

High Principals

In which the writer misses nine-tenths of the point

The doings of vice-chancellors in these days when they are expected to behave like CEOs of their universities and to be rewarded accordingly are a perfectly proper subject of public scrutiny and comment; not to mention—given the pretensions of some of them—a source of innocent merriment. When the VC of the University of Ulster sent out to all members of staff that internal email, which the *Eye* quotes from, alluding to “misleading and inaccurate” speculation about the state of his marriage which nevertheless, he insisted, had no bearing on his work as vice-chancellor, it was to be expected that the newspapers would pick up the story. But what they made of it was nothing much more than gossip.

What most journalists had fun with, including the *Eye*’s man, was the folly of someone trying to stem speculation about his private life by alerting strangers to rumours that most of them knew nothing about. But in stopping there they showed that they shared the mentality of the vice-chancellor and his advisers. They were so preoccupied with the email’s effect that they didn’t attend to its meaning. But it is the meaning of the email and what it, all unwittingly, tells us about this vice-chancellor and the kind of intellectual and moral world he inhabits, that is the most revealing thing about it. And everything that is most damaging to the writer’s reputation in it—damaging to his private reputation for good sense and to his public reputation as fit for the office he holds—the *Eyehack* misses.

The striking thing about the email is its uncertainty about what it’s trying to say. There are bits that are would-be personal and other bits that are would-be impersonal. It looks to be heading off in one direction and then it ends up somewhere else. It veers Coriolanus-like between appeals to our sense of decency and contemptuous rejection of the suggestion that the writer has anything to answer for. The overall effect is one of incoherence: incongruous bits of other and half-remembered public statements torn out of context and jumbled together in a mish-mash.

Colleagues,

Some of you will be aware that there has been speculation, much of it misleading and inaccurate, in regard to my personal life. Specifically, it concerns the situation with regard to my marriage.

It looks from this opening as if the Vice-Chancellor and President is going to ‘set the record straight’: to say *what* is “misleading” and “inaccurate” in the speculation about his personal life. But he doesn’t tell us what. How much is *much*? Does describing speculation as *inaccurate* mean that it isn’t *true*? Couldn’t speculation that was inaccurate in detail be true in substance? “Inaccurate”, as used here, is just stonewalling. It means whatever the writer wants it to mean. In the language of *All the President’s Men* this is a classic example of the “non-denial denial”. And why can’t he say, straight out, “speculation about the state of my marriage”? Why the tortured circumlocutions: speculation “in regard to my personal life”, that “concerns the situation with regard to my marriage”? As if “the situation with regard to” were

something different and apart from his marriage, for which he needn't feel any personal responsibility.

As Vice-Chancellor and President of the University it is incumbent upon me to address this matter, as such comment is not in the interests of the University, which is more important than any of us. In the light of this, and after much consideration, I thought it appropriate that I should write to each of you.

Aside from its pomposity, the startling thing about the first sentence is the claim that the University (with a capital U) is “more important than any of us”. When Jules Romains’ Doctor Knock said: “Above the interest of the patient and the interest of the doctor there stands the interest of Medicine”, it was a joke. The boss of the University of Ulster offers it, or its equivalent, as the plain truth (which makes a better joke still). But what *is* “the University” apart from its members? What the vice-chancellor *meant* to say, we must presume, was that no one member is more important than the university as a whole—quite a different matter. That could be decently said, without implying that there is something over and above the members of the university, and the values they uphold *as* members, that has a claim upon them. Couldn't you imagine a different vice-chancellor saying something of this kind: “None of us is more important than the university—not even I the vice-chancellor—and therefore, since my conduct has given rise to speculation that is damaging to the university, I must—regretfully—tender my resignation”? Whereas the effect of Professor McKenna’s elevating the University and its interests *above* those of its members is to elevate himself, as its chief officer and representative, along with it.

The source of the comment is a matter in my personal life which does not impact upon the University or my ability to discharge my responsibilities.

This is the ‘brazening it out’ part of the message: “Whatever I may have done has nothing to do with (“does not impact upon”) my competence to lead the university.” Well, if you say so, Guv. Although how “comment” on the VC’s conduct could be damaging to (“not in the interests of”) the university (*see above*), but the conduct that originally gave rise to it *not* be, would be a difficult question to answer. Is Professor McKenna claiming that his work as vice-chancellor is a value-free zone? That integrity and trust in one’s personal life are irrelevant to leadership of a university? (The irony in all this—which has not gone unnoticed by ordinary members of staff—is that university senior managers, with the VC at the head, have for months been on at them to identify the institution’s “core values”.)

Therefore, I ask only that colleagues respect my privacy and that of my family at a difficult time.

The writer of the *Private Eye* piece, like most journalists, found it ludicrous that anyone should appeal to have his and his family’s privacy respected in an email to all and sundry that *drew attention* to rumours that most people knew nothing about.

People *will* talk, and now, as a result of the VC's email, *more* people will talk—what else could he have expected?

But mightn't we expect the *Eye* to have been a bit more penetrating? After all, Professor McKenna's plea to colleagues to respect his privacy and that of his family "at a difficult time" would have struck a deeper note had it been coupled with some frank admission of culpability on his part. It would, in that case, have been an appeal it would have been indecent *not* to respect. But when the writer admits to nothing and defiantly refuses to acknowledge any link between his personal conduct and his responsibilities as vice-chancellor, isn't appealing for his privacy and that of his family to be respected just glib and self-serving? Was it really his family's privacy he was thinking about—in which case, why send the email?—or was it saving his own skin?

