

Letter to Listener, 18/4/07

Becomings and Goings

The best thing about the Section 59 debate is that it has led to a wider consideration of attitudes toward children. Contrasting articles in current issues of the Listener (Joanne Black, Listener, April 21-27, '07) and North & South (Jenny Chamberlain, North & South, May '07) illustrate the point. One takes a traditional view and ridicules the idea of children as human beings rather than human becomings. The other calls for a culture of respect for children.

Joanne talks of her five year old's inability to cook dinner as an obvious demonstration of her incompetence and irrationality. 'The greatest right that kids should have is to be treated like children, not adults', she says. Her vision is of children safe and protected, nurtured and given space and time to play. They are their families' business, and nobody else's and that is best for them. Who could argue with that?

And yet, this vision is not the reality for many children in New Zealand. How is our record of violence toward children to be overcome? Why do parents in European countries kill far fewer of their children than New Zealand parents?

These were the questions Jenny Chamberlain went to Europe to answer. She talks of the Dutch Civil Code's definition of the role of parents as a 'duty and right' and of the rejection of physical force. Dutch law uses the language of entitlement for young people. Ireland has a Minister for Children and the EC a new children's rights office.

It is doubtful that the law and structural changes in European countries have led directly to the lower rates of violence toward children. It is more likely that they are expressions of a new and different view of children, but one that can reach to all levels of society with the help of public education. We should take heed.