

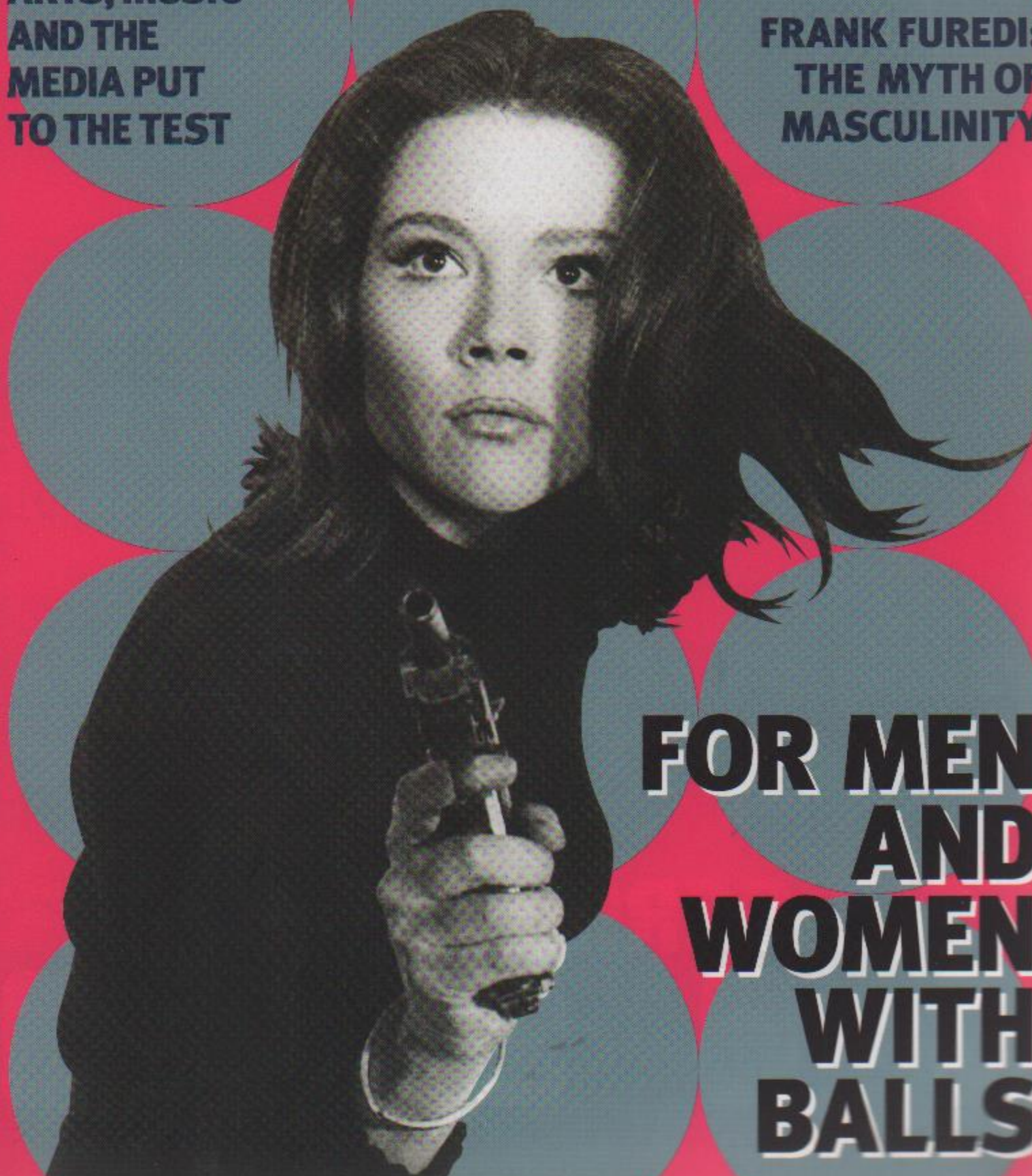
# LM112



**WHO'S  
DUMBING  
DOWN?  
ARTS, MUSIC  
AND THE  
MEDIA PUT  
TO THE TEST**

**FAY WELDON:  
'TONY BLAIR IS LIKE  
A LITTLE GIRLIE'**

**FRANK FUREDI:  
THE MYTH OF  
MASCULINITY**



**FOR MEN  
AND  
WOMEN  
WITH  
BALLS**



**LM is the most interesting and provocative magazine I have read for many years. It has found a new centre ground where libertarian and anti-authoritarian ideas are given complete freedom.**

**JG BALLARD**

**Someone has to be a dissenting voice in our brave new world— let it be LM.**

**FAY WELDON**

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Do boys really need sex and relationships education? asks Wendy Earle

# LM112

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# MICK HUME

Editor



## RIP PC? YOU AIN'T

YOU COULD BE FORGIVEN FOR THINKING THAT WE are living in a post-PC age. Relieved right-wing newspaper columnists have started talking about political correctness as a fad whose time has passed. Television schedules include self-consciously 'incorrect' programmes, from cheesy old situation comedies to irony-laden 'lad's TV'. In between watching lap-dancing and football, you can ridicule the PC language imposed over the past decade without being denounced as an emotionally/intellectually challenged dinosaur. Nobody in their right mind will now admit to being politically correct.

But don't be fooled into thinking PC has crawled off somewhere to die. The fact is that it has crept quietly into every corner of life. In Tony Blair's Britain, like Bill Clinton's America, we are living under a tyranny of political and emotional correctness. And the worst is yet to come.

Those who think that PC is out are turning reality on its head. In truth, political correctness is now so all-pervasive in our society, so ingrained in the public consciousness, that we no longer even notice anything odd about it. Only the most bizarre and extreme examples attract comment—like a ban on a traditional children's book, or a ruling that an onstage shower in a US strip club must have wheelchair access, or the insistence that the phrase 'accident blackspot' is a racial insult.

But this kind of cultural flotsam has never been what the phenomenon known as political correctness is really about. The essence of PC is the attempt to regulate personal behaviour—in particular, to lay down a new system of rules governing interpersonal relations. At this everyday level, political correctness now influences the way that all of us live. Yet hardly an eyebrow is raised.

Contrary to the general impression you get from its critics, political correctness was not simply dreamt up by a few bitter feminists and loony left council committees. It is a product of

the general climate of our times, an age in which many of the old connections and solidarities between people have broken down and trust is at an all-time low.

At a time when few of us seem to have much faith in other people (or ultimately in ourselves), when we are often ready to assume the worst about the motives of strangers and neighbours alike, there is a demand for more supervision of what people are allowed to do, say and even think. PC and its ubiquitous codes of conduct arose largely in response to that demand. It has since come to exercise a tightening grip on events—especially with the election to government of New Labour, the natural party of political correctness with a mission to re-educate the untrustworthy public.

At the same time as everybody laughs at PC language codes, for example, nobody questions the legitimacy of the voluminous new rulebook on what constitutes 'appropriate' behaviour between people today. Many words and gestures which might once have attracted little attention are now likely to be treated as serious offences against the sensitivities of others. Just see how often accusations of 'bullying', 'abuse' and 'harassment' now crop up everywhere from the workplace to the newspapers, as the definition of such personal crimes expands to cover all kinds of unexceptional behaviour.

Ridiculous PC rules, like the ban on interracial adoptions, may no longer be publicly acceptable. But the politically correct demand to regulate interpersonal relations now impinges on the practice of every important institution in society. From the churches to the medical profession, all have felt obliged to reorganise their affairs around the assumption of mistrust, introducing codes of conduct in a bid to persuade people that they are safe from abuse by the priests and doctors whom they would once have revered.

The key PC point which now informs debates about public and private life is that

nothing can be left to chance, or to common sense. It is generally accepted that every aspect of interpersonal behaviour must be formalised, if not via a new law then through some kind of government guidelines or quasi-official advice. Take the issue of marriage and family relationships.

At a time when family breakdown is blamed for all kinds of social problems, the authorities are determined to interfere in and regulate our most intimate relations. Not content with making it even harder to get a divorce, the New Labour government now wants to make people pass more stringent moral tests before they can get married in the first place.

There are proposals coming out of Jack Straw's home office for premarital counselling

## POLITICAL MORALITY FOR

(perhaps to prepare people for the ordeal of the compulsory counselling they now have to go through before their divorce). There are discussions of whether registry offices can be made to issue vicar-style lectures on commitment to would-be newlyweds—a dumb idea which has already been further dumbed down to the typically PC panacea of giving out an official advice pack to the assumed-to-be unhappy couple.

And there is Straw's brother, Ed, writing a pamphlet published by New Labour's favourite think-tank Demos, on how TV soap operas like *EastEnders*, *Coronation Street* and *Brookside* should show fewer marital break-ups and play more of a role in the moral instruction of the ignorant masses. (As if the soaps had not



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# SEEN NOTHING YET

already been ruined by PC moralism, with their constant stream of stories which preach about the dangers of drink, drugs and Aids, and when barely an episode passes without family members earnestly talking through their domestic difficulties like members of an addicts' support group.)

The PC notion that no aspect of human behaviour can be left for humans to decide for themselves is part and parcel of Blair's emphasis on 'lifelong learning'. Education is no longer just about imparting knowledge to young people. It is about giving us all moral instruction. In the classroom it means that children are now subjected to an intrusive regime of 'personal, social and health education', which lays down more rigid rules for life than the old Christian Brothers ever dreamt of beating into their

pitch for more moral soap operas, the makers of television dramas were already bombarding us with positive images of a PC world where worthy women put pathetic men in their place.

The rise of supposedly post-PC television also fits into this pattern. The defence offered by those involved with programmes like *Men Behaving Badly* is always that they are 'ironic'; in other words, we know it's naughty, but don't worry, we don't mean it—and we've got the sad bastards under control.

Scratch the surface and it seems that nothing is now safe from the influence of political and emotional correctness. In June's *LM* our World Cup special argued that even football is going PC on and off the pitch, being turned into another outlet for the nineties mantra about the

that we are all, in the words of Diana the PC princess, 'battered this and battered that', in need of support and therapy and the thought police. Political correctness provides an entirely appropriate morality for these mistrustful, insecure times. In the end it is not about what we think of words or images, but people.

At *LM*, we reject all of the lowlife assumptions about the human condition on which the power of PC rests. Our magazine is concerned to promote a human-centred morality for today, and to counter the culture of low expectations of which PC is an integral part. That is why, in this issue, we have made such a big deal of exposing the dangers behind the crusade against 'masculine values'. It is why I hope to

## CORRECTNESS PROVIDES AN ENTIRELY APPROPRIATE THESE MISTRUSTFUL TIMES

charges. Beyond the school gates it means that we are all being treated like pupils in need of supervision. This is not the old-fashioned 'nanny state'; it is the new PC parent state, the caring professional state, the expert state that only wants to help us to make 'informed choices'—just so long as we make the 'right' choice based on the selective information we are given.

No sooner has the first half-decent day of summer dawned than doctors and council environment officers are queuing up to warn us of the dangers of sunstroke and skin cancer. The authorities repeatedly insist that adverts be amended or withdrawn to stop unscrupulous companies sending us 'incorrect' lifestyle messages about fast cars, strong drink or anything else off-message. And long before Ed Straw made his

need to regulate behaviour. That argument was spectacularly vindicated by the Gazza affair, where the lardy one was finally punished, not for being unfit and off-form (what else is new?) but for failing to fulfil England coach Glenn Hoddle's moral mission to turn him into a reformed role model for the macho miscreants whom the government has branded the 'Loaded generation'.

In the end, it does not matter how ludicrous or laughable we think the more extreme cases of political correctness might be. The tyranny of PC will continue, and continue to get worse, because it is feeding off the anti-human assumptions of our age. The assumption is that people are not capable of getting through life without more and more moral guidance;

explore these issues further at a forthcoming debate on 'The tyranny of the new PC', just one of the 'Living Dangerously' events which *LM* is hosting at the Edinburgh Festival in August (see page 14 for details).

While the critics sneer at the 'failure' of PC, it continues its quiet advance. Unlike Enid Blyton's books or Punch and Judy, there has not yet been a high-profile failed attempt to ban *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. But my daughter has just been given an 'updated', non-adversarial version of the story in which, instead of being chased off by the hungry bears, Goldilocks instantly becomes their best friend and moves in with the family. No doubt the social services, NSPCC, ChildLine, Kidscape, Relate and the rest have been informed.



**HARD-LY**

I admit that the occasional man I have met who could not sustain an erection for a satisfactory length of time has been far less of a problem than the many who could not sustain a conversation long enough. But is Viagra really such a bad thing? (David Nolan, 'Stiffening up', June). Perhaps it is 'normal' for most men to 'experience some sort of sexual failure'. What's so great about that? What other artificial aids to 'satisfactory sexual performance' are you against? Lubricants? Butt plugs? Mucky movies? Did you by any chance have a good Catholic upbringing?

The rest of your magazine seems all in favour of exercising science to improve the quality and the length (no pun intended) of life, and of not being content with what satisfied our grandmothers. The only thing I can see wrong with Viagra is that it is confined to medical, not recreational use. How do I join these Viagra tests on women?

**TIMANDRA HARKNESS***London N1***A REAL MAN'S GAME**

That football is the 'beautiful game' was well expressed by Alan Hudson ('Why England cannot win', June). A passion for the game also oozes out of Mick Hume's editorial ('A man's game?') defining the ills afflicting it. Why then does *LM* proceed to dilute the best with 12 pages of invective and whining from the rest?

Duleep Allirajah ('Why it's cool to support England') engages in the most extraordinary contortions to justify draping himself in the flag of St George. Clearly he is far from comfortable when explaining that he is now associated with old-style nationalism, which is okay as it is redundant, as opposed to the current brand proposed by Blair. No, Duleep, that tired symbol is every bit as offensive as in days gone by. Support England by all means, but leave out the anguished excuses.

As for Stephanie Pride ('I bet you don't do that at home'), the Scarborough steward ('a person appointed to maintain the arrangements or order at a public

gathering', Oxford English Dictionary), was she press-ganged into the job? No, she joined in order to go to the match free and then complains that she is under instruction to do her job. Perhaps you could join the cops, Stephanie: the pay's better and you have a far better chance of breaking somebody's ankle.

As if the endless twittering of the chattering classes is not tiresome enough, we are now faced with *LM*'s repackaged version. Can we have our ball back, please?

**ALEC TURNER***London N1***FREEDOM TO INCITE?**

James Heartfield ('Why hate speech?', February) seems unaware of the law of incitement. If Heartfield's hypothetical man said 'kill the niggers' and somebody else did so, he could indeed be convicted for murder and rightly so. At common law it has been an offence to solicit a person to commit any offence since at least the case of Higgins in 1801, provided intent can be proved. This does not in any way absolve the individual of responsibility to judge for himself whether to act on the speaker's words; but to allow the speaker immunity from the consequences of his actions in the name of free speech flies in the face of common sense.

Piers Morgan's opposition to privacy law ('Certain judges can't wait to give us a kicking', February) I find even less convincing, and not simply because his arguments are self-serving. A case cannot be dismissed because of the advocate's motives for making it, and Morgan is right to point out that incorporating the European Convention on Human Rights will enable judges to create new law by imaginative interpretation case by case. But that is not an argument against a privacy law as such, rather a recognition that what are essentially political decisions should be made in the open by elected politicians. Moreover, even a judge-made privacy law need not automatically lead to tyranny. Such a law could in principle be applied to prevent insurance companies or employers requesting an individual's medical records or to

prevent the police from building a national DNA database.

**ROBERT CLAYTON***Isle of Man***CHILDREN AND SEXUALITY**

While welcoming your articles on the paedophile scare ('Discussing the paedophile panic', May), I feel that you left out the heart of it all: the fact that the British public is screwed up about sex. We have not yet got over the Victorian period and most people, in their heart of hearts, still think sex is something dirty and only to be enjoyed in the dark behind locked doors.

The second issue you left out is child sexuality. Children often start to have sexual feelings when they are very young. They are told that they must not find out about 'all that' till they are older, with the result that they do not know what is going on. I threw myself at grown-ups from the age of 10. I fell in love with the man who drove the Sainsbury's delivery van and he used to give me lifts home from school. I think my mother suspected what was going on and told me that I must not ride in his van as it could get him into trouble. I had no idea what this was about and could well have defied her—and he could well have lost his job and maybe landed in prison. Had it been explained to me, I would have understood and saved him and me from possible horrors.

I am not pretending that there is no problem, but it is nearly always a problem of non-consensual sex within the family. The current panic is largely a false thing whipped up by the sensation-seeking media. However, there will always be a problem as long as sex is considered too horrid to be discussed with 'innocent' children. This attitude invents the threat and disarms the child: all children need to know the basics, and then they will be more able to deal with unwanted advances from adults.

**BILL THORNYCROFT***London SE27***MEGALOMANIAC MICROSOFT?**

If Microsoft (MS) produces standards that are good for all (Mark Beachill, 'Bill Gates rules cyberspace, OK?', May),

that is indeed good. However, that is not always what MS does: MS devised ActiveX technology for the Internet which can prove harmful to computer users as it allows direct access from server to client hard drives. Such a security risk can be used maliciously to erase files and spread viruses. Furthermore, MS actively discouraged its more secure rival Java, which also had the benefit of working on any modern computer, whereas ActiveX only worked with MS Windows.

Microsoft is in the business of creating an electronic hegemony by undermining all other operating systems, many of which are better suited to certain tasks than Windows. Would I be right in suggesting that *LM* is produced on a Macintosh using Quark Xpress? Surely you believe that the more choices, the better.

**JASON WALSH***Belfast***THE ART OF THE WORTHLESS**

The American correspondent who objected to Mick Hume's foray into art criticism ('Ghoul Britannia', May) argued that 'politics is not a valid basis for judging the aesthetic value of art' (*LM*-mail, June). This antiquated stance ignores the boast of contemporary art that it possesses no aesthetic value whatsoever: we can either like Britart or lump it, but we cannot say it is 'good' or 'bad' by applying some purely artistic standard, since none exists. Art now means anything you want it to mean.

By instigating the aesthetic of self-immolation, the contemporary art world probably hoped to secure its experiments against the strictures of public opinion. But the reverse has proven to be the case. The pursuit of the puerile has not only cramped creativity, it has also left the field open for others to find a value for modern art that suits their own agendas. The Britart themes—that art is essentially meaningless and life is futile—have been hijacked by the establishment. Since no substantial criticism of this abuse of contemporary art as yet exists, either in the artistic or the political spheres, Hume's editorial was timely.

**AIDAN CAMPBELL***London*



## FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

The great strength of Andrew Calcutt's book *Arrested Development* is that it touches a raw nerve in anybody who has been influenced by the counterculture. It stands our inverted images of freedom and rebellion back on their feet and shows them to be the stuff of contemporary conformism. It certainly seems to have touched a nerve in *LM*'s reviewer Michael Fitzpatrick ('Senile delinquents', June). 'Nostalgia is death' according to Fitzpatrick, but there seems to be more than a whiff of it in his 'reservations' about *Arrested Development*. While of course Fitzpatrick is right to remind us that possibilities existed back in the sixties other than those that have subsequently come to dominate, his attempt to find the positive in the counterculture specifically, rather than in the broader 'popular upsurge' of that 'golden decade', only reinforces Calcutt's point.

Fitzpatrick reproduces Calcutt's quotation from a contemporary of 'anti-psychiatrist' Dr RD Laing—'his inculpation of society comes so near to being absolute that it is experienced as an exhilarating liberation'—simply to confirm the experience of 'exhilarating liberation' provided by Laing at the 'Dialectics of liberation' conference. But regardless of how Laing's radicalism was experienced at the time, to the extent that Laing absolutely inculpated society he was plain wrong. He was wrong

then and the idea is wrong now and, as Calcutt demonstrates, it is an error characteristic of counterculture and victim culture alike.

If *Arrested Development* was an assessment of Laing's life and work, its failure to consider the 'humanistic current' that predates his immersion in the counterculture would be a major flaw. But *Arrested Development* is not about the sixties: it is a book about one of the sources of the victim culture's legitimacy in society today.

**PETER RAY**

London

## LOLITA: THE FACTS

Irene Miller's review of Adrian Lyne's *Lolita* ('Making Lolita grow up', June) was a well-written piece with some interesting points. A pity, then, about the nonsense of her final paragraph. If she had bothered to read the foreword of the book she would have found that Nabokov (as John Ray Jr PhD) tells us that Humbert 'died in legal captivity, of coronary thrombosis' and Lolita 'died in childbirth giving birth to a stillborn girl'.

**RENNIE HUGHES**

Dumfries and Galloway

## IRELAND CALLING

I am a reader of *LM* now living in Ireland, and I would like to hear from other *LM* readers here. Please contact me at the e-mail address below.

**STEVE DALEY**

steve@anu.ie

## The what's NOT on guide

**WRAPPED:** Fabergé's Fusion perfume advert has been censured for featuring a dj with a small drug-style envelope and the message 'Fusion fragrance—the only thing worth sniffing in a club'. Janet Betts, mother of 'Ecstasy victim' Leah, called for the magazines carrying the advert (*Muzik*, *Ministry*, *i-d* and *Sky*) to be banned. Drugs tsar Keith Hellawell said that the advert 'portrays the drugs culture as glamorous' and 'should therefore be avoided'. Shame on Fabergé for saying perfume is better than drugs. **SEX, DRUGS AND ROCK'N'ROLL:** The estate of Jimi Hendrix has stopped the National Theatre from using 'Are you experienced?' in Kevin Elyot's play *The Day I Stood Still*. The Hendrix estate judged that the play contained too many references to sex and drugs. Have they never seen the cover of *Electric Ladyland*? And presumably when the great man choked and died he must have been eating a kebab. **NOT JUST TEASING:** Under the new rules for the poster industry, advertisers who 'produce offensive or irresponsible material' can be sentenced to compulsory pre-vetting for up to two years. The coyly named Copy Advice team has expressed concern over 'teaser' adverts that make 'shockingly possible' but fictitious claims. According to the Advertising Standards Authority 'most people enjoy a good joke but advertisers should take good care to consider the effect of the individual elements of a teaser campaign if they are seen in isolation... If advertisers are uncertain about the likely impact of a campaign, the Copy Advice team is on hand to help dot the i's and cross the t's'. In other words, 'you can laugh at our terrible puns but when we tell you to check everything with us we're not joking'. **CHEESED OFF:** The organisers of the Cooper's Hill cheese-rolling race blamed police and council officials for the cancellation of this year's main event (a small group of dyed-in-the-wool contestants raced illicitly under cover of darkness). Since Roman times crowds have gathered to watch participants roll Double Gloucester cheeses down the 45 degree slope at the village of Witcombe. After 30 injuries last year, the organisers felt that the insurance demands placed on them were impossibly high. Forty-three years a cheese roller, Tony Peasley complained that 'we live in a nanny state society where people aren't allowed to do anything risky or have fun and the authorities intervene to protect people from themselves'. Peasley says cheese-rolling is a 'robust country pursuit', but these days even the yeomen are not allowed to be stout. **SCRATCHED:** 'So who's bought the Diana scratchcard? I say "scratchcard"—in fact, you can't get the surface off just by rubbing with a coin. No, you have to slam it into a concrete surface at 128 miles per hour. But you can win a Mercedes, so I think it's worth it.' Recorded as part of Carlton TV's variety show *The Warehouse*, this joke was dropped from the final version due for broadcast on 16 July. Comedian Timandra Harkness reported that 'the producer seemed quite happy with it at the time, but after the programme had been edited she told me on the telephone that she'd been told to cut it out'. Harkness also said she would not have minded so much but she had 'already self-censored the joke for television. In the live version, the prize is a handbag full of cocaine'. **SILLY BREEDER:** 'Organic farmer' Charles Windsor, aka the Prince of Wales, has warned that genetically modified food 'takes mankind into realms that belong to God, and to God alone'. This can only mean that HRH is against good breeding, which is a form of genetic modification, after all. Presumably his marriage would not have been so godless if Diana had been a plain, ordinary pleb instead of a lady. **SING SOMETHING SAFE:** Camden council has organised chant monitors to go to pubs which are showing World Cup matches and check that fans are not singing chauvinistic songs in an offensive manner. Top of their list are 'Two world wars and one World Cup' and the theme from *The Dambusters*. The local constabulary has approved the plan. Meanwhile Relate, formerly the Marriage Guidance Council, is issuing advice on how rocky marriages can survive the World Cup without breaking up. Love-making to the theme to *The Dambusters* is not among the suggestions.

