

Banning the Belt and Banning the Bomb

I was a secondary school teacher in Scotland at a time when it was still permissible for teachers to hit pupils on their palms with a leather strap. As a pupil I was myself hit in this way on a number of occasions. Corporal punishment was eventually banned in 1987, though abandoned in many schools and local authorities prior to that.

Looking back on these days, which were in this respect genuinely old and bad, I am hooked by the similarities between the banning process for the tawse and for nuclear weapons. In the UN at the moment nation states are discussing the status of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Those nuclear-weapon states which are parties to the NPT, along with their willing or unwilling allies and client states, have a standard narrative: Like all of you we want a world free of nuclear weapons but now is not the time – the security environment is not there yet – when things are better we will look at eliminating our arsenals. They call it Creating an Environment for Disarmament. Now, for me that rings a loud bell. I recall the discussions in our school in Falkirk in the late 70s when the belt retainers argued that we should work gradually towards a disciplinary environment where enforcement by corporal punishment would be no longer necessary. But the idea of a belt-free school began to grow. Could such an unimaginable change actually happen? There was an increase in pupils refusing to accept the belt and in one case in particular the mother of the pupil in question took on the system with great courage and persistence. Gradually there was an acceptance that an official ban was on the way and the strips of leather disappeared from teachers' briefcases. Not long after, a woman who lived in the bungalows behind the school expressed to us her surprise that the big crowd fights she used to see at the end of the school day were a thing of the past. The environment had changed. The ban had changed the environment.

The long grass kickers of the nuclear weapon establishment have this exactly wrong. It is the ban which can change the environment. You could also argue that the prospect of the Treaty on The Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons coming into force, perhaps next year, is already changing the environment. Big international investment companies have divested from nuclear weapons. There's a growing understanding that disarmament is not the exclusive property of the nuclear club - we are all affected and must all have a say. Above all, the windows of imagination have been opened. Alongside "we have to do this if we are to survive", there is "we can do this, it can happen, and it will bring so many other gifts in its train".

Back to the days of the belt. I guess you asked a question of me then, and yes, I did myself wield the belt on occasion in my earlier days. No excuses, it was always wrong, but I don't think we realise just how far things have progressed in Scotland since the fifties and sixties. Read **The Invisible Spirit: A Life of Post-War Scotland 1945-75** by the late Kenneth Roy to discover just how brutal life was in these decades. In the same way, in a decade or two we could look back in wonderment that apparently sensible persons were once arguing that the way to get rid of nuclear weapons was to keep them.