

DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY

A monologue

Speaker

Colleagues, Ladies. Although I know none of you 'socially', the years we have spent together attending these monthly meetings of the POPE committee encourage me to think of you as 'friends'. I hope sincerely that the unusual or, as some may see it, shocking revelation I shall be sharing with you will not be regarded as an abuse of this 'friendship'.

I acknowledge that in the past my contributions to this committee's deliberations have been limited and that my interventions have been so brief that none of them has found its way into the official record of our proceedings. I offer two explanations for this:

First, as the only remaining representative of my gender on the POPE committee, I concluded there would be more merit in being seen than being heard. Secondly, I am conscious that, in the ranks of this committee, I stand at the lower end of the SMAQ scale. (For the benefit of Miss Blancheflower, I should explain that SMAQ is the *Standardised Mental Attainment Quotient*.) I have therefore generally felt it appropriate to defer to members with higher SMAQ scores than my own.

With hindsight — and hindsight I shall be arguing is not something we should dismiss lightly — my diffidence may be seen as an abnegation of responsibility. But that is the past and the focus of our work is the future.

Some of you will ask why I have requested that our team of 'scientific experts' — the geneticists, statisticians and social scientists who over the years have advised us at length — be absent from this meeting. You may also be puzzled by the presence of Miss Blancheflower who, as some of you will know, only recently joined the housekeeping staff at the front desk. If I may, I will return to Miss Blancheflower a little later. To revert to my request to exclude our experts, I believe that the time has come for members of this committee to review the consequences of its policies and initiatives unencumbered by the 'scientific' advice that hitherto has shaped so much of our discussion: the watertight analyses, the robust recommendations and incontrovertible forecasts that so frequently have proved — to put it bluntly — as solid as blancmange.

To begin at the beginning ... (Forgive my 'narrative' approach but there are times when looking backwards is the best way forwards.) The necessity for POPE stemmed from the widely agreed prediction that catastrophic consequences would be detonated by the 'demographic time bomb'. (I'm sorry Miss Blancheflower. I should have explained this earlier. POPE is the acronym for the *Practical Oversight of Population Ethics*, the remit of this committee.)

After years of herding the populace into healthier habits, society found itself encumbered with an ageing population that displayed an inconvenient reluctance to die. Our support for the introduction of the OAP was, as it transpired, a resounding success. We were aided, as is often the case, by the accidental conflation of two utterly unrelated ideas: the demand that dignity should be restored to death (particularly

after the shameful debacle of the 'drop dead body' collection centres initiative) and — more prosaically — the reading public's growing distaste for 'misery literature'. Thus arose the 'happy endings' movement which welcomed the OAP — the *Old Age Potion* — with open arms. Or should I say open mouths? It was understandable. Why endure the miseries and indignities of old age when a potion — free at the point of delivery — induces a state of intense euphoria for as long as the cardiovascular system can sustain the strain? (In most cases about six months.) The take-up was truly extraordinary; the population time bomb was defused; and the campaign's evocative strapline — 'Reach for the bottle!' — embedded itself in popular culture.

Buoyed by this success, we were confident that the POPE committee could accommodate the rising popular clamour for 'birth control'. To refresh your memories, this was a time when the general public became aware that advances in genetic selection allowed the 'man and woman in the street' or, as one might put it, the 'man and woman in the bed' to have, in the words of one newspaper headline, 'an input into their output'. There was, you will remember, hot opposition in certain quarters but it seemed a reasonable compromise — a first step that was to prove a slippery slope — to permit parents to choose the sex of their offspring.

Based on our sociologists' predictions (which were as confident as they were entirely wrong) it was assumed that a majority of parents would opt for boys and that it would therefore be necessary to 'incentivise' the birth of girls. This was implemented through a tax credit system which the popular press termed the 'gender bender'. The resulting explosion in the birth of girls marked the beginning of a period of gender imbalance which persists to this day.

The removal of the 'gender bender' tax credit had little effect and it took us longer than it should have done to recognise that most modern parents prefer girls. We have done what we can through a mix of fiscal stimulus and regulatory persuasion to redress the balance, but our cause isn't helped by the plain fact that a significant proportion of the female population seems content with things as they are and sees no need at all for more men. This is evidenced by the exponential growth of the 'hen house' community movement.

