

Brass monkeys

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Those of you who are not resident in the UK may not be aware that we are suffering another one of our periodic moral panics. A wailing and gnashing of teeth, by the guardians of the public morals has been triggered by the broadcast, on the partially state funded TV Station Channel 4, of an episode of the satiric comedy programme *Brass Eye*. Putatively focused on the issue of paedophilia, the programme, broadcast on Thursday 26 July at 11pm, received several thousand complaints- apparently a significant number. This weekend's newspapers have been full of columnists on their high horse denouncing Channel 4, and, most worrying of all, government ministers who share the view that *Brass Eye* was offensive, ill-advised and beyond the pale. Under a one-way media barrage the police have been persuaded to launch an investigation and there is talk of charging the programme makers under the offence of 'outraging public decency'

This *Brass Eye* was not in fact about child sex offences per se, but a vicious parody of the way the media reported and nurtured the surge of 'paedophile' frenzy which gripped this country last summer (a wave of violent and incoherent protests which in addition to terrorising many not convicted of any crime succeeded in forcing a paediatrician from their home in fear of their life from illiterate protesters).

What Chris Morris, the presiding genius of these darkly satiric mock news shows, did was successfully expose the manipulative, trivialising and pig-ignorant activities of the media. The jokes were close to the bone but the target was clear - not sex offenders or their victims, but the careerist journalists and insincere and none too bright 'celebrities' who endorse these periodic witch-hunts. The high point of the shows was the appearance of Phil Collins on screen denouncing paedophilia wearing a TV emblazoned with the words 'Nonce Sense', and 'comedian' Richard Blackwood explaining to kids how paedophiles have been sending 'penis shaped electric waves' through their computer keyboards.

Ok so we have a fiercely satirical show which has raised a large number of complaints. So far so usual. Again as usual those of us who wish to express our support for the show have no forum - it is the complainers who take the floor. But the troubling aspect of the whole affair, which relates to the public service debate we have been having here has been the reaction of the Labour government. A succession of ministers, including Tessa Jowell the new 'culture' minister have seen fit to publicly declare their disapprobation of Channel 4 for showing the programme - they are obviously running scared of appearing, to those who didn't understand Morris' swingeing satire, to suggest that child abuse is a laughing matter. Worst of all has been the response of Beverley Hughes, the minister in charge of child protection who has publicly stated that the programme was 'unspeakably sick', before revealing that she had not in fact seen it. Home office minister, David Blunkett, according to the *Daily Mail* has also condemned the programme after his aides described the contents to him, he did not find it remotely funny, apparently (this kind of ignorant wagon-jumping, which the media are so happy to carry as 'news', is precisely Morris's target). Behind these public statements by ministers lurks the ugly possibility that pressure will be put on Channel 4, currently leaderless with the defection of

Michael Jackson to the US, not to broadcast anything which might be thought to offend. Yet Channel four's public service remit is all about providing minority niched programming that may not appeal to everyone but has a vital place in our diverse culture.

I too am shocked; not by *Brass Eye* but by the fact that the culture secretary feels there is no place for 'satire' within a healthy culture. By the logic of New Labour *Absolutely Fabulous* promotes drunkenness and child abuse, and *Fawlty Towers* is offensive to Britain's hoteliers.

Too often when these debates arise the argument sounds like the Springfield town gossip from *The Simpsons* who pops up occasionally and wails 'Won't somebody please think of the children' as if that in itself resolves the debate. Commentators start to speak 'as a journalist and a parent' and all perspective is lost. I am thinking of the children here. What is truly offensive is media falsification, intellectual laziness, the unaccountable power of celebrity and government ministers afraid to acknowledge that causing offence is the price to be paid for freedom of speech. When I think of the children I want them to live in a country where satire is encouraged to puncture all claims to the moral high-ground, and where we can separate the real and difficult issues like child abuse, from the self-serving antics of media, celebrity and, increasingly, government.

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