

Shopping in your Jim-Jams

THE MOST AWFUL THING about fashions is the way that entirely unsuitable people adopt them without any serious regard for the distress, embarrassment, or offence that they may cause. Just think of the fashion for wearing perpetually falling down trousers. To look good with your pants falling down you have to be somewhere between 18 and 24, slim hipped and male, with excellent taste in underwear. Anyone else and it's just a disaster. Of course, there are some practices, like wearing socks with sandals, or wearing Crocs with anything at all, in which nobody looks good, not even slim hipped lads with excellent underpants. Alternatively, there are some kinds of apparel, which suit almost everybody.

Jim-jams spring readily to mind, those loose fitting sleeping suits in which absolutely everybody looks great. No doubt some people look greater than others, but most of us just look pretty good in our jim-jams. There was a time when pyjamas were thought to be passé like Aertex vests and nylon shirts; nightshirts, mostly without trousers, were resorted to in various retro styles. Then cotton baggies with fetching t-shirts were tried (*even by Marks & Sparks*), all in an entirely fruitless attempt to get rid of old fashioned pyjamas in pale stripes with white plaited drawstrings.

In the end tradition has won out, leading Paul Smith and others to sew their labels on matching sets of cotton tops and bottoms in fetching designs barely distinguishable from those which passed for night attire in the nineteen fifties. The designers have come to their senses. Pyjamas have got to be loose, they've got to be easy to slip on and off; they've got to be warm and soft. This is all that matters, which is why traditional themes in jim-jams are utterly unbeatable. They are the ultimate in democratic clothing; whether

costly or inexpensive, silk, glossy satin in deep colours with white piping, sheer cotton, or fluffy winceyette, everybody looks good in them.

They're not depressing like shell suits or trackie bottoms – there's nothing slovenly or underclass about jim-jams. This is why people have often been tempted, throughout the ages, to go out in them. In the (Persian) Gulf emirate of Ras al-Khaimagh even civil servants were, until recently, in the habit of going to work in jim-jams. However, this greatly upset the Emir who felt that his realm was falling behind Dubai and Abu Dhabi. So as part of his modernising drive he got his government's head of personnel, Dr Ma'ath Al Mutawa'a, to decree that from New Year's Day 2007 all government employees were henceforth to wear national dress – a long white robe for men and the black abaya for women. Expatriate Europeans were, in all circumstances, to wear suits and ties – this was presumably directed only at the chaps – though one can't be a hundred per cent sure where the edicts of Emirs are concerned.

There is no doubt that most British people would actually find Ras al-Khaimagh's national dress indistinguishable from Arabian night attire so saturated are we with eastern influences – after all pyjamas are as English as verandas, bungalows, and jodhpurs; not for nothing is our national dish *chicken tikka masala*. It's the kind of thing that drove Edward Said absolutely barmy as he surveyed our imperialistic bedazzlement with all things oriental.

Of course, in our decadent Western manner we have tended to incorporate pyjamas into slightly risqué pastimes like pyjama parties; although, even these events can be sanctified by the touch of charitable celebrities. Mick Jagger and Jordan, among others, have been known to boldly wear their PJ's to swanky riverside parties where they looked splendid in their jammies and had pillow fights for the cameras and tabloid journalists, all for good causes.

Celebrities, of course, can get away with much that ordinary mortals cannot. For example, in 2005 Michael

Jackson turned up to court in his pyjama bottoms and Chris Evans has even been spied in the pub in his sleepwear with just a coat thrown over his shoulders for the sake of modesty. But two years ago the backlash began. The manager of a café in Dublin felt moved to put up a sign saying “No Pyjamas”. A youth group in the city ‘had’ to impose a pyjama ban because of complaints, which asserted that pyjamas in the canteen are “unhygienic”, concerns were also raised about the moral turpitude provoked among the young by public pyjama wearing. The pyjama habit has even spread to Belfast where both, Catholics and Protestants, Republicans, Loyalists, and Nationalists have been wearing their jim-jams to the school gates as they deliver their kids for another day’s intensive instruction on the finer things in life.

The habit has now radiated to Liverpool, a city not known for its sartorial panache, where large numbers of women have taken to walking the streets of Norris Green and Croxteth in pyjamas. This has resulted in the launching of the Facebook group, “Stop Girls and Women Wearing Pyjamas on the Streets of Liverpool.” These nasty anti-chav moralists are merely emulating Dublin’s pyjama haters who have been active since the early years of this century attempting to stamp out pyjama wearing throughout the city’s highways and byways.

However, it is important not to blame the Arabs and the Irish for this phenomenon because these peoples are often accused of being offensive and embarrassing when everybody knows that they just can’t help it. Anyway wearing pyjamas in the street, in cafés, youth clubs, or even government offices is not restricted to the (Persian) Gulf or to the Irish; it has been observed as far afield as Shanghai and Beijing. No doubt the Communist Party will do its very best to eradicate it along with Googling words like “democracy” and “freedom”. But, on the whole the communists are not likely to be any more successful than Mao Zedong was in defeating capitalism. If the

Chinese masses want to wear pyjamas to the shops, then they bloody well will.

The manager of Tesco at St Mellons in Cardiff needs to take note. He recently banned shopping in nightwear or bare feet. "We're not a nightclub with a strict dress code . . . We do, however, request that customers do not shop in their PJ's. This is to avoid causing offence or embarrassment to others."

Note the word "request". This is not, a "request" of any sort. It's an *instruction*, an order worthy of the Communist Party of China. Evidently Tesco have decided that they are now responsible for ensuring that their customers are not offended or embarrassed. This is a bizarre role for a shopkeeper. Does this mean that because people might be offended or embarrassed by men shopping in drag, or anybody wearing Crocs, that Tesco are going to ban them? In fact I can think of a lot of things that embarrass and offend me: *Cup-a-Soup*, for example. I could start making a list of things that Tesco managers could ban, starting with sovereign rings and homemade tattoos, or tattoos of any sort.

On the other hand, it would be much wiser to recognise that it is not the job of Parliament or the police, let alone, shopkeepers, to protect us from embarrassment or offence. Embarrassment and offence are in the eye of the beholder and are not the proper business of the state or Tesco or even Waitrose. In a world in which Muslims get offended by cartoons and the Pope is offended by condoms, the Archbishop of Canterbury is embarrassed by homosexual vicars, and I am deeply offended by Christians and Muslims in general, and by priests and mullahs in particular, it would be better for all concerned if we just learned to put up with being offended and embarrassed.

The right to offend and embarrass is a fundamental human right, like having a green Mohican hairdo, loudly doubting the virginity of Mary, *the Mother of God*, wearing Crocs or Ugg boots, or shopping in your pyjamas.