

THE REPELLENT MR ROSS

NOWHERE IS THE TACIT ALLIANCE between vulgarity and legalised corruption in Britain better illustrated than in the career of Jonathan Ross, the radio and television presenter to whom the BBC has seen fit to transfer £18 million of tax- and licence-payers' money for three years' activity. The main advantage of such a vast salary, from the BBC's point of view, or at least that of its directors, is to make its yearly payment to the Director-General, Mark Thompson, of £788,000 in 2007, seem comparatively modest.

Let us recall just a couple of highlights of Mr Ross's career so far.

In 2006 he interviewed the leader of the Conservative Party, and possible next Prime Minister of this country, David Cameron (I shall reserve my estimate of Mr Cameron's part in the proceedings for a little later). In the course of this interview, he asked Mr Cameron whether he had masturbated as a 12-year-old boy while thinking of Mrs Thatcher. His precise words were, 'But did you or did you not have a wank thinking of Mrs Thatcher?'

This question came as the culmination of a series of questions as follows:

Ross: Let me ask you a question which you may consider a little risqué. How old were you when Lady Thatcher, back then just plain Margaret Thatcher, was first elected?

Cameron: Twelve, thirteen, something like that.

Ross: That is a time in a boy's life when you begin to look around for women who are attractive.

Cameron: This is when I realise why politicians never come on the show.

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Ross: I put it to you, sir, that as a young man, you may have rejected, but I think you probably considered, Margaret Thatcher, in a carnal fashion. As indeed we all did.

Cameron: I wasn't that interested in politics when I was 13.

Ross: We're not talking about that.

Cameron: I wasn't really following it all very closely.

Ross: Did you think of her as a woman? Do you think she might be pin-up material?

Cameron: No.

Ross: You didn't want to see her in stockings?

Cameron: No.

After discussing Mrs Thatcher's political achievements, Ross then asked the question; after which he added, 'I tried but it was a challenge even for me.'

In 2008, in the company of a comedian called Russell Brand, Jonathan Ross telephoned Andrew Sachs, the 78-year-old actor who had played Manuel, the Spanish waiter in the television series *Fawlty Towers*, and made obscene jokes recorded on his answer-phone.

Even without the obscenity that was to come, the manner of both Ross and Brand was extremely vulgar and discourteous. Speaking in a tone of fatuous familiarity, Brand said: 'Hello Andrew Sachs, I am a great appreciator (*sic*) of your work over the decades. You're meant to be on my show now mate, I don't know why you're not answering the phone, it's a bit difficult – I'm here with Jonathan Ross.'

At this point, Ross said, 'Hello Andrew.'

In modern Britain, apparently, this is now deemed a decent and perhaps even admirably informal way in which to address a complete a stranger in public for the first time. Since all men are created equal, no respect is due to age, of course. The ideological imperative to level down trumps by a long way the need to consider

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the feelings of the person addressed, or what he might expect of others.

Ross and Brand decided to continue talking while the answer-phone recorded. In the course of their inane banter, Ross suddenly blurted out, 'He fucked your grand-daughter.' Then he laughed, and said, 'I'm sorry, I apologise. Andrew, I apologise. I got excited, what can I say, it just came out.'

Brand then said, 'Andrew Sachs, I did not do nothing with Georgina – oh no, I've revealed I know her name! Oh no, it's a disaster.'

They then discussed whether Mr Sachs might hang himself as a result of these revelations.

Ross then made a facetious attempt to exculpate himself. 'How could I carry that round in my head like a big brain blister all day? I had to pop it and let the pressure out.'

A little while later, during a second call to Mr Sachs, Brand recited a kind of poem while Ross hummed in the background:

I'd like to apologise for these terrible attacks – Andrew Sachs.

I'd like to show contrition to the max, Andrew Sachs.

I'd like to create world peace, between the yellow, whites and blacks, Andrew Sachs, Andrew Sachs.

I said some things I didn't of oughta, like I had sex with your grand-daughter.

But it was consensual and she wasn't menstrual, it was consensual, lovely sex.

It's full of respect. I sent her a text. I've asked her to marry me.

At this point, Ross asked Mr Sachs to marry him.

Further on, Brand said, 'And even after the show's finished, Jonathan, we can find out where Andrew Sachs lives, kick his front door in and scream apologies into his bottom. We can just keep on

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troubling Andrew Sachs, let's do it, OK. You pretend you're Andrew Sachs' answer-phone.'

