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Legalize pepper spray [1]

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Imagine a world where possession and use of fire extinguishers was banned. Let us suppose that a terrible tragedy ? a child accidentally asphyxiated while playing with one ? caused widespread media fuelled outrage. In a grand parliamentary review it was decided that there would be a blanket ban on all future possession of fire extinguishers except by trained health and safety professionals.

?But you need fire extinguishers to put out fires!? protested the few curmudgeons opposed to this new law. ?Fire extinguishers are the first line of defense against fires. Without fire extinguishers there will be more house burnings.?

?So you support child asphyxiations then, do you?? chimed a newly popular strawman in response. ?Besides, that's what firefighters are for.?

Within a year house burnings have more than doubled. Instead of questioning the law (now firmly embedded in general approval), a new lobby group is on the streets shouting that the recent outbreak of house burnings was caused by dilapidated fire stations and government austerity.

The moral of this story alludes to a very real problem. 80,000 women are raped every year in the UK. That's not even to mention the 400,000 who are sexually assaulted, every year, according to the government's Action Plan on Violence Against Women and Girls [3] (2010-2011). And one of the most proven and minimally violent methods of deterring sexual crimes is completely banned in the UK.

Pepper spray, or *oloresin capiscum*, was prohibted under section 5 of the Firearms Act of 1965, which classifies pepper spray in league with automatic firearms and rocket launchers. Pepper spray is also banned under similar grounds across most European countries, except, typically, Switzerland where it is classified as a self defence device- not a weapon- and can be carried by all.

In Switzerland there are on average about 150 incidents of rape per year. Adjusted for population, Switzerland has proportionally 84 times fewer rape victims every year than the UK. This really is a staggering figure.

Oloresin capiscum is an inflammatory agent that causes temporary blindness. It can temporarily incapacitate an aggressor in a relatively safe and non-violent manner. The compound used in pepper spray is almost identical to tear gas, used by riot police to control mobs.

This raises interesting though rarely considered questions about the inequality of power between the state

and its citizens. Why always must the state be the sole exception to its own laws?

But putting aside such abstract considerations, what if tomorrow parliament completely legalized this relatively tame form of self defence? What if every pocket and handbag in the nation was equipped with pepper spray? I believe the evidence indicates that cases of rape and violent crime would plummet considerably.

As always, there are the unintended consequences of state prohibitions. The only self defence devices available on the market are mini alarms and so called ?criminal identification spray? which brands the aggressor and makes them easily identifiable to the police (for what purpose seems to be unclear, given the truly shameful rates of rape convictions). But since these products don't actually deter the criminal or give any window of escape, using them would most likely only aggravate the situation even further.

There is no such thing as a miracle cure, but putting the power of self defence back into the hands of citizens is not only right in theory, it is highly effective in practise. Better to extinguish the fire at the source, then to wait half an hour for the state to deal with the smouldering rubble and ruined lives left behind.

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