

Whose consent?

By David Holland

JUST UNDER 100 years ago, in August 1885, 100,000 people took to the streets of London to demand the raising of the age of consent from 13 to 16. Nine processions wound their way from different parts of London to Hyde Park, accompanied by 34 brass bands. There was a large waggonette filled with little girls carrying the slogan 'Shall the Innocents Be Slaughtered?'

Legislation to protect 'the innocents' was rushed through parliament.

Many people see this successful campaign as a victory in the struggle against exploitation, comparable to the child labour laws and affording necessary protection to children from sexual exploitation.

Yet a humane, down to earth report from the National Council for One Parent Families, published last week, recommends the repeal of the age of consent law. It points out that the law does little to protect young people, but does a great deal to make their lives more difficult.

Fear of prosecution makes it less likely young people will have access to contraceptives, more likely they will have unwanted pregnancies and be fearful of admitting early pregnancy so that the problems raised can be dealt with. An immense area of police discretion exists to back parental sanctions against 'wayward' youth.

This report's recommendations are made in response to the real

pressure of young people asserting their rights to make their own sexual choices. 1 in 8 of the young women under 16 at the moment have sexual relations of some kind. Harassment and repression of young people expressing their own sexuality is what this 'protective' law brings.

The background to the age of consent law is the massive 19th century ideological assault on the working class, involving the imposition of the norms of the bourgeois family. This itself was part of the tremendous restructuring of society undertaken to make the country safe for capital.

Labour

No longer could agricultural workers be sucked into the hungry cities. The problem was the disciplining and ideological integration of entirely new generations of docile workers. Children were taken out of the labour force and a mass schooling system developed. Women were driven out of the world of work to take responsibility for child care in the family.

Just as this redoubled oppression of women was linked to a massive puffing of the ideals of tender femininity and sacred motherhood, so as children were segregated, regulated and repressed, a glowing idealization of the golden faery world of the child was developed. Romantic ideas about childhood, still very



strong today, were first generated in the mid 19th Century.

But the 'little angels' did not live in a Lewis Carroll idyll. A savage attack on children's sexuality was launched to establish the childhood realm of purity and innocence.

At the same time as the nation wept over the death of Little Nell, Dr. Baker Brown, the President of the London Medical Association was carrying out countless clitorectomies on little girls.

Peter Pan

As the nation thrilled to Peter Pan, devices were being widely marketed with sharp steel teeth or which set off loud alarms to be attached to little boys' penises to prevent them getting erections. Masturbation, unremarked by previous generations, was proclaimed to lead to insanity, epilepsy and death.

It is against this background that the campaign to raise the age of

consent should be seen. It did have an ambivalent character — the 1885 marchers also carried banners reading 'Equal Rights for Men and Women'. An attack on the double standard of sexual morality was begun by a mobilization of women.

But the other elements in the campaign — the Salvation Army, the Purity Leagues and their youth section the Snowdrop Band, the Quakers and the overwhelmingly religious idiom, were part of the massive effort to colonise the working class with bourgeois morality and the ideology of the bourgeois family: a fundamentally repressive process.

The law parliament passed in 1885 not only raised the age of consent, it also introduced beating as a penalty for sexual activity between minors, victimised prostitutes by introducing fresh penalties for soliciting and made homosexual acts between consenting adults in private illegal.

This was a moral crack-down not a victory against exploitation.

The present day situation in which threats of police and prosecution back up the arbitrary power of teachers and parents over young people is a result of this historic victory of bourgeois ideology. Readers will remember the recent amazing case of the nationwide hunt to run down a young couple who had quite rationally decided to go away together.

Paedophilia

Separate treatment is really needed of many of the ramifications of these questions! Gays for example for whom the age of consent is 21, face many other specific inequities. There is also the related question of paedophilia.

Those, however who see the spectre of the child molester and the brutally buggered toddler lurking behind any threat to the age of consent, should consider who originated these figures. My guess is it was the same firm as brought you the Black Rapist and the Union Wrecker.

It is worth remembering that of all the sexual offences against young people under 13 that come to court 94 to 95 per cent do not involve penetration let alone demonstrable violence or coercion. A rather higher proportion of evident violence and coercion exists in sexual offences against adults!

Young

But cross generational sex is a side issue for the 40,000 young women under 16 involved each year in sexual relationships with people in their own age range. It is they who bear the brunt of intimidation and harassment.

It is on their behalf, since they have barely the beginnings of a political voice themselves, that socialists should argue for the repeal of the age of consent law and for abortion and contraception facilities for youth.