

Uniform Treatment

Mike Perry (1953-1960)

Although none of us -- the pupils I mean -- were legal experts, we all knew that the 1944 Education Act made it obligatory for each of us to arrive at school each weekday morning and depart again in the late afternoon attired in the official school cap and tie. We knew this because the headmaster had told us so ... again ... and again and again ... But that did not mean that we accepted this dictum. Resistance set in about the time one made the transition from shorts to long trousers; it fermented and grew steadily until the completion of the A-level examinations. There seemed to be little objection to wearing the school tie, which in our view provided a sufficient sense of identity with the school. We felt that this put us on a par with those wearing club ties, regimental ties, university ties and so on. But the school cap was something different.

We regarded the school cap as the attire of infants and no self respecting *revolucionado* over the age of sixteen could admit that he approved of wearing such a thing. We also noted that *the girls* who, by then, had been transhipped to a new brick building half a mile away up Cheadle Road detested the felt 'soup bowls' with which authority had forced them to adorn their curly locks. The regulations governing the attire of school children had been laid down by erudite educational theoreticians in the exhalted belief that compulsory wearing of school uniform would reduce the distinction between the children of richer parents and those whose parents were less well off. The sad reality was that the market for the uniforms of any particular school was exceedingly small compared to the turnover of the retail trade in childrens' clothing. The result was that uniforms were only available from a single supplier and often in a quality that was considerably lower than that available from large retail chain stores at a significantly lower price. Thus school uniform served to separate those children whose parents could finance the frequently needed replacements and those who couldn't. But that didn't stop the staff from insisting that we comply with the law, and spot checks were carried out at the school gates from time to time.

But school uniform can be viewed from various angles and a little side story illustrates my point. At a certain point in the 1980's my twelve year-old daughter went to the American School of the Hague. Prior to admission, a teacher explained at length that the school had no official uniform and students could wear whatever they wished (within reason). For her first day at the new school, my daughter was sent off looking as pretty as a picture (à la Brit). She returned that evening, reeling from the culture shock which was rapidly transferred to her parents when she produced a shopping list of clothes which had to be bought immediately. The blue jeans, shoes, shirts, rucksack etc. etc. were all accurately specified with brand names. And they weren't cheap. Default would have meant ostracism, and so the following Saturday she was taken to the shops to be *re-equipped*. You see, even if the school's management had no requirements for a school uniform, her classmates had evolved their own dress code which was enforced far more rigidly than any British headmaster could ever hope for. Thus with or without *official* school uniform, the parents [the old *revolucionados*] have to foot the bill! But I digress.

Although no self-respecting *revolucionado* would be seen wearing a school cap, we all had one. It would be kept hidden in a rucksack or the saddlebag of a bicycle, as a precaution in case of a sudden spot check. Many caps had been "acquired" from the school's lost property office and it was almost a matter of pride that the cap was either too small or too big. [Neither the law nor school rules appeared to specify that the cap should actually fit the wearer !] One of our number even found a use for his school cap. His bicycle had an unreliable gear system and the chain came off frequently. Everyone knows that replacing the chain is a dirty, greasy, oily task with a pair of filthy hands as a result. Our hero had devised a method for picking up and replacing the chain using his school cap, thus keeping his hands clean. We were suitably impressed by his ingenuity and also by his cavalier disregard for the System.

One afternoon, I can't remember exactly when, all exits to the school were sealed (yet again) by posses of masters, representing the Enforcement Authority. Only those wearing a school cap were allowed to pass the barriers. [In addition cyclists had to produce a lock and chain.] Our hero walked up to the barricade, bareheaded and nonchalantly wheeling his cycle, since school rules expressly forbade the riding bicycles within the school grounds.

"Where's your cap, boy?" demanded the voice of Authority.

"Here, Sir." said our hero, obligingly pulling the filthy rag out of his saddle bag.

"Good!", said Authority, "Put it on".

"What?" spluttered our hero, stunned. "But, Sir, it's ..."

"Put it on! Now! Or go into detention!"

[Nothing in school rules said that a cap had to be clean.]

Wincing and shuddering, our hero pushed his cycle through the school gateway with the symbol of his disregard for Authority perched on top of his head, precariously arranged for least possible contact with his hair.