Compiled by Andrew Calcutt

## WE WELCOME READERS' VIEWS AND CRITICISMS

Write to The Editor, *LM*, Signet House,  
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Letters may be edited for clarity and length



# TABOOS

*Do boys really need sex and relationships education?  
asks Wendy Earle*

## MASCULINITY CAN MAKE YOU GO BLIND, BOY!



How can you tell soap operas are fictional? In real life, men aren't affectionate out of bed.

Why can't men make eye contact? Breasts don't have eyes.

These two anti-men jokes are from a collection of over 30 recently e-mailed to me by a friend. The fact that my friend is a man is pretty telling. Being male these days is a joke, it seems: or at least you have to laugh or you would cry. There is a growing consensus that through moral education boys must be protected from a dismal future as 'typical' men—potential delinquents, child abusers, wife-beaters and all-round losers.

Last November the Sex Education Forum, a wing of the National Children's Bureau funded by the department for education and employment, published 'The charter for effective sex education in school', calling for the inclusion of sex education in the national curriculum. Effective sex education is not really about the biological processes so much as about preparing children 'for healthy and fulfilling

relationships'. This latest initiative is particularly targeted at boys: the Sex Education Forum has launched a government-sponsored campaign entitled 'Let's hear it for the boys!' to support 'sex and relationships education for boys and young men', for which they have published a handbook with the same name.

In contrast to the traditional notion of a carefree boyhood, the editors of this handbook assert, 'It all feels a bit grim, growing up as a boy, alone and alienated and relying on a peer group which also fosters that aloneness'. They claim that their research 'showed that boys and young men felt under real pressure to present as "hard", "strong" and "knowing it all" and to conceal displays

of caring, dependency, loving and other forms of nurturing or supposed effeminacy' (*Let's Hear It for the Boys!*, Gill Lenderyou and Caroline Ray (eds), 1997).

Along with many others today, Lenderyou and Ray argue that a key purpose of sex education should be to counteract gender-role socialisation that makes boys act out male stereotypes. Masculinity, they believe, leads to displays of unacceptable behaviour: 'The goal of achieving successful masculinity may force them to differentiate themselves from gay men, women and "failures" by adopting homophobic and sexist behaviour and attitudes.'

Effective sex education is here about establishing a new standard of acceptable behaviour, one that is based more on traditional 'feminine' attributes rather than 'masculine' ones. 'Masculine' attributes—aggressiveness, presenting a strong front, hiding emotions, appearing knowledgeable and rational—are now seen as inherently problematic: damaging both to boys themselves and to the people around them.



boys are strong  
and girls are not





Sharon Lamb, writing in the *Journal of Moral Education*, argues that 'sex education must take as its moral injunction the diminishment of violent sexual behaviour in our culture' ('Sex education as moral education' in vol 26 no 3, 1997). In her view there is a continuity between the obnoxious behaviour of a pubescent boy who grabs a girl's breast as he walks past her to impress his friends, and the crimes of a serial rapist and murderer. She claims that sex-role socialisation puts boys 'at risk of becoming sexually coercive in adulthood', that boys are less trained in 'empathic interpersonal problem-solving', and are 'less accepting of emotions such as sadness and tenderness'. Therefore, sex education should 'teach values such as consideration, carefulness, concern and care as healthy sexual practice'.

The concerns about boys' social and emotional development are largely misplaced. There is no connection between 'laddish' behaviour in boys and their adult personas. Research evidence shows that boys (and girls) grow out of stereotypes. As children and teenagers they use stereotypes in different ways, to help them work out their identity and establish themselves in social groupings and in wider society, but as they acquire a more complex grasp of human individuality and moral values they become more complex and individual themselves. As they mature, they lean less and less on stereotypes as guides to their behaviour and attitudes, and develop more individually defined approaches to their social interaction.

So if a grown-up man acts like a 'yob' after a football match it is not because he is acting out predetermined behaviour ingrained in him from birth. Just because he acts like a big kid, it does

not mean he thinks like a 10-year old. In 'letting himself go' he is merely responding to the excitement of the moment. You will probably find the same bloke changing his baby's nappy the next day, a picture of caring and conscientious fatherhood.

*Let's Hear It for the Boys!* proposes that sex education should 'support boys' emotional and sexual health to help them communicate more effectively, access help and advice and reduce the rising suicide rate amongst young men'. Yet do boys (or girls) need this kind of help in growing up? Aren't they better off doing what they have always done—learning from their friends and peers and working things out as they go along?

In doing the research for this article I came across a paper written in 1986, 'The dirty play of little boys' by Gary Alan Fine. He points out that 'the dirty play of children seems to be a natural outpouring of some of the developmental imperatives of growing up'. He describes the crude sexual talk and posturing of pre-adolescent boys, usually conducted well away from adults, as being part of a process whereby boys 'act mature'—live up to what they perceive to be adult standards of behaviour and address adult issues from which they are generally excluded.

Of course, when adults do catch a glimpse of this closeted activity we might well be shocked: but what we see is boys' immaturity, their crude attempts to act out their maleness, in which they pick up on and caricature all kinds of images and information, most of which will be discarded in their interactions beyond their circles of friends and peers. The last thing we should do is take this kind of behaviour seriously: it is not a particularly prevalent feature of boys' activity and they will grow out of it. Attempts by adults to suppress or control this behaviour are likely to do more harm than good, denying children opportunities to strike out on their own and play out their free-ranging fantasies of adulthood before they have to buckle down in the real world.

The moral pressures of wider society eventually kick in and boys learn to behave in socially acceptable ways. Yet whereas in the past socially acceptable adult behaviour meant acting as an independent, competent individual, capable of controlling and expressing one's thoughts and feelings more or less appropriately as situations and relationships demanded, now it is becoming increasingly common to consider this kind of behaviour as problematic. *Let's Hear It for the Boys!* asserts that 'nationally, the percentage of young male users of young people's sexual health services is worryingly low, with estimates ranging from three to 20 per cent. The potential repercussions of this are serious in terms of both young men's mental and physical health and, of course, there is a subsequent effect on their relationships'.

It used to be generally recognised that men don't use sexual health services because, unlike women, they don't need to. Women have to deal with the possibility of getting pregnant—and have to use the health services if they want effective contraceptives or if they do become pregnant. While once we thought that men were lucky for being able to get through most of life without seeing a doctor, now this 'condition' has been pathologised—they are seen as putting themselves and others at risk for not taking responsibility for their sexual health.

There is a danger that the new focus on boys' sex educational needs will simply serve as a means to play on the vulnerability of young men, when what they need is to take confidence in their strength—not as against girls, but alongside girls in shaping their role in the modern world. ●

Childlike caricatures of boys and girls from the National Children's Bureau publication *Let's Hear It for the Boys!*



boys like to play  
B Play Fighting



Girls like to play  
SPICE



Diana Rigg is  
Emma Peel in *The  
Avengers* TV series





The government-led campaign against all things masculine is becoming an obsession, says Frank Furedi

# IN PRAISE OF MASCULINE MEN— AND WOMEN

It's official: British men are hopelessly stupid, devoid of emotion, lacking in basic social skills and stubbornly resistant to the helpful lifestyle advice offered by the New Labour government. This was the line advocated by Tessa Jowell, public health minister, when she launched yet another propaganda booklet designed to 'help men to help themselves'. According to Jowell, women are not the problem, since they are 'far more aware of health and lifestyle issues', but men have a lot to learn. Her banal booklet, 'Life begins at 40', probably refers to what she thinks is the IQ level of her target audience. Her top tip is 'give up smoking or at least cut down', followed by the exhortation 'enjoy a drink, be sensible'.

Jowell's patronising assumptions about male inferiority are widely shared within the political and cultural establishment. For some time now the media has been scaring us with alarmist accounts of 'male underachievement', 'the crisis of masculinity' and the 'lost generation' of young boys. In recent months it has been claimed that young men are far less competent than young women at adapting to the new labour market. 'It's a woman's world' was the confident message on the front page of a recent *Newsweek*. According to this mantra, women are more adaptable and more flexible than their oafish male counterparts.

In all of these accounts there is an uncritical acceptance of the idea that female is good and that male is bad. Educational experts dwell on the problem of boys' negative attitudes in schools. It appears that while the boys are off playing football, the girls are busy talking to each other and learning sophisticated communication skills. Health professionals continually remind the public that men are incapable of expressing emotion and find it difficult to talk about anything other than sport, beer and page three girls. Men are also suicidal and self-destructive, psychologically out of control. One such 'men in crisis'-type report published recently in the *British Medical Journal* claimed that, in Scotland, depression was on the increase among men; while the female admission rate to hospitals was falling, male admission had risen. Nobody needed to spell out the inescapable conclusion—that yes, men are a sad lot.

It is not only officials in health and education who tend to pathologise male behaviour. Newspaper reports involving young men frequently exude an air of panic, linking the social problem of male failure with sensationalised accounts of crime and family violence. According to one study of the treatment of men as fathers in British newspapers in the month of July 1994, the largest single category of stories reported concerned 'men as monsters', who had bullied or abused or murdered their children (cited in *The End of Masculinity*, J MacInnes, p15).

The stigmatisation of masculinity is strongly endorsed by the New Labour government. The home secretary, Jack Straw, is now reported to have set up a special ministerial committee to deal with the problem of delinquent young men. It is likely that this committee will come up with the usual politically correct proposals, such as helping boys to develop a 'more positive self-image'. Although the committee is ostensibly about dealing with the danger of youth delinquency, it is evident that the government's agenda is inspired by a wider brief. According to reports, the 16-24 year age group is continually referred to in Whitehall circles as 'the *Loaded* generation', after the self-consciously un-PC men's magazine.

The scorn which New Labour expresses for *Loaded* has little to do with its concern for poor young men. This stylish glossy magazine is not exactly required reading on the run-down inner-city estates of Britain. The real target of this campaign is not men trapped in poverty, but men influenced by what the government imagines constitutes masculinity. The term '*Loaded* generation' expresses New Labour's contempt for such supposedly masculine values as risk-taking, assertiveness, self-confidence and competitiveness.

The new British establishment's crusade against the '*Loaded* generation' indicates that the object of its scorn is not simply men, but a set of values and norms of behaviour that it characterises as masculine.

Today's anti-masculine culture condemns forms of behaviour that in the past were considered elementary human virtues. Critics of masculinity have a strong distaste for the habit of self-reliance and self-control. They believe that the aspiration for heroism is ludicrous. And they are intensely suspicious of the virtues of independence, willpower, risk-taking and rationality. One interesting study of this subject sums up the change in mood:

'What were once claimed to be manly virtues (heroism, independence, courage, strength, rationality, will, backbone, virility) have become masculine vices (abuse, destructive aggression, coldness, emotional inarticulacy, detachment). Advocates of the anti-masculine culture are particularly disdainful of the alleged inability of men to "ask for help" and "display emotion".' (*The End of Masculinity*, J MacInnes, p45)

Clearly this unhealthy 'male desire for control' goes against today's social norms, which dictate that we are all increasingly dependent on therapeutic intervention to get through life.

The key point that has often been overlooked in this debate is that the attacks on masculinity actually mask a rejection of such fundamental human principles as the sense of self-worth and the aspiration for self-determination. That is why ultimately this debate is not really about men. Women who display such 'masculine' characteristics as self-control, →





## The myth of MASCULINITY has little to do with THE BEHAVIOUR

← rationality, courage and leadership have also come under intense suspicion.

Every time a so-called 'superwoman', such as money manager and multiple mother Nicola Horlick, runs into trouble, there is a collective snigger about their unrealistically high expectations. The flipside of this is that when powerful women give up high-pressure jobs in favour of their personal or family lives, they can count on being widely praised for lowering their horizons (see the reaction to the recent resignations of *Frank* magazine editor Tina Gaudoin and Conservative frontbencher Angela Browning).

Writing recently on contemporary British heroines, Angela Neustatter worried about the impossible example such women set to others. She cited approvingly a psychologist who claimed that 'if people are encouraged to think they must be brave' then they 'may deny what they really feel' ('To boldly go on', *Guardian*, 13 April 1998). From this standpoint, bravery and exemplary behaviour are actually obstacles to people getting in touch with their 'real' emotions.

Men who act like women are clearly preferred to women who act like men. According to the politically correct hierarchy of virtuous behaviour, feminine women come out on top. Feminine men beat masculine women for second place. And of course masculine, 'macho' men come last.

Many trendy health professionals adopt this approach when considering health risks. According to one study 'masculinity' is a 'significant predictor of poor health practices'. In contrast, 'feminine characteristics' are associated with 'health-promoting behaviour'. The emphasis here is not on gender but on behaviour. The study argues that 'highly feminine men' exhibit the greatest concern about their health and that, irrespective of sex, those with a feminine orientation are more likely to 'maintain good health habits'. Why? Because traditional masculine types are allegedly individualistic, dominant, competitive and willing to take risks, and such values are inconsistent with the health obsessions favoured by today's professionals (see 'Appraisal of health risks: the roles of masculinity, femininity and sex' in *Sociology of Health and Illness*, vol 17 no 2, MS Kaplan and G Marks, 1995, p207). Another way of saying the same thing is that individuals who stand up for themselves and who are prepared to take responsibility for their lives are unlikely to rush down to their GPs every time there is a new health panic. That is why the very experience of masculinity is now seen to constitute a health risk.

Critics of masculinity are so confident of their crusade that they very seldom pause to reflect on the logic of their argument. A belief in their moral superiority absolves them from the tiresome task of backing up their convictions with evidence. Articles in otherwise liberal newspapers casually accept the myth of boy/male inferiority at school. Experts see

no need to elaborate on their thesis that emotional literacy is the preserve of women and that men are rarely in touch with their feelings. Feminist writers (of both sexes) simply assume as a matter of fact that women's way of knowing is superior to men's. Under the guise of social research, there has been a reversal in the prejudice that used to inform gender relations. The traditional prejudice of male superiority has been replaced by the cult of femininity.

In some ways the present discourse on masculinity involves striking echoes of the nineteenth-century discourse on race. The racial view of the world associated different races with diametrically opposed characteristics. White people were rational, black people were emotional. The Western races were scientific, the Eastern ones were spiritual. Today, enlightened opinion understands that racial traits and characteristics were not only stereotypical, they were also fantastic products of the imagination. Yet many people who are dismissive of racial myths are quite happy to embrace the myth of masculinity. A similarly sharp counterposition of male and female traits and emotions informs the current intellectual climate.

Of course men and women often do react differently to situations. This divergence is above all the result of the differential experiences of men and women within the division of labour that prevails in society at any time. For example, the experience of working at home influences human personality in ways that are radically different to life on a building site or at sea. But differential experiences do not lead men and women to develop genuinely contrasting emotions. It is not so much that women are emotional and men are not, but rather that their feelings are expressed through different social conventions.

All of the serious research has continually questioned the assumption that there are qualitative differences between men and women. On the contrary, researchers have emphasised that there are greater differences within one sex than between them. For instance, although most commentators uncritically accept the contention that boys find it more difficult than girls to confide in friends, research suggests that such differences across the gender line are very small.

As we all know from our everyday lives, there are plenty of cold competitive women and lots of warm supportive men. And we also know that the same individual can at different times act very differently: warm and affectionate on Sunday, cold and competitive on Monday. Individuals can also adopt different emotional strategies in different situations. There is no inconsistency between one person playing the roles of callous manager, passionate lover or anxious father.

The myth of masculinity really has little to do with the experience of boyhood or the behaviour of men. Like the racial imagination of old it is based upon a presumption of



## OF MEN—

it is infused with the same moral repugnance that Victorian missionaries felt towards the savage

female virtue and male vice. Those who uphold this prejudice imagine masculinity as inspired by a brutish and destructive impulse to dominate. Masculinity is now presented as the cause of a wide spectrum of violent behaviour, from child abuse to war. The anti-masculinity literature is infused with the same moral repugnance that Victorian missionaries felt towards the savage.

These days, ostensibly academic accounts of the experience of boyhood can barely conceal a profound distaste for their subject matter. You can almost hear the tone of disapproval with which one recent account of schoolboys growing up describes the young savages. It reports that 'compared with girls, boys speak hard, act hard and, to our detriment and theirs, perhaps in so doing they actually do become hard'. It concludes that these 'processes constitute a divisive and brutal form of learning to be a male' ('Shorties, low-lifers, hardnuts and kings': boys, emotions and embodiment in school', S Prendergast and S Forrest, *Emotions in Public Life*, 1998, p202). For the critics of the young brutes there can be no greater sin than being 'hard'.

There is an unquestioned assumption that growing up to be hard is necessarily destructive and will inexorably lead to behavioural problems. Anti-masculine writers are obsessed by the troublesome and conflictual dynamics of the childhood experience, since they imagine that these are the source of the key problems facing society.

The campaign against masculinity has become an obsession — a fact illustrated by the tendency for otherwise serious politicians and public figures to associate all kinds of problems with the so-called crisis of masculinity. The lines that divide different types of behaviour have become blurred; what would once have been characterised as simple self-assertiveness now tends to be lumped in with everything from bullying to serious violence, as characteristics of the same problematic masculinity. From the perspective of the masculinity-haters, all these forms of behaviour reflect a hard macho style of learning to become a man. Tragically, the creative side of growing up hard has been entirely overlooked in all of this. In the real world, hardness is not so much a male artefact as a practical way of negotiating the many challenges thrown up by life. It teaches children to learn how to be assertive. Moreover, it can help them to gain physical and emotional confidence.

The myth of masculinity assumes that the key to the emergence of an enlightened society is for children to learn to come to terms with their emotions. That is why boys growing up hard are seen as such a big problem. It is suggested that these callous young monsters continually cover up their emotions with a false bravado and physical violence. The conclusion of this therapeutic worldview is that boys as well as girls need to be taught to cry more, to focus on their feelings and to get in touch with their inner selves.

The fact is, however, that learning to control your feelings, act rationally and face the challenges thrown up by the outside world are all a key part of growing up. Getting children to become more 'emotionally literate' will not make them any better at dealing with the unexpected problems they will inevitably face in life. More likely it will encourage an empty introspection, a generation of navel-gazers. Worse still, it is likely to hold back children from being bold, from actively experimenting and developing a sense of adventure. Girls as much as boys will pay the price for this new attempt at social engineering.

And make no mistake, the anti-masculine project is above all an exercise in social engineering. Its emphasis on emotion legitimises the growing tendency of the state to colonise the private sphere. Once the emotion of the self becomes the business of educators, caring professionals and public officials, the line between private and public concerns will become blurred. That is why masculinity, stereotyped as a refusal to acknowledge emotion, is so despised by the New British establishment and its therapy state.

If you want a glimpse of the anti-masculine future, look at what happened at an all-women basketball match in upstate New York earlier this year. A player, Nykesha Sales, was one basket short of becoming the leading scorer in the history of women's basketball. But she had ruptured her Achilles tendon and could not play in the game. So at the start of the match the opposition stood aside and let her score an uncontested basket, to break the record. Michael Tranchese, the official who organised the fix, thought this charade was a great advert for feminisation. He explained that 'males are made up differently to women' since 'men compete, get along and move on with few emotions'. He added that 'women break down, get emotional, get so much more out of the game' than men. That is what we are supposed to cheer today.

The contemporary discussion on masculinity does not so much reflect a new phase in any 'gender war' as a wider loss of nerve across society as a whole. We prefer sad men and women who openly indulge their weaknesses to those who want to get on with life, take risks and if necessary ignore the pain. And instead of acknowledging our anxieties and trying to overcome them, we wallow in them and insist that we are actually more 'aware' and more in touch with our feelings. Such flattery, such self-deception. Bring on the masculine men and the masculine women who are prepared to fight hard, love hard and take a few risks.

Frank Furedi is the author of *The Culture of Fear*, published by Cassell. He will be speaking at the LM debate 'Sad men and worthy women' at the Edinburgh Book Festival on Thursday 20 August (see page 14)



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**Dr Anna McGee** *Glasgow Caledonian University (BPS)*  
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Speakers:

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**Ferdinand Mount** *Times Literary Supplement*  
**Joan Smith** *Independent on Sunday*  
**Pat Kane** *The Herald*  
**Broadcaster Lesley Riddoch** will convene the debate.

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Wednesday 26 August

### HOME-MONGERING: THE FEAR OF THINKING BIG

Speakers:

**James Woudhuysen** *professor of innovation, De Montfort University*  
**Allan Murray** *architect*  
**Malcolm Fraser** *architect*  
**Richard Murphy** *architect*  
**Architecture journalist Penny Lewis** will convene the discussion.

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# SOFT BOYS AND BITCHY BASTARDS

...when all Jennie Bristow wants is a bit of passion

I will never forget the day I saw my first 'real man'. I was about 12 years old and impressionable; he was 40-odd, sweaty, noisy, passionate and not very tall. It did me no favours at school when I proclaimed myself Bruce Springsteen's biggest fan, but so what? Now I know that it didn't have to be Springsteen—Madonna in concert probably would have inspired me just as much, with that noise, that passion and that arrogance. Contrast it to the low-key concerts by Morrissey and the Beautiful South that I went to with my friends; skinny soulful men and women whispering into their mikes, almost apologising for being there. As I sat in the audience, bored and depressed, I realised that my own pop era had passed me by. The nineties, with its skinny-chested blokes in cardigans and its waif-like women with problems, was here to stay and so, unfortunately, was I.

