

The BBC and bucking the trend

Letter from Francis Bennion to Marmaduke Hussey, Chairman, British Broadcasting Corporation, 4 July 1990

I see you were born in 1923, the same year as me. I don't know about you, but I now feel left out. The values I was taught to respect as a child, the BBC tends to ignore or deride.

I was brought up to believe in the British Empire and the British Constitution. Armistice Day was the high point of the year. After that, Empire Day. Few people thought there was anything wrong in fur trapping or tree felling. Patriotism was encouraged and admired.

It was right to have class distinctions. Jack was not as good as his master. There was such a thing as the ruling class, fed by the public schools. Thank God for it.

One was taught manners. It was bad form to bleat and squeal about one's lot. Men were expected to fend for themselves, and stand on their own feet. We had to look after the ladies, God bless 'em. They in return didn't want to pinch our jobs. We obeyed the law, and respected the police. We were God fearing. England was England, not a branch of the United Nations.

All these bright young chaps and gals today reject that as a lot of rot, but where does that leave our generation? The fate of *Any Questions* gives the answer. Where today are the characters like A. G. Street and Ralph Wightman? It is all boring politicians, and no one dare step over the opinion line.

In my youth I worked for the British Empire and know the great good it achieved, though obviously there were exceptions. I worked in many different countries, including several years in West Africa, so I know what I am talking about. Just to take one example: the British were implored to take over what became the Gold Coast colony by the Africans themselves (against the wishes of the Foreign Office). I know this because I researched it for my 1962 book *The Constitutional Law of Ghana*. The Ga people implored the British to enter in order to rescue them from the Ashantis, and they very reluctantly did so.

On slavery, you may be interested in the following letter I had published in the Sunday Times for 26 January 1992-

Chief M Abiola of Lagos (Letter, last week) writes as though Europeans invented African slavery. In truth it was a feature of life there long before European traders arrived. From early times slaves were sent from Africa to Turkey, Arabia, Iran and elsewhere. African custom recognised slavery as a feature of tribal life. When Lagos was annexed by the British in 1861 it was for the purpose of suppressing slave smuggling. The first ordinances of the Gold Coast colony when it was established by Britain freed those treated as slaves by Africans themselves under their own customary law (Gold Coast Emancipation Ordinance 1874).

In any case I do not think it is appropriate for the present generation to 'apologise' for things their ancestors did. We need to remember that pregnant saying of L P Hartley's in *The Go-Between*: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'. There is something patronising - even absurd - about such presumptuous 'apologies' of one generation for another. No one living today has any responsibility for what was done before they were born.

Comment on this letter from Kim Atrosh of Manatee County, Florida:

"After reading your letter to Marmaduke Hussey, I wanted you to know that even though I am a 42 year old American, I understand what you are saying and I agree with you. We have the same kind of things going on here in the States. What a shame that life can't be the way it used to be. I think the whole world has lost out. I wish I could have been a part of that special time, when things made sense."

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