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Can there be such a thing as a politically correct satirical magazine? Yes, if that's what sells. Why not? It's just a question of positioning yourself in the market—going far ... but not too far ... in certain directions ... but not others.

So there's one joke (there may be more) you won't find in Britain's foremost satirical magazine: the one about the soldier who so far forgot the traditions of his regiment and the conduct expected of a British soldier on active service abroad that he had himself photographed pretending to punch a civilian. The entire British politico-journalist caste—knowing what the Iraqis had been and were still doing to one another—was shocked, horrified, scandalized, outraged and totally disgusted and appalled by the shame and disgrace of it and the effect on Britain's image abroad. It was totally unacceptable. And to send a very clear message out there (including as a very sincere apology to the Iraqi people), the soldier was banged up and discharged in disgrace. But this joke I couldn't find anywhere, not in this issue or any other. Which is a funny thing.

And, if you are going to run a piece about fraudulent postal voting, don't make the point of your piece that the only people who seem to have their fingers in this particular electoral pie are Asians. No jokes about ... whatever, please. No Front Cover showing ... anything like that, thank you. It wouldn't be funny. Jokes about importing Eastern voting practices into Western elections would be in bad taste, and lose readers. Such things are a Sign of Diversity, and to be Celebrated, even in *Private Eye*, even if only by silence and default. The way to square the circle, and be both satirical *and* politically correct, is to make your butt partly the new voting system itself—one that presupposes political parties that won't systematically try to corrupt it—but mainly the man who brought it in, John Prescott. He's always good for a laugh.

Street of Shame

After all this time on the Street, watching, listening, and taking it all in—forty-three years- and 1,129 issues-worth of being on the inside and in the know—you'd think the *Eye* would know, and would say, who on the Street was worth knowing and who wasn't, who worth reading and who not. After all, that's what the inhabitants *do*: they write. Well ... who does it well, who contemptibly badly? Who's got something to say, who not? Which newspapers are better—or less bad—than which others? Even, perhaps: Have newspapers dumbed-down?

You'd think, after all this time and so much practice, "Street of Shame" might have got up the nerve to do for journalists what "Bookworm" does for novelists or "Nooks and Corners" for architects, to *judge* them, as journalists, and to give its readers a standard to judge them by.

But it never has had the nerve. The column is just a streetcorner where journalists gossip to one another about one another. Which would be OK if it were *on* the street, or in the bar—but *in print*, for the general public, as if journalists were celebrities—"the people you'd like to know"—and its readers people who'd like to know them? Other gossip columns trade in actresses' blemishes, this one, in journalists'. What's the difference? Where's the satire?

Who reads it, except the people who appear in it? Can anyone who does read it, say what he's read when he's read it? Even the people who appear in it? It's like

trying to listen to the weather girls. Endlessly, obsessively repetitive, mercilessly ‘bright and lively’; pellet after indistinguishable pellet of gossip, adding up to ... nothing whatever. A lot of bits that form no picture—the bits that are something more than gossip lost and invisible amongst the bits that aren’t.

It found a formula early on and has spent forty years working it to death: “X said A and then did (or said) B” or “He said it of A but not of B” or “He says This but not That or Here but not There.” It’s not criticism or judgement (and definitely not satire), just catching people out, usually in a sort of self-interested inconsistency that very few of us can be sure we are entirely free of. It’s a kind of limitless cynicism that’s not a form of judgement or criticism but its opposite. A *Dunciad* written by the dunces.

Thirteen pellets this week:

1. Whereas A-K say *Boo* (to the unarguably booable), Donald Trelford says *Cheers*.
2. X boasts of a scoop, which Y printed three months earlier.
3. X condemns behaviour in Y, over whom he has power, which he (silently) condones in Z, who has power over him. (This piece imputing double standards to Michael Gove depended on there being nothing to distinguish tax evasion from tax avoidance. It was a good example of two things: (1) the way in which the indiscriminateness of the *Eye*’s attacks draws any sting they might have (2) the vices it professes to condemn.)
4. One newspaper in a group doesn’t speak ill of another.
5. The celebrity magazine *Too Utterly Worthless For Criticism* doesn’t advertise its own mistake.
6. Short, dull story, the point of which was that two hacks who didn’t use to like one another probably still don’t. [*Prize for first reader to produce copy of Private Eye in which this story has not appeared.* Ed.]
7. Having behaved boorishly to his patron, hack tries to flatter him.
8. A combination of 6 and 7.

[*That’s enough. We get the point.* Ed.]

Hackwatch

“Street of Shame” on a small scale. Same formula applied to a single journalist. No judgement of writing involved. A matter of catching the butt out in a succession of mistakes, inconsistencies, banalities. The easier the butt to hit, the better. The rough equivalent of music criticism that listed all the wrong notes a notoriously bad musician played between November 9 2003 and March 18 2005.

(to be continued)