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Lost innocence

Solidarity Federation

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Summer 1999

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The British Government now seems to have accepted that the law on physical punishment should be changed following the ruling that a British stepfather's caning of a young boy breached the European Convention on Human Rights. The Children are Unbeatable Alliance have called for a complete ban on smacking and physical punishment. However, in spite of many parent education programmes, physical punishment is far from dying out in Britain. Still, over 90% of children are smacked by parents and carers, including babies under the age of one year.

Once it was thought it was acceptable for men to hit women, specially their wives. Now we believe that the concept of zero tolerance promoted by campaigners against domestic violence should be extended to all children, who are surely the most vulnerable members of society.

child soldiers

There are over 300,000 child soldiers world-wide, some as young as seven. They are mainly concentrated in Africa. Because of developments in weaponry, such as lightweight materials, children can carry, handle and operate such arms. These new weapons are produced mainly by Britain, France, Russia and China.

Currently, there are some 15 million children who are refugees, of which 5% are orphaned or abandoned. In many cases, they have witnessed the murder of their parents or family members. They have been psychologically scarred. As a result, many want revenge.

Children are regularly kidnapped and forced to fight. Through this, they have again been forced to participate in and witness atrocities. In Uganda, a gun can be bought for the price of a chicken.

punishment

The NSPCC has recently launched a campaign to end cruelty to children called “Full Stop”. It reports that one child under five dies each week in the UK as a result of parental abuse and neglect. Recent Government-sponsored research found that more than a third of all children in 400 ‘ordinary’ families were punished ‘severely’. ‘Severely’ was defined as the ‘intention or potential to cause injury or psychological damage’.

In Sweden, smacking and physical punishment was outlawed more than 20 years ago. In the 1980s, no Swedish children died and, between 1990 and 1996, 4 children died as a result of physical abuse. Prosecutions for abuse also showed a decline in trend during this period. This trend is most marked amongst parents in their 20s who grew up in this “no-smacking” culture.

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Why have we declared war on the world's children?

New Labour is considering electronically tagging children as young as ten, in its drive to deal with the expected rise in young people held in custody, caused by implementing the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act. Already, children aged ten to fifteen are being tagged in two pilot projects run by the Youth Justice Board, in Manchester and Norfolk. The pilots will continue until March 2000. After this, the Government will decide on extending its plans nationwide.

Jack Straw is a real charmer — even more reactionary than Michael Howard. Speaking recently at a Family Policy Studies Centre Conference, he expressed surprise that, at any given time, 3,500 children under two years old are in local authority care. At the same time, childless couples are waiting many years on adoption registers.

Straw said: “It is in no-one’s interest, not the mother’s, nor the child’s, nor the prospective parents’, to allow a situation to develop where a crisis point is reached in the baby’s first year, because the ability of the mother, often a teenager, to cope has been misjudged by well-meaning but misguided people”. Here we have, in New Labour guise, the Tory hatred of the single/teenage mother. And it goes far beyond negative stereotyping of grubby and stupid beer-drinking plebs. Straw’s blatant discriminatory middle-class fear and loathing of working class people is remarkable — was he bullied at school, or did he just have a rough time potty-training?

Single parents need support. They are generally doing a good job with little practical help, in spite of the negative stereotyping and right-wing ideology which masquerades as, on one hand, common sense, but also as ‘social science’.