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- submitted by Delia Lloyd on 12/21/2008



Alcohol at the School Fair? Yes, Please, We're British!

By Delia Lloyd

Over the two years that my children have attended a state primary school in England, I've witnessed my fair share of parent protests. But I must admit that I was totally unprepared for the latest storm of parental indignation: a decision -- wait for it -- *not* to serve alcohol at an upcoming school fair.

The event in question was an international food fair that's organized annually by the PTA. Apparently, several Muslim families brought food last year, but didn't stay for religious/cultural reasons because there was alcohol being served.

And so, given that this was an explicitly international evening with an inclusive theme, the parent committee that organizes fund-raisers for the school (I'm on it) decided to make this one alcohol-free. After all, there are three pubs within spitting distance of the school's gates. We could all just nip out for a pint when the thing was over. No big deal. Right?

Wrong. Within hours of the decision going public, an unofficial citizens-for-alcohol-at-the-food-fair campaign was launched over email. People were coming out of the woodwork. There would be boycotts! They wanted an explanation!

For some, the issue was multi-culturalism. Like the recent debate over head scarves in France, some parents feared that in bending the rules of the majority to accommodate the beliefs of a minority the school would cease to be...well...British.

As one parent argued: "If my children were at school in Saudi Arabia, I'd be more than happy to comply with their rules and beliefs, as I would have no choice. But this is a multi-cultural English school!"

For others, the decision was an assault on personal liberties. For this faction, the protest wasn't about drinking itself, but about the principle of living in a free country: "We're adults! Don't tell us what to do!" came

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the clamors against the nanny state.

Finally, the battle was also over the cultural place of alcohol in England. "This isn't X!*% Disneyland!" screamed an English friend of mine who doesn't even have kids, upon learning of the brewing (no pun intended) scandal.

She was referring to the controversy that exploded in France in the early 1990s when Euro Disney opened without alcohol. "Having wine with food is just part of our culture!"

One parent even volunteered that she would actually prefer that her children saw adults drinking in a responsible way outside the home and it not being a big deal.

At first, I must confess that I really didn't get what all the fuss was about. "What's next?" I laughed. "Smoking Pot at PTA meetings?" You see, I come from America. You know, that country where we almost elected Sarah Palin Vice President? It's a place where people feel totally comfortable regulating morality...and personal choice...and all sorts of societal taboos. More to the point, everyone there is a recovering alcoholic who wants to pontificate about their 12-step program.

So I always thought it strange that we served alcohol at any school event where kids were present. And just to be sure that I wasn't betraying my own inner Sarah Palin, I quickly dashed off an email to some friends in the U.S. who verified that alcohol is, in fact, off-limits at family school functions ("That's why I always come prepared with a flask in my purse," quipped one friend.)

But part of the beauty of being an expatriate is that just when you think you really "get" another culture, you find out that you actually don't, and peel off a whole new layer of understanding. Which is another way of saying that just as "there's no such thing as a joke," this whole incident taught me that "there's no such thing as a drink."

What I initially dismissed as misplaced bickering over whether or not to get trashed during a three hour meal, turned out instead to lead directly into several debates that lie at the core of British identity. Live and learn.

In the end, the brou-ha-ha at our school was resolved with a compromise: we served alcohol at this event, but we confined it to the "top hall" to keep it separate from the food.

As for me? I learned a lot. Prior to the eruption of Merlot-gate, I'd been thinking that at the next PTA meeting, I'd casually suggest re-naming the annual Christmas Fair something like "Winter Carnival"-you know, to be more inclusive.

Not on your life. I plan to keep my mouth shut and stand right behind Father Christmas. And, yes, thanks, I'd love some mulled wine while I'm at it...

Delia Lloyd is a writer/journalist based in London. Her essays have appeared in The International Herald Tribune, The Christian Science



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this is really funny and interesting!

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