

Insulting behaviour...and other misdemeanours

Introduction

To be accurate, “insulting behaviour” as legally defined was the one offence I was charged with and *wasn't* found guilty of, as I record in Chapter 4. But I suppose one or two things I did as a revolting student could be called “insulting behaviour” – by some people anyway.

In the 1950s and early 1960s they used to play God Save the Queen last thing at night in the cinema and on television and before the action started in the theatre. Loyal cinema-goers stood to attention without moving away from their seats or stopped in the aisles when the music started. According to urban legend, loyal TV watchers, particularly in the Home Counties, rose from their sofas and armchairs and did exactly the same in their own sitting-rooms. In the theatre the audience obediently rose as one.

But disloyal subjects like me who didn't worship God and the Queen wouldn't necessarily join in. Once I was sitting in the Oxford Playhouse theatre waiting for the performance of Albert Camus' play *Les Justes*. As the national anthem started I remained in my seat confident that Albert the rebel would have approved. But the person next to me, an elderly woman expensively dressed in black, certainly didn't. As she and everybody else sat down again she turned, looked at my lapel and saw the nuclear disarmament badge. “I know who you are,” she said. “You're one of the 100, aren't you? Well, I'm sorry I have to sit next to you.”

I did wonder how well she knew the play, which is about the failed Russian revolutionaries of 1905, and what she thought of the subversive views of the man who wrote it – but about me she was spot on. I was a member of the Committee of 100, the radical direct-action wing of the anti-nuclear movement, which defied the law and disconcerted the general public, particularly the God-fearing middle classes.

However, I hadn't started out as an anarchist or an atheist and I was certainly middle-class. Both my parents were Conservatives. My actuary father was an active Anglican and my schoolteacher mother a devout Catholic. So naturally I was a Conservative until I was 14, when the Suez crisis made it impossible to believe in “Great” Britain, and a practising Catholic until I was 18 when “God” seemed equally far-fetched. (By the way I'm aware that “Great” Britain was originally a geographical term distinguishing our island from Brittany – but tell that to the marines, as they used to say when I was a boy.)

After prep school I worked hard at the Jesuit-run Stonyhurst College, particularly in English and history, won an entrance scholarship to Oxford and spent time learning French in Paris before going to university in 1960. There I joined the Labour party, which had just voted to ban the bomb at its Scarborough conference, and found myself part of the “New Left”, who were against the bomb, as opposed to the right-wing Gaitskellites, who campaigned to keep it.

At Oxford I did very little academic work. In fact for the next four years my main activity was agitation – public speaking and debating, inspired by increasingly radical politics, polemical writing and demonstrating. I was elected chairman of the university Labour club and secretary of the Oxford Union; when the direct-action Committee of 100 came along I joined it and was arrested on numerous occasions with two short spells in prison (one in the summer term before my final exams); I was one of the founders of Oxford's first anarchist group, wrote for the anarchist press and started an anarchist youth magazine, distributed leaflets and stickers, hitchhiked down to anarchist summer camps in southern France, spoke at various public meetings including a peace rally in Athens and an anarcho-syndicalist conference in Paris and organised the anarchist group that appeared in a BBC2 programme, *Let Me Speak*, which included Stuart Christie who was then jailed in Spain for trying to assassinate Franco.

But by the autumn of 1964 the Committee of 100 was in decline and I was in Manchester as a “graduate trainee reporter” on the *Daily Mail*. There I learnt some of the basics of journalism and a lot about pop music. I went to the *Top of the Pops* studio for weekly rehearsals by people like Sandie Shaw and Georgie Fame; I heard Bob Dylan in the Free Trade Halls the year before he was booed for going electric and Dusty Springfield in Mister Smith's club; then when the Tamla-Motown tour came to town, I interviewed Diana Ross.

In Manchester I met an actress who came back to London with me when the *Mail* let me go. She gave up acting and worked in the Mayfair offices of Radio London while I spent the year school-teaching in the East End. We lived the life of Riley – good food and wine, soul music from the pirate stations on the radio and football at White Hart Lane or on the box with England winning the World Cup in July 1966.

A week after the football final I was on my delayed gap year (or rather nine months), hitching across Europe to Athens; then on by ferry across the Mediterranean to Alexandria; by train to Cairo, on to Khartoum and up the Nile to Uganda; then after some months school-teaching in Kampala by train to Mombasa via Nairobi; across the Indian Ocean to Bombay (as it still was); and back to Europe on the hippy trail, via Pakistan and the Khyber Pass, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey.

It was back to work – and another dose of radical politics. I got a job at the education and careers publishers Cornmarket Press and started writing a column for the anarchist weekly paper *Freedom*. It was a lively time with the summer of love in 1967, and in 1968 the anti-Vietnam war demos, Enoch Powell's infamous “rivers of blood” speech, the civil rights movement in the US and our own in Northern Ireland, student protests everywhere but above all in Paris where the events of May shook and nearly toppled de Gaulle's government.