Ross then said, 'Hello, Manuel is not in right now. Leave your message after the tone.'

This puerile, obscene and mildly menacing drivel continued for nine minutes; it could not therefore be said to be a slip of the tongue or momentary lapse. Moreover, the whole episode was pre-recorded; the BBC saw fit to broadcast it, despite having had ample time and opportunity to suppress it.

It is difficult to conclude anything other than that Jonathan Ross is paid a fortune specifically because of his vulgarity and abusiveness, both fearless and determined.

More important, significant and revealing than the episodes themselves were the responses, public and official, to them.

Protests about the questioning of Mr Cameron were relatively few and muted. Some of the responses were beside the point. Mr Howarth, a Conservative Member of Parliament, said that 'to refer to the most distinguished Prime Minister since Winston Churchill in this way is beneath contempt'. It was not Mrs Thatcher's distinction, however, that made the question objectionable; it would have been no better had it been asked, say, of Mrs Castle, the Labour Minister, or Mrs Williams, the Social Democrat, or indeed of anyone else. It was wrong in itself, pointless in its vulgarity; indeed, its vulgarity was its point, and its whole point. It was vulgarity triumphant, crowing its victory over restraint and refinement.

Jonathan Ross said afterwards, in response to criticism, that he thought his question was 'valid' (not merely valid, in fact, but 'perfectly valid'.) This word in its modern usage is to real thought what viruses are to the operation of computers: it destroys it. What did he mean by saying that his question was valid? That it was correct in grammatical form? That it was susceptible to an answer that might be true or

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false? That the answer to it was of great political importance? That it was a biographical detail that the British public needed, and had a right, to know? To say of the question that it was ‘valid’ was an artful way of imputing some value to it without having to go to the trouble of specifying what the value might be.

The response of the Director-General (who at the time was being paid only a paltry £609,000) was absolutely typical of the moral and intellectual pusillanimity of the modern British administrative, bureaucratic and political elite. Before considering it further, let us remind ourselves of a few of the provisions of the BBC Charter, which tells us:

- i) that the BBC exists to serve the public interest, and
- ii) that its main object is the promotion of its Public Purposes.

The Public Purposes of most relevance here are the following:

- a) Sustaining citizenship and civil society.
- b) Promoting education and learning.
- c) Stimulating creativity and cultural excellence.

In defending Mr Ross, then, and allowing him to be paid £18 million to ask questions such as whether the Leader of the Opposition had masturbated at the age of 12 while thinking of the then Prime Minister, the Director-General considered that he was serving the sustenance of citizenship, the promotion of education and the stimulation of learning and cultural excellence: a misjudgment so bizarre that only utter contempt for the charter itself, corruption, delusion, stupidity or abysmal incompetence could explain it. None of these explanations would suffice to justify his continuance in office.

Mr Thompson, the Director-General, said that Mr Ross was ‘outstanding’, among ‘the very best’. He said he gave enormous enjoyment and represented good financial value. What good financial value is to a public corporation which is not profit-making he did not explain in detail; but there is little doubt one might be able to say

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the same of public executions, were they broadcast, namely that they gave enormous enjoyment and, being cheap to arrange, represented good financial value.

The Director-General went on to say that, were Ross to leave the BBC, ‘you would have headlines about that fact, and I think our licence fee payers would be disappointed’. But popularity, certainly not popularity alone, is not a proper measure of what the BBC was set up to do and what the charter still enjoins it to do.

Thousands of people complained to the BBC about Ross and Brand’s broadcast. Ross was suspended for three months and Brand decided that he should refrain from appearing further on the BBC. Before he did so, he issued two ‘apologies’. In the first, he spent more time attacking the *Daily Mail*, which had roundly condemned the two men, than in his apology, which was equivocal at best:

I would like to issue a personal Russell Brand apology to Andrew Sachs... for a message Jonathan and I left on his answer-phone, but it was quite funny. But sometimes you mustn’t swear on someone’s answer-phone...

That he, or anyone else, found his own drivel funny is self-condemnatory; that he thinks being funny is some kind of excuse for pointless cruelty is likewise self-condemnatory; and that he thinks it is often (presumably more often than not) permissible to ‘swear’, as he calls his obscenity, on people’s answer-phones requires no comment either.

