

# Confessions of an unrepentant columnist

Peregrine Worsthorne

Can a columnist go too far? — that is the question I have been asked to answer. At one level the reply has to be in the affirmative — as any remotely controversial columnist's postbag would make painfully clear. For readers are always writing in to say they have cancelled their subscriptions because some expression of opinion has "gone too far". Indeed if a columnist doesn't get such indignant letters he should have cause to start worrying that he is falling down on his job, the main point of which is to stir the readers up.

Recently, for example, I got a shoal of outraged letters accusing me of anti-semitism after I had described how a pushy Rabbi had elbowed himself to the front of an immigration queue at Kennedy Airport. Another complaint about my gross lack of taste followed an account of how I had broken wind on an Underground train in a successful effort to remove a passenger sitting in the next seat who was eating a particularly foul-smelling box of fish and chips. More often than not, however, columns which provoke one lot of readers to express their irritation encourage others to write in congratulating the author for having the courage to tell the truth.

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But this, I suspect, is not the level on which the question is asked. What the questioner wants to know is whether there are any views or opinions which I myself would hesitate to express for fear of "going too far". In other words, are there still unbreakable taboos which even professional controversialists — amongst whom I have no choice but to number myself — would not think of breaking? Quite honestly I don't think there are, at least not when writing for British publications. In the United States the situation is very different. There, political correctness pretty well rules out all heretical thoughts on the subjects of racial equality or sex equality. Several times in the last few years I have had pieces returned by American publications, on

grounds of political incorrectness, which have been found quite acceptable by British editors. Over here, one can be as politically incorrect as one likes so long as the writing is up to scratch. Style in these matters is all.

Nor in Britain is it a question of only being able to get away with it in newspapers or journals which happen to share the columnist's prejudices. I have found, over the years, that the Guardian and the Observer are quite as prepared to publish my Right-wing rant as is the Sunday Telegraph; in fact

David Astor, the Observer's owner and greatest editor, once offered me a job. I don't think this was masochism on his part, or rather vicarious masochism on his readers' behalf. He seemed to think

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that progressive readers might actually enjoy having their convictions upset and derided. To some extent all of us enjoy such an experience. We enjoy being shocked, outraged, incensed and insulted. It gets the adrenalin going.

Controversial writers by no means only give pleasure to those who enthusiastically agree with them; among their devoted fans are also many who disagree most violently.

So my answer to the question is that a bad columnist can certainly "go too far", just as a bad trapeze artist can fall off a tight-rope. In both cases, however, disaster strikes only as a result of a lack of skill — or even, more often, through a loss of nerve. But if skill and nerve remain intact, there will be no disasters. Nerve is crucial as much for the col-



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umnist as the trapeze artist. For if a controversial columnist falters, or loses confidence, he is doomed. He can't be hesitant, judicious or even objective. Qualifications, doubts, second thoughts are luxuries he cannot afford. On the other hand, paradoxes he cannot do without. They are his mainstay. Nothing is so disarming as a paradox. Disgruntled readers are thrown by paradoxes. They can't quite get to grips with them. Or so one trusts. It is a bit of a con trick really. Paradoxes startle.

They turn ideas upside down, and by the time the reader has got the point he is too ashamed at not having got it earlier to feel able to complain — rather like the victim of a practical joke who is loath to draw attention to his gullibility.

Nevertheless, after finishing a column one is never certain that at long last one has not gone beyond the point of no return. In my case, the dangerous temptation is to overdo the vituperation. I love it so. Once the venom

begins to flow there is no holding back. But this is not at the same thing as "going too far". The only definition I would accept of "going too far" is writing something of which I myself, looking back, am ashamed; something which in retrospect seems even to me

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unforgivably malicious, offensive, insensitive, rabble-rousing or untrue. Doubtless I have been guilty on these scores. But only, I like to think, very occasionally. The record speaks for itself. Readers have forgiven. At least many of them have, since the readers who write saying they have cancelled their subscriptions almost always write a few weeks later threatening to do so again. So, I am glad to say, have many of the victims. Insulted politicians seldom bear grievances. Or if they do, the wounds soon heal.

Being able to express unfashionable views, and to make extremely provocative judgements, in a disarming way, is not a particularly exalted knack. But such as it is, I am lucky enough to have it. In the end my luck will almost cer-

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tainly break and I really will "go too far", even by my almost infinitely elastic standards. But if this does happen it won't be because, in old age, I started to take too many risks but because, in old age, I started to take too few. He who dares wins. If that motto is fitting for the SAS it is no less fitting for the columnist.

On re-reading the above I feel I may be guilty of prevarication. Perhaps all I am saying is that a skilful enough columnist can wound and damage in such a way as to leave no marks, rather in the same way as certain pugilists or torturers can inflict physical blows which leave no incriminating mark. There is a danger here. One may have done more harm, given more hurt, than ever one became aware of. Certainly, this may have been true of things I have written about ethnic minorities; or of views that I have expressed about authoritarianism which came near to justifying fascism. If this is the case, then

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it is no excuse to say that the offences have been committed in such a way as to prevent discovery. Perhaps as well as deceiving others as to the harmlessness of an uninhibited, no holds barred style of commentating, I have also deceived myself. This is by no means improbable. For there is always a terrible temptation to find excuses for doing what you enjoy most. "Going too far" has always been a pleasure as well as an occupation, and it could well be that this apology is no more than a piece of special pleading.

Sir Peregrine Worsthorne's career in journalism spans more than 40 years. He wrote a weekly column for the Sunday Telegraph from 1961 until he retired in 1991 as editor.

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