



Good golly, it's Sooty!

QUEEN OF THE JUNGLE, The Honourable Carol Thatcher, the daughter of The Right Honourable The Baroness Thatcher and Sir Denis Thatcher, Baronet, has always been something of a favourite with me. Considering the nest of vipers from which she was spawned I have always thought that the girl done good. She is a witty and engaging woman and has made her way to independence as a journalist with aplomb. However, I have no doubt at all that she loves her mother and her appalling father. She probably also quite likes her spiv of a brother, The Honourable Sir Mark Thatcher, famous in his own right, for getting lost in the Sahara and for the part he played in a failed attempt to overthrow the government of Equatorial Guinea. Undoubtedly, she is unfortunate in her relatives, and foolhardy in her expressions of affection for them, but this sentimentality is surely not entirely blameworthy. She loves her Mum. She has a good heart at least.

So, it came as quite a shock when I learned last week that the BBC had removed her from her job on the magazine programme *The One Show* for referring to tennis player, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, as a "golliwog". She was only making a joke, and she evidently didn't mean anything by it. What have things come to when an amusing intelligent raconteur can't make an innocent remark in the privacy of a BBC hospitality

suite without being hauled before the court of political correctness? It's just plain madness.

It is just like attacking Harry, Prince Henry of Wales, for encountering a fellow soldier with, "Ah, our little Paki friend, Ahmed." Or when he asked a colleague, "Do I look like a raghead in this?" This was plainly just boyish banter. Harry, a lieutenant in the Household Cavalry has got to be allowed to let off steam. After all, his father, Charles Prince of Wales, calls his Punjabi polo chum Kuldip Singh Dhillon, "Sooty", and his grandfather, the Duke of Edinburgh, while on a state visit to China in 1986 cautioned a group of British students with the warning: "If you stay here much longer, you'll all be slitty-eyed."

This is, of course, all of a piece with the normal attitudes of those at the Palace; it was the Duke's late sister-in-law, Princess Margaret, who in 1979 told Jane Byrne, the Mayor of Chicago, that the "Irish are pigs". When challenged she wittily suggested that she'd been misheard. What she'd actually said was, the "Irish dance jigs". Which I'm sure was news to Mayor Byrne.

It just goes to show that people shouldn't get all het up over all these gaffes from these charming, funny, down-to-earth people. Jokes are jokes and it never does to take them too seriously. It's like themed merchandise and toys that annoy. For goodness sake they are toys. . . how can toys be insulting? The political correctness police have now forced even our own dear Queen Elizabeth II to remove the stock of little cloth golliwogs from the shelves of the gift shop at Sandringham, her palace in Norfolk. However, one does wonder what connection there is between Sandringham and golliwogs. Is it jam? Is it Noddy? Is it slavery? Or perhaps, they're just prepared to sell any old tat to the tourists.

Golliwogs, of course, are caricatures, of black people. Not just of any Little Black Sambo from Tamil Nadu, nor of Uncle Ben or Aunt Jemima from Kentucky, nor of Scarlet O'Hara's 'Mammy', or the slave Prissy, her maid-of-all-work from Georgia, but of

the minstrels and vaudeville acts that forever remind us of the manifold humiliations of black people. Golliwog dolls render safe, comical, and even charming, the rather unsettling, even threatening, black people they lampoon. As long as they are *jolly golly wogs* all will be well. What is true of dolls and caricatures is also true of words.

This hoo-hah about correct and incorrect terms reminds me of a dispute I had many years ago with a leading comrade in the Revolutionary Communist Party. (The pre-fix “leading” in these circles meant “senior”.) He was sagely advising me that I shouldn’t get too upset about being called a queer or a turd burgler, a nonce, or a nancy boy. These were just words and we couldn’t afford to be too sensitive about cultural sensitivities. We had bigger fish to fry. “Yes . . .” I replied, “So you won’t mind if I call you a fucking wanker then will you?” Needless to say he was not amused. The connection between insulting him and insulting whole groups of people to which he did not belong was not immediately apparent to him – despite his leading position as a wordsmith and cadre. So even in an organization that had a fairly good record of fighting prejudice the need for political correctness was not deemed to be pressing.

It is entirely true, of course, that one cannot make racism disappear merely by changing people’s vocabulary. I discovered this during the eighties when members of my trade union started attacking the imaginary privileges being enjoyed by “the ethnics”. On first hearing, it took some moments for me to realise that “the ethnics” was a newly *acceptable* term adopted by the racists in our union branch for our black or Afro-Caribbean members. Similarly, school children throughout the country have adopted the positive word “gay” for homosexuals, and routinely employ it to mean sad, pitiful, and ineffective. Chris Moyles recently used his Radio One slot to popularise and disseminate the anti-gay use of “gay” to a much larger adult audience. And so it goes on, words morph and mutate, shifting from derogatory forms and then

they bounce back renewed, like “Queer” as in “queer studies” – now an entirely respectable academic term – or moving back the other way as in “gay” or “ethnic”. It always depends on usage and intention.

Certainly, Jacques Toubon’s efforts in the early nineties as Minister of Culture in France to keep English words out of French usage has not met with conspicuous success. Similarly, despite the best efforts of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, nigga gangsta rappers have continued to use offensive terms for black people in particular and women in general, as they rap and shoot their way through the hood. Come to think of it, “coloured people” was replaced by “black” and “Afro-” whatever some years ago.

What does it matter? It matters a great deal. Despite the egits who (apocryphally ?) object to Ba Ba Black Sheep, or Christmas trees at Christmas because they might offend Muslims, it is abundantly clear that the battle against racism and sexism and the oppression of homosexuals has made great strides over the years. When I was eighteen, looking for a bedsit in Leeds in the Autumn of 1963, all the little shops along the Chapeltown Road had cards in their windows advertising “Room to let: suit single gent, No Blacks”. The Irish frequently suffered the same fate and, of course, homosexuals were all but invisible.

We have come a long way, but we haven’t come close to winning. That is why we need to be vigilant and make bloody sure that members of our reactionary elite are not allowed to wittily ratify racism or humorously reinforce the many other popular prejudices, which continue to blight the life of the country.