He continued:

I would like to remind the *Daily Mail* that while it is a bit bad to leave a swear-word on Andrew Sachs’ answer-phone, what’s worse – leaving a swear-word on Andrew Sachs’ answer-phone

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or tacitly supporting Adolf Hitler when he took charge of the Third Reich? It's up to you, the listener, to decide which is worse. Offending Manuel, for which I apologise, or is it worse to tacitly support the death of millions?

These are not the words of a man who feels much contrition, indeed any contrition whatsoever; if he did, he would not describe his (and Ross') nine-minute telephone call, grossly discourteous and obscene from beginning to end, as leaving 'a swear-word'. He couldn't really apologise, because he couldn't really see that he had done anything wrong; and as we shall soon see, that is an inability that he shared with many of his countrymen.

Introducing the *Daily Mail's* inglorious support for Hitler between 1933 and 1939 was the kind of rhetorical smokescreen that is used by many wrongdoers to justify themselves. Here Brand is insinuating a kind of syllogism:

The *Daily Mail* condemns me.

The *Daily Mail* supported Hitler.

People who condemn me are in agreement with the *Daily Mail*.

Therefore, people who condemn me are Nazi sympathisers, and in no moral position to condemn people such as I who leave obscene telephone messages.

Therefore what I did was not very wrong, if it was wrong at all.

It would be tedious to dissect the reasons for the moral irrelevance of this defence, its logical errors and its deeply unpleasant egotism. Suffice it to say that he is not even right historically where the *Daily Mail* is concerned: it changed its tune in 1939, before the Nazis had killed millions (brutal as they already were). As it happens, the *Guardian* also had a few hard words for Brand, but he did not resort to the

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argument that, in the 1930s, the *Guardian* had suppressed Malcolm Muggeridge's reports of the Ukrainian famine, and which was worse, leaving 'a swear-word' on Andrew Sachs' answer-phone, or tacitly supporting the deaths by starvation of millions of Ukrainians?

Brand also failed to mention in his self-exculpation that the very man he selected for his 'prank' was himself a refugee from Nazi Germany, who came to this country to escape Nazi persecution when he was eight years old.

His second apology – made with a portrait of Stalin in the background, not exactly a tactful choice of personage for someone who had recently claimed to be sensitive about the murder of millions – was just as egotistical. In it, he admitted that what he had done was 'really, really stupid', and added that this was especially so since he admired Andrew Sachs so much. Thus it was his admiration for Mr Sachs, which was not so great that it led him to address him with minimal politeness, that made his conduct reprehensible. If he had left obscene messages on the answer-phone of someone he did not know, or worse still had no admiration for, it would not have been nearly so bad.

I was reminded of a recent case in which a woman in a supermarket called her boyfriend to come to her because another customer had accused her of jumping a queue. Upon her pointing out the man, the boyfriend went over and punched him. The man fell and hit his head on the ground, later dying of a head injury. The manager came over to the woman's boyfriend and told him he had got the wrong man – as if there had been a *right* one to punch and kill.

Ross apologised for his behaviour; but he also did not think that leaving obscene phone calls and suggestions that a 78-year-old man might hang himself as a result was not merely a prank, or more than a rush of blood to the head, but a revelation of something much deeper, a coarse, brutal and stupid mentality. Speaking to Brand some

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time after the 'show', he said that the broadcast had been a mess, and, he added, 'let's face it, an un-entertaining mess'. On this view, entertainment is the highest value; the quality of being entertaining would justify anything, including obscene phone calls.

In the very week after his suspension, which suggested that he had been guilty only of an error of judgment rather than of something far worse, and which left him to scrape by on only £4,500,000 of public money that year, he again made a tasteless sexual joke. Speaking on air to his producer, who had claimed while in Spain to have been accosted sexually by a woman in her eighties who lived near his villa there, Ross said, 'Eighty, oh God! I think you should, just for charity, give her one last night. One last night before the grave. Would it kill you?'

Admittedly in this case Ross did not know that his joke was about a woman who, as it turned out, actually existed and was suffering from Alzheimer's disease (of which sexual disinhibition is sometimes a symptom). But he must have known that either she did not exist, in which case the joke was merely pointless and crude, or that she did, in which case it was likely to be offensive as well as crude.

He had learnt nothing from his suspension, as indeed was no doubt expected and indeed intended by his employers (men of his age do not suddenly learn refinement of feeling), who were simply heading off criticism with as little fuss and inconvenience as possible. It was precisely for being crude and shallow that, *de facto*, agents of the British state were paying him so munificently; they must have thought, or at least have claimed or pretended to think, that the dissemination of such crudity was in the public interest.

