families You seem to find the idea offensive.

Everyone making an argument focuses on the useful bits. Cameron is as human as your folks.

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[1](#) [2](#) [3](#) ... [13](#)

[Next »](#)

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