As a University we face immense challenges and I assure you of my deep commitment to meeting those challenges and to building upon the success we have achieved together over the past five years.

Thank you.

*Professor Gerry McKenna
Vice-Chancellor and President*

These fragments I have shored against my ruin: "*immense challenges ... assure you ... deep commitment to ... meet those challenges ... build upon success ... achieved together ... past five years ...*". No, Gerry, *these* fragments, these recycled scraps of nothing-meaning, *are* your ruin. They are what (from the point of view of *mind*) ruin is. Utterance, in well-formed sentences, reproduced mechanically by the prayer-wheel of (in this case, managerial) cliché. *Professor* McKenna? Is it possible? Such a man, such a mentality, to be *Professor*? Of what? And such a Professor—of no matter what—without, apparently, the slightest capacity (or inclination) for honest thought, to be not any Professor but the one who impressed the Selection Committee as the best Professor of all, the Professor fittest to lead all the other Professors, as Vice-Chancellor and President of his University (an institution destined to have the same relation to education that Guzman Bento's administration in Conrad's Costaguano has to politics).

It's enough to make one gasp—it would be, if it weren't so commonplace, or one had any capacity for gasping left.

What is 'the university' apart from its members? Mission Statements and Course Structures and the like, rags ... and jobs. Nothing more important than to appoint the right people, the best people at every level—those *with* the capacity (and inclination) for honest thought. Appoint the wrong people, appoint Gerry McKennas at every level and the University of Ulster (and of Everywhere Else) might as well be the University of the Coast-of-Birdshit: a university in which (as at Ulster) Philosophy is abolished and a Centre of Excellence created in *Meedya Studies* .

But where does the *guano* begin, or end? The Selection Committee appointed Gerry McKenna. Gerry McKenna appointed ... whoever he did appoint, according to his lights. But who appointed the Selection Committee? And who appointed *him*, or Them? It isn't, is it, that we've got the universities we deserve? Why travel to the Costa del Sol, when we've got the Costaguano right here at home?

*

Number Crunching

A joke in which the point is that the Vicar gets his timing wrong

If Number Cruncher ridicules Tony Blair for taking only 1hr 45 mins to comment when John Peel died, 2hrs for Jill Dando, 3 hrs 20 mins for Princess Diana, 7hrs for Frank Sinatra and 12 hrs for George Harrison but 4 *days* for tens of thousands of tsunami victims ... isn't "Number Crunching" itself a candidate for "Tsunamiballs"?

Or does the *Eye* think the important thing is that the Vicar proportions more exactly the speed with which he mounts Albion's pulpit to the relative importance of the dead?

*

TV Eye

The trouble with "Remote Controller" is the trouble, in small, with, *Private Eye* as a whole. He wants the impossible (impossible not because merely too difficult but because self-contradictory), to judge the world of television in a style and from a standpoint that is its own.

So he talks scornfully of "the mass-audience" turning to "any old rubbish"; "rubbish it usually is"; "however bad they are. Which—generally—they are"; "marooned between tits-out, ratings up ... and ... highbrow rhetoric". On the one hand there's "tacky drama-doc", "a stream of punch-ups", "live necrophilia if ... there was an audience for it"; on the other, "Tessa-impressing late night news and current affairs", "going upbrow to secure the licence fee", "the tits channel ... trying to reposition itself as the arts channel".

But he wants to have his cake as well as eat it. It's the *Eye* he's writing for not *Scrutiny*, and the year's 2005 not 1955, so he can't take his own scorn too seriously or too far. You *may* sneer at popular culture but only if you lick its boots too. (You don't want to sound like Lord Reith or Queenie Leavis, do you?). So if television was "in trouble this Christmas" and "the New Year outlook is bleak", it *isn't* because of the rubbish but the ratings: "another 1.5 million viewers went awol".

For "Remote controller" has another standard of judgement, rival to the one according to which the only choice he sees is between different kinds of worthlessness, the mass and the upbrow. And when he's judging by this second standard, he talks just like any tv industry executive, in an idiom in which "bad television" has nothing to do with rubbish and "good stuff" means what everyone wants to watch, movies and sport. So, *good* for Roly Keating, "already having the respect of the media editors", and *good* for the BBC having poached back "impressive drama honcho" John Yorke.

This is an idiom that creates room for some fine and judicious distinctions. Aggie and Kim were "fun" cleaning up people's houses but—when the formula got over-exploited—"yucky" when they did bodies. The "edgy comedies and dramas that gave the channel its flavour" were, well, *edgy* and "last year's dark medical drama" was definitely dark but not when repeated on a different channel. Then "these shows feel second-hand".

In this idiom, what counts is not whether something is rubbish or not but whether

it's a "ratings-winner", a "ratings banker", a "kudos project", a "must-watch product", "programming that feels canny" or not. And when things have gone wrong, what's needed ("desperately") is "a new future shape" or ("desperately" again) "another [God help us] image makeover".

What difference would it make if Moron *were* the editor? [*You mean it would make no difference if Moron were the editor?* Ed.]

*

Literary Review

In which it is proved that a book by Michael Crichton is worthless.