

Off The cuff

DON MILLIGAN'S

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Backwoods Barbie

DOLLY PARTON was born in Sevierville in 1946 and was raised in a one-room cabin at Locust Ridge, Tennessee. She was the fourth of twelve children living in a remote rural area in an atmosphere of 'holiness' Pentecostalism. From her early childhood she was acquainted with the snake handling and 'speaking in tongues' foretold by Jesus Christ:

“And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues;

“They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.”

Mark 16, 17-18.

This was all devoutly believed by many in Sevier County when Dolly Parton sang in church during the nineteen fifties, and it probably still is, although snake handling has tended to die out, the victim of state and federal laws on the keeping of venomous reptiles and, it must be admitted, a number of fatalities suffered by Pentecostal preachers.

All this, taking place in the Great Smoky Mountains in the centre of the richest and most sophisticated society on earth in the middle of the twentieth century. However, Dolly made the most of this contradiction dragging herself, and then her brothers and sisters, out of poverty by writing songs that have earned her millions of dollars. The girl from the backwoods, after limited success as a pop singer, discovered that her *forte* was for writing and performing Country Music songs in a milieu that many would associate with an atavistic yearning for the bucolic simplicities of hillbilly

life, saturated with sentimentality and Confederate revanchism.

But things are, as ever, more complicated than that. For example, I am a thoroughly English man given to weeping at histrionic performances in the cinema and (until now) a secret admirer of Dolly's *Jolene* and *I Will Always Love You*. This might be a genetic inheritance handed down to me by my Irish-Scots forebears, who as everybody knows are given to singing any number of heart-rending ballads about leaving, longing, and loss at the drop of a hat. (After all, I also love potatoes, whisky, and drink too much.)

On the other hand it might be because I'm gay and simply identify with maudlin schmaltz concerning those who have, like Dolly, had a tough start, suffered rejection, and overcome adversity . . . singing along with Gloria Gaynor "I Will Survive" . . . or words to that effect. These perplexing indulgences had to be kept quiet during my revolutionary communist days as 'the contradiction that dare not speak its name'. But now that everybody from Ministers of the British Crown to the Mayor of Houston, Texas, has *Come Out* I guess I can come clean about loving Dolly Parton.

Oh, and I'm not the only one. Last week *Pink News* reported that Dolly was receiving bushels of hate mail because of her growing gay fan base. In another report on CNN Dolly told Joy Behar that gay men identify with her because some of them "love to dress up too". She went on to say we should "love everybody for who they are; we're not supposed to change people." When told that charismatic preacher Joel Osteen had said that homosexuals were not God's best work, Dolly said, "God made us who we are and how we are. And if he was a religious person he wouldn't be judging people."

But, being neither blond nor dumb, she is cautious in her public statements ensuring that her views on homosexuality are couched in terms of personal religious belief without political implications, "I don't get into talking about these issues to this degree". On gay marriage, she says with a shrewd wit, "Sure, why can't

they get married? They should suffer like the rest of us do.” She evidently belongs to the live-and-let-live school of social tolerance, “We should allow people to be as they are and love them as they are”.

Growing up religious in a one-room cabin in the back of beyond she probably learned little about racial equality, women’s rights, or homosexuality; however, she certainly learned a lot about the value of tolerance, and it is these values that she now applies to America and the wider world. She knows that when Natalie Maines said that she was ashamed that George W. Bush came from Texas, *The Dixie Chicks* suffered and lost fans. “So”, Dolly says, “I stay away from that”. A determined businesswoman who has hung on to the copyright of all of her songs through thick and thin she has no intention of allowing ill-considered political comments to damage her career or her earnings by attacking the Republican Tea Party crowd. She has learned to live with contradictions in a country full of them.

A couple of years ago, she released *Backwoods Barbie*. On the cover, Dolly was resplendent in a flowing pink taffeta gown, which was open at the front to reveal a sumptuous black and gold one-piece corset. There, with a mountainous peroxide wig, and her ample bosom, she lays comfortably outstretched on bales of hay in the back of a General Motors pick-up truck. Nothing is out of place. It’s all artifice, all pure Dollywood.

The same cannot be said about the Senator-Elect from Massachusetts: “I’m Scott Brown from Wrentham, and I drive a truck!” This truck, however, has an entirely different meaning from millionairess Dolly Parton’s camp reference to her own youth and the verities of the Country Music scene. For Scott Brown a wealthy lawyer and real estate man, it is meant to suggest that he is a simple common man seeking to represent the political and economic interests of the hardworking millions.

It is true that he, like Dolly Parton, has risen to wealth and fame from humble beginnings but, unlike

her, he is attempting to use his faux proletarian status to suggest that he knows exactly how the 'little people' feel, and his General Motors pick-up is taken as a potent symbol of that. "You betcha" it's "kinda like" Sarah Palin's *Hockey Mom* routine, where a petit bourgeois opportunist from Wasilla Alaska evokes the ideas and aspirations of the "real Americans" from the strip malls of the country's small towns and straggling suburbs. The appeal of this unlovely pair to the Tea Party movement is their folksy commitment to rejecting everything that is metropolitan, and liberal. It is, as Jonathan Raban recently said of Palin's autobiography, "a paean to virtuous ignorance".

Yet, this is the same country that elected an urbane and sophisticated black President less than a year ago. Blamed by the right for attempting to introduce socialism by saving the banking system and trying to extend health insurance to the poor, Obama can do nothing good; after all, they insinuate, he's not really an American. Meanwhile, those on the left and centre-left blame him for having to manoeuvre and trim his sails in order to get anything through the Congress. The election of Scott "I drive a truck" Brown to the Senate will now make matters considerably more difficult. The President will have to duck and weave and water down his programmes to get anything through.

Yet, make no mistake, the revamped and resentful populism of the Republican right, is gaining ground and the likes of Sarah Palin and Scott Brown have a lot more shocks in store for us. Without leaving religious certainties and opposition to abortion behind they are managing to broaden their appeal to all those who feel that they are losing out to the depredations of Wall Street and big government.

In the end we've got to hope that most people in pursuit of the American Dream will heed the wit and wisdom of Dolly Parton: "Some people are blind or ignorant, and you can't be that prejudiced and hateful and go through the world and still be happy."