

Out of the way - Laugh at thy neighbour

by Francis Bennion

Is race prejudice a laughing matter? The answer is clearly "yes." and it has been clear at least since April 1972. It was then that Thames Television first put *Love Thy Neighbour* on the air. Each of the six episodes, whose rerun ended recently, was watched by 14 million people, and two of the six topped the ratings. It continues where *Till Death Do Us Part* left off. A further series will be broadcast shortly.

All right; so this particular form of black humour is regarded by the populace as good entertainment, which means it is regarded by advertisers as good for business. But is it good for race relations? The Race Relations Board has doubts, Tania Rose, the board's officer responsible for education and public affairs. says: "I haven't met a black person who isn't offended to hell by it" When the series began she was invited to see the first episode in advance and found it harmless. So she agreed to write a welcoming piece for *TV Times*—only to find a different episode used for the first actual broadcast. That one angered her because it gave the impression the board would entertain a complaint from a white family that blacks intended to move next door. She offered to meet the writers and explain the board's true function. When further episodes again upset her she repeated the offer. It was ignored. Tania Rose now considers Thames tv's altitude "very irresponsible."

The row has since blown up again, this time over clubs. Clubs have been a sore point with the race relation industry since an incident at the East Ham South Conservative Club in April 1969. An Indian, A. S. Shar, was refused membership because of his colour, and the Race Relations Board took the club to court. The board lost in the Westminster county court, won in the Court of Appeal, then lost again before the House of Lords, who decided firmly that a club which genuinely elects its members is outside the Race Relations Act. The statutory test is whether members of the club are "a section of the public," and the Lords held that even though it was a political club (to which members of the Conservative Party were elected almost as a matter of course), that did not mean its members were "a section of the public."

A dismayed Race Relations Board suffered further disappointment last year, when the House of Lords widened its previous ruling to include not only *members* of a single club but *associates* with a right to use the facilities of 4,000 clubs. These associates, numbering over a million, have the right to use any club affiliated to the Working Men's Club and Institute Union, but only subject to the rules of that club.

A black associate ordered drinks in the Preston Dockers Club, but was told to leave because the club operated a colour bar. Lord Diplock called this a "deplorable affront," but joined his four noble colleagues in upholding an appeal from the Court of Appeal (who had allowed the board's claim) on the ground that the one million associates were not "a section of the public." In law their reasoning was impeccable; in common sense it had the asinine quality so often detected by laymen in judicial decisions.

It is understandable that just now the Race Relations Board are sensitive on the subject of clubs. Not so the producers of *Love Thy Neighbour*: they are not sensitive at all. In a recent episode, the nub of the plot was that Bill Reynolds (the black neighbour) got Eddie Booth (the white neighbour) kicked out of the Caribbean Club. Eddie avenging himself by calling in the Race Relations Board. Harmless fun so far? Perhaps.

But the man from the Race Relations Board as depicted by Thames would be sacked on the spot in real life. He started by producing the wrong act and reading out (as if it were still in force) a provision repealed seven years ago. He took Eddie's complaint seriously, though it was obvious that the ejection from the Caribbean Club was due to Eddie's usual insufferable ill-manners, and was not on racial grounds at all (his honky mates Jacko and Arthur were

cheerfully allowed to remain). The board's man threatened Bill with a criminal prosecution although the point of the Race Relations Act procedure is that it works by conciliation and, in the last resort, *civil* proceedings.

Finally, he twisted the knife in the board's wound by acting as if those House of Lords rulings about clubs had never been given. Viewers not solely out for a giggle must have gained a clear impression that the law would come down with a thump on any club managers who excluded people on racial grounds. Not all watchers of *Love Thy Neighbour* have the attitude: "I'm here for a laugh don't confuse me with the facts." Or is that too charitable an assessment of the viewing public's social consciousness?

I thought not, and wrote to Thames suggesting that, though they might seek to argue that the programme is a comedy programme and that it does not matter if in such a programme the law is inaccurately portrayed, there is another aspect: "The series is based on the problem of racial

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prejudice and is watched by a large number of people As a result of this episode they will have a totally incorrect impression of the law covering this sensitive field . . ." I added that it is not the function of television stations to propagate misunderstanding of this kind and asked Thames to broadcast a correction.

Thames refused. They said: "The object of the series is, of course, simply to amuse and entertain and we believe it has, in fact, been remarkably successful in doing so. Such evidence as we have of public reaction to the behaviour of the two principal characters in the series seems to prove that they are now fully accepted as "figures of fun," and that no exception is taken to their absurdly exaggerated notions of racial prejudice."

Fair enough so far. To bring an explosive subject within the field where it can be made fun of is to defuse it, and that would be an important achievement. But then Thames get on to less confident ground: "We fully accept your point that the portion of the programme dealing with the officer of the Race Relations Board and the incident at the Caribbean Club did not give an accurate impression of the law relating to racial discrimination. The original script was amended slightly so as to reduce the inaccuracy as far as possible, but to alter it sufficiently to bring it fully into line with the correct legal position *would have destroyed the whole point of the programme* and this we did not feel we should do."

Now this is a striking admission. The *whole point* of an episode watched by 14 million people turned on deliberate misrepresentation of the law governing racial prejudice. Thames want to equate the Race Relations Board conciliator with the Gas Board inspector. Who cares if some comedy sketch misrepresents the functions of the Gas Board? But those functions don't impinge on the deepest feelings of many citizens. When the hurts of rejection, the despondency of exclusion, are in issue should the powerful TV medium travesty a law so recently and controversially enacted by parliament? That leads into deep questions about the social responsibility of television. Race is not the only sensitive subject. Can we accept the fencing-off of a large area labelled: "Humour—suspend our belief and take no notice of the facts"? I doubt it, and so does Sir Geoffrey Wilson, chairman of the Race Relations Board. Lenny Bruce proved the potent social force of humour, and it is Sir Geoffrey and his colleagues who face the backlash here. I asked him how he viewed the argument with Thames. He said: "I find this contempt for its social responsibilities by a major television network very sad. Obviously on this issue they are not prepared to strike a balance between television ratings and morality."

The impression strengthens that television regards race prejudice as up for laughs. The BBC have now joined in with *The Melting Pot*, described by one critic. Clive James, as the worst thing for race relations since Pharaoh went sour on the Israelites. He adds that it would make "a terrific series."

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References:

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