'Sensitivity' is what the nineties has been all about, and if you haven't got it you will not sell many records or make many films. The aggression that was once the basic ingredient of good rock music became the angst-ridden keening of Nirvana and later, the cynical low-key bitching of Pulp and Blur. When dealing with the press, pop personalities go into sensitivity overdrive by recounting as many of their own life tragedies as they can remember. Ex-*Neighbours* star Natalie Imbruglia is on the way up, shocking many with her ability to be beautiful and sing, yet the pop-packagers promoting her know that talent and beauty is less of a marketing strategy than her much vaunted 'insecurity'. As the *Guardian's* Sam Wollaston pointed out in an interview on 15 May, when Nat says she is depressed 'all the time', by depressed she surely means 'a bit down'. Even my old heroes and heroines are not safe from the endless thirst for proven sensitivity: I read a horrible article in the *Independent* by Suzanne Moore on Madonna and her newfound vulnerability. Is nothing sacred?

And these are only the women, and this is only pop. All you need to know about men in pop is the rise and rise of Boyzone, the ultimate girly boy-band, when the only 'men' of the music world exist in the ironic, self-conscious, infantile cod masculinity of Oasis. In their quest to become acceptable, throughout society men are aping women and women are aping more 'feminine' women: 'feminine' meaning vulnerable and emotional. Young men and women, growing into a world of enforced girliness, are the clearest examples of the new values in action: and if you don't believe me, just go to a university.

When I started my degree course at Sussex University in 1993, I remember feeling kind of stunned. You look around your fellow freshers and you simply cannot tell the difference between the lads and the girls. Skinny, clean,

shy and generally vegetarian, they all go to the pub together to chat about their personal problems and none of them wants to walk home alone. In seminars about women's writing or feminist theory, the men are by far the most vehement critics of their own sex; in seminars about anything else they try to talk about women's writing and feminist theory. Women's studies courses, where girls go to talk about their feelings and emotions, are ever popular and now, apparently, there are men's studies courses in American universities where boys can do the same thing. Sussex is, admittedly, painfully right-on and hippyish, but go to Bath or Birmingham or Bristol and it's no different. Mixed-sex halls of residence might as well not be, because students are a) androgynous and b) not having much sex. And that's another thing.

When your friend, who happens to be under 21, gorgeous, intelligent and generally brilliant, tells you that her problem is that she always fancies bastards, what picture comes into your mind of the said bastard? A macho hunk, maybe, or a cold and haughty Adonis. Certainly not the same person that your friend is talking about: the nineties bastard.

The nineties bastard treats you badly...but does it by behaving like a girl. The nineties bastard goes out with you for a fortnight before running off because he is too mixed up at the moment, he needs to sort his feelings out, he doesn't want to get too committed. The nineties bastard goes out on a date (you buy the drinks), then refuses to sleep with you because he doesn't want to get too committed. The nineties bastard bitches about you to his friends—who are generally girls. And so it goes on. That sly, manipulative prick-teasing that used to be the prerogative of women has now been adopted by new, 'nice' men who have had all their macho bastardness educated out of them.

The problem I have with this adoration of girly girls and wannabes, is that I've done it all before. As a teenage girl with a diary and friends with diaries, I spent seven years getting emotional, obsessing on my own problems and everybody else's, blowing the most minor inconvenience or humiliation out of all proportion. It took all of a week at university and six months reading the papers for me to realise that this sad, petty, narrow world of the teenage girl had been a blueprint for the society I grew into. If Springsteen was my own symbol of thinking big, acting tough and taking on the world with confidence and passion, the world in which everybody loves *Bridget Jones's Diary* and where pop stars get credibility through their angst represents the opposite: thinking small, behaving like a wimp and letting all your problems overwhelm you. In this sense, it really is a little girl's world.





# LOADED Q

Claire Fox talked to Adam Porter of *Loaded* magazine about tits, dicks, New Labour and that 'fucking lemon' Nick Hornby

The 'Loaded generation', according to Tony Blair, is shorthand for delinquent single men aged 16-24 whose bad behaviour is encouraged by this laddish men's magazine. Harsh but fair? *Loaded* magazine is commonly seen as today's metaphor for men behaving badly. Teenagers may not buy it—the core readership is aged 21-25—yet for a government obsessed with making young men more 'responsible' the stereotypical *Loaded* reader fits the frame. *Loaded* man supposedly wallows in irresponsibility, tits, bums and lager. By contrast, Jack Straw's 'positive role model' campaign includes recruiting more male teachers, the use of mentors based on the aptly titled American 'Big Brother' project, and a scheme to send health workers out to talk to young men about safe sex and parenting in 'their own environments'. *Loaded* and Labour? Surely different worlds.

But Adam Porter, who is about to leave *Loaded* after working as the managing editor throughout the magazine's four-year life, has taken offence at Blair's comments. 'They've got no right to talk to people like us in that fashion. We are their moral and intellectual superiors.' If this sounds strange coming from a magazine that features its fair share of amoral pleasure pursuits, Porter has his own ideas about the government's superior values. 'For them to even start moralising about lads who might have had a fight in the street—which is not what *Loaded* is about—but for them to dare lecture us, look us in the eye and talk about violence when they would have happily dropped bombs on Iraqi civilians a few months ago—it's unbelievable.' Observing that New Labour is always on the look out for a soundbite with

media appeal, Porter believes that Blair's team hope to launch a moral crusade, using *Loaded* as 'a moniker for the troubles of society'.

When Porter argues that members of the *Loaded* editorial team are 'loads better role models than Tony Blair—I'd much rather any kids I ever had would turn out [more] like me than him', I might agree with him. But wouldn't a more appropriate 1990s role model be somebody like the self-consciously anti-masculine Nick Hornby?

'Nick Hornby is not a man. I mean he's got a cock. But he's soft, a conformist, a fucking lemon. Nick Hornby's books are about Nick Hornby becoming an accepted middle class writing aspirational fuck-wit.' Porter says *Loaded* was originally set up as a reaction to what passed for male culture at the time ('alloy wheels and stupid gadgets') and is meant to reflect what ordinary guys do. 'There's nothing inherently bad in what young men get up to in this country, especially the nice stuff reflected in the magazine. There's no stories about us beating up on people or doing anything nasty—except to our own bodies and lungs.'

Unlike Blair and Straw, Porter does not accept that male behaviour is any worse today than in the past. On the one hand he believes 'politicians want you to get in trouble—they love it—why do you think they have drug laws?', but he also argues that attitudes towards male behaviour have changed more than the behaviour itself. The kind of activities now deemed problematic might once have been seen positively as showing spirit. 'Douglas Baden-Powell—who was the guy with no legs?—the pilot who did the scouts, he loved hooligans, Victorian hooligans, he thought they were

the best type of boy. The naughty ones were the ones who had got some sort of adventure, some sort of spirit, who won't conform to other people's ways of thinking. Today, more than ever before, everybody must conform.'

Porter sees New Labour's attacks on young men simply as the latest exercise in enforcing conformity. By 'ridiculing them, making them out to be lots of things that they aren't', the Blair government is using a cynical method to get people to accept less—low pay, demeaning jobs or the dole: 'Batter people over and over and tell them they're car thieves, violent, murderers, junkies, shit at school, and you tell them over and over again and eventually they believe it, eventually they'll take delivering post for people like me.' What Adam Porter doesn't seem to get is that it is people like him, not just his post-boy, who most offend liberal sensibility today.

Porter is aware that criticism about *Loaded* comes from an unusual direction: 'We get pilloried a lot by the people who should support us. The right-wing people don't really give a fuck about us, but so-called liberals these days are really illiberal and right-wing, but not quite as open about it as other people.' Despite the fact that these illiberal liberals now hold up *Loaded*-style masculinity as an example of the trouble with boys, Porter refuses to believe that 'feminine' values are now the only acceptable values to have. He insists that the topics covered in *Loaded* appeal to both sexes: 'Taking drugs, going travelling, getting pissed, chatting people up and having sex—that's all pretty feminised isn't it? I mean women do all that.' True enough, but surely he can see that Blair is keener than men



# QUESTIONS

PHOTOS: UPLOADED.COM



become more like women than vice versa? At this point, Mr *Loaded* started to sound more like Nick Hornby's mate than I had expected. 'I think the world would be a much better place if it were run by women. Men have had 2000 years of practice. Alexander the Great wasn't a woman. Men still kill, rape and sexually abuse; women don't do it, or are only five per cent of the problem.'

Porter seemed surprisingly defensive about *Loaded's* reputation. I was not phased when we were interrupted by somebody saying 'we can't get that bird till Wednesday' (something about soccer kits and photo shoots), and I enjoyed the story about one *Loaded* feature, a 'thing called pornalikes where people send in pornography, playing cards and things like that, featuring people who look like celebrities in

the porn' (he was furious that a *Times* journalist had accused them of airbrushing on actual celebrity heads). Still Porter tried to reassure me that *Loaded* staff are 'not Neanderthal, misogynist twats', explaining apologetically that 'we still want to look at pictures of women, we still find them exciting and attractive physically, but we don't hate women and want to subdue them and want to suppress them'.

At times Porter goes overboard in trying to break down the myths about his magazine. He stresses its serious side and objects to the way *Loaded* is caricatured: 'We're always getting "you're always pissed/out taking drugs"; but read the mag, it's not really like that. Read it properly.' Not that I could get anybody actually to admit that they read *Loaded* properly. Comments ranged from 'you don't read *Loaded*,

you just look at the pictures' and 'I've flicked through it occasionally at the barber's' to 'my brother buys it, but I only glance at it'. It seems that for some in these conformist times, admitting to reading *Loaded* really is like admitting you buy porn mags.

Like *Loaded*, Porter is full of contradictions. He says he knows that thirtysomething men like himself should settle down—'you should already have got your mortgage and be ready to work the rest of your life for an insurance company or Toshiba'—but this is not in his plans. He is contemptuous of the established norms, proclaiming that 'their standards are irrelevant bullshit and there's a whole generation of people who are under 50 now who just say screw that'. Yet he took the unusually 'responsible' step of standing in the local council elections as an Ealing Green Party candidate, assuring me that the greens are 'reasonable commonsense-type people—not like Socialist Worker dicky hippies and crusty twats. They might not be quite like me—but they're all right and they let me stand'. He is obviously rather proud of his vote: 'I only went to one meeting, got 10 signatures, did no campaigning whatsoever but still 110 people bothered to vote for me. That's really good; I was only 40 votes behind one of the two Liberal Democrats.' And he does think, after all, that *LM* goes too far in its libertarian stance.

But I don't mind. Managing editors who refuse to conform are about as rare as in-your-face magazines. Post-*Loaded*, Adam Porter might be saying goodbye to all those tits and bums, but I hope he keeps his balls. ●



Helene Guldberg has a woman-to-woman talk with Fay Weldon

## 'TONY BLAIR IS LIKE A LITTLE GIRLIE'

'Tony Blair is a girl', giggles Fay Weldon. 'It is the whole feminisation of politics. At the head of it is Tony. In America we have Clinton, who is also a girl. He isn't guilty of penetrative sex, is he? It's a kind of letting off steam, like a railway engine.' She leans forward, pushing her hands up in the air: 'Sssshhhwwwoooooosshhhhh, like that! And somehow this is what he has to do—which renders him girlish. It is not penetrative. It is not *male* sex.'

'And on this side of the Atlantic we have got Tony—idolising the pop stars like a little girlie, talking in the language of caring and sharing. He is a girl. And Mr Hague—now he just can't make it as a girl. He is too associated with the old men. He hasn't learned to say sorry, like Blair.'

Fay sees the current propensity for everybody to apologise for everything as part of the post-Diana feminisation of society. 'You know, even Australia has its "Sorry day" [for the treatment of the Aborigines]. It's silly isn't it? It doesn't make any difference saying sorry. If it means people won't do it again—well, good. But it's more like your grandmother telling you "say you're sorry". So you say "sorry" and then you do it again. I think we should apologise to the Japanese for dropping the Bomb. Have we said sorry to the Argentines? Lounging on her living room settee, we get carried away discussing all the things that could merit an apology. The list is endless.'

But what about Fay Weldon herself—maybe she has something to apologise for? Has she not turned her back on sisterhood, writing articles entitled 'Pity poor men' that ask whether 'feminism has gone too far', and whether 'the pendulum of change has stuck and needs nudging back to a more moderate position'?

She has even half-jokingly talked about the need for 'a masculinist movement'. What is going on? Fay and her husband Nick Fox have seven sons between them—which, of course, could explain her concern about what is happening to men. But there is more to it than that. 'Men have changed', she says. 'You sort of feel they are opting out. They don't seem to know where they are going today. There are more women applying for university than men. Women cope better with tests.'

Pity poor men, indeed! She once wrote, 'Men, or so the current female wisdom goes, are all idle, selfish bastards/rapists/think with their dicks. So men shrink, shrivel and underperform—just as women once did'. Polly Toynbee was not impressed, wondering aloud whether Fay Weldon, 'the great imaginative voice of feminism', had suffered a 'damascene conversion', or turned into 'an obedient little woman' in her comfortable Hampstead home, complacent about the plight of the women who do not have it all.

Fay is a little irritated by such misinterpretations. 'Polly Toynbee, what does *she* know? Things have changed. But that does not mean I have turned my back on the plight of women.' Anyway, Fay never described herself as a feminist. 'I wrote about how people lived. I am now writing about what it is like today, what people struggle with, what people's hang-ups are. It's difficult to put your finger on it.'

She does put her finger on some of the key changes in her most recent novel *Big Women*. The book charts the life and death of Medusa, a female publishing company, from its inception in 1971 to its end, following an aggressive takeover bid, in 1996. It is a witty, enticing and thought-provoking novel.

Through the main characters, Fay explores the way in which society has changed—the shifts in the values we uphold, the relationships we form, our fears and aspirations. The four women who launch Medusa, referred to as 'the Furies', are not particularly sympathetic characters. It is rather difficult to take them seriously. The image of Stephanie walking out on her husband and children, after the birth of Medusa, naked, with 'bare boobs pressed into the steering wheel, for she had not brought her glasses', sums up the farcical nature of the women's travels through life. But they do at least have a vision of where they want to go (even if not being able to agree on how to get there). As Fay says, 'Their enterprise did take off because they believed in something'.

So what is she trying to tell us? Fay sees society turning its back on male virtues in favour of female ones. 'Traditional male and female virtues are not necessarily what men and women are like. It is part of the roles that we were expected to have. The male virtues were those of reticence, courage, intellect, reason, self-discipline and a protective instinct, I suppose. The traditional female virtues were nurturing, caring and sharing, also feeling, apologising and all the rest of it. And society has sort of flipped, I think, towards the female. Politicians speak in a female voice. And the male values are somehow discarded.'

Fay Weldon was born Franklin Birkinshaw. She changed her name to Fay but used the male-sounding Franklin when filling in application forms, which, she believes, helped her get into university. Now she thinks the tables have turned: 'Young unmarried professional women who are educated have a wonderful time, better than any other section of society.' →





figments

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← Today, Fay believes, you may get further with a female name. For instance, as a writer, you are more likely to get the big advances from publishers — 'which is not necessarily a good thing. It's only as good as the book is'.

What does she think of the new women's writing? 'I think *Bridget Jones's Diary* is a terrific book! It is the sort of epitome of all these books. It's very entertaining, Helen Fielding's got style. I am not sure if it is literature though, because it's so personal—and yet it is a fictionalised feature. But that's fine. Why not?'

So is *Bridget Jones* a kind of role model for women today? 'I think it is a very unambitious role model, but I am afraid it will do for a lot of women. It tells us a great deal about a lack of aspiration. And about relationships...' As she continues I start feeling a little downhearted. I too enjoyed *Bridget Jones's Diary*. What I did not like was any of the similarities I could find between her and me. Like *Bridget* I am a single thirtysomething. I would like to believe the comparison stops there. But here is

'What do you think of more women MPs?' is the first question I can think of. 'I don't necessarily think it is a good thing. I don't know whether just because an MP is a woman she is a better MP. I don't know whether these sort of traditional gender politics of nurturing and caring are what necessarily makes a good MP.'

Fay has a bit of a reputation as a mischief-maker. It is not so much what she says but the way she says it. Earlier, while sipping some rather strong Grappa in her kitchen with Nick, she recounted what she had just said to a departing journalist from a wildlife magazine. 'It is a little sentimental to be preoccupied with saving particular species, don't you think? I told him that extending sentience to more and more animals is part of the dumbing down of human abilities!' she declared triumphantly, glancing at us over her glasses. I can imagine the stunned silence of the journalist. I caught a glance of him earlier and he looked like such a gentle man. But then again, I suppose he should have known what he was letting

In 1992 Ron Weldon walked out on their 30-year marriage after his therapist told him that his star-sign, Gemini, and Fay's, cusp of Virgo and Libra, were incompatible. He refused to discuss the matter with her and died of a heart attack within hours of her receiving their divorce papers.

'If you listen to your therapist you think your problems are somebody else's fault.' But did you not benefit from therapy? 'Yes, but that was in the sixties. It was about wanting to know about yourself. Today it is not about wanting to know about yourself but to get somebody else to cure you of your unhappiness. You want somebody else who knows better than you. But you are unlikely to find them. Unless you are very—it is a term I hesitate to use—but if you are very stupid. Then somebody more intelligent than you may be able to tell you, for instance, that if you hit your wife then she won't like you any more. We don't need to be told the self-evident. Everything is lowest common denominator.'

Fay also raised some eyebrows



## 'Therapy DESTROYS RELATIONSHIPS— if you listen to your therapist you think your problems are somebody else's fault'

Fay Weldon having a go at young single women, lumping me in with *Bridget Jones*.

I tell her I don't need a relationship, I am quite happy at the moment with no men cluttering up my life. 'You just don't try hard enough', she says. So we younger women should all make more of an effort? 'Yes, I think you should. I think you should make much more of an effort to put up with relationships.' Maybe she is right; maybe I should try harder to form a proper 'relationship'.

Fay continues: 'A lot of young women despise men. They are all looking for men who are better and brighter, who earn more and are higher up the social education scale. Their instinct is to look for their better. It's a sort of transfer situation. Men always used to marry beneath them. It was just assumed that that was what you did as you were not going to find your equal.' So now we should make do with men who we do not consider our equal? I start going off the idea of trying a little harder, and quickly change the subject.

himself in for. Nick looks a little concerned however. 'You've got to be careful', he mutters. 'What will people think?!' But I agreed with her. I drew the same conclusion in an article I wrote for *LM* last year about animals and pain.

Fay says she will be pursuing the theme of the 'gender switch', also explored in her imaginative new collection of short stories *A Hard Time to be a Father*, because 'it just seems so interesting and makes people so cross'. Do you enjoy doing that, making people cross? 'Well, no. But when you say something which you think is perfectly sensible, and other people react in this way, you know that you are actually saying something that is to the point. Therefore you must pursue it. It's not that I do it because it makes people cross. I do it because there is something there that needs to be aired.'

Her anti-therapy book, *Affliction*, also provoked a reaction. 'Therapy stops you forming new relationships', she says. 'Therapy destroys relationships.' Fay has firsthand experience of this.

after meeting Dolly the cloned sheep. 'She was lovely. She had a soul, such a benign spirit.' A soul? But what if cloning was extended to humans? 'What's wrong with that? I don't think it's that different. People already do the best they can to breed the right kind of person. Just because people are the same genetically they are not going to turn out the same, are they?'

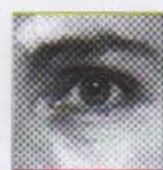
Most of what Fay Weldon says is perfectly sensible. So why all the fuss? I hope Fay will keep plugging away. What I really like about her is that she has got so many of what she described as the traditional male virtues—courage, intellect, reason and self-discipline—which she manages to wrap in such a warm, soft exterior. She can get away with murder while she giggles like... well, like a big girlie. ●

*Big Women* and *A Hard Time to be a Father* are published by HarperCollins, £12.99 each. *Big Women* starring Daniella Nardini will be broadcast on Channel 4 in July



ANN BRADLEY

# Spot the paedophile



**There are some** newspaper reports which lead you to believe that journalists (and editors) have either taken leave of their senses or suspended disbelief for the sake of a gripping pull-out quote. Get this: 'Today in Britain there are probably 1.1 million paedophiles at large.'

It appeared—unchallenged, taken as fact—in a recent *Guardian* article headlined 'The epidemic in our midst that went unnoticed' (2 June 1998)—part of a

depraved interest in undeveloped bodies with even less developed minds.

Does the author of this piece really expect us to believe that he considers one in 20 of his male acquaintances to be a paedophile, conniving to find a way to molest the young and vulnerable? I don't think so.

The 1.1 million paedophiles that journalist Nick Davies warns us of are truly faceless figments of his imagination. The

'prevalence studies' which also rely on statistical wizardry. Samples are taken of the population, it is established how many are 'victims of abuse' and then this figure is projected on to the population as a whole. Prevalence studies suggest that in Britain 20 per cent of women and eight per cent of men have been victims of sexual abuse. 'In the current population of UK children', the *Guardian* warns us, 'that would cover 1.5 million girls and 520,000 boys'.

Scary stuff. But the major problem with prevalence studies, which is widely recognised by sociologists, is that they reflect the definition of the issue under scrutiny. A prevalence study of 'child sex abuse' hinges on what you regard as 'sex abuse'. Commonly it involves questions such as the following: did anybody ever try or succeed in touching your breasts or genitals against your wishes before you turned 14? Did anybody ever feel you, grab you or kiss you in a way you felt was threatening? Were you ever a victim of attempted petting? With questions like this it is difficult to work out why the prevalence rate is not 100 per cent.

According to Neil Gilbert, a professor in social welfare at the University of California, some studies even correct for the fact that people do not consciously recall traumatic events before the age of five. One US study claims 'the corrected incidence rates [of sexual abuse] are at least 60 per cent for girls and 45 per cent for boys'. Accept this if you must, but also accept Gilbert's appraisal: that this would mean a sexually abused child in almost every family in the US (or two abused children in every other family). Not very likely is it?

I'm sure the authors of the *Guardian's* paedophile exposés are concerned and well intentioned. They may argue that I am in denial, and that it is people like me who allow the abuse to continue because we close our eyes to it. In response I would argue that my eyes are wide open—and particularly open to claims and allegations which beggar belief, but in so doing cause needless panic and suspicion. ●

## The 1.1 million paedophiles that Nick Davies warns of are faceless figments of his imagination

four-part special on paedophilia, 'the most secret crime'.

This is the kind of statistic that takes my breath away because it is such obvious bunkum. Think about it for a minute. There are only just over 57 million people in Britain of whom 30 million are women. Of the men, 5.5 million are under 15 years of age. At the risk of causing upset to those who like to remind us that women and children can be sex abusers too, I am going to eliminate them as potential paedophiles. So we're left with 21.5 million likely suspects. If you are prepared to believe that there are 1.1 million paedophiles among them you will presumably accept that one man in 20 is a sexual deviant who preys on children.

