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## Was Mary Whitehouse right all along?

**If Joan Bakewell is worried, we need to ask if liberal attitudes have gone too far**

William Rees-Mogg

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Last week, who made this comment on modern culture? "The conspicuous consumption of exchanging sex for money is now in our faces. In every newsagent's, young children see at eye level images of women seeking male approval through their distorted bodies; clothing chains think it proper to sell ludicrous bikinis to little girls who won't have breasts for another four years."

Who was the author? It might have been Mary Whitehouse, since it expresses one of her strongest views, but she is no longer on Earth. It occurred, in fact, in an article in *The Daily Telegraph* by that committed intellectual liberal, Joan Bakewell, who used to be the scourge of everything that Mary Whitehouse stood for. What is more, this passage, with which I would entirely agree, comes in an article in which Ms Bakewell is explaining that she still disagrees with Whitehouse, though she had seemed to be more sympathetic to the Whitehouse point of view in a recent Radio 4 programme on Whitehouse's career.

In 1988, I became the first chairman of the Broadcasting Standards Council (BSC), which was subsequently merged into Ofcom. Margaret Thatcher was an admirer of Whitehouse's work and set up the BSC to establish limits to the broadcasting of violence or pornography.

The BSC was ridiculed, particularly in the early days; that was only to be expected. Our most useful work was probably the research, including opinion polls and focus groups, then little-known, carried out on public reaction to the broadcasting of violence, explicit sex and bad language.

I was struck that we found broadly similar attitudes in different groups and in different regions. The attitudes of grandmothers in the South West turned out to be much the same as those of Glasgow policemen. Few of our witnesses held extreme views, either on the liberal or the Whitehouse side.

Most were tolerant about the showing of sex, but concerned about the impact of a hypersexualised culture on children. People were, and I assume still are, more worried about television violence, which they believed would encourage violence in society. I think it probably has. And there was concern about children becoming accustomed to high levels of violence as normal. Our focus groups were less worried about explicit sex when adults were viewing, but they were concerned about bad language. We had not expected the reaction to questions of language to be so strong. Many people found the stronger swear words aggressive and offensive.

I remember a student at a Midlands university commenting on the question of swearing on the box. She had her own test. "My mam wouldn't stand for that." Women were more likely than men to see bad language as something uncivilised that could be an invasion of the home. As mothers, they expected to set the standards of language for their children. Bad language was, for them, an infringement of the mother's cultural space.

Women who were not greatly worried by erotic films later in the evening might be offended by hearing extreme language before the 9 o'clock watershed, which they supported. They did not want the BBC to take the key decisions about language in the home out of the mother's hands.

However, Ms Bakewell's reflections on the significance of Whitehouse have highlighted an important issue. She has raised questions that are now challenging our liberal culture. Should there be any limits for liberalism? Ms Bakewell has been regarded as a committed Voltairean liberal, willing to oppose almost any restrictions on freedom of speech. She has been, for Britain, almost a one-woman First Amendment to our constitution.

In this, she has had the general support of the media, including broadcasters, the print press and, nowadays, bloggers. In this article, she makes it clear that she still holds her liberal views. "So, yes," she writes, "I agree with her [Whitehouse] about the risks attendant on sexual freedom. I don't just share her answers."

Whitehouse believed, to her last days, in the Christian duties of self-restraint and fidelity in marriage. With St Paul, she believed that "evil communications corrupt good manners".

One belief that I would share, both with Whitehouse and with Ms Bakewell, is that the media have a unique role in shaping the culture of society. Many fear that our culture is falling apart. They look at our society and see a series of social epidemics. Some of these, such as 24-hour drinking, have been the result of legislation, but many seem to have been self-generating, under the influence of media that do not recognise the social responsibilities of power.

These epidemics of violence, drugs, divorce, abortion, porn and debt have made Britain a less secure and less stable society, harder to live in, less attractive and much harder for the lives of children. Ms Bakewell, despite her recognition that some at least of Whitehouse's concerns were legitimate, still lists with approval the liberal reforms of her time: "I remain thankful," she writes, "for the swathe of new laws, against censorship, legalising homosexuality, abortion, easier divorce, that led to the tolerant society we have today."

I am wholly in favour of the legalisation of homosexuality, which is obviously just, but the other liberal reforms have to justify themselves in terms of a society that has lost its confidence in itself. To adapt Edith Cavell's last words in 1915: "I realise that liberalism is not enough."

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