

Barbara Kay: Obama should not be promoting single-parent families

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In 2008, while on the presidential campaign trail, Barack Obama's Father's Day message was: "[Black fathers] have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men, and the foundations of our families are weaker because of it."

Such a public acknowledgment of African-Americans' cultural plight was a courageous act of leadership. It raised hope in many observers that, as president, Obama would exploit his unprecedented political capital to address the great social scourge amongst African-Americans: An upward spiral since the 1950s of poor, single-family households, and the flight from fatherhood amongst black men.

But once he became president, Obama's burst of candour was not followed up with public policy strategies or programs encouraging a return to committed relationships in the African-American community. On the contrary, this spring's most talked-about Obama campaign ad could be called the president's "Fatherless Day" message.

The Life of Julia, an interactive web ad, features a faceless, affectless simulacrum of a middle-class American woman named Julia. As you click through her life cycle, the images highlight significant government-subsidized rites of passage — university graduation, career launch, motherhood and retirement — that demonstrate how increasingly supportive a second-term Obama would be in helping Julia realize all her major ambitions.

There is only one glaring omission in the ad: A father for the child Julia chooses to have. (Julia is not specifically described as a single mother, but the ad contains no mention of a husband or long-term partner.)

The ad clearly targets single women, especially those with children. And for a good political reason. There are 10 million more single women than single men in the United States. More than a quarter of the voting population, they are the group most likely to favour government patronage — particularly women with dependents. Between 2000-2010, the number of single women eligible to vote rose by 19%. Today, they are Obama's to lose.

But research shows that when single women marry, or divorced women remarry, they begin to vote like other married women — that is, their voting trends rightward.

In purely arithmetic terms, therefore, Democrats have an interest in expanding the ranks of single unmarried women. And, in fact, The Life of Julia paints an alluring picture, implying single women can have it all — education, children, a secure retirement — without a man, but at no personal cost or sacrifice.

This implicit endorsement of single-parent families comprises a betrayal of fatherless children and most single mothers, especially African-Americans. The average black single mother looks nothing like Julia. She is not getting a university education, or starting her own business, or enjoying leisurely retirement. And by all accounts, she would happily trade subsidized poverty for a hardworking, committed father of her children by her side.

Blacks are the most unmarried group of people in America. (And in Canada: In Toronto's black community, half the children are raised in single-parent homes, of which 80% are headed by women.) Their rates of marriage have been in steady decline for decades. Over 70% of black women, and half of black men, never marry. Moreover, black men are more likely to father more children by multiple partners than men from other groups.

Single motherhood has been exhaustively researched and its consequences widely distributed. Obama must know, or should know, that the "father deficit" is the single most reliable predictor for children's diminished self-esteem, behavioural problems, poor grades and truancy, early school dropout, juvenile delinquency (85% of youth in prison have an absent father), gang membership, promiscuity, teen pregnancy, risk of sexual abuse, substance abuse and homelessness.

But acknowledging these facts when addressing single women voters will not advance Obama's political fortunes. What will advance them is his false assurance that the state can bestow comparable value to what has traditionally been provided by husbands and fathers.

Here's an irony: Monogamous Mormon Mitt Romney stands for strong nuclear families and smaller government. But what is Obama's "hubby state," with him at the helm supported by millions of single women dependents, if not plural political courtship on a massive scale?

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