

The Death of Comedy

by [Ralph Berry](#) (April 2021)



Comedy, Paul Klee, 1921

The Left hates comedy. It subverts and challenges the dicta of the liberal hegemony, and is closed down whenever possible. The Left has had notable successes, and I can point, with dates, to the two decades in which the free comic spirit operated on TV before the cultural commissars took control. These dates are 1968 to 1989.

In 1968, the reforming Home Secretary Roy Jenkins steered through Parliament an Act that decriminalized homosexuality. That led to a period when homosexuals were inducted into the world of comedy. What had been a serious matter became a repository of gay jokes, open and unabashed. Many viewers will remember John Inman as Mr Humphries in the long-running TV series *Are You Being Served?* Inman was the outrageously camp follower in the Grace Brothers department store, whose feature line was his response to the question 'Are you free?' He was very popular in America, where he became a gay cultural icon. On one occasion, a cyclist in Los Angeles fell off his bike on seeing his idol, crying 'I love you, Mr Humphries!' To the signature question put to him by members of the public, he would answer 'No, but I'm reasonable.' The TV show ran for 12 years (1973-1985) but shades of the prison-house grew around Inman. He incurred the wrath of those who thought it his duty to come out. He never did during the show years, but much later in life entered into a civil partnership. With Inman a generation of gay jokes came to an end, and political correctness chalked up a victory. But it had been a glorious time.

In the early 1970s it was still possible to make gay jokes, before the thin-lipped Customs officers of sex moved in. *Up Pompeii* featured a hand-bag carrying Ancient Brit. Pride of place went to the film *Up the Chastity Belt* (1970) with Frankie Howerd. Hugh Paddick, himself gay, served up a gay Robin Hood for our permanent delight. This was not quite an innovation: I have seen productions of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in which the audience is allowed to have doubts about what the Outlaws, that mob of junior role-players, get up to in the woods. But Paddick took his Robin to a height of sublime campery. They don't do gays like that nowadays.

We move from gays to sexism, an offence not yet on the statute book but it might as well be. The first martyr was Benny Hill, generally reckoned as the most popular comedian in

the world in the 1970s and 1980s. *The Benny Hill Show* was seen in 140 countries, many of which still repeat his works. Hill revelled in the bottoms-and-bosoms school of English comedy, with slapstick, double entendres, and scantily dressed young women as his staple. His shows would end, literally, with a running gag in which male and female chased each other in a circle. This may seem basic stuff, but Hill's admirers included Johnny Carson, Hal Roach, Burt Reynolds, Michael Jackson, and Walter Cronkite. But the TV mandarins withheld their approval. In June 1989, Hill was summoned to the office of the Thames TV's Head of Light Entertainment, John Howard Davies, and was told that *The Benny Hill Show* was being discontinued. Hill, who had thought he was responsible for a huge success, was devastated. He died in 1992, after failing to respond to phone calls for several days. His producer fetched a ladder to peer into his second-floor and saw him, dead, in his armchair before the TV. To this day, Benny Hill is virtually banished from British TV. He can still be seen around the world, but seldom in England.

In Liberal H.Q. they prefer not to talk about their greatest blunder. This was the inspired TV series, *Till Death Us Do Part* (1965-75), written by Johnny Speight. It featured a stereotypical bigot, Alf Garnett, played by Warren Mitchell. The idea was to mock Alf's Neanderthal attitudes. Instead, to universal shock in the upper reaches of the BBC, the show was enormously popular. Warren Mitchell made his career out of Alf. Naturally, the Empire struck back. *Till Death Us Do Part* is 'lost,' the tapes wiped. I do wonder how this distressing event occurred. Still, all over the world, there are private tapes made of a great and unrepeatable show. The *samizdats* continue to circulate.