The most positive thing at the time was the underground press. It was messy and incoherent but alive, unlike so much stodgy left-wing propaganda. I dreamt of being part of it and helping to professionalise it. So in 1970 I left Cornmarket, went freelance and planned an “alternative” paper that would be both radical and professional. When I failed to raise the money necessary to launch it I accepted an offer from Richard Neville, the wizard of *Oz*, to join his proposed “radical but professional” weekly paper called *Ink* instead. It was a fiasco: the people who ran it had no idea about what they were doing. After that disaster I published my own bimonthly “alternative” news magazine *Inside Story* which lasted for two years from 1972, then joined a group that published *Wildcat*, which was more polemical. When that folded in 1975 I accepted defeat.

I took myself off to Garnett College of Education for a year to learn how to teach journalism, which became my main professional activity, though I never gave up the writing and subediting. For the first time I took a sustained and critical look at British state education and above all, the teaching of English in schools and colleges. What I found was not encouraging and I was relieved to be destined for journalism teaching instead. However, in due course I found myself producing a guide to English – for journalists.

Most of the events described in this book took place in what some historians now call “the long Sixties”, the period that started in the mid-1950s with the Suez debacle and the Hungarian uprising of 1956, to the raucous sound of skiffle and rock ‘n’ roll, and petered out somewhere in the mid-1970s. Academics, journalists and memoir-writers have produced an endless series of books, articles, TV and radio programmes, films, doctoral theses, blogs, tweets on this subject...and there’s even a scholarly periodical devoted to it – *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*, published twice a year by Routledge.

I can’t claim to have read everything there is to read on the subject. But I’ve read enough to know that some accounts are misleading while others have left important things out or failed to give them enough emphasis. So in telling my own story I want to correct some of the distortions.

For some people, there seems to be a problem with the whole idea of something that started in or before 1960. To the late Jenny Diski, for example, the Sixties “were not the decade of the same name. They began in the mid-1960s with the rise of popular culture...” (*The Sixties*, Profile, 2009). From one woman journalist to another, ex-*Guardian* columnist Suzanne Moore: “What’s happening, man? I feel lately like I fell asleep and have woken up in the 60s. Not the swinging 60s when we all loosened up, but the part of the 60s that was really still the 50s: the *Mad Men* era... Women knew their place, how to wear a girdle and fix a Martini...” (28 May 2011)

I suppose the source of the problem for some British feminists is that women’s liberation, as a *movement*, didn’t really get going until the Sixties were almost over – indeed the first national women’s conference wasn’t held until early 1970. That might be an argument for saying the Sixties weren’t very woke or female-friendly but it’s hardly one for saying that they weren’t in fact the Sixties. Indeed I think you can argue that what is now called “second-wave feminism” was partly a response to – even a revolt against – “the Sixties”. Both Sheila Rowbotham, the feminist historian, and Marsha Rowe, the co-founder of *Spare Rib*, seem to suggest this.

Then there’s the idea that the sexy Sixties didn’t start until 1963 when, according to the poet Philip Larkin, *Sexual intercourse began/...Between the end of the Chatterley ban/And the Beatles first LP*. It’s certainly true that the Beatles’ first LP, *Please Please Me*, was released in 1963 – on 22 March, to be precise. But in that year Larkin was 41, which would have been “rather late” for him to lose his virginity. In fact he’d been enjoying sex with a succession of partners since the 1940s.

According to one of Larkin’s biographers*, while his relationship with Monica Jones was developing in the early 1950s, Larkin had “the most satisfyingly erotic (affair) of his life” with Patsy Strang, who was at the time in an “open marriage” with one of his colleagues at Queen’s University, Belfast. So he wasn’t the late-starter suggested by the poem – and the 1950s and early 1960s weren’t as strait-laced as it implied.

*Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, Peter Owen, 2005

The Profumo scandal certainly reached its sordid climax in 1963 with the hounding to death of the osteopath Stephen Ward but he'd introduced war minister John Profumo and Christine Keeler two years earlier in July 1961 – and Keeler had been having sex with various people for years before that. One account* cites local youths, a Ghanaian cleaner and an American from a local airbase; and says that at the age of 17 Keeler gave premature birth in April 1959 to a son who died six days later. Setting the scene the author notes: “The 1950s were the pioneering decade of the sex party in England” – though he adds that “English sex parties fell short of orgies”.