Who are these men? Unfashionable as it may be to say so, I do not believe I know any paedophiles. I know they don't come complete with a lounge-lizard leer and a dirty old raincoat, and I know that paedophilia is 'easy to commit, easy to get away with' (the *Guardian* article takes every opportunity to remind me of this); even so, I believe I'm sufficiently astute to suss out the sexual predictions of my male friends. Furthermore, I refuse to accept that so many men have a

fact that they are conjured from statistical analysis does not make them any less fictional. The narrative of the article itself reveals the shakiness of its foundations.

Davies admits that nobody knows the exact numbers, but he says 'to construct a picture is to watch an arithmetical explosion'. We are invited to 'start with a hard fact' (which is an important if unconscious indication of how few other hard facts inform the calculation). The hard fact is that 'at the last count there were 2100 child sex abusers behind the bars of British jails'. Now we are asked to think of all those who have previously been convicted but who have been released back into the community—about 108,000 according to the home office. Then we have to think about all the child victims who are 'conned, confused and never report their abuse'. We are told that specialist police believe that official figures for convictions account for no more than 10 per cent of the paedophile population, which draws us to the gob-smacking conclusion that 'today in Britain there are probably 1.1 million paedophiles at large'. Other studies apparently suggest that the figure is 'very much higher'.

This is apparently consistent with



# EXCHANGING TRUST FOR FEAR



**Y**ou wouldn't let your children go and stay in somebody's house down the end of the road if you didn't know them.

But you'd send them 2000 miles on an exchange trip and not ask any questions.' Earlier this year detective chief inspector Chris Gould of Avon and Somerset constabulary hit the headlines with a shock story for our times. The home office had just given him £20 000 to research the dangers of abuse facing children staying with 'host families' around Europe, and to make recommendations about how to regulate the home-stay industry. Gordon Blakely of the British Council, a major funder and facilitator of exchange visits, gave DCI Gould the keynote speech at a conference on the

risks facing young people abroad. The press jumped on board, printing lists of horror stories about kids having to sleep in cupboards and being watched in the bath by their host fathers.

Why, after over 30 years of kids jetting off on exchange visits, should we start panicking now? Because, apparently, it has only just occurred to the authorities that the home-stay industry is unregulated. Whether your child goes on a school exchange programme, to a commercially run language school or even on a trip with the Guides, you are sending your bundle of joy to a stranger who could, quite literally, be 'anybody'. All you have to go on is an intuitive trust that these foreign strangers will not molest your children. And in these fearful

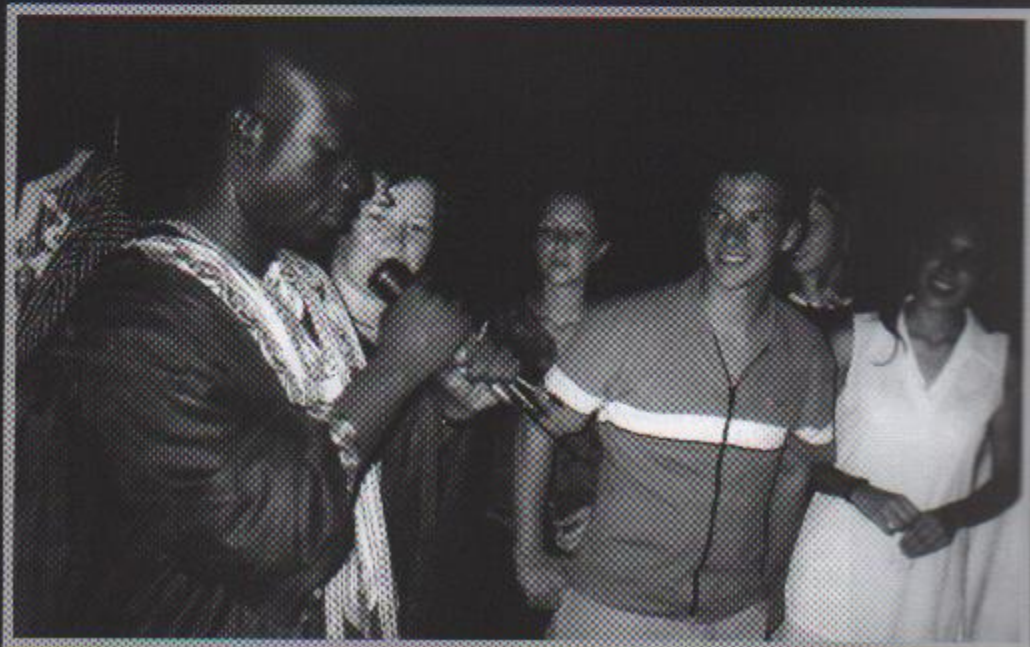
times, trust is no longer enough.

The unregulated nature of the home-stay industry is not new, and there is no evidence that child abuse is common or increasing. The industry has come under the spotlight now only because society increasingly perceives strangers as a potential danger. Gordon Blakely told me that 'the world has always been a happy place, but in the past few years society has uncovered all sorts of predators': a shift in perception, not a new threat. But the fact that home-stays, like every other area of a child's life, contain even the remotest possibility of abuse is enough to spark a panic—a panic to be fuelled by DCI Gould and his mates in the home office.

Before we began the interview, Gould handed me a leaflet produced



*Why shouldn't you trust a foreign family to look after your teenager? Jennie Bristow grills the senior British policeman who is behind the panic about potential abuse on exchange trips and home-stay visits in Europe*



by his force, headlined 'The Child Protection Team—finding the hidden victims'. The 'hidden victims' are those children who don't report abuse, and Gould's team has the brief of hunting them out and getting them to testify. It is precisely because so few kids report problems with exchange or home-stay visits that Gould assumes there must be enough 'hidden victims' out there to give him a job for life. 'You don't necessarily get official complaints made because of the nature of the abuse we're talking about. So of the dozens and dozens and dozens of cases I have come across—anecdotally, and often dating back some years—I think only two have ever been reported to the police'. Only two. Okay. Even Gould's 'gut feeling' about the

extent of abuse is only 'about one per cent' of all home-stays, with 99 per cent of children getting through the haphazard, unregulated system of home-stays with no major problems. But to Gould, the actual extent of abuse is not only unknown, it is irrelevant, since 'even if there were just one case it's one case too many'. Never mind the millions of kids who have a positive exchange: the one child that has problems is the only one that counts.

When you start looking at the potential risks in a largely unregulated industry, you do not need proof or statistics to make you press the panic buttons. Pure fantasy will do. So when I tentatively suggested that school exchanges know the families involved through their pupils, and therefore

had their own informal method of regulation, he immediately presented me with an alternative scenario. 'Many of these schools don't place them all with their own parents. So what you get is little Johnny who's from this school: his mum and dad will put up one of the French kids when they come over but his auntie, who lives three roads away, she's also quite happy to do it as well. So whilst they may know Johnny's family quite well, they know absolutely naff all about Johnny's auntie...whose husband happens to be a sex offender. As an example.' Wow. You just don't know with anybody, do you?

The fear of 'stranger danger' has already had an impact on some voluntary organisations whose trips abroad involve home-stay visits. →



← Ceri Dingle, director of the youth exchange charity WORLDwrite, has taken children on trips to Europe, Japan, Ghana and is about to take a group to Brazil. She describes a shift in parents' attitudes to home-stays over the past six years: where once parents were happier for their children to stay with families because 'the kids had less chance to get drunk and go wild like they do in hostels', now parents tend to push for a group-stay in a dormitory. Austin Stickley, who coordinates the exchange programme which I went on at school, told me that the number of children wanting to take part in the 'Staffordshire-Limousin Experience'

a small amount of money to act as host families over the summer. As he explains, many of the complaints his students come out with are usually the result of 'a misunderstanding or a cultural thing'. Such as? 'We get students who think they have had cat food for instance', he laughs. 'Or they think the family are drug addicts because there are needles in the fridge, because one of the family has diabetes. We get all sorts of funny things.' DCI Gould tells me that he is appalled by the fact that kids can tell their parents horror stories and be met with a dismissive response: these children, for him, are clearly some of the

research. Regulation? But as he admits, 'it doesn't matter what regulation or legislation you have, it [child abuse] can still happen'. The end point of his research will be that the procedures used by those organising home-stays will be tightened up somehow. For now, he is content with what he has already done in terms of 'raising public awareness' about the potential dangers kids in home-stay programmes face. Yet it is precisely this 'awareness raising' that worries me.

Gould tells me over and over again that 'the last thing we want to do is ruin the industry' and that he thinks there are 'lots of cultural and educational benefits' to exchange visits. I believe him, I really do. But the starting point for his research—that you cannot trust any family without asking endless questions and bringing in more and more regulations—has already attacked the very foundation of exchange programmes. Once you put into the minds of parents and children that other families should be treated as potential abusers, inter-European harmony is off the agenda. What kind of 'cultural benefit' are you going to get from staying with a family whom you suspect have some kind of base motive for wanting you in their house? What kind of 'education' is it that teaches children to be as wary of the German parents of their penfriend as they are taught to be of the stranger down the street, and to hold up cultural differences (discipline, food) as cases of abuse?

Ten years ago, I was 13 and scared. I got off the plane at Limoges airport in central France and was whisked into the middle of nowhere by a family who could have been 'anybody'. Many times I was homesick, many times I wished I had gone on holiday with my friends instead; a few times I cried in bed because my penfriend had said something I suspected was an insult but which I did not quite understand. For all this I had a good time and learned far more than a bit of French vocabulary. What I learned was that 'cultural' differences are nothing compared to the fact that families, everywhere, are much the same: they want the best for their own kids, they want the kids they are hosting to be happy, and they would never deliberately hurt anybody.

Trust of other—foreign—people was once the biggest gain of home-stay visits, as you landed upon them in your defenceless adolescence and took them as your parents for a fortnight. Now these same visits are set to become an exercise in mistrust, as parents demand police vetting and constant supervision and put their offspring on a plane with a list of what it means to be 'abused'. Would you want that for your child?



## Serious problems are conflated with the things spoilt BRITISH KIDS moan about all the time and grouped together under the title of 'abuse'

has plummeted from 490 at each end in 1990 to only 150 at each end in 1998. No doubt there are various reasons for this, but I would be very surprised if the current fear of strangers has not played a big part in discouraging children and their parents.

It gets worse when you realise that the paedophile under the bed is not DCI Gould's only concern. Like much of the child abuse industry, he is problematising the everyday, redefining as 'abuse' some of the most commonplace experiences of kids on exchange visits. Gould's definition of abuse covers 'the whole range': anything from being given 'inadequate food' or 'the same food' to 'a small room', from 'discipline' to 'verbal abuse', from 'being present at domestic violence' to 'being beaten up by the sons of the family' to 'sexual abuse'. Serious and thankfully very rare problems—criminal offences against children—are here conflated with the kinds of things that spoilt British kids moan about all the time, and grouped together under the official title of 'abuse'. Suddenly we move from the chance-in-a-million that your child will be placed with a serial rapist to the guilt-trip that if your child has had a bum exchange trip you have allowed them to be 'abused'.

Aart Smith runs Avalon Travel, a commercial youth travel agency based in Brighton, which pays local people

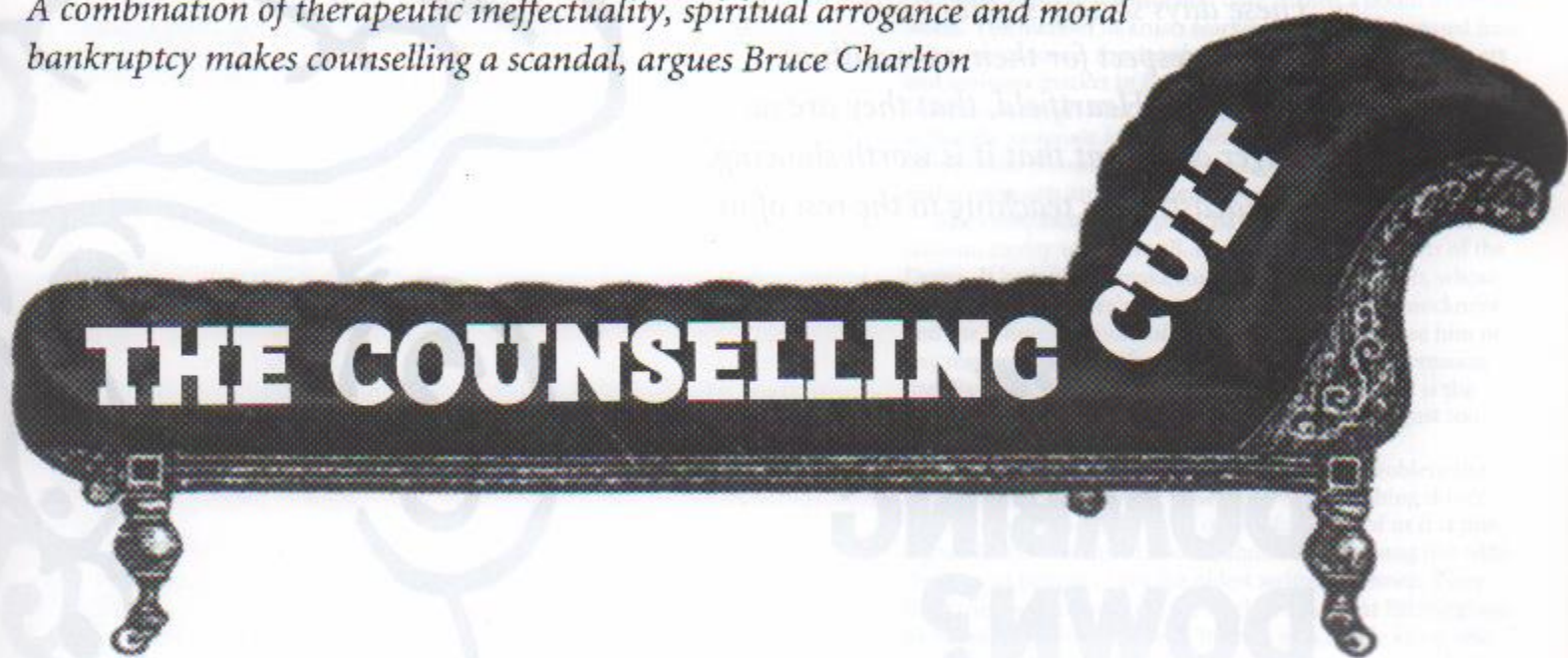
'hidden victims' of abuse. But maybe these children, like those at Avalon Travel, just get the wrong end of the stick.

When I went on my first exchange trip, I thought my penfriend's father was a sexist pig and believed the row her parents had downstairs one night was bound to culminate in a thump. Present at a scene of domestic violence and too traumatised to tell anybody? No: an overactive imagination. On my Spanish exchange trip at age 17, I shared a cramped room with a younger, flirtatious and bitchy English girl who was exchanging with my penfriend's brother. Inadequate sleeping arrangements? I coped. The girl concerned was convinced that the family father was a pervert: for no reason at all outside of her own fantasies. I could give DCI Gould a whole list of stories I have heard from my fellow exchangers and he may well term them 'abuse' but, unfortunately, kids do lie and moan and exaggerate. By making a big deal out of these gripes, Gould and his sponsors in the home office are embarking on a nasty, divisive project: helping to institutionalise mistrust and suspicion between families across Europe, on the basis of nothing more than their own warped imaginations.

By the end of our interview, I find myself bemused by what exactly DCI Gould hopes to achieve through this



*A combination of therapeutic ineffectuality, spiritual arrogance and moral bankruptcy makes counselling a scandal, argues Bruce Charlton*



There are hundreds of different schools of counselling or psychotherapy. But they are all set apart from the actually effective psychological techniques of behaviour therapy and cognitive therapy by a belief in the intrinsic virtue of confession.

The crux of counselling is a conversation in which the client unburdens himself frankly and fully. Such relationships are based on the Freudian notion that it is always beneficial to 'talk through' feelings, experiences, opinions and especially bring to light memories of secret or shameful events (usually from childhood) of a kind that are supposed to be the cause of current problems. This type of one-sided confessional relationship is a vital component of many 'brainwashing' techniques, creating an emotional reliance upon the confessor: the more secret and shameful the things confessed, the greater is the desire for that 'absolution' only the confessor can give.

Yet confessional counselling has no specific therapeutic effectiveness. When tested under controlled conditions there is no difference in therapeutic outcome between trained and untrained personnel, and no difference according to length of training or between schools of practice. The therapeutic benefits of counselling are the result of a placebo effect and are non-specifically due to supportive conversation. Expertise in counselling cannot be inculcated, and the techniques and theories (Freudian, Jungian, Adlerian, Kleinian, etc) are irrelevant to effectiveness. Professional therapists are no better at the job than Joe Bloggs: indeed there is good reason to believe that professional counsellors are usually worse than Joe Bloggs.

Counsellors are largely self-selected, which leads to recruitment of a considerable number of individuals whose motivations are suspect. It is an open secret that counselling differentially attracts practitioners from those who have suffered emotional and psychological problems and are (consciously or implicitly) seeking help for their own difficulties through the counselling relationship. Of course, having suffered from such difficulties oneself does not necessarily

mean that one is inappropriately motivated or unable to help others; but having a history of psychiatric troubles is not a recommendation for dealing with vulnerable people. It makes little sense for recruitment to be based upon incapacity rather than ability.

The various schools of counselling should be considered not as therapies but as a collection of quasi-religious cults, which employ confessional brainwashing techniques to win converts. Although counselling techniques do not have specific therapeutic benefits they often induce distinctive personality changes: in particular, dependence on the therapist and a new way of interpreting human affairs. Such outcomes do not constitute an improvement in personal functioning, but an initiation into the role of acolyte. As with any cult, the convert claims vast benefits and positive transformation, while the convert's previous friends and family can see only wilful blindness and fanaticism. There is no arguing with converts—they have had inculcated a set of standards of evidence and special methods of reasoning that render normal rational arguments ineffective. Indeed, to argue against counselling is itself seen as a sign of sickness: a pathological denial of revealed truth.

Ultimately the rise of counselling can be seen as a triumph of hope over common sense. Everybody hopes for true friendship with somebody who is kind, understanding, wise and a good listener. But it is absurd to imagine that true friendship can be had for the asking—paid for on an hourly basis—or that its benefits can be encapsulated in a trained technique deployed impartially. We have no reason to believe that the fundamental problems of life—birth, love, loss, happiness, sadness, death—are amenable to solution by applying a technique of managing conversations, or that the negative, etiolated worldview embodied in counselling makes a satisfactory religious basis for a conversion experience. The counselling cult is a confidence trick, which preys upon a wishful craving that perennial questions can be answered and intractable miseries dissolved by

'talking through' things with a hired expert. The problem is genuine, the response is phoney.

This is a cultural strategy that is profoundly damaging for both individuals and society. In times of trouble many of us seek a true friend, a person of goodwill and good sense. If no true friend, no trusted family member and nobody familiar of solid and sympathetic character (perhaps a doctor, priest or teacher) is available, then, and only then, may a paid conversationalist be a suitable last resort. Counselling is merely a poor fourth best. Yet it is routinely implied that counselling is not a last resort for the socially isolated, but the optimal assistance that can be given to all desperate and damaged people. Close family, trusted friends and familiar professionals are being 'warned off' conversing with loved ones who are deeply troubled or when the issues are grave, because they lack 'training' in the recommended techniques. This suggests that people who genuinely care about us (as opposed to being members of a 'caring profession') are disqualified from being helpful because they are too 'involved', too 'judgemental', too 'directive'. The cant phrase 'you need professional help' says it all: that somebody deeply troubled 'needs' help from these self-styled experts in life itself.

If counselling becomes established and entrenched, as it already has in certain parts of the United States, then family life, relations between friends and voluntary association will all be rendered two-dimensional—robbed of depth and seriousness as tough questions are passed over to paid conversationalists. But there is no trainable technique for dealing with problems of living, and no routine expertise in discussing the meaning of life. Counselling is a phoney profession; paid conversationalists are no substitute for real friends. ●

Bruce Charlton MD is a lecturer in psychology at Newcastle University. He will be speaking at the LM debate 'Dunblane, Diana and the dangers of counselling culture' at the Edinburgh Fringe on Monday 24 August (see page 14)



*These days society's elites have so little respect for their own culture, says James Heartfield, that they are no longer confident that it is worth showing, broadcasting or teaching to the rest of us*

## WHO'S DUMBING DOWN?

**A**re we in danger of dumbing down? Playwright Alan Ayckbourn seems to think so. He and other panel members of the Arts Council have resigned in a snub to the culture secretary Chris Smith and his new appointee as Arts Council chair. The resigners allege that the Council is being run on business lines and that the government is more interested in hob-nobbing with pop stars than it is in the high arts. In turn, Chris Smith has accused director-general John Birt of dumbing down the BBC. Selling scratchcards on the National Lottery show and voyeuristic fly-on-the-wall documentaries are cited as evidence that the BBC has failed in its duty as a public service broadcaster. But the government does not get off the hook that lightly: Stephen Bayley, 'creative director' of the Millennium Dome, resigned early in the year, accusing 'Dome secretary' Peter Mandelson of prostituting art before the shrine of Walt Disney.

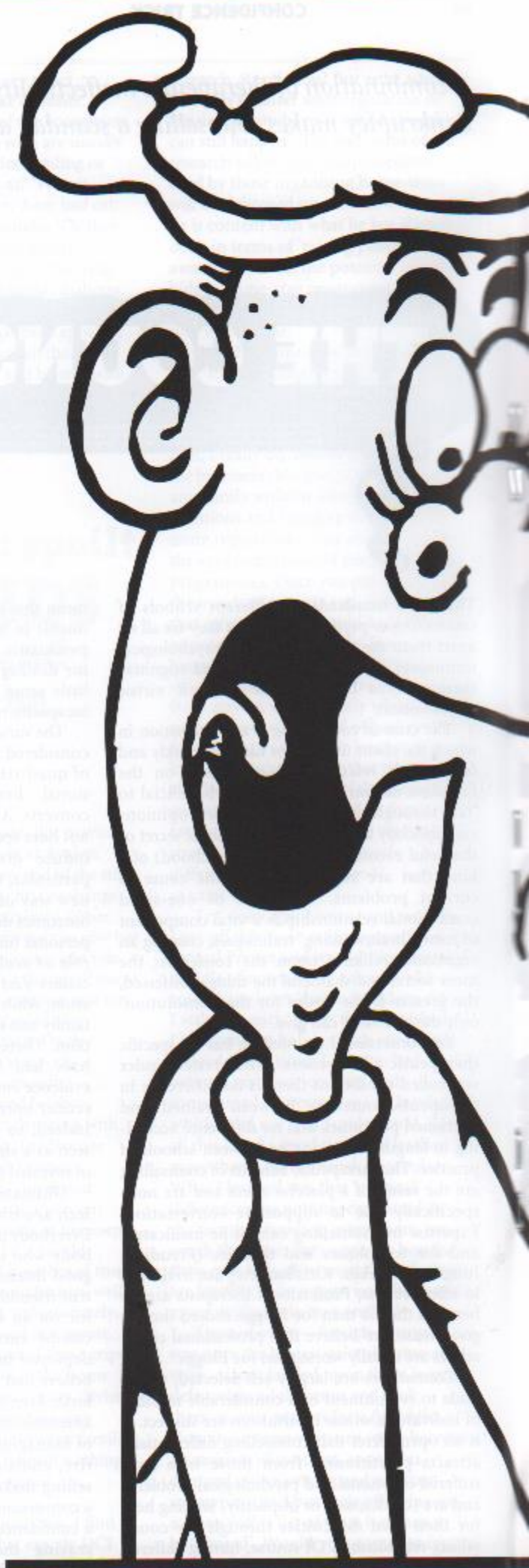
It is important to be sceptical whenever you are confronted with a tale of decline. Myths of a passing 'golden age'—whether it is in broadcasting or artistic patronage or public celebration—are always doubtful. For some people, every democratic change implies a vulgarisation. No doubt to certain members of the landed gentry it seems like a backward step that scullery maids have got the vote.

