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NEWZTEL NEWS: TRN 2ZB "GARRY WARD"

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(2ZW A)

PRESENTER (TONY WADSWORTH): The smacking debate is going to come under the spotlight again tomorrow. A booklet is being launched at Parliament called "Children are unbeatable" and its aim is to stop parents smacking their children. Sir Roger Singleton, the former head of Barnados UK, is in the country. He's warning if we want smacking banned we must ban it completely. That warning comes after Britain changed their smacking laws a couple of years ago. He joins me now. Sir Roger, good morning.

SIR ROGER SINGLETON (FORMER BARNADOS UK HEAD): Good morning.

PRESENTER: What's your personal view on this smacking debate?

SINGLETON: Well I personally have never been able to get massively excited about it but I do recognise that there is a very strong opinion amongst professional groups, amongst lobbying groups that in today's world the best way forward is to put a total prohibition on smacking, and that certainly has been the view which Barnados in the UK and Barnados here in New Zealand have taken.

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PRESENTER: So what do you think of the proposed bill to repeal the reasonable force section of our Crimes Act?

SINGLETON: I think what I would say is that if there's going to be a repeal and I think that there should be, then you should go the whole way, that would be our experience in the UK. I mean in the UK at the moment the law doesn't actually forbid parents or prevent parents from physically smacking their children but it is an offence to hit a child if the child is left with marks or bruising. Now that might be seem to be really quite a sort of sensible thing until you begin to think about the practical implications of it. You don't actually know whether a child is going to be left with marks or bruising until it's actually happened, and there have been no cases tested in the, in the British courts of this. So, I think that it's got to be one thing or the other. It's got... they've got to continue either with the defence of reasonable punishment or I think there's a growing body of opinion here in New Zealand thinking that it should be prohibited completely.

PRESENTER: How is the law change being policed in the UK? Is it a matter of dobbing people in when you see their children with marks on their arms for example?

SINGLETON: Not at all. There's been none of that and I think that if... I think many parents in the UK simply don't have a clue what the law is. This is a matter which is of great importance to professionals involved in child welfare but

I sense that perhaps here in New Zealand it's a matter in which the general public are taking an interest than they did in the UK and certainly if you look at some of the countries where physical punishment has been abolished completely, countries like Denmark and Finland and Norway, Romania, Sweden, Austria, all these countries, in fact, there has been no rush to the courts at all. It's been much more a matter of people saying, well that's the law, we've got to find other ways of disciplining our children and that really is very largely the end of it apart from a tiny, tiny, minority of cases which have found their way into the courts.

PRESENTER: So has the legal change led to any social change in the countries you've just mentioned?

SINGLETON: I don't think that there's been a significant change. I mean one of the things that people very often quite rightly ask about is whether there's been any reduction in the abuse of children in families as a result of this change and I don't think in all honesty one could point big changes in that way. I think the changes that have been brought about have been much more about parents looking for alternative means of disciplining and controlling their children, looking at much more acceptable rewards and punishments when children disobey as they obviously do day in and day out. And I think we've seen a much greater emphasis in these countries in parenting programmes, in a wish for parents to bring up their children without a recourse of smacking.

PRESENTER: Is there any overt policing of the law in those countries?

SINGLETON: I'm not aware that there is. I mean this was a big concern on the people who opposed change. They thought that this was going to be a gross interference by government in what they saw as their basic parental freedom, they saw that police time was going to be distracted and diverted away from serious crime onto this sort of activity and I'm not aware that has happened and I think I can say with some confidence that it certainly hasn't happened in the UK.

PRESENTER: The other concern that is raised in this debate is the risk of good parents being branded criminals.

SINGLETON: Yes and there again that was a big concern of those who have opposed the changes. The law in the... in England changed early in January in 2005 and in the first sixty [phon] months not a single case has been brought in the courts, so that the issue of parents being branded as criminals has not so far materialised.

PRESENTER: You'll be aware of this booklet being launched at Parliament tomorrow called Children are unbeatable. Barnados led a campaign in the UK by the very same name; what was the push behind that?

SINGLETON: Yes, the Children are Unbeatable campaign within the UK is an alliance of organisations who basically believed that the best interests of children would be promoted if physical punishment were abolished all together and Barnados was one of those organisations. And I think the points which we found persuasive in the UK were that children do have a right to the same degree of respect and legal protection which adults receive. I think we were persuaded by the fact that the evidence showed that physical punishment was not an effective way of changing children's behaviour certainly in the medium to long term although it might be immediately, sort of, have some effect. And that in... it's most important not to over-estimate this or over-state this, but in a small minority of cases that the culture of hitting and smacking by parents can gradually and incrementally over a period of time lead on to more serious injuries and to child abuse and if you have a culture, a general expectation that parents won't and don't smack their children, then at least you minimise, you don't remove but at least you minimise the risks of small smacks going into something more serious and more dangerous.

PRESENTER: I think we can all agree on that. There are a large number of Kiwis who are for this ban but an equally large number will defend their right to smack, so Sir Roger, thank you for sharing your perspective on the debate this morning.

SINGLETON: Thank you very much for the opportunity.

PRESENTER: Sir Roger Singleton, former head of Barnados in the UK.

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