

A Lethal Cocktail

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When the Press Complaints Commission's Professor Pangloss, sorry, Pinker, admitted in the course of his otherwise characteristically starry-eyed preface to the PCC's *Annual Review 2002* that 'serious challenges still lie ahead', little could he have realised just how serious these would turn out to be. What Pinker had in mind was the perfectly reasonable – to anyone outside the press, that is – idea floated in some of the debates on the Communications Bill that, in an increasingly converged media environment in which newspaper owners are to be allowed to take a far larger stake in the broadcasting environment, the new communications regulator OFCOM might occasionally need to pronounce on matters pertaining to the press. This, warned PCC director Guy Black in February, 'would not simply be statutory control by the back door - it would be state control bashing the front door down'.

The all-too-predictable shrieks and howls occasioned by the OFCOM spectre were, however, as nothing compared to the extraordinary press paranoia which greeted the Select Committee on Culture Media and Sport's modest inquiry into press intrusion. By March, Black was inveighing against 'the most lethal cocktail of challenges since the death of the Princess of Wales' and editors were openly rowing with the Committee (and each other) over the merits and demerits of the PCC. Matters reached a head when Committee member Chris Bryant, writing in the *Guardian*, accused the PCC of being incestuous and argued that self-regulation was failing, following which Les Hinton, chair of both News International and the PCC's editorial code committee, accused him of prejudging the issues which the Select Committee was considering; in turn, Hinton was roundly ticked off by the Committee's chair, Gerald Kaufman, for being impertinent and offensive. A clearly piqued Hinton then complained in the *Observer* that 'the PCC's chance of discussing its strong record of service to the public had been obscured in prejudice, deliberate misunderstanding and "rumour"', whilst the PCC decided to take its ball away and told Kaufman that it didn't wish to be examined by Bryant. Poor little diddums! You'd never think that these are the representatives of some of the most thuggish newspapers in the world, which delight daily in delivering a good kicking to all those who have the temerity to disagree with their editorial line. Still, it's yet more proof that when *Dad's Army's* Corporal Jones uttered the immortal line 'They don't like it up 'em' he was, of course referring not to Germans but to journalists.

The PCC's case before the Committee can hardly have been helped by the appearance of its *Annual Review 2002*. Usually this farrago of self-congratulation and twisted logic passes without much comment (except in the pages of *Free Press*) but doubtless this edition will have been thoroughly scrutinised by Kaufman's committee, and it's a fair bet that this will be the last occasion on which the PCC produces quite such a smug, self-deluding and, ultimately, self-defeating document.

The *Review* reveals that 2630 complaints were received in 2002. This was down on the record of 3033 in 2001 but significantly higher than the average of the previous three years. In its usual fashion the PCC argues that 'this substantial level of complaints ... underlines its success in making its services known'. The idea that it might be a reflection of widespread dissatisfaction with press standards is, presumably, far too bizarre for the PCC even to entertain.

One third of complaints the PCC found to be outside its self-imposed remit. In the case of 26% of the remaining 1799 complaints: 'no breach of the Code was established, or no further action was required by the PCC after the editor of the publication concerned made an appropriate offer to remedy any possible breach'. The PCC actually adjudicated on a mere 36 cases, upholding 17 and rejecting 19. This means that it adjudicated on only 2% of the complaints which it investigated, and upheld only 1%. Of course, according to the PCC's own inimitable *Alice in Wonderland* logic, the less complaints it adjudicates the more successful it considers the process of 'self-regulation' to be.

The sheer lunacy of this approach, which means that the PCC's most successful year would be that in which it adjudicated on not a single complaint, can be neatly illustrated by its attitude to complaints about discrimination.

The PCC Code of Practice, Clause 13 (i) states that: 'the press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to a person's race, colour, religion, sex or sexual orientation, or to any physical or mental illness or disability'. 13 (ii) states that: 'it must avoid publishing details of a person's race, colour, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental illness or disability unless these are directly relevant to the story'. In 2002 17.9% of complaints to the PCC concerned discrimination - up from 13.5% the previous year. The *Report* rather coyly notes that this might have something to do with the 'continuing reporting of debate about issues relating to asylum seekers and refugees'. None of these complaints were upheld. And yet, this was the

beginning of the period in which, as former *Mirror* editor Roy Greenslade has claimed, many papers have conducted an anti-refugee campaign 'misinformed by hatred, lies and exaggeration which have played on people's fears and prejudices'. In his view: 'underlying all that has been written is a vile racist agenda', with papers 'appealing to the basest of human instincts: suspicion of the alien. That is racist in principle and in practice'.

However, PCC inaction on press racism is hardly confined to 2002. According to an analysis of ten years of PCC adjudications, undertaken by Chris Frost, Head of Journalism at Liverpool John Moores University and chair of the NUJ ethics council, the period was marked by a steady rise in discrimination complaints: from 1.7% of all complaints received in 1993 to 10.6% in 2000. In 1993 1.17% of complaints adjudicated concerned discrimination, and in 2000 5.45%. During this period the PCC adjudicated on only 38 complaints concerning discrimination (5.6% of the total number of complaints adjudicated) and only six were upheld. The upheld complaints concerned discrimination against gays and the mentally ill. None concerned race, although 16 (42%) of the original 38 did so.

In order to understand PCC inaction on press racism it's important to realise that the PCC believes that the purpose of the discrimination clause is 'to protect *individuals* from prejudice – not to restrain partisan comment about other nations' (*PCC Report No 42*, 1998). Its position was further outlined in a speech by Professor Pinker in March at Green College, Oxford. As he explained, the code 'draws a clear distinction between the personal and the collective aspects of discrimination' and the Commission 'does not accept complaints on matters relating to issues of taste and decency', issues which, in its view, are frequently the basis of complaints about discrimination. The crucial point here, however, is that these are entirely *self-imposed* and *self-denying* ordinances: no-one other than the PCC has drawn up the discrimination clause in the code, and no-one other than the PCC has decided how it will be interpreted. There is thus not the slightest point in Pinker bleating about examples of 'the worst type of journalism which all too easily can bring the whole of the press into disrepute' and 'lapses in editorial judgement' in articles pertaining to race and ethnicity when the plain, simple and unavoidable fact is that the PCC *chooses* to avoid confronting them. Knowing this, and being well aware that one of the other restrictions which the PCC has conveniently imposed upon itself is a veto on third party complaints, many people who are affronted daily by press racism simply don't bother to complain as they know that it would be an entirely pointless waste of time. Indeed, the only real surprise is that, in these impossible circumstances, the PCC receives as many complaints about racial discrimination as it actually does.

The brutal truth of the matter, as Richard Desmond has discovered at the *Express*, is that stoking people's fear and hatred of foreigners, and generally appealing to their very worst instincts, sells papers. These papers finance the PCC, and their editors are responsible for the code and how it is interpreted. In these circumstances you don't exactly have to be Noam Chomsky to work out why the PCC has repeatedly declined to censure its paymasters for what an increasing number of people, including many journalists, regard as coming perilously close to the inflammatory filth emanating from Goebbels' anti-Semitic propaganda machine, or, more recently, from some of the media in Rwanda, Serbia and Croatia.

This article will appear in Free Press, May-June 2003. Chris Frost's findings will be published in full next year in Journalism Studies.