Seen in the round it is clear that doom-laden tales of what Saul Bellow called a 'moronic inferno' of popular culture are unfounded. Literacy rates continue to rise and fewer people leave school without qualifications. Listening to some commentators you get the impression that it was a better thing when people were not able to read the *Sun*; at least then we would not have been confronted with its shortcomings.

There is without doubt a degree of snobbery in the idea that Britain is dumbing down. The flamboyant retreat of the Arts Council members and the Dome's creative director are largely pique.

The members of the Arts Council panels have been complaining about government support for the arts for as long as there has been an Arts Council—and rarely with less justification than today. For all the wining and dining of pop stars at Number 10, the high arts are booming, and have been for more than a decade. The art market is awash with cash, with the money that business has been failing to invest in new industry, in fact. Instead of trying to innovate in new technology, many firms prefer to buy a Patrick Hughes for the lobby. Higher dividends for shareholders and business prizes

THE BISH STREET KIDS' PUG, BY LEO BARENDAE







and other kinds of sponsorship have fuelled a boom in the art world. The number of artists working in Britain increased from 32 700 to 55 900 in the decade from 1981-1991. In 1996 the art and antiques market in Britain had a turnover of £2.2 billion. What most upsets the cosseted dignitaries of the Arts Council is that the rationale for their own status as patrons is being swept aside. Nowadays only the notoriously uneconomic performing arts are dependent upon Arts Council subsidy.

The complaints of Stephen Bayley are equally difficult to fathom. Bayley was, after all, in charge of the contents of the Dome. If he failed to make something out of the job, whose fault was that? Bayley's complaints about 'scruffy mockneys' and the 'Disneyfication' of the Dome usefully excuse him of any responsibility for the venture. One gets the impression that Bayley is happier outside the tent, pissing in. It is the outlook of the beautiful soul, whose conscience is just too sublime to compromise it with worldly affairs.

But for all the snobbery there is a very real problem that is motivating these critics. When they say 'dumbing down' we know what they mean. Of course for most of us it is just a good laugh when the Labour cabinet tries to hang out with the stars of Britpop. Like the oldest swinger in town, Tony Blair tries hard to impress the world's leaders at Birmingham by being seen with All Saints, but the girls barely know who he is. None the less, there is a real problem when a society's leaders feel that they have to court the latest music fashion in an attempt to seem relevant.

In his new book, Chris Smith writes that the distinction between 'High Culture' and 'low culture' is misleading at the best of times, and that 'George Benjamin and Noel Gallagher are both musicians of the first rank' (*Creative Britain*, p3). Whatever the particulars might be, the sentiment behind Smith's point is wrong. Pop music is all right for kids, but when you become a man you should put away childish things—or at least put them in some perspective. It is no good saying that excellence in all things is important. Pop music is not supposed to be excellent, but ephemeral and trashy. None of us really believes that Smith listens to Oasis anyway (even if Tony Blair probably does), so why does he feel it necessary to flatter pop stars?

The government feels a need to identify itself with popular success because of its own uncertain grip on public opinion. It seems strange to talk about New Labour trying to be populist when only a year ago it won a landslide victory in the general election. Compared to the doleful performance of the opposition New Labour still looks pretty good. But in other respects its grasp on the popular consciousness is fleeting. Disappointing turn-outs in the referendums on the London mayor and the Welsh assembly indicate that Labour's popularity has not reversed the process of popular disenchantment with politics. Having dismantled the old Labour networks of trade unions and local government, New Labour is looking around for any point of contact with the people.

It is Labour's insecurity about the depth of its support that draws it to the stars of pop, TV and film. Not surprisingly, New Labour's awkward attempts to be popular have provoked derision and hostility from the intelligentsia.

When senior politicians start talking about pop music as an art form you know that they are talking down to you. Labour thinks that it is being popular when it lauds Britpop or revels in sentiment. In a way it is. But it is appealing to the most passive and under-ambitious side of the popular mood. When New Labour talks down to people it is giving up on the goal of betterment and advance. Political leadership should not be about flattering people, but about appealing to the best in them, and encouraging them to raise their sights. Instead New Labour is happy to make any point of contact, however base. In its heart of hearts the government knows that it has not got anything inspirational to say to people, so it prefers just to hang out. →



← The problems of New Labour are only a microcosm of the more general problem faced by all kinds of institutions. An anxiety about connecting with people drives the powers-that-be to talk down, seeking out the lowest common denominator. A deep insecurity pervades the establishment. That insecurity prevents its representatives from forcefully asserting their authority in the traditional way. Instead the elite is on the defensive, always apologising for being elitist. When criticised for spending more money in London than in the provinces, it is rare that anybody will make the point that it is after all the capital city. Instead, the authorities apologise profusely and promise more grants for the Brighthouse and Rastrick Brass Band.

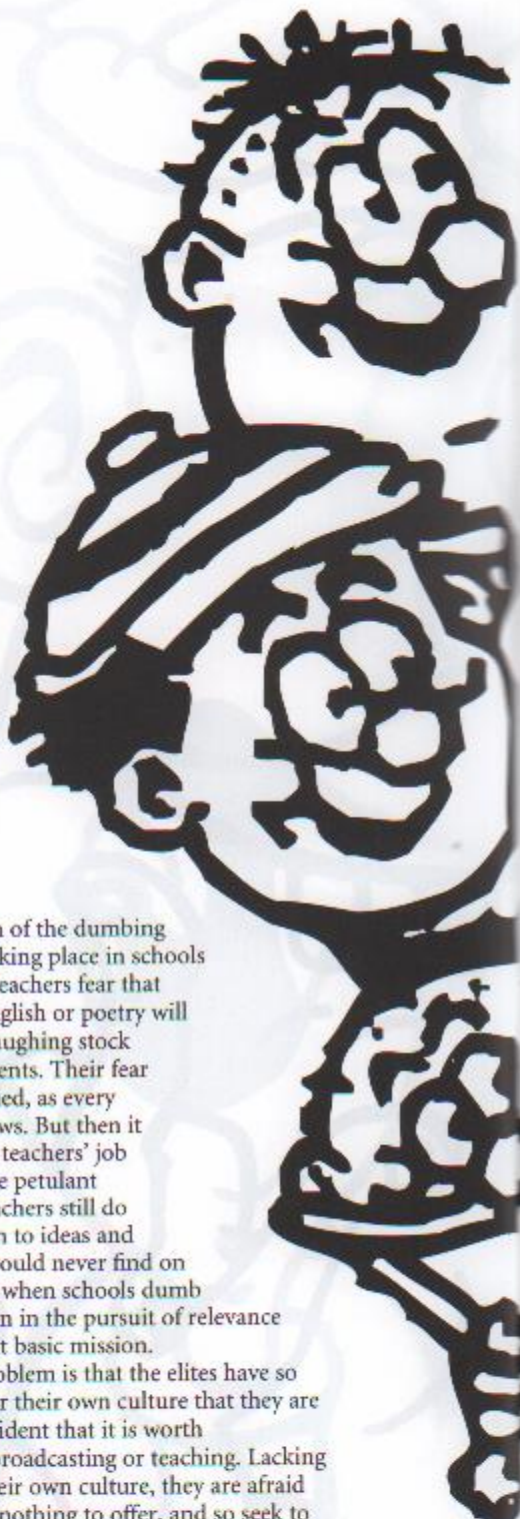
The privileges of power that once were taken for granted are today a source of embarrassment. The 'over-funding' of Oxbridge colleges and the 'over-representation' of their graduates in the corridors of power was once a source of pride, but now it is seen as a problem. Instead of promoting themselves as elite institutions and centres of excellence, those colleges are now trying to demonstrate their commitment to egalitarianism, promising to do something about their intake of students from state schools.

When first appointed director-general at the BBC, John Birt struck people as pretty pompous for claiming that public service broadcasting was not just entertainment, but had a 'mission to explain'. If only Birt was that arrogant. In practice, BBC programming has been dumbed down by the programme makers' own fear that they have no mission to explain and nothing worthwhile to impart. Instead of missionary zeal, the corporation has been wracked by doubts about its supposed 'lack of relevance'. The pursuit of relevance goes from 'minority programming' pillar to 'regional programming' post. The final destination is game shows and minutely observed fly-on-the-wall documentaries.

These observational documentaries are so common now that they are the subject of jokes and comments upon the 'trend'. In style they concentrate ever more closely on the mundane and the particular. A little slice of real life is the ideal, no matter how banal. The belief is that the more like real life they are, the more that real people will like them. One director told me that he dreaded another series of his popular observational documentary, for its exploitative and voyeuristic nature—a point confirmed after he got a tip-off from the emergency services that Saturday night would be especially good for filming accidents. But, the broadcasters respond, the public likes them. When Michael Jackson was still at the BBC he fended off criticisms of a dumbed down documentary schedule by saying that the public did not like foreign stories, and that the more human scale of the flagship programmes was a great advance.

The 'mission to explain' is of little account because the programme planners lack confidence in their ability to communicate a distinctive message, still less to stretch and elevate an audience. All television now is plagued by the introspective debate about relevance that used to be restricted to 'youth' programming. The BBC's defensiveness is expressed in its (false) belief that it has an 'elitist' image. Reacting to charges of being London-centric, and dominated by middle-aged white men, the Beeb engages in a phoney campaign of regional and multicultural programming. Of course none of this means that much, except that the corporation is uncomfortable with its image. What the broadcasters do not realise is that their own lowered horizons are the source of the problem. It is convenient to say that the public is to blame, but they are too rarely willing to challenge the public.

What has happened to broadcasting has happened on a more local scale to schools and colleges. Even more than broadcasters, educators live in perennial fear of appearing to be irrelevant or out of date to their students. The virtual displacement of English literature by media



studies is a sign of the dumbing down that is taking place in schools and colleges. Teachers fear that Elizabethan English or poetry will make them a laughing stock with their students. Their fear is wholly justified, as every schoolboy knows. But then it always was the teachers' job to challenge the petulant philistines. Teachers still do expose children to ideas and insights they would never find on their own. But when schools dumb down education in the pursuit of relevance they betray that basic mission.

The real problem is that the elites have so little respect for their own culture that they are no longer confident that it is worth transmitting, broadcasting or teaching. Lacking the belief in their own culture, they are afraid that they have nothing to offer, and so seek to flatter the public instead of challenging it.

When the Arts Council was formed as the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) during the Second World War, it was designed to protect the high arts against the onward march of mass civilisation, especially the cinema and the radio. When CEMA put on Shakespeare for the South Wales miners, the luvvies called it missionary work. Snobbery was at the heart of the Arts Council. The difference between then and now is that for all their snobbery, those actors felt confident that their art was worth an evening of anybody's time.

And the truth was that the wartime concerts and plays put on by CEMA were immensely popular. Actors and musicians were shocked at the intelligent and sympathetic hearing they got from the common folk. But once the war was over, the new Arts Council under Lord Keynes forgot the missionary work among the working class and put on art for the elites,



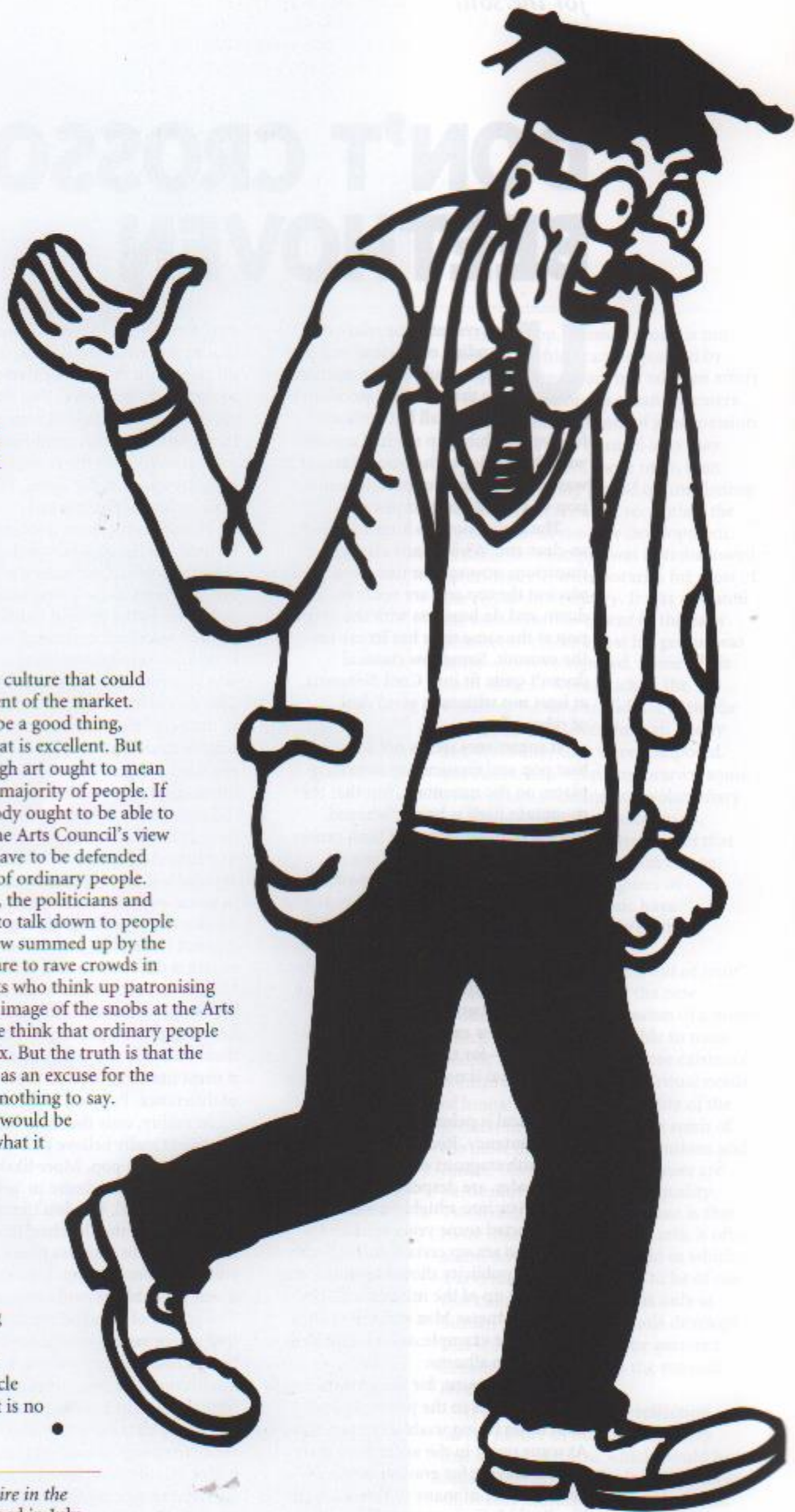
Snobbery can be a  
**GOOD THING**  
 if it means a  
 celebration of  
 all that is excellent

as a kind of subsidy for an effete culture that could never survive the harsh judgement of the market.

What is called snobbery can be a good thing, if it means a celebration of all that is excellent. But believing in the superiority of high art ought to mean that it is worth sharing with the majority of people. If it really is excellent then everybody ought to be able to see that it is so. But that is not the Arts Council's view today. They think that the arts have to be defended against the degrading influence of ordinary people.

By contrast, the broadcasters, the politicians and the schools think that you have to talk down to people to make yourself relevant—a view summed up by the proposal to introduce Shakespeare to rave crowds in 10-minute gobbets. The populists who think up patronising schemes like that are the mirror image of the snobs at the Arts Council. Both sides of the debate think that ordinary people and demanding ideas cannot mix. But the truth is that the audience is being deployed here as an excuse for the elite's own insecurity that it has nothing to say.

An elitism you could respect would be one that had the confidence in what it had to put before the public. A populism you could respect would be one that did not just flatter people's lazy side, but demanded the best of them. Instead we have the choice between broadcasters, educators and politicians talking down to us on the one hand, and the snobs refusing to talk to anybody but their own small circle of friends on the other. And that is no choice at all.



James Heartfield's *Need and Desire in the Post-Material Economy* is published in July



*Mark Ryan thinks the fashionable marriage of classical and pop music is bad for the soul*

## DON'T CROSSOVER BEETHOVEN

Until recently the relative standing of classical and pop music could be summarised like this: classical stood on the summits with a small but dedicated following, while pop sloshed around with the hordes at the base. Classical was respected and supposedly elitist, pop was rebellious and plebian.

The distinction no longer seems so clear cut. While many classical musicians now appear unsure of their place at the top and are ready to come down and do business with the masses, pop at the same time has its eye on the summit. Somehow classical doesn't quite fit into Cool Britannia, at least not without a good deal of rebranding.

It sometimes seems not so much that pop and classical are switching places on the mountain, but that the mountain itself is being flattened, leaving representatives of both genres to wander aimlessly in the crater. One of the biggest recent growth areas in record sales lies in what is known as crossover, or 'popsical', described by *Newsweek* in rather apocalyptic terms as 'the only future classical has'. Crossover has dissolved the rigid division which once existed between classical and pop. With few exceptions the results are dismal—for the simple reason that popsical is not a development in music.

Popsical is primarily a development in accountancy. Record companies, faced with stagnant or falling classical record sales, are desperate to catapult their artists into a higher earning orbit. What started some years ago as an attempt to sex up certain soloists with salacious publicity shots has ended with the sexing up of the music itself. The violinist Vanessa Mae and cellist Ofra Harnoy, for example, are now making straight pop albums.

Another reason for the growth of popsical lies in the psychological difficulties facing washed-up pop stars. At some point in the autumn of their years a craving for gravitas seems to get the better of many of them. Either, like Paul McCartney and Billy Joel,

they actually try to write classical music, or, like Sting and Elton John, they appear on stage with the likes of Pavarotti, as if to convince themselves that they too are great singers. Michael Bolton seems to have contracted this condition prematurely, with the revelation of his secret passion for opera. I only wish he had kept it a secret.

However, the most important influence is the general spirit of relativism which pervades our times. For 200 years, since it first became accessible to the general public, what is loosely described as classical music has been acknowledged as being in some way superior to every other form. This acceptance was often expressed in the belief that classical music was serious or difficult, and therefore required a degree of concentration and intellectual effort which other genres did not. Today, however, few people have either the stomach or the belief to affirm the superiority of anything, especially if that superiority is associated in some way with elitist tastes. So classical is undergoing regrading. It is not better, it is just different; just as jazz is different to soul is different to funk etc, etc. In this featureless landscape of musical difference classical has no right to a privileged position; it must be made relevant, and above all it must immerse itself in the free-flow of difference. Popsical is the result.

In reality, only the most hardened relativists really believe that classical is no better than pop. More likely, people who have a vague desire to 'get into' a bit of classical, but don't know where to start, think that Michael Bolton's intense look or Vanessa Mae's pout will give them a leg up. Unfortunately it will probably have the opposite effect. The appeal of popsical indicates a hope that an appreciation of great music can be reached without too much effort or intellectual exertion. Relativism acts as little more than a cover for this type of laziness. The inner voice which stands ready to charge us with philistinism and wilful stupidity can now be brushed off with the smug reassurance that there is no such thing as great music anyway.

Perhaps one of the reasons that relatively few people feel sufficiently inspired to overcome their musical weakness is because of the aura of the monumental which has been built up around classical music. The very misnomer 'classical' conjures up an image of something unchanging and monumental, like a great building in one's native city which we drive around and navigate by but never stop to look at and study properly. Classical CDs have this monumental function in most people's collections. You know from their position in the collection that the owner rarely listens to them, yet their presence is fundamental to the integrity of the collection and its owner.

The idea of the monument to which we occasionally pay homage only reinforces the superficial prejudice that classical music is something unchanging and static, while pop music (and I use 'pop' in the broadest sense of 'popular') is dynamic and inventive. Actually the opposite is the case: it is classical which is dynamic while pop is static.

The essence of pop music, what makes it popular, is its immediacy, its ability to respond to the passing moods of the moment. But because these moods are so fickle and transitory pop can never go beyond the circumstances in which it was born. Pop music is nearly always locked into its own time. Even when it appears to last, it rarely does so without help from some sentiment external to the music itself. Today it seems as if the main sentiment keeping much of pop afloat is nostalgia.

While location in time is intrinsic to pop, time generally acts only as a way of helping us categorise in classical. To the extent that we do find ready associations in time in classical music, it indicates that such music is no longer challenging to us and has almost become like pop. Much eighteenth-century music is like that, which is why you hear a lot of it in pretentious shops. The greater and more challenging music becomes, the more it will acquire a purity and abstraction which seems to place it outside time altogether.





Unlike pop, classical music is not something which can be grasped by immediate sensation, but takes an effort of the mind before its meaning enters the soul. While at times of great passion and energy a new musical idea may capture that spirit, more often than not it takes a long period of time before a wider musical public recognises the significance of the new development. JS Bach, for example, was overshadowed by his lesser contemporaries for most of the eighteenth century. It was not until the romantic movement in the early nineteenth century that his genius was more widely recognised. Some of his most difficult work, such as the *Goldberg Variations*, did not enter the repertoire until after the war, nearly 200 years after they were composed. For Beethoven's contemporaries, some of his greatest and most revolutionary work sounded a discordant mess, prompting the widespread belief that his deafness had driven him insane. Many of the greatest figures of twentieth-century music have provoked fierce hostility from the musical public.

The reason 'the time is out of joint' in classical music is that the new musical idea is the expression of a mood which may be imperceptible to most people at the time, but whose existence springs from the deeper spiritual needs of humanity. Hence the ability of the greatest music to express the spirit of the most diverse times, aspirations and causes. Beethoven's symphonies are particularly known for this quality. The strangeness of great music is that more than any of the other arts, it often seems not to be of the world in which it was created, but turns out to be of one that comes much later. It is only as human sensibility as a whole develops that it comes to fill out the garment already created for it by the musical creation of the past.

