



LET ME DIE

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Let us play – and beat the CRB zealots

Jenni Russell Published: 19 August 2012



I've just spent two weeks at a meditation retreat held at an English boarding school. I've never done this kind of thing before and all the meditative bits were delightful. We drifted into trances at least three times a day yet emerged as ravenous as if we had been on a 10-mile run.

The boarding school bits were as you would expect — spiky-sprung mattresses and sepulchral lighting in the corridors — but there were grand buildings and magnificent views over valleys to make up for that.

The one disappointment was the music. I'd packed my piano books, thinking that practising Mozart would add to this unaccustomed serenity. I asked for permission when I arrived, assuming it was a formality, since during the summer

holidays there would be many unused practice rooms.

The school's answer was categorical: under no circumstances could I enter the music block. A party of French teenagers was staying nearby and, because I hadn't had a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check, I might pose a threat to them.

This made no sense. The teenagers all ate in the same dining room as we did, and were as free to walk through the woods and grounds as we were. If any of us had come on the course secretly hoping to be alone with a 15-year-old at the end of a nine-hour meditation day, there would have been plenty of opportunities to try that without using music practice as an excuse.

The school felt as helpless as I did. It had to follow the national guidelines on child protection. Not one adult had the authority to meet me and conclude that I was interested in arpeggios rather than adolescents. We were all impotent.

This wasn't the culture I had hoped for two years after the formation of the coalition government. One of the most appealing parts of its programme was its determination to reverse Labour's over-zealous approach to child protection and replace it with something based on common sense.

Labour had been about to insist that anyone who had more than fleeting contact with children had to be licensed to do so. That would have meant 9m people having to be monitored on a state database. The coalition scrapped the plan and halved the numbers by restricting vetting to those people who have regular and unsupervised access to children or vulnerable adults. [by following this link](http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/comment/columns/JenniRussell/article1106065.ece)

It is no longer collecting gossip from neighbours about individuals and treating it as fact, and it is allowing people to challenge their records when they find that unsubstantiated allegations against them are preventing them from volunteering or getting a job.

This autumn the government is changing the ludicrous system that demanded a new CRB check for every single role an individual carried out. For example, someone who is a school governor, a treasurer of the nursery PTA, a parent-helper and a supply teaching assistant has required a fresh CRB certificate for every position – even though they are the same individual working in the same school.

These changes are important, but they have been inadequate. When the deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg, announced them 18 months ago, he said the intention was to lift the atmosphere of suspicion around individuals who work with children.

Too many people who were simply trying to do their best for their communities had been treated almost as criminals in the Labour years, and volunteers had consequently been deterred. Paul Burstow, the junior health minister, said that while children needed to be properly protected, it should be done without driving a wedge between them and adults.

It is this culture of fear that has not shifted by a single degree. The concept of adults as potential predators has sunk so deep into our psyche that fiddling with the practical arrangements for monitoring has made no difference.

A woman I know beamed at a smiling baby on a park bench the other day, and was instantly shamed as the mother glared back at her and swept the child protectively into her lap. A female saxophone teacher no longer dares touch children's hands or diaphragms to show them what position they should hold, even though that is an essential part of learning to play well.

A male academic sat next to a three-year-old on the Tube who was proudly holding up his fingers in multi-coloured gloves. He wanted to compliment the child but didn't because he feared the boy would have been warned never to talk to strangers.

The drive for vigilance at all costs is being led now by children's charities such as Barnardo's and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). It is backed by risk-averse civil servants, institutions frightened of being vilified if any child in their charge comes to harm, policemen who encounter the worst of human nature and parents who are continually hearing the message that paranoia is the socially acceptable context in which to bring up the next generation. The counter-argument – that cultivating distrust makes people unhappy and isolated, breeds aggression and eats away at any sense of community – simply isn't being heard.

A frustrated senior Tory told me the coalition's reforms have had no real impact. The culture is so embedded that only a dramatic repealing of many of the current rules will catch the public's attention.

He even floated the possibility that the CRB might be scrapped altogether so people return to relying on references. He told me that there has been a prolonged struggle within government over more reforms, with the Home Office and the Department of Health resisting changes.

Civil servants are siren voices in ministers' ears, warning them of the consequences for their reputations if they make a decision that leads to a single child being hurt. But the senior Tory promised that the reformers were winning, not least because they have the prime minister on their side. Some form of radical change, he assured me, is on its way.

The prize the reformers want is a less frightened society, where children grow up understanding that most people are generous-hearted and that only a tiny minority is a potential threat. They argue that cutting the dispiriting web of rules governing child-adult contact will transform those

relationships, make volunteering more attractive and give more children the chance to enjoy everything from theatre to mountaineering.

One minister cited a recent report by the Economic and Social Research Council, which concluded that sports coaches are now so terrified of being accused of inappropriately touching children that most cannot work as effectively as they did in the past; others have abandoned coaching altogether. Researchers have pointed out that this threatens the Olympic legacy.

I want the reformers to succeed, but I'm not at all confident about their chances. Clearly there is something in the human soul that loves these vengeful pursuits of purity.

In the 17th century the target was witches; in the 1950s it was communists; now it's paedophiles. Everyone wants children to be protected from mistreatment, but they cannot be made perfectly safe while they live among other people. Meanwhile, that pursuit of purity poisons the normal interactions between the generations.

My one hope comes from the Olympic experience. For a fortnight we understood the pleasure of being more trusting, more open and more helpful to one another. It was a different model of how to live and it was much more attractive than cultivating paranoia.

Perhaps ministers can find a way to build on that. And perhaps next year I'll be allowed to play the piano when I'm on a retreat.

Martin Ivens is away