**An English Affair*, Richard Davenport-Hines, HarperPress, 2013

Larkin's reference to the banning of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is also misleading. The “ban” had been effectively killed off by the Obscene Publications Act of 1959 and it was in 1960 that Penguin published the book, which was prosecuted and found not guilty. Incidentally, the trial that autumn was one of the early highlights of the decade with prosecuting counsel asking the jury (which included three women) whether *Lady Chatterley* was “a book that you would have lying around in your own house...a book you would even wish your wife or your servants to read”.

A succession of expert witnesses for the defence including EM Forster, Rebecca West and the Bishop of Woolwich testified that the book was not obscene. Later in a celebrated article in *Encounter* John Sparrow, warden of All Souls College, Oxford, took great delight in pointing out that the sexual antics described in the book – and likened by the bishop to Holy Communion – included anal sex (or buggery, as it used to be called). I treasure the response of Graham Greene when he was invited to become one of the defence witnesses. Of course, he said, he was opposed to censorship and so, logically, in favour of publication, but if pressed in the witness box, he would have to admit that *Lady C* wasn't in his opinion a particularly good book (as many of the millions of people who bought it after the trial probably agreed when they ploughed through it in search of the sexy bits).

Among the journalists who reported or commented on the trial the dramatic critic Kenneth Tynan scored the first of a Sixties hat-trick when he managed to get the word “fuck” printed by the *Observer*. Later, in 1965, he claimed to be the first to say “fuck” on BBC television and later still, in 1969, he put together the erotic revue *Oh! Calcutta!*, which featured nudity and sex rather than wit and was a huge success.

Probably the biggest piece of nonsense spouted about the British Sixties is that it introduced the “baby boomers”. The term “baby boom” is borrowed from the United States where it accurately describes a massive increase in the birth rate immediately after the second world war. But in postwar Britain there was no such thing.

The American baby boom lasted from 1945 until either 1960 or 1964, depending on your source. During those years the birth rate was nearly twice its 20th century average. By contrast the British birth rate, which had climbed steadily during the second world war (from 590,120 in 1940 to 751,478 in 1944), actually fell in 1945, spiked in 1946-7 (over 800,000 in both years), then fell again in 1948 (775,306) and again in 1949 (673,735). For the next six years –

while the Americans were breeding like rabbits – the British birth rate stayed obstinately below 700,000.

So you can talk about a mini-boom (1946-7) if you like but 1948 is where it stopped. Of course, there's a perfectly good case for saying that the late 1940s was a good time for British people to be born (well, certainly better than the early 1940s, what with the bombs and all) with free secondary education (and school milk) from 1944, family allowances from 1945 and a national health service from 1948 – just don't call those lucky postwar children "baby boomers".

Incidentally, there are signs of academic and commonsense resistance to the whole business of classifying people by generations. An *Observer* columnist* quoted a study by three psychologists which sabotaged the trendy doctrine of "generationalism", comparing it to the women's magazines enthusiasm for "astrology" which uses your birth sign to determine your personality and speculate about your life chances. As the study says, belonging to generation X, Y or Z says about as much about you as whether you're an Aries or a Pisces.** One comical aspect of the whole thing is the ludicrous "silent generation" label applied to all those born before 1945. As a *Guardian* reader noted in a letter (19 June 2022), "Whoever thought up this label has obviously never met anyone in that age group."

*Catherine Bennett, 14 November 2021, referring to *Generationalism: Problems and Implications*, Rachel S Rauvola & others, St Louis University, USA, May 2018

**The same point is made by Professor Bobby Duffy in *Generations: Does When You're Born Shape Who You Are?*, Atlantic 2021, reviewed in the *TLS*: "Duffy shows that a lot of what passes for generational analysis is really a glorified form of astrology: tell me when you were born and I'll tell you who you are."

As a war baby myself I have to agree – as would my celebrated 1942 contemporaries, such as Stephen Hawking, Aretha Franklin, Muhammad Ali, Paul McCartney, Terry Jones, Christine Keeler, Billy Connolly, Barbra Streisand, Jimi Hendrix, Brian Jones... and all the other people who were born in the early 1940s – the people who really did make the Sixties happen.

By the way, you may be wondering why this book is self-published on the internet rather than by conventional means. I won't lie. I have approached various publishers and been told that memoirs, unless you're a household name, don't sell. However, an excerpt that did sell was my account of "a summer with Boris's mother" (*London Review of Books*, 10 September 2020) – see *Chapter 4*.

In this form the book has two advantages. The first is that you don't have to pay me, or a publisher, or a bookseller – or the appalling mega-business Amazon – any money to read it. And the second is that you can choose which sections or chapters to skim-read or reread or download or print out...so over to you. And if you feel like making a donation, I'd suggest Wikipedia; I make no apology for using it to check all sorts of things.

My one request is that if the book, or a section of it, has any merit in your opinion please advertise it to the people you know.

Wynford Hicks, St Aulaye, July 2022