It is an extraordinary reflection on the nature of human sensibility that a piece of music which would have caused immense difficulty to the most cultivated musical ear of 1800 should be instantly recognised →



← as music (though of course not appreciated) by the average child of today. This is because our sense of music has expanded with the development of music itself. The Austrian emperor's famous quibble with Mozart over his new opera in the

themes working together or against each other, for the average ear to cope with. But assuming that our musical faculties continue to develop and expand, there is no reason why people in 100 or 200 years time should not listen to Schoenberg or even Stockhausen with

Most of the classical repertoire is not readily appreciated and requires a struggle of the mind before it is assimilated into the senses. In these days of soundbites and reputedly short attention spans, the classical concert is an almost unique experience in the stillness and concentration it imposes on the listener for two or three hours, while a five-hour performance of *Parsifal* can test the powers of concentration of even the most committed Wagnerian. Superficial emotions place no demands on the intellect; in fact they are often antagonistic towards it. It is always the expression of the deepest human passions which engages and tests the intellect to the greatest extent.

By mixing up classical with pop music, or by trying to make classical more relevant, we are avoiding the demands which great music imposes on us. Freshness and superficiality is part of the charm of pop, which is why it should remain the music of the young and immature. The danger in confusing the great currents of the deep with the froth on the surface is that we end up sweeping the whole lot together into one swirling torrent of garbage.



By mixing up  
**CLASSICAL**  
with pop we avoid  
the demands which  
**GREAT MUSIC**  
imposes on us

movie *Amadeus*, 'too many notes' (this was actually a common criticism at the time), most of us would today apply to many nineteenth and most twentieth-century composers. There is simply too much going on, too many

the same ready appreciation with which we today listen to Mozart or middle Beethoven. It is also possible, of course, that our sense of music could regress and that we lose those higher faculties which have taken so long to develop.

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DR MICHAEL FITZPATRICK

# The significance of Bristol



**Last month the** General Medical Council judged that two Bristol surgeons were negligent in continuing to operate on babies, despite warnings from colleagues, when their death rates were far in excess of the national average. The distressing accounts of the Bristol cases led to widespread demands for closer regulation of the medical profession and within days the government announced plans for hospital 'league tables' based on surgical survival rates and other indicators of medical performance. But can such methods work?

The furore over the Bristol case follows a series of revelations in the press and on television about negligent, incompetent and fraudulent doctors. There have also been numerous exposures of the GMC as at best a toothless old bulldog and at worst a conspiracy of doctors out to protect their own against a hostile public.

Like all doctors I have my stock of grisly anecdotes about colleagues of dubious competence and sobriety and have personally (as a witness) experienced the ponderous ineptitude of the GMC. But there is nothing new in any of this, while the upsurge in concerns about the performance and propriety of the medical profession is very recent. It is impossible to separate the flurry of medical horror stories in the past few months from the drive to impose new forms of regulation on doctors.

The proposed hospital league tables follow the proposals in the recent White Paper, 'The new NHS', to establish a new framework of 'clinical governance', involving a National Institute for Clinical Excellence and a Commission for Health Improvement (Nice and Chimp). These plans to extend the methods of Ofsted from education into health have been widely welcomed as marking the decline of deference to medical mystique and the advance of patient empowerment.

I wonder. The real problem here is that it is impossible to resolve the mismatch in knowledge and expertise between doctor and patient at the level of the individual encounter. This is particularly the case when the patient's relative ignorance is

compounded by the incapacity resulting from illness and decisions need to be taken promptly. Even when the gulf between doctor and patient can be reduced by recourse to league tables and the internet, a leap of faith is still required.

The leap of faith in the medical consultation assumes a level of trust, not only between doctor and patient, but more broadly between the medical profession and the public, and within society as a whole. Indeed it is the breakdown of relations of trust in society that is at the root of the current predicament of doctors.

One conspicuous manifestation of the breakdown of trust is the loss of faith in doctors that leads to the chorus of demands for regulation following the Bristol case. A less apparent but more fundamental manifestation of the problem is the way that doctors have lost confidence in themselves and in medical science.

The current vogue for medical ethics—in essence a new etiquette governing medical practice and now a 'core subject' in the curriculum prescribed for 'tomorrow's doctors' by the GMC—reveals the insecurity of today's doctors. The discussion about how to reformulate the Hippocratic Oath implies that difficulties in medical practice can be resolved by reference to a statement of absolute principle derived from ancient Greece and redrafted by a committee. The extraordinary credulity extended to diverse forms of quackery (homeopathy, acupuncture, etc) by modern doctors is another illustration of the extent of contemporary demoralisation. In one of the few critical responses to this trend in the sphere of medical education, the distinguished physician and scientist David Weatherall has warned that 'it is essential that, while trying to improve the social, pastoral and communication skills of our future doctors, we do not dilute their scientific education' (see *Science and the Quiet Art: Medical Research and Patient Care*, 1995, p329).

In his historic 1925 work *Medical Education*, the American physician Abraham Flexner quoted with approval a review by Naunyn of the 'early days of scientific

medicine in Germany in the 1860s. Emphasising the common approach of investigator and practitioner, he observed that 'our patients obeyed us gladly. Our zeal led them to respect and trust us. It never occurred to them to inquire whether this zeal was in the interest of treatment or in the interest of science' (p8).

At a time when scientific medicine and society moved forward together, patients put their trust in doctors who were themselves inspired by the prospect of using science in the service of humanity. It is worth noting that this trust predated by several decades the emergence of truly effective medical treatments in the early twentieth century.

In the 1950s, when the Manchester orthopaedic surgeon John Charnley, pioneer of the hip replacement, discovered that the plastic used in his first 100 artificial hips was liable to perish, he simply invited his former patients back to hospital for a replacement. Whereas today he would be castigated in the press, condemned by the GMC and sued for millions, then his patients, sharing his commitment to experimentation and innovation, obeyed gladly.

It is ironic that popular faith in doctors has declined at a time when their treatments are more effective than ever. The poor performance of the Bristol surgeons reflects the dramatic advances in heart surgery in recent years—even 20 years ago their survival rates would have been considered unremarkable.

How can public confidence in doctors be restored? Not through hospital league tables, surgical batting averages, computerised audits, public inquiries, institutes or commissions, guidelines and protocols, oaths and codes of practice—or through litigation. These mechanisms simply reflect and compound medical insecurities, encourage a cautious and conservative practice and offer illusory protection to the public. The process of restoring trust in doctors can only begin with doctors regaining trust in themselves and in the methods of clinical science that won public confidence in modern medicine in the first place. ■



Brendan O'Neill finds the restyled television news broadcasts a turn-off

# IS NEW NEW

**U**ntil we came along TV news audiences were getting pretty old and were dying off. I think we have created something which is appealing and more interesting to a younger adult audience, something which has captured young people's attention.

Chris Shaw, editor of *5News*, has good reason to be confident. As Channel 5 passes its first birthday, his innovative news programme is its biggest success story. Launched without a mission statement, but with the aim of being a 'modern upstart', *5News* is now watched by more 16 to 30-year olds than any other terrestrial news programme. 'Of course our aim was to be taken seriously', says Shaw, 'but we also wanted to be younger, clever, alternative and different'.

Anybody who watches *5News* will know that it is different. Instead of an anchorman behind a desk, *5News* has a 'walking/talking style', where handsome young presenters Kirsty Young and Rob Butler break the news as they stroll around the technicolour studio or perch on the edge of a desk. The programme's

researchers can be seen and heard in the background, giving *5News* a sense of dynamism and urgency. According to Shaw this new approach points the way to a 'less patronising, more inclusive' news format:

'There is a sense that the more traditional news programmes are very authoritarian, where you usually have a middle-aged man in a grey suit telling the world what is going on. But many people want news which feels relevant to them. They don't want us to rely on the language of authority, but on language that feels more "on side" and more in tune with their interests. What we are arguing is that credibility can be achieved through empathy as much as it can through authority.'

Shaw is right that there were many problems with the old-style news format, not least the sense of moral superiority that infused much of its output. But is the solution to make the news more 'relevant' and 'accessible', if that means pitching it at the imagined level of an unworldly GCSE student? Yesterday's news editors may have been high-handed, but they

also had a sense that their audience were adults, capable of coming to terms with potentially difficult issues. Is Shaw implying that we, the viewers, now need to have the news made easy enough for us to understand?

'I don't think so', responds Shaw. 'The way I see it is that it's like the changes that have taken place in the world of medicine. Thirty years ago a woman with an illness would probably feel that she was not being properly treated unless the doctor was saying, "Don't you mind dear, I'll just scribble out a prescription because I know what's best". But these days if you go to the doctor you want him to be sympathetic to your problems and to talk to you in an understanding way. That is how I see the changes in television news.' That all sounds well and good, but personally I am still most concerned that my newly sympathetic doctor should know what he is doing and be able to give me an authoritative and accurate diagnosis of the problem. And the same goes for the news.

*5News* may be an imaginative attempt to devise new forms of reporting

PHOTOS: CHANNEL 5





# NEWS BAD NEWS?

for our changed times, and the aim of bringing news to a younger audience is certainly laudable, but there are serious problems with this approach. With its emphasis on empathy over authority, the 'new news' risks undermining journalistic standards and the idea of objective reporting, by coming down to what it perceives to be 'our level' and diluting information to make it more accessible. And it is not only the 'upstarts' at Channel 5 who want TV news to change in this way.

'The style and presentation of 5News has to some extent rubbed off on the industry as a whole', says Peter Barron, deputy editor of *Channel 4 News*. 'At Channel 4 and in the news industry more broadly, I think people are realising that news has got to be accessible to the people it is trying to attract.' In a bid to rejuvenate *Channel 4 News*, ITN installed a new editor, Jim Gray, last December, promising to make the programme 'less conservative, more radical'. 'And in the few months since', says Peter Barron, 'the conservatism has gone or is going very quickly. We are committed to a much more original

and lively style and we will continue down that path as we relaunch the programme in 1999. Accessibility and understanding is what it is all about'.

Even BBC News has had a change of heart. BBC2's *Newsnight* has jazzed up its Friday night slot into a chat show-style discussion of the week's issues, complete with tongue-in-cheek swingometers, funny films and a new emphasis on cultural and youth issues. And when the BBC launched its 24-hour news channel last November, Channel 5's fingerprints were all over it. There was the relaxed young presenter in a colourful studio, with researchers and writers in full view in the background. In fact, the BBC had to tone down the new look when older viewers complained that they found the studio nauseating and that they could hear the journalists muttering.

For much of the 1990s, news bosses have been dreaming up ways to make the news more watchable and viewer-friendly. The end result is a news format which increasingly seems to assume that viewers either cannot or will not understand important world

developments or handle anything too stressful. 5News, *News at Ten*, *Newsnight* or BBC News 24 were not the first programmes to present the news in this way. Long before the discussion about the 'new news' began there was a programme dedicated to presenting the news in an informal, relaxed and unchallenging manner, and it is still running: it's called *Newsround*.

In Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke (Ha Ha Ha)* the child protagonist is confused as he watches the news, believing guerrillas to be gorillas and wondering why apes would want to fight a war. This is why *Newsround* exists, to explain to children who do not know any better what is going on in the world. *Newsround* is filmed in a colourful studio, with young presenters who walk around and sit on the edge of their desks to make their viewers feel more at ease, and who present the news in clear and simple language so as to not look down on their audience and make them feel stupid. Maybe 5News was not such an original concept after all.

But this avuncular approach is understandable on a programme like

Kirsty Young (left), the face of 5News, and Chris Shaw, its editor





*Newsround*, which is designed to make sense of a confusing world for unworldly children. (Although it has to be said that *Newsround* has gone downhill lately. Under John Craven 10 or 15 years ago the programme did its best to report important events objectively. A recent episode I watched, however, had moralising items on anorexia, the threat to the environment and the dangers of scratchcard addiction. New Britain, New *Newsround*.) But to take a similar patronising approach on a news programme for adults risks insulting the audience's intelligence.

Much of television news seems to be in danger of being dumbed down to a kind of lowest common denominator.



## The last thing I want when I turn on the news is to be spoken to like a child

This is reflected in the trend for children's TV presenters to move on to front more serious news and discussion programmes without altering their patronising and childlike tone. So Juliet Morris has moved from *Newsround* to the *Breakfast News* and now to the live discussion programme *Here and Now*, without changing the tone of her reporting. Channel 5's Kirsty Young came to *5News* from the BBC's *Style Challenge*, and sometimes it shows: in an interview with Don King, Young sped through the boxing promoter's newsworthy legal battles, and spent the rest of the time asking how he gets his hair to stand on end.

Many point to this new relaxed style of presenting the news as a welcome break from the cold, aloof delivery of the past. But as somebody who is interested in what is going on in the world the last thing I want when I turn on the news is to be spoken to like a child. I would much rather news reporters assumed that I am as capable of understanding events as they are and presented their stories in a detailed, rigorous and challenging way.

Taken together, the new relaxed style of presentation, the elevation of empathy over authority and the focus on 'ordinary' news stories make up what has been referred to as 'the People's News'. This new news is not only concerned with communicating the facts of important events: it also aspires to present the 'right' moral message, the truth of the day.

'I vigorously refute the notion that we are all style and no content', says Chris Shaw. '*5News* is not a format, it's an approach; more than that, it's an attitude.' There was a time when TV news saw its primary role as the provision of stories and information; now it seems that news editors are more interested in having the 'right attitude'.

'A term which is quite in vogue at the moment is "reporter involvement"', says Shaw. 'But that is slightly different from reporters getting involved in the story in the Martin Bell sense', he adds, careful to avoid the accusation that he is practising the journalism of attachment: 'I'm not talking about the Martin Bell thing of being outraged by Serbian atrocities and showing that outrage.

"Reporter involvement" is more about doing your journalism on site with ordinary people, talking to people and to witnesses.'

Shaw recognises the death of Princess Diana as a turning point in the discussion about 'reporter involvement' or 'people-led news': 'Diana's death was extremely significant. You can see its effect right across the board, it's kind of where those "real TV dramas" and "docu-soaps" are coming from. People are fed up listening to pundits and representatives and all the rest of it; they want us to get down there and hear what ordinary people have to say. They want us to approach stories from the point of view of how they impinge on you and me. So a people-led news is certainly becoming more popular.'

Channel 4's Peter Barron agrees: 'I think the Diana tragedy in particular did have an effect on the style of news, with much more emphasis on looking at the popular mood, gauging the mood of things. I think it fitted in with the whole New Britain thing, with people looking at mood rather than hard facts.'

Days after Diana's death Tony Hall, chief executive of BBC News, spelled out 'the People's News' approach of elevating mood and emotion over facts and figures, in an article entitled 'The people led, we followed':

'Journalists like facts. Who, what, when and where; that's the mantra for every fresh-faced recruit to our profession. Our job is to gather those facts, form them into a coherent report and get them on air. Audiences are

supposed to be listening to us, not the other way round. But last week we learnt a tough lesson. We learnt that emotion has its political dimension, that by giving voice on our airwaves to "ordinary" individuals' thoughts and feelings, we could get at some kind of truth, which would otherwise elude us, no matter how many facts we assembled.' (*Times*, 10 September 1997)

When a senior BBC man talks about a 'truth' that is somehow separate from the facts, it is surely time to worry about where the news is heading.

The post-Diana 'new news' presents itself as more viewer-friendly and people-oriented, but it can also be highly coercive and censorious. When emotion is put before analysis, and broadcasting the 'right' moral message takes precedence over investigating all sides of the story, woe betide anybody who deviates from the correct line.

On Sunday 31 August last year, as the nation was waking to find out that Princess Diana was dead, professor David Starkey was invited on to ITN news. As a well-known conservative constitutional historian, Starkey was asked to appraise Diana's life. He repeated many of the criticisms he had made of her while she was alive: that she had been manipulative, a liability for the royal family, that the *Panorama* interview had been an effective character assassination of Prince Charles and so on.

What happened next was remarkable. Newsreader Dermot Murnaghan cut Starkey short and hustled him off air. Then, when the cameras crossed to outside one of the palaces, royal correspondent Nick Owen made an unprompted attack on Starkey and challenged him to 'come down here' and see what the people made of his blasphemous criticisms of Diana. 'I thought it was utterly unprofessional', Starkey told me. 'ITN's coverage was scandalously biased. As we have this convention of impartiality in our newscasters, the notion that immediately we all have to agree that this woman was totally perfect struck me as being seriously shocking. What we got was Diana propaganda and there was no intelligent coverage whatever. It was totally unbalanced.'

Not only does the new news tend to look down on us as people who need to have information spoon-fed in an easily digested form, it is also intolerant of anybody who strays from the narrow confines of the discussion, of anything which jars with the 'truth of the day' about Diana, Louise Woodward or whatever the next moral spectacle might be. If it carries on like this, in the end we might just as well go back to watching *Newsround*.



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ENGAGING THE MIND





*The people of Northern Ireland are being asked to wear thorns to remind them of their suffering.*  
Kevin Rooney explains

In May this year a report commissioned by the British government provided a comprehensive breakdown of the victims produced by the Northern Irish conflict from 1969 to December 1997. The report, 'We will remember them', detailed the religious, political and gender make-up of the 3585 people killed in the conflict.

The end of any war is a time for a period of reflection and the report certainly made me pause to remember those friends and family members that I had lost over the years. However, the report was not intended to produce a momentary reflection. Instead 'We will remember them' is part of a broader attempt to place the treatment of victims at the centre of the Irish peace process. This victim-centred approach has been enthusiastically endorsed by all sections of society and has seen the debate about how to honour the victims turn into a major national obsession. Along with the victims comes a celebration of the innocence of children. Bono from U2 led his concert for peace with a heartfelt appeal to 'remember the kids—think of the next generation'.

As others have noted, the form of the conflict in Northern Ireland has completely transformed over the past few years. The adversarial politics which underlined the clash between the struggle for a united Ireland and the continuation of British rule, has given way to a new discourse where all sides agree to compromise on their goals for the sake of peace. The recent discussions about how best to recognise the suffering caused by those adversarial politics have produced a morbid morality circus in which political representatives outdo each other in trying to become the champion of the victim.

Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, author of 'We will remember them', sets out to encourage a major debate about the most fitting memorial to those killed in the conflict. While proposing a number of options for discussion, his personal favourite is a special building in a garden of remembrance:

"The building should be a striking work of modern architecture, which would also house works of art contributed by communities

## VICTIMISING THE IRISH

or countries outside the North whose citizens had also suffered. It could contain an archive of the Troubles.'

Others are battling for a repeat of the Vietnam memorial in Washington, with a wall bearing the names of the 3585 dead.

Nowadays, the question of how to honour the dead is more contentious than the republican movement's historic acceptance of the principle of consent. The proposal for the Vietnam-style memorial was the most popular, until a major row broke out when Unionist politicians objected to the IRA's fallen being included—prompting Sinn Fein's withdrawal from the scheme.

The cult of the victim dominates every aspect of the peace process. While politicians may argue along sectarian lines, nobody questions the concept of organising politics around victimhood.

Secretary of state for Northern Ireland, Mo Mowlam, announced that the British government would appoint a 'minister for victims', who will be there to 'to understand and to listen'. Instead of arguing against the principle of this unprecedented new political post, people merely argued against Mo Mowlam's particular choice. So Sinn Fein, while accepting the need for a minister for victims, objected to Adam Ingram because he is also the minister in charge of armed forces in Northern Ireland—the very forces that have created 400 nationalist victims during the course of the war.

Mowlam and Ingram proceeded to set out a list of areas of consideration, including more compensation for victims of violence, a memorial day for victims, a possible South African-style Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the appointment of an official victims ombudsman.

There is a broad agreement that Northern Ireland needs a minister for victims—which is not that surprising given that all sides in the Northern Irish conflict now present themselves as

victims. The main political groups in Northern Ireland act like schoolchildren looking for special help from their teachers. They put their hands up to say they are being badly treated and ask Miss Mowlam and Mr Blair to give them special favours to bring them into line with the other children in the class.

The republican movement used to boast that it had never asked Britain to leave Ireland, but had opted to force them out through armed struggle. Now leading republicans claim that the struggle was really about winning 'parity of esteem' with the Unionist community. According to Gerry Adams, all nationalists ever wanted was to be free from discrimination and for the British government to treat the nationalist tradition with the same respect as the Unionist tradition. Similarly, the Unionists knock on Tony Blair's door to protest that the Unionist tradition is falling victim to a green nationalist agenda.

Victim politics has entered the vacuum left by the exhaustion of nationalist and Unionist ideologies. And who better to take the lead than Tony Blair's New Labour government? Mo Mowlam is the personification of victim politics. At the start of her stint in the Northern Ireland Office, Mowlam went public in the media about her brain surgery. No profile of her is complete without several paragraphs on plucky Mo's personal struggle with illness. In sharp contrast to the stuffy officials that surround her in the Northern Ireland Office, Mowlam exudes humanity, hugging people she meets rather than shaking hands and thinking nothing of taking her wig off in public.

Touchy-feely Mowlam was the perfect candidate to oversee a process in which the political contest at the heart of the Northern Irish conflict has been replaced by a conflict between emotionally insecure groups seeking





for victims, was the no-nonsense tough-talking politician who Neil Kinnock selected to smash the Militant tendency in the Labour Party, a job he executed with ruthless efficiency. The same Kenneth Bloomfield who wiped away tears as he presented his report on the victims of the conflict was chief civil servant to the Orange state that victimised nationalists over the past 25 years. But that's all right, because he's sorry now.

This politics of emotion is certainly not confined to politicians. The Northern Irish media is now dominated by statements from the myriad of victims' groups that have mushroomed during the course of the peace process. The Shankill Stress and Trauma Group complains that its voice is not being heard, while North Belfast Survivors of Trauma are happy that the government is paying more attention to their concerns.

In tune with the new climate, Belfast's Royal Victoria Hospital has opened up a new trauma and therapy unit to counsel victims of the conflict and Mo Mowlam has said that other similar units will follow. The prime minister has announced a grant of several million to provide 'comprehensive and effective counselling initiatives' and, not to be left out, the Irish prime minister Bertie Ahern has announced the establishment of a commission for those victims who died in the Irish Republic.

Nobody seems to have noted the irony that the explosion of initiatives for victims of violence has come about at the exact time that the fighting has finished and the suffering has abated. Is it not strange that when the war was at its most intense, claiming large numbers of victims, people apparently had no need of such support groups? The people of Northern Ireland are being asked by Bloomfield to wear sprigs of gorse. As the *Irish Times* reported, Bloomfield thought of the gorse because 'the thorns were a reminder of the suffering and sacrifice, while the bright blossoms spoke of freshness, renewal and rebirth'.

Far from facing a bright, fresh future, the people of Northern Ireland are to be subjected to a miserable period of dwelling on the past and revelling in their own frailty and victimhood. ●

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recognition for their identities and respect for their suffering.

But Mowlam's apparent affinity with the victims of the conflict was not altogether natural. She was one of a number of Labour MPs who attended a major conference in March 1995 run by leading psychotherapists and academics at the Tavistock Clinic, Britain's most prestigious centre for psychoanalysis. The contributors examined the need to develop the values of attachment and identity as the basis for a new kind of politics.