All this is part of the huge, easy commerce between Britain and the US in all matters of the entertainment industry. Alf Garnett spawned Archie Bunker, the 'lovable bigot' who had great success in America. His show, *All in the*

Family, ran from 1971 to 1979 and was openly based on *Till Death Us Do Part*. Carroll O'Connor, who won Golden Globe and Primetime Emmy awards, established himself as a key figure of a shift in TV's centre of gravity: the working-class sitcom crystallized around him. Progressives were urged to embrace their 'inner Archie Bunker.' They didn't—a refusal that led to the 'Deplorables' of the 2016 Presidential election. And its outcome. Alf and Archie had even more in common than anyone realized at the time.

With gays and sexism on the index of banned jokes, together obviously with race, political correctness advanced on a broad front. We can see the map extent of their territorial gains by consulting the past. The *Blackadder* series—four main series, together with some spinoffs—are to my mind the greatest achievement of British TV comedy, which peaked when Captain Blackadder went over the top in 1989. *Blackadder* is still shown regularly, and I never miss *Blackadder's Christmas Carol*. But political correctness would now threaten the texture of the great scripts. One notices in the re-runs the greater freedoms of the past scriptwriters. In *Blackadder III*, Blackadder is thinking of emigrating to a plantation in Barbados. Then he'll send for Baldrick to join him: 'From now on you will stand out as an individual.' Baldrick rather likes the idea: 'Will I?' 'Of course, you will—all the other slaves will be black.' That might offend some editorial sensitivities today. And in *Blackadder II*, the Protestant fundamentalist is allowed to say 'cold is God's way of telling us to burn more Catholics.' Rowan Atkinson fought to have this kind of jest preserved from the legislative zeal of the Labour Government. He had some success—professional comedians are regarded as fairly safe from prosecution—but the looming shadow of hate crime has not disappeared from the screen. Comedians have wilted before its malign presence. The suffixes *-phobia*, *-phobic* do the work of argument. Who distinguishes between hate, strong dislike, trenchant criticism, and bad-taste jokes? In the past, no one. It was

not an issue. It is now.

Comedy has opened up a front in the culture wars. It is a hegemonic threat to the liberal Establishment, and the hegemony is now engaged in what used to be called a 'punitive expedition' against the rebels. It takes the form of political correctness, which is censorship by another name. And another target area is language itself. Speech of any kind is increasingly taxing, on the evidence of TV and film drama. A simple experiment: watch any film of 40 years ago, British or American. You will hear every word. Now try a contemporary film or TV or TV drama, especially a thriller. Much of it is designedly inaudible. Muttered asides, expletives, throwaway lines fill up the spaces where speech used to be. The lips move, sounds come out, feelings are conveyed, but the transference of meaning from one mind to another, by way of words, is abandoned. Language has become filler. The tactical goal is 'authenticity,' the strategic goal the subordination of language to image. Method acting has become Method script-writing.

All this augments the gains of militant liberalism in the culture wars, and the steady denaturing of comedy. An increasing number of media performers label themselves as 'comedians,' a ruse which is merely a statement of aspiration unconnected with any kind of reality. I have just seen a TV programme hosted by a woman who announces herself as 'virologist and comedian.' It is conceivable that her virology was the funniest part. On the subject of female comedians I shall not be drawn, but I think the funniest woman of her era was Carol Burnett. She had the true comic spirit, untainted by any agenda other than to make the audience laugh. Her *Carol Burnett Show* ran from 1967 to 1978, and she received many awards including the Presidential Medal of Honor. Hyacinth Bucket (Patricia Routledge) had many American fans. Conceivably, the plague that has visited comedians may yet lead to the resurrection of comedy. But that day is not yet in

sight. Until then, I hoard in my memory bank a *New Yorker* cartoon of some years ago—I doubt if they could do it now. A barfly is addressing another barfly: ‘*Sure I’m a bigot, and with reason.*’

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Ralph Berry has spent his career in Canadian universities, ending with the University of Ottawa. After that, he took a Visiting Professorship in Kuwait University, followed by the University of Malaya. In recent years he has written for *Chronicles* magazine. His hinterland is Shakespeare, but not as a figure of Tudor history. Shakespeare’s works are a mirror to today’s issues and themes, through which we can better understand today’s politics.

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