The dialectical relationship between a morally and intellectually corrupt elite and a debased population was perfectly illustrated by one part of the public response to the Ross-Brand episode. By the time 10,000 people had complained about the broadcast, 50,000

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people had signed up to a petition on Facebook in support of the supposedly-persecuted comedians. Of course, neither figure allows us to say who is in the majority in Britain, and many thousands more did eventually complain, but it seems that, at the very least, a fairly large percentage of the population, especially among the young, is now so morally coarsened that it can no more see what was wrong with the behaviour of the two comedians than can the comedians themselves. A BBC reporter, commenting on the fact that, at the time, the BBC had received six times as many messages of support for the comedians as complaints about them, gave typical examples of the comments received: 'Anybody who thinks it's disgusting should get a grip,' 'Russell is hilarious,' 'Hey, they are comedians – it's their job.'

The flavour of the more extended commentary to be found on the internet in favour of the comedians can be gauged from the following:

The whole thing is ridiculous, and has brought all kinds of unpleasant people out of the woodwork. Essentially it is a fuss about someone making a joke about fucking someone, you know – that thing lots of adults do for fun – but has played as if Jonathan Ross has somehow tarred Manuel's adult granddaughter by outing the fact that Russell Brand shagged her at one of his hot tub parties. As if sex is somehow dirty and taboo. The headline should be "Man shags woman, tells grumpy elderly relative, incensed newspaper readers foam at the mouth."

The problem here is not lack of intelligence; I should guess that the writer is of above average intelligence, and probably has attended university. The problem is crudity, intellectual, moral, psychological and cultural. What is altogether lacking here, and is culturally

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disastrous, is an awareness that there is any distinction to be made between the public and the private: that a joke that is permissible, if not particularly funny, in private is not permissible in public. The fact that the writer thinks that the complaint is about ‘someone making a joke about fucking someone’ demonstrates this.

He continues (*le style est l’homme même*):

Be sure to check out all of the comments from the new puritans, rabid anti-BBC types, armchair moralists, old people of questionable intelligence, and general fuckwits... It wasn’t that funny to begin with but the shitstorm of indignation from the illiterate opinionated twats of Great Britain has made it lolworthy (laughable)... All of those people that are morally outraged have been trolled hard (have been duped into overreaction by a deliberate provocation), and can go fuck themselves. If that’s the kind of people Russell Brand and Jonathan Ross have offended – good. Well done BBC – but it’s stupid to suspend people for pissing off an elderly guest of the show.

Some supporters of Ross and Brand referred to free speech, and one even mentioned the death of Socrates. Another defence is that he is Jonathan Ross: Jonathan Ross behaves like this, it’s what he’s known for. I am reminded of a burglar who said, when I suggested that he stopped burgling, ‘But I’m a burglar, burglary’s what I do.’

When I have mentioned the case of Ross – his persistent and triumphal crudity – to Americans and Frenchmen they have been astonished. Of course, few British people, parochial despite (or perhaps because of) years of lip-service to multiculturalism, are aware of, or care about, the shock that their tastes and behaviour would now evoke in people of other nationalities. Most foreigners have retained

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some residual, but erroneous, notion of the British as a restrained and self-respecting people. The Americans and Frenchmen to whom I have spoken were even more astonished that the British state has become corrupted enough, morally, intellectually and financially, to subsidise such crudity with such public largesse.

Mr Cameron claimed after he had appeared on the Ross show to have enjoyed it (no doubt an attempt to curry favour with people like the writer of the lovely words I have quoted above). This claim is by itself enough to demonstrate that he is not fit to hold any public office, as indeed is the fact that he agreed to appear on the show in the first place, because the transcript shows that he was fully aware of its nature. Ross, after all, had celebrated his award of the OBE in 2005 by playing a song by the Sex Pistols, whose words went as follows:

*God save the Queen, the fascist regime.
They made you a moron, a potential H-bomb.
God save the Queen, she ain't no human being.*

Ironically, Ross' conduct with Brand was all the more reprehensible since his insensitivity to the feelings of others was matched by a marked hypersensitivity in regard to his own feelings. He threatened a lawsuit, for breach of privacy, against a man who took and wanted to publish some photographs of him as he played tennis at a private club. It is a sign of the degeneracy of British culture that anyone would be interested in publishing or looking at them.