As we now know, permitting parents to select the sex — and later the sexual orientation — of their children opened the floodgates and 'pro choice' agitation grew apace. Many parental demands were too particular — and too peculiar — to be remotely realistic; for example, an aptitude for crosswords, a passion for plainsong, the ability to cook the perfect soufflé and so on. But generally they boiled down to two things: looks and intelligence. It is, of course, understandable that most parents wanted both. It's also understandable that when the realities of mass market genetic 'mechanics' were explained and it was admitted that several of the refinements provided by private sector 'engineering' could not be offered by an overstretched National Health Service, some bitterness ensued. Several mothers became particularly incensed and insisted that their daughters should be allowed 'to have it all'. However, broadly speaking, it became accepted that in practice the 'choice' was between brains and beauty.

Should we have predicted that so many parents would opt for beauty at the expense of brains? Should we also have predicted that allowing parents to 'mix and match' physical attributes without guidance or supervision would produce so many hideous aberrations. (Although we may blush to admit it, I believe we are all grateful for the initiative that established a London colony for these unfortunates – but the popular press has been grossly reprehensible to label it 'the Isle of Dogs'.)

About this time social planners concluded that parents were the problem. The political consensus was that, although 'family values' remained important and 'parenthood' should be retained, change was required. It was decided that *in vitro* fertilisation – so clean and clinical – was vastly preferable to the conventional hit and miss (and often messy) *in vivo* process which – with very little fuss – was speedily banned by an unnoticed order-in-council.

It is now generally agreed that the speed-dial self-select breeder-menu was the best solution on offer. Apart from anything else, there was something pleasingly democratic about providing parents with the same total of allowable points enabling them – within a carefully-controlled range – to choose their children's SMAQ and SPAM. (You will remember, Miss Blancheflower, that SMAQ is the *Standardised Mental Attainment Quotient*; in the same way, SPAM is the *Standardised Physical Attractions Measurement*.)

Which brings me to what I will describe as the 'rise and fall' of participatory sex. Whether decoupling sexual activity from procreation was instrumental in the changes we have witnessed, I cannot say. It has always been true that, for a section of the population, spectating has provided greater satisfaction than participation, but this was assumed to be a tiny minority. Again, with hindsight, this assumption may have been flawed. Lower testosterone and higher oestrogen levels among males may have been one contributory factor. The modern woman's higher expectations and lower boredom threshold another.

The simple fact is this. Participative sex runs a high risk of disappointing while spectator sex – 'spec sex' in the common parlance – is rarely a letdown. It cannot be denied that the professionals, toned and trained as they are, do it so much better. Amateur fumblings in the bushes or behind the bike-shed can't compare with the practised routines of glistening athletes gliding and sliding about the 'field of play'. The gap is unbridgeable and what most couples would once have clamoured to do for themselves, they are now content to let others do for them. 'Match day' is the high point of many people's week and I can state with confidence that 'the beautiful game' is here to stay.

However, I must now make a confession. I am not myself an aficionado. This isn't something I would normally acknowledge for fear of others' disapprobation but the athletic antics of the professionals leave me cold and unmoved. Close to despair, in fact. It's my belief that among many men this despair is more prevalent than generally admitted. Let me say more. Not so very long ago I was tempted to follow the example of the other male members of this committee and visit an approved pharmacy and – yes – 'Reach for the bottle'.

I am happy to reveal that I have now passed this point. The OAP is not for me. How was I saved? I will tell you. Last month, at the front desk

of this building, I set eyes on Felicity — Miss Blancheflower — for the first time. And she set eyes on me. She won't mind my saying that, like me, Felicity's SPAM and SMAQ scores are not exceptional and for both of us the first flush of youth is a hazy memory. But, in that moment when our eyes met, there was — I know this is most unscientific — 'chemistry'. And not long afterwards there was what I will describe — I hope not indelicately — as 'biology'.

Colleagues, ladies, friends. This is what I want to share with you. It is a message of hope and joy. The POPE committee has been tasked to postulate, regulate, prescribe and proscribe. But the law of contrary consequences has pounced on us time and again like an agile cat on a two-toed pigeon. Life may be hurling itself recklessly off a cliff, or it may be dancing daintily to a higher tune. In either case there is nothing useful we can do about it. Life is as it is and we should 'Let it be'. Or, to quote the same impeccable source, 'All you need is love'. Which is why today I am tendering my resignation from this committee and plan to spend my remaining days with Miss Blancheflower — Felicity — doing what comes naturally.

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