Mowlam is certainly not the only politician who is adept at the politics of emotion. Gerry Adams has repeatedly apologised for the pain and hurt caused by the republican struggle, while constantly reminding others that the nationalist community has suffered too. Adams even borrowed Bill Clinton's election slogan, 'I feel your pain'. Known in the past as the hardnosed face of terrorism, Adams has won praise for showing his emotions—admitting that he was 'pissed off' at Unionist intransigence or shedding tears after his party's historic decision to abandon abstentionism.

This politics of emotion has also allowed the hard men to reinvent themselves in the guise of sensitive souls. Adam Ingram, the new minister



# FUTURES

Mark Beachill is bugged by stories of millennial computer doom

## ARE YOU READY FOR YEAR ZERO ZERO?

Tony Blair is out to create a 20 000-strong 'army of bug-busters' to deal with what he calls 'the biggest problem facing the world economy'. A Millennium Bug summit will focus on the problem in Moscow. Not to be outdone, the CIA is collecting data on what its man calls the 'social, political and economic tumult' that it thinks could result around the world.

What could be causing this global consternation? The fact that many computer programs use too few digits to store the date.

Instead of using four digits to store the year, many programs use just the last two: so 1998 is stored as 98. In the year 2000 (Y2K) the first two digits change—and these programs will think it is 1900 again. Will hire cars due back on 29 December switch from being two days late to being free-hire for another 99 years and 363 days? What will computers do about phone bills that cross the millennium and seem to go back in time? The worry is that unpredictable things will happen, including computer failure.

And then what? Don't computers run everything these days? The press is full of stories about pacemakers stopping, planes falling from the sky, a computer-instigated depression. Simon Reeve, co-author of *The Millennium Bomb*, says, 'unless the G8 governments mobilise their workforces as if for war, the dawn of the new millennium will herald an immediate breakdown in global telecommunications'. Edward Yardeni, chief economist of the Deutsche Morgan Grenfell merchant bank and a self-confessed 'alarmist', keeps revising upwards the chance of a global recession 'at least as severe as 1973-74'. Presently he puts it at 60 per cent and rising.

What are we to do? The advice of Ed Yourden, author of 25 programming books, has a distinctly survivalist edge: 'Most of all, we strongly suggest that

you spend the next two years paring down and simplifying your life, so that you can face the millennium with as much flexibility as possible.' I am sure he doesn't mean that we should all head for the hills. But these kinds of warnings are having an impact, especially on business practice. The question is, why?; for despite the plentiful scare stories, the problem is not what it is cracked up to be.

In summary the situation is this: many companies' software is already what is called 'year 2000 compliant'. When and if problems do occur, they are rarely critical; systems will keep on working into 2000. Programmers will attempt solutions and tackle persistent problems on a case by case basis, as usual.

If you are one of the many people running Windows and Microsoft Office software, or variants, you are most likely fine already. Companies which produce accounts software or order-processing applications will have made a year 2000 version, and their single effort will resolve many other people's problems. If they have not, they will soon lose customers to those who have.

It is custom-built software that needs checking and amending the most. But any computer program that works with a range of dates stretching into the next century *already* has to work with the Y2K problem. Examples include calculating bond deals, planning production schedules, accepting credit cards and handling sell-by dates (go to the supermarket and look at the 'best before' date on the beans).

Most major corporations which use this sort of bespoke software are already having to deal with the problem. A recent Information Technology Association of America survey found that 45 per cent of business and IT managers have experienced year 2000-related failures under actual operating conditions. In the same survey 65 per cent reported

failures while testing. That we are already experiencing problems is good. Programmers are acquiring experience and developing novel, rapid solutions.

Systems have also been designed to ensure that big problems cannot occur. Take the example of power stations, often touted as systems likely to fail. The power station itself will run on failsafe control systems that monitor temperature, power output and fuel use. There is little need for a computer to make calculations based on the date. Where there is a date calculation it is for something like forward ordering of fuel, which is usually carried out by separate computer systems. The possible temporary failure of a system for calculating the fuel needed two years hence is not exactly a crisis waiting to happen.

Where most errors will occur with dates is not in operations, but in recording and reporting data: important, but not important enough to bring things to a dead stop. For example, pacemakers are programmed to work no matter what the date is, but they record the date and time whenever the wearer has a heart murmur. If the test equipment cannot handle the transition from 99 to 00, medical assessment might be impaired, but the clock is hardly ticking to a deadline for pacemaker wearers.

Where operations are dependent on handling dates this can be anticipated and adjustments made. Already large corporations and government departments with custom software have teams of programmers working on the code. Some have started late, largely because their IT departments see it as a boring repetitive task. For them, solving the Y2K task is a simple, if tedious, programming exercise, a 'no brainer', or, as one IT chief put it, a three on a difficulty scale of one to 10.

Overall, we might say that problems will occur where there is custom software being used *and* where that software



is for vital operations *and* where the date is a vital part of it working *and* where the problem will only emerge on 1 January 2000 *and* where the company has been too stupid to do anything about the most anticipated technical problem in history.

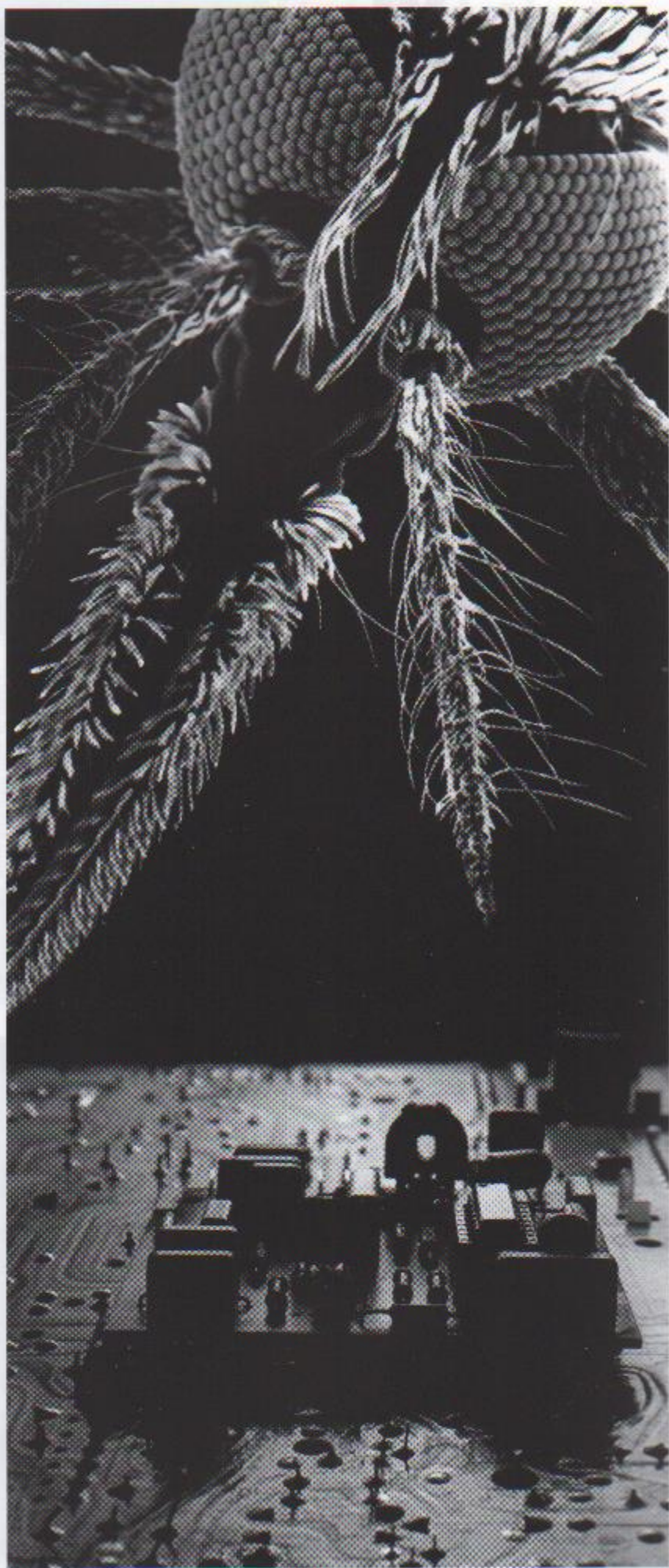
So why all the panic? And why the international summits on the issue? What the predominate response most illustrates is a tendency to hype up problems today, combined with a lack of confidence in peoples' ability to cope—even when it comes to the IT department, whose usual joke office-sign is 'the impossible we can do today, miracles take time'.

Even when you can rely on your programmers, what about everybody else? Manny Fernandez, the CEO of Gartner Group, a large US consultancy firm selling \$300 'Year 2000' videos like hot cakes, puts it like this: 'The year 2000 problem isn't just your problem. You can be thoroughly prepared. But what about all your suppliers, vendors and customers? It's going to be a mess.'

Fernandez has hit on the fear that is motivating many large corporations. Rather than trusting their suppliers and the market, they are acting like the government inspectors they railed against in the past, creating a stifling industry of red tape and mistrust. Instead of talking to suppliers, many companies on both sides of the Atlantic are spitting out questionnaires on compliance, quasi-legal documents which threaten cancellation of contracts if suppliers cannot guarantee immunity from the Millennium Bug. This spread of panic and mistrust across the economy threatens to be a bigger problem than the bug itself.

Government might have responded to the warnings, which came as early as 1986, by encouraging and subsidising businesses to upgrade their systems to the latest technology and to bring new compliant software systems online. But in modern government there is a complete absence of strategic thinking. And far from filling this gap with a rational approach of their own, businesses have tended to sink into a morass of reactive fear, trusting neither the market nor one another. Instead of taking the Y2K in its stride as a delimited, simple and foreseeable technical problem, business has suffered something like a nervous breakdown as it goes off on a wild bug-hunt.

Even though I work as a computer programmer, let me assure you that come the morning of 1 January 2000 I will be nursing a hangover, not manning the computer barricades. You can, however, e-mail me at [mark@mbo1.demon.co.uk](mailto:mark@mbo1.demon.co.uk) with offers of ludicrously well-paid Y2K work if you want to help me enjoy the new millennium. ●





a l t . c u l t u r e . c o o l

# THE PARTY'S NOT OVER



## TOO MUCH HIS WAY

*Frank Sinatra's death prompted a mourning chorus. Singer Des de Moor sounds a discordant note*

**A**fter the death of Frank Sinatra in May, Pavarotti tearfully compared him to Mozart. Bob Dylan cited him as an influence 'whether I knew it or not'. U2's Bono called him the 'big bang of pop', Ian McCulloch labelled him a 'dude' and even Snoop Doggy Dog proclaimed his 'love' for Ol' Blue Eyes. These days, when youth revolt seems a quaint anachronism and even the cheesiest easy-listening vies for space on the trendy young ironist's leopard-skin CD rack, it is easy to see why Sinatra is 'in'. But unlike most of his contemporaries, he did not need the coming of the ironic condition to make him hip again. Sinatra was cool all the time.

*Rock Dreams* (1974), a collection of iconic images of rock'n'roll heroes by Guy Peellaert and Nik Cohn, begins and ends with

*Cool Britannia may be undergoing a name-change, but Andrew Calcutt believes that the New Labour combo of pop and politics will play on and on*

scheme whereby employment officials will somehow identify the genuine creative types at the labour exchange and provide them with financial support and relevant training opportunities. Apart from bringing an unforeseen veracity to the rhyming slang for dole ('rock'n'roll'), this initiative can only be a flash-point for more trouble as state functionaries take on the role of A&R men for Creative Britain (Spice Girls soundalikes—get a job stacking shelves; All Saints lookalikes—we may have something for you).

If Smith thought he could leave behind the naff bits of Cool Britannia by changing the label to Creative Britain, he is sadly mistaken. The secretary of state is probably the naifest of them all, behaving like a trendy vicar, trying to involve everybody while getting their names wrong (in his book drum and bass is spelt 'drum & base' and dj/record producers Roni Size and Jazzie B become 'singers'). Former Tory minister George Walden accused Smith of 'appalling condescension' and suggested that the secretary of state was 'dumbing himself down'. Perhaps he is. But there is a far more important casualty of this dumbing down. Most at risk from the stupefying effect of New Labour is politics itself.

Far from abandoning the attempt to marry popular culture and politics, New Labour remains intent on turning the entire political process into a pop-style charade.

relevance; the New Labour experience is not intended to produce any form of political activity, but rather to prompt the kind of star-audience relationship which is the stock-in-trade of pop culture. As an experience which belongs in the world of emotion, the new politics depends on the suspension of rational appraisal on the part of the fan base (for that is what the voter has now become). We are meant to be blown away by Blair in the same way that generations of rock fans have been smitten by a wall of sound.

Just as the electorate has been dumbed down to the level of a teenage fan club, so politicians have become performers whose role is simply to sing in tune ('on message'), regardless of how banal the words might be. In this respect, the pre-election publicity photos of Blair strumming a Fender Stratocaster were not just a cynical ploy on the part of a middle-aged politician trying to look like he is in touch with the kids. That would have been a valid criticism of Harold Wilson and his photocall with The Beatles back in the sixties. But in Blair's case the pictures were an authentic image of him as the premier political performer for the nineties. His soundbites are more like song lyrics than logical arguments. And, like song lyrics, it does not matter all that much if they do not make sense.

In the Channel 4 programme *The Party's Over*, various commentators remarked that

**C**hris Smith's book *Creative Britain* had been trailed as a celebration of New Labour's first year in office. But publication day (20 May) was marked by resignations from the Arts Council, while the book's cover artist, Damien Hirst, stayed away from the launch party, as did Bill Woodrow, the sculptor who produced the artwork presented to Smith by publishers Faber and Faber (Woodrow went fishing). The following night Channel 4 broadcast an hour-long programme, *The Party's Over*, chronicling New Labour's love for Cool Britannia and the NME-led backlash against it.

In the Observer playwright David Hare dismissed Smith's book as 'a windy testament to impotence'. Like Robert Hewison, the cultural historian sometimes credited with coining the term 'Cool Britannia', Hare criticised Smith for failing to fund the arts properly. By Sunday, the secretary of state for culture, media and sport was in Cannes for the film festival, where Ken Loach, director of the prize-winning





portraits of Sinatra. Jay Division's Ian Curtis had the crooner on his turntable the night he strung himself up. In the mid-1980s, the (then) fashionable Frankie Goes To Hollywood named themselves after Sinatra. In recent years singers such as Bono and Annie Lennox queued up to duet with him. The man was the height of fashion for half a century.

It is difficult not to admire Sinatra's work. His repertoire spanned a huge range ('My way' is a version of a *chanson populaire* by the French-sixties songwriter Claude François). Some of his recordings are electric, though they are as much the work of arrangers and bandleaders like Nelson Riddle and Neal Hefti. Yet I would contend that Sinatra's monolithic influence has done more harm than good in popular music. The quotes from 'My way' have been overdone in the past few weeks, but when it came to the interpretation of songs, Sinatra certainly did do it his way. Very early on he perfected that distinctive style, and proceeded to apply it without discrimination (or much variation) to everything he encountered. No matter what the tune, the performance projects the Sinatra style so strongly that anything the lyricist and composer have to say is obliterated.

The rich low-baritone register (Sinatra was at his best here; he can sound strained at the top of his range), the easy, subtly syncopated phrasing with its many little hesitations, the light vibrato, the distinctive portamenti (slides) between adjacent notes, all contribute to the throwaway quality of casual speech in his singing. Now and again he holds a note to prove he has the power, but mostly he is intimate and conversational. He always sounds controlled and confident, a man at ease with himself and the world. This is the 'Everyman' style which Mel Tormé mentioned in his tribute. It suggests that anybody could be up there crooning these songs, but it is an illusion, a musical equivalent of cinematic realism in which high levels of technical skills are used to efface themselves. It is also a style totally unable to express conflict, fragility and anything approaching genuine emotion.

Sinatra is ideally suited to confident numbers like 'New York, New York', but he takes an identical approach to even the most sensitive ballads. Such is his skill that he usually pulls it off at first hearing: but have another listen to what the song itself is about and the approach quickly reveals its limitations. In 'What now my love?' he sounds positively cheerful for a man who has just been dumped by the love of his life. In 'It was a very good year' there is little sense of yearning or regret. Even William Shatner's (Captain Kirk) hammy rendition responds better to the content of the song.

Of course jazz singers have long disregarded lyrics in favour of virtuoso vocal display. But Sinatra does not even do that. On the surface he appears self-effacing, but by making his material unimportant, by stifling any problematic or emotional content it had, he comes the closest yet to reducing artistic interpretation to a simple and repeatable encounter with a manufactured and formulaic personality.

The consummate Las Vegas entertainer, Sinatra was top dog in a world which values the ability to smother real tensions and unpleasant realities in a glossy patina of phoney self-confidence. This may explain why, even though Tormé could put in a credible r&b performance from time to time, Sinatra was always too slick to rock.

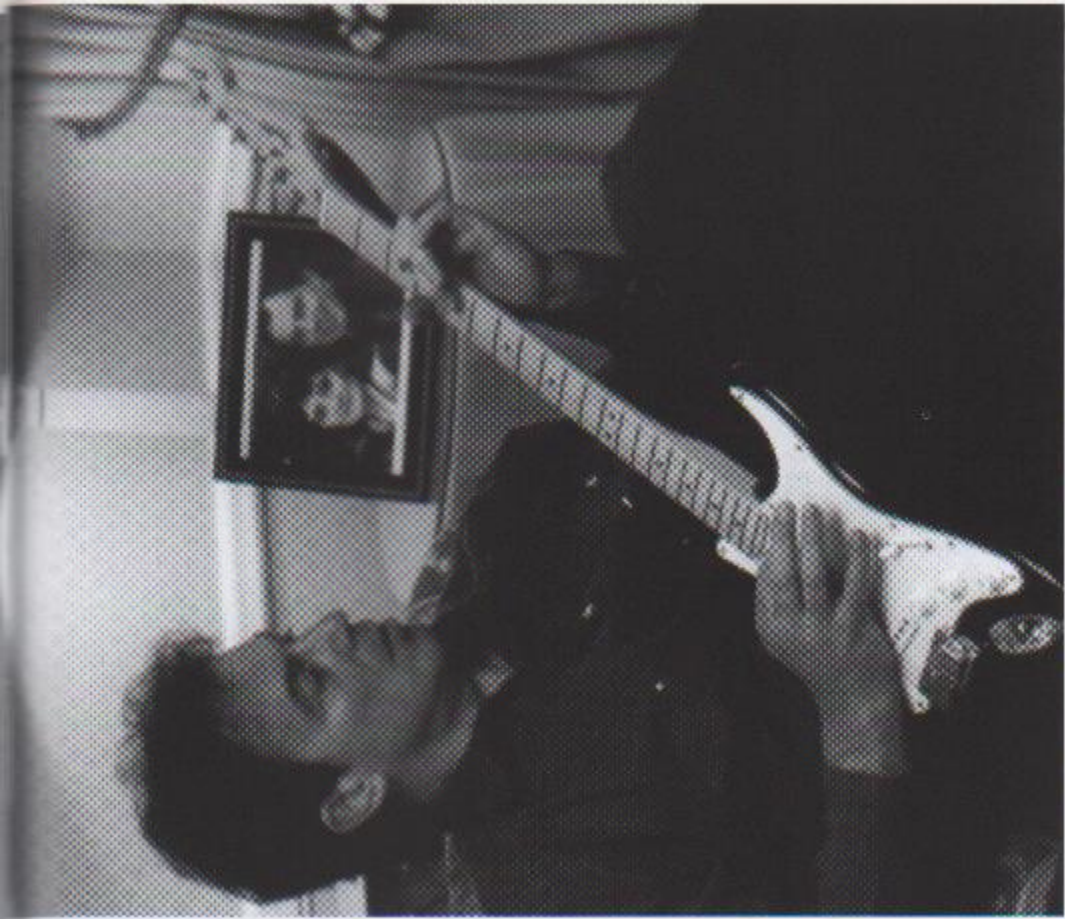
**Des de Moor** is a singer, songwriter and promoter of Pirate Jenny's musical cabaret club ([www.commix.org/jenny](http://www.commix.org/jenny))

film *My Name Is Joe*, had already declared 'we'd run a mile from being associated with New Labour'. After all that, the minister for cool could have been forgiven for reflecting on the words of Victorian prime minister Lord Melbourne: 'God help the government that meddles with art.'

New Labour came to Cool Britannia in search of a rare shared national experience. Although Smith now 'reject[s] the flawed phrase', he is still hoping that 'cultural activity can help us with the development of our sense of who and what we are'. Renamed Creative Britain, the aim remains the same: 'drawing people together...to ensure social inclusion and to overcome isolation and rejection.' But by the end of May Smith appeared isolated, while New Labour's embrace of creativity seemed only to have pulled people apart (high arts v popular culture, opera v Oasis, pure art v applied arts). As Hare pointed out, New Labour was 'cycling furiously away from the notion of Cool Britannia with the same air of desperation with which John Major once had to abandon Back to Basics'. In both instances, the tag that was meant to represent harmonious unity of purpose only highlighted divisions and acrimony.

In one respect, the rift was not of New Labour's making. Outsider status is part of the equipment of every pop culture professional. Incorporation, aka 'selling out', has long been seen as the deadliest of sins, and everybody in the business is obliged to decry it or risk losing all credibility—and a drop in sales. As soon as Tony Blair took office it was inevitable that Creation Record's Alan McGee would walk out at some point (without slamming the door behind him, mind you). The backlash against Cool Britannia is simply this year's bandwagon.

The kudos of outsider status, and the complications this causes for New Labour, are exemplified in the recent manoeuvres over dole-queue rock. Identifying with the sense in which being on the dole is outside the world of work and, by implication, beyond conformity (supposedly), a host of professional outsiders complained that New Labour's 'welfare to work' plans would stifle the output of artistic claimants who have been using the dole as an unofficial government grant. In an attempt to restore unity and bring the outsiders back into the fold, New Labour has announced a



For every Noel Gallagher...there are a thousand wannabes

With New Labour, the political realm has finally become a spectacle which the public is invited merely to consume, in the same passive way that we would partake of a rock concert or a pop video. It is de rigueur to be moved by New Labour: the model response is Noel Gallagher's declaration 'Tony Blair's speech brought tears to my eyes'. What we are not supposed to be is activated. At Cannes Ken Loach was articulating an Old Labour complaint when he said that 'these days being a Labour Party member just means supplying your Visa card number'. But his observation that 'they don't want activists' has a broader

New Labour had enjoyed a one night stand with the pop world. But there is more to it than that. Cool Britannia is no longer cool, but New Labour is now joined at the hip to the pop experience. Indeed, with Blair as frontman, politics has been absorbed into pop culture and the political realm has been thoroughly degraded as a result. It is politics, not pop stars, which has been 'betrayed' by New Labour.

**Andrew Calcutt** is the author of *Arrested Development: Pop Culture and the Erosion of Adulthood*, Cassell



# THE WIND?

# alt.culture . multimedia

PHOTO: MILAN 11 MARCH 1972, ALDO BONASIA





# PISSING

The Pliss Factory—a multi-media, multi-venue event in London in May—combined film and music at Hoxton's Lux cinema and Blue Note club with a photography exhibition at the nearby gallery run by *Dazed* and *Confused* magazine. It is a bid to bring together those cultural/creative types not enamoured of the New Labour age. Named after a Patti Smith song, with references to the controversial artwork 'Piss Christ' and to Andy Warhol's Factory, the event was centred on *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, a film by Johan Grimmonprez which repackages documentary images of radicalism and terrorism, and the work of photographer Aldo Bonasia, who documented the social unrest in Italy during the seventies.

Was the Pliss Factory, sponsored by trendy jeans company Evisu, an example of what Tom Wolfe called 'radical chic'—playing at subversion? Or did the event (and the luminaries who attended it, such as Wayne Hemingway from Red or Dead and Bobby Gillespie of Primal Scream) represent a genuine attempt to explore subversion and creativity at a time when so much of what passes for art and culture is safe and predictable? Alessio Quarzo-Cerina, the Milan-born club-culture consultant who organised the Pliss Factory, outlines his motivation for putting on the event.

something with it because it seemed to have a very amoral point of view. The impression you get is of a nineties artist working with these events as images and putting you in the audience on the spot.

'I grew up in Milan in the seventies, which are known as the "years of lead": radical politics, right-wing groups, terrorism, bombings, kidnapping, looting, shooting in the street. On the days of demonstrations it was like everybody was preparing for war, putting on balalaavas and getting out huge spanners. At the time my best friend was the son of the photographer Aldo Bonasia, who took really beautiful pictures of what was going on. But he never considered himself an artist, he was a social documentarist interested in creating manifestos—manifesto in Italian means both poster and a political statement. He used his pictures to make cheap posters and put them up all over the place. So Bonasia was working with similar material to Grimmonprez, but to a different effect. It seemed very interesting to put the two artists together.

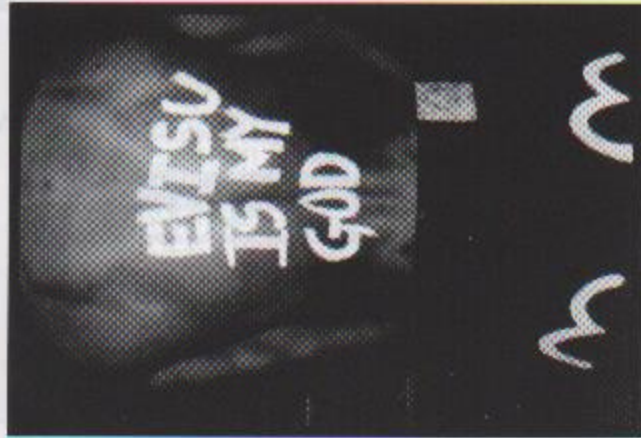
'I think there is something really democratic about club culture. This was our opportunity to put some "serious" visual culture in a club setting, allowing people to enjoy these images and reflect on them if they wanted to. So we had this idea, and when we talked to other people they took to it. Wayne Hemingway became very passionate about it and wrote

the best take on it in the *Evening Standard*. We struck a chord with thinkers and doers—pop musicians, architects, entrepreneurs, who are in strong positions and who feel uneasy that there is no politics today.

'There is a danger of being nostalgic, of saying 'let's go back to the sixties when culture was subversive'. But those currents have played themselves out and nobody believes that fully. Radical chic is current, yet there is something very dissatisfying about it. We are in a paradoxical position: as youth culture professionals we are completely incorporated in the system, but as political subjects we are marginalised. Then again, we are in a strong position at the centre of things here in London.

'I was happy about the event in that it attracted innovative people who have not been involved in politics, but who may want to use the influence they have to create a bit of a stir: people who make a difference in culture, but with no power in the political sense. I would love to have Pliss Factory Two, and force the realisation that we can go round spouting our heads off and it makes no difference, unless we focus our attention. Maybe then we could write a manifesto and run a candidate for mayor of London.'

**Alessio Quarzo-Cerina** is the CEO of club culture inc. People with ideas for future editions of the Pliss Factory are invited to phone him on 0171 275 9666



'We saw *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* last summer and liked it a lot, because it's a collage of TV footage about consumerism, Cold War mentality and political movements, with a really funky soundtrack. It comes across as something beautiful, mesmerising, and it's only afterwards you realise you've seen some pretty serious, violent stuff. We wanted to do

## alt.culture.kerouac

Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs are still revered by today's alt-rock generation as the elder statesmen of counterculture. The recent deaths of Ginsberg and Burroughs (Kerouac died 30 years ago, an alcoholic wreck) have helped foster a miniature industry of beat generation spin-offs aimed at today's angel-headed-hipsters-cum-consumers. Biographies, albums, magazines and a steady stream of new editions have materialised in a repackaging frenzy reminiscent of the heritage gift-shop.

Half-in and half-out of this nostalgia-fest is Barry Miles. Something of a veteran counterculturalist himself (as plain 'Miles' he co-founded the underground paper *International Times* in the 1960s), he has written biographies of Ginsberg, Burroughs and now Kerouac. But at the launch of *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait*, he spoke out against the way that the lives and legacy of the beat generation are being sanitised for mass consumption now that they are 'conveniently dead'. He mocked the Kerouac Commemorative, a \$100,000 monument to the self-proclaimed 'dharma bum', and jibed at the Hilton Hotel in Kerouac's hometown (Lowell, Massachusetts) for planning to put a statue of the holy idiot in its pristine forecourt.

Miles' nostalgic take harks back to a time when there was a much greater distinction between the values embodied by the beats and the American way; a time when FBI chief J Edgar

Hoover called the beatniks 'the third greatest threat to American civilisation' and the counterculture had some grounds for seeing itself as an opposition to the status quo. But now that the Vatican has announced plans for a millennial event in the spirit of Kerouac, it seems more like mainstream society has been co-opted by what was then the counterculture. Certainly the hallmarks of Kerouac's work—DIY spirituality, emphasis on private feelings and a confessional approach to writing—have become the dominant motifs of today's 'Oprah-atic' media.

Miles remains insistent that the counterculture has been victimised by corporate America. He has occasional insights into Kerouac and his work ('he didn't address adult themes, he was a perpetual child') and a heart-warming enthusiasm for a writer who 'captured the size and dynamism of America and its ordinary people'. But perhaps Miles is simply too much a man of the sixties to recognise how the transformation of counterculture into over-the-counter culture also means that the mainstream is now dominated by Kerouac-like figures who used only to exist on the margins.

**David Panos**

*Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* is published by Virgin (£16.99)

# THE BEATS GO ON



# WHOSE WAR IS IT ANYWAY?

The Dangers of the  
Journalism of Attachment

MICK HUME

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pamphlet... Hume makes

a devastating attack on the

"journalism of attachment",

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# READING

## BETWEEN THE LINES

JOE KAPLINSKY takes a look at some scientific optimists

## STARS IN THEIR EYES

### VISIONS: HOW SCIENCE WILL REVOLUTIONISE THE 21ST CENTURY AND BEYOND

Michio Kaku  
Oxford University Press, £18.99 hbk

'THE EVER-INCREASING PACE OF TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE' seems to have become a constant reference point for social, economic and political ideas. The message of the books under review is you ain't seen nothing yet. But they differ from much other commentary in their positive assessment of future possibilities. Instead of seeing technology creating as many problems as it solves, they see it opening up unlimited possibilities for human development. Though their books are quite different, what Michio Kaku and John Lewis share is a sense of the scale of human activity, of how far human civilisation has come and of how far it could go.

*Mining the Sky* is tightly focused on the exploration of space. Rather than trying to predict the future Lewis's book is an attempt to shape it. Lewis opens with a quote from William Jennings Bryan: 'Destiny is not a matter of chance—it is a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be waited for—it is a thing to be achieved', and ends with one from HG Wells: 'There is no way back to the past. The choice is the universe—or nothing.' Railing against the spinelessness of our age he is none the less confident that enough individuals will push forward, in the face of

### MINING THE SKY: UNTOLD RICHES FROM THE ASTEROIDS, COMETS AND PLANETS

John S Lewis  
Addison Wesley, £10.99 pbk

opposition from meddling government bureaucrats and short-sighted politicians, to realise the amazing possibilities of colonising the solar system and beyond. A professor of planetary sciences and co-director of the space engineering research centre at the University of Arizona-Tucson, he always includes enough technical detail to back up his speculation.

*Mining the Sky* surveys what we could do in the solar system right now. It starts at the moon (relatively boring), moves through Mars (more exciting) to the asteroid belt (inspirational) and beyond to the outer planets. Towards the end Lewis looks ahead to how we might start a journey to distant stars.

Lewis argues that the barriers to realising our dreams are to be found in society, not in technology. While his passion is directed towards space science, his fury is aimed at those whose sense of crisis stops them thinking big: 'Liberals tell us we are running out of natural resources, and cannot use the ones we have because energy production, mining and industry pollute. Conservatives tell us that we are running out of money and can revive the economy only by slashing funding →





**KAKU IS CONVINCED THAT RISK CAN BE DEFEATED. IF WE CAN OVERCOME OUR CHILDLIKE STATUS WE WILL MAKE OURSELVES 'INVULNERABLE TO ANY NATURAL DISASTER'**

← for research and education and lowering environmental standards. The message of this book will not sit well with either camp.' (pxi)

Lewis contrasts the past optimism of Nasa to its present caution, pointing out that since it took eight years to get to the moon last time, and the present plans would get us there in 'only' 16 years after go-ahead, we are twice as far from the moon now as we were in 1961. He puts this down to the attitudes of officials, whom he likens to the eunuchs who ruled Ming China in the fifteenth century. Just as the Chinese trading fleets had opened the coasts of India and Arabia, had rounded the Cape of Good Hope and were about to break into European waters, the eunuchs called a halt to exploration and ordered the treasure boats burned along with plans and records of the explorations. China cut itself off from the world. 'The eunuchs have won the day', declares Lewis. Our problem now, as then, is that our leaders don't have the balls for exploring the new and unknown.

LEWIS AND HIS IDEAS ALSO MAKE AN APPEARANCE IN KAKU'S *Visions*, but set in a wider context. *Visions* is a broad survey of developments in computer, biomolecular and quantum science. Kaku has dealt with the problem of predicting the future by presenting the consensus among scientists and engineers who are actually producing new technology, set against what he calls the individual prejudices of 'eccentric social critics' such as journalists, sociologists, writers, fashion designers, artists and philosophers, who merely consume it.

Kaku identifies 'three pillars' of science: matter, life and mind. Scientific study of the mind has not undergone the same dramatic transformation as the rest of science, and Kaku focuses on the advances in computing instead. That's okay because he does not pretend that present efforts in the field of artificial intelligence have anything to do with human consciousness (yet), and the future advances he does highlight, from the transformation of the internet into a useful tool to 'quantum computing', are interesting in their own terms.

He draws the material together around two themes. First, that we are moving from the age of discovery into the age of mastery: 'We are on the cusp on an epoch-making transition, from being passive observers of nature to being active choreographers of nature.' (p5) While that may sound like the pessimistic sociology of Ulrich Beck, it comes with none of the fretting over risks and unintended consequences. Kaku is convinced that risk can be defeated. If we can overcome what is, in civilisational terms, our childlike status, we will eventually make ourselves 'invulnerable to any natural disaster' (p326).

Kaku's second theme is 'synergy', the way in which developments all across the frontiers of science feed off each other today. Drawing on a broad range of sources,



he presents a useful counter to the idea that knowledge is somehow fragmenting into narrow specialities.

Some of the discussion in *Visions* about the social consequences of technical advance is not so good. Drawing on impressionable sociologists and management consultants like Lester Thurow, the Tofflers, Kenichi Ohmae and Hamish McRae was bound to produce an assessment of the computer 'revolution' that is more rooted in present preoccupations with social division than in future reality. Kaku's reply to the panic about a split between information haves and have nots is devastatingly simple—'My own point of view is that we need to increase the size of the pie' (p128)—but it would have been nice if he had developed the point a bit more, rather than let the sociologists have their say.

The discussion of problems associated with genetic technologies is even more uncritical, and Kaku even goes so far as to endorse a ban on germ-line therapy. But what keeps Kaku on track is his sense of the big picture. All of these problems fade away as mere details which will be overcome in the struggle to forge what Kaku calls a 'planetary civilisation'. As yet, according to Kaku, we do not even qualify as a civilisation proper.

The contrast between this vision and the low horizons of an environmentalist outlook is illustrated in Kaku's treatment of future energy supply. Like any good Malthusian he postulates that our energy consumption will grow at a constant rate. A 'modest' growth rate of two per cent per annum implies that our energy consumption will increase by a factor of 10 billion in 1200 years. At this point he parts company with Malthus: rather than using these figures as 'proof' that growth must come to an end, he deduces that on this timescale our civilisation will really consume this much energy, and so must have mastered the entire output of the sun. Growth beyond this will not become impossible either; it will just send us off on our way to mastery of the entire galaxy!

THE SAME SENSE OF UNLIMITED RESOURCES IS PRESENT in *Mining the Sky*. Indeed, Lewis provides a concrete scheme through which we might capture useful amounts of energy from the sun by constructing massive solar power stations in space, using asteroids as the raw material. The scale of resources available in space is mind boggling. In an attempt to bring it down to Earth Lewis calculates its cash value. The value of iron and steel would come to \$7 billion per head at current population levels, nickel \$6 billion per head, cobalt \$26 billion per head, and that is without counting up the platinum, gold, silver, copper and all the rest. On this sort of income he suggests that we could support an effectively unlimited population on Earth. Of course, it is an elementary mistake to assume that a lump of metal in the sky could somehow transform the social organisation



## DE WAAL SHOWS HOW THE VESTED INTERESTS OF THE AID WORKERS AND THEIR ORGANISATIONS WIN OUT OVER HUMANITARIAN IDEALS

of the planet on which an income depends. It is the same mistake made by economists who believe in 'natural capital'. But ultimately Lewis knows that it is people, not rocks, which count:

'As long as the human population remains as pitifully small as it is today, we shall be severely limited in what we can accomplish. Human intelligence is the key to the future: human beings are not as some would have it, a form of pollution. Having only one Einstein, one Hokusai, one Mozart, one da Vinci, one Shankara, one Poulenc, one Arthur Ashe, and one Bill Gates is not enough. We need—and can have—a million times as many.' (p256)

But to produce geniuses needs more than human bodies. It needs a society that will allow individuals to push forward and which will inspire them to push themselves to, and even beyond, the limits. These books are a solid contribution to creating a culture which could do just that. ●

Para Teare reviews a study that puts aid organisations in Africa on trial

# HUMANITARIANISM INTERNATIONAL PLC

## FAMINE CRIMES: POLITICS AND THE DISASTER RELIEF INDUSTRY IN AFRICA

Alex de Waal, African Rights, £11.95 pbk

ALEX DE WAAL'S BOOK, I AM RELIABLY INFORMED, HAS caused a furore among aid workers in what are now called 'non-governmental organisations' (NGOs), by calling for aid to Africa to become more directly political. Aid agencies, which have always insisted that they are neutral, were deeply upset by the suggestion. 'How dare de Waal jeopardise aid by tying it to political ambitions?' was the criticism.

But aid has never been neutral, nor can it be. Aid has always come with certain political and economic conditions attached. The recent G8 summit is a case in point. In Birmingham there were at least 60 000 people calling for the major economic powers to cancel the debts owed them by developing countries. A noble gesture, but a gesture just the same—because any country that has its debt cancelled will have to conform to strict conditions on how it runs its affairs, conditions imposed by the IMF or the World Bank. Yet 60 000 people, mostly Christians and aid workers, were demanding this

new dispensation. I certainly did not see any banners questioning the right of Western-run institutions to intervene in the affairs of developing countries. To my ears, saying that aid should be political in its intent is like telling the truth, instead of hiding behind a phoney neutrality.

Through the prism of famine, de Waal traces the history and the role of Western humanitarianism in the less developed world, from the initial actions of Oxfam in the Biafra famine of 1968 to today. He shows how the NGOs have mushroomed into influential organisations, courted by the media and supported by donor governments, to the point where they have become major policy-makers in many third world countries—more important even than the national government. His criticism of the NGOs is that, for all their clout, they are not successful in preventing famines. He takes us through country after country in Africa, demonstrating how within each particular context famines are either created, ignored or manipulated.

WHERE DO THE NGOs FIT IN? DE WAAL SHOWS HOW THE vested interests of the aid workers and their organisations tend to win out over humanitarian ideals. Instead of preventing famine, upholding human rights or helping the poor, aid organisations tend to be more concerned with winning influence and publicity for the charity concerned, or even with enhancing the individual career prospects of those involved. De Waal convincingly argues that international humanitarianism is really about the self-preservation of the 'Humanitarian International'. According to de Waal it makes no difference to aid organisations that African elites manipulate aid and famine alike for their own political purposes, because the aid organisations too are dependent on disaster for their existence.

The NGOs are not democratic or accountable, nor do they like their work to be tested against any obvious standards. They certainly have many critical evaluations internally but, as de Waal points out, these only ever serve to redouble their efforts, never to question their overall direction. No NGO will publicly admit that it has failed. The NGO world is a tough one where competition is fierce, and whoever gets the most publicity gets the most funds. For this reason the most important relationship for the NGOs is with the media, which plays a key role in helping aid agencies get a large international relief response.

De Waal vividly explains how journalists know exactly what a 'famine relief story looks like' and search for the right elements—starving babies, food queues and squalor. De Waal quotes the BBC's George Alagiah: 'Relief agencies depend on us for publicity and we need them to tell us where the stories are. There's an unspoken understanding between us, a sort of code. We try not →





## APART FROM BEING A (PROBABLY) WELL-MEANING SCAREMONGER, BIDDULPH IS A MINE OF PREDICTABLE, HALF-BAKED OPINION

← to ask questions too bluntly, "Where will we find the starving babies?", and they never answer explicitly. We get the pictures just the same.'

De Waal's criticism is that in all of this talk of humanitarianism, the 'famine vulnerable' are the very people whose interests are overlooked. His alternative is an openly political humanitarianism—in other words, he wants Western agencies to play a more proactive role in intervening to ensure that aid is distributed to the right people. He wants consultation, not with authoritarian governments, but with local people, the 'famine vulnerable' themselves.

If de Waal was arguing that African people should mobilise themselves against their governments and start controlling their lives, he would have a point. I would like to think that is what he means. But his proposals sound more like a scheme for leaving the 'famine vulnerable' under the supervision of unaccountable Western-run institutions, instead of unaccountable governments and NGOs. He says he wants famine to be made into an offence—a famine crime—so that those responsible can be tried by an International Tribunal. Such a tribunal has already been used to impose the authority of the 'international community' in Africa, through the trial of those accused of crimes against humanity in Rwanda (see 'Showtrial, UN-style', *LM*, September 1997).

De Waal's analysis of current NGO strategy is a powerful exposé of the imperial condescension behind Western aid. But his own proposals point towards a system of more direct political domination by the West. Is that really the radical alternative that Africa needs? ●

Para Teare is coordinator of Genderwatch

### READ ON READ ON READ ON READ ON READ ON

#### THE SECRET OF HAPPY CHILDREN

Steve Biddulph, Thorsons, £8.99 pbk

HAVE YOU NOTICED HOW THE BABY AND CHILDCARE SECTION of your local bookshop is growing? Hardly a month goes by without a new expert giving us the benefit of their wisdom on such matters as thumb-sucking and bed-wetting, because we seem incapable of coping with these things on our own any more. 'Parent' is now a verb, and 'parenting' is being professionalised.

I have to admit that, being a critic of this new tendency towards 'paranoid parenting' (and a normally anxious parent), I have read them all. The latest of these childcare gurus is Steve Biddulph, a family therapist from Australia, whose new book is modestly titled *The Secret of Happy Children* (what caring parent could

afford not to buy that?). Biddulph generously asserts in the introduction that we should take his advice with a pinch of salt, because 'experts are a hazard to your health! Your own heart will always tell you, if you listen to it, what is the best way to raise your children'. This book is simply his 'love and encouragement' to us. But he begins to turn the screw on the very next page. 'When reading this book you may realise that, by accident, you are hypnotising your children into disliking themselves, and causing them to have problems which may last a lifetime.'

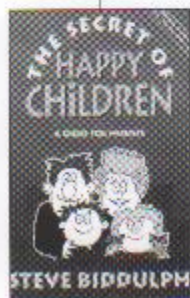
Got a headache? Kids driving you mad, but you are trying hard to remain pleasant? Stop now. 'Don't pretend to be happy or loving when you aren't feeling that way—it's confusing and can make children become evasive and in time quite disturbed.' And you do not want disturbed children, do you? Perhaps you are the 'shy, timid' type of parent who finally blows up only after a lot of simmering? Biddulph helpfully points out that 'it will come as no surprise to you that parents who injure their children are often from this category'. Can you feel your confidence growing even as you read?

BUT NOT TO WORRY; HIS BOOK IS FULL OF ADVICE TO GUIDE you away from these pitfalls. He spends long pages deploring the way some parents put down their children, and issuing assurances that little Johnny is bound to become a mad axe-murderer because of it. Then, just when you are swearing an oath that you will never treat your children like that, Biddulph issues another warning: 'Some parents, of course, go to the other extreme. They swear never to scold, hit or deprive their own children. The danger here is that they may overdo it, and their children suffer from a lack of control. It isn't easy is it?'

Apart from being a (probably) well-meaning scaremonger, Biddulph is a mine of predictable, half-baked opinion. Inevitably, on 'food and kids' behaviour: 'did you know that poor food intake is thought by some to be the major factor in juvenile crime?' On education: 'thousands of years ago Aborigines were teaching young people on a one-to-one basis and had no failures or drop-outs.' (And no rocket scientists either.)

Biddulph includes at the end of his book a remarkably professional-sounding 'Letter from a mother', who, after a few sessions of family therapy with him, apparently went from being a tranquilliser junky on the verge of killing her children to a happy, confident wife and mother. (He asked her what happens to her body when she gets mad with the kids, and told her to join Parents' Anonymous.) 'It's still hard sometimes', writes the mother, 'but I feel like a new person compared with back then, and the kids are much better for it...So what can I say but THANKS.' Pass the nappy sack... ●

Virginia Hume





**LM** libel appeal

The **OFF THE FENCE** fund

### **ITN**

is suing *LM* magazine for libel, over a story about its award-winning pictures of a Bosnian camp published in the February 1997 issue. It is a case that threatens to bankrupt *LM* and raises wider issues about the threat to press freedom.

English libel law is a censorship charter that the rich can hire to buy immunity from criticism through the courts; an American court recently called it 'repugnant' to

human rights and the principle of free speech.

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