Comment

May's state controls will destroy the press

Downing Street is threatening to hose down newspapers with a cooked-up plan to penalise them whether they're guilty or not

Matthew Parris

From the debate on press regulation, columnists in quality papers sometimes stand back a bit prissily. We don't want to appear as pooodles to what might look like corporate self-interest. Nor do we approve of gutter journalism or wish to seem to defend it.

We sense, too, that at any social gathering that isn't of media people, the words "press regulation" — or, worse, "The Levenson inquiry" — will have guests rushing for the doors and windows. We don't want you, our readers, to do likewise.

But this matters. Look away if you don't care about it, but look away for too long because when your attention returns there may no longer be a free press to look at. If (as rumoured) the government now plans to activate the as-yet-uninvoked Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, then newspapers in England and Wales may have to choose between state regulation and death.

Too theatrical? Well, imagine your angry next-door neighbour thinks a tree in your garden spoils his view.

It's like sticking a 'kick me' sign on someone's back. It's beyond satire costs that for smaller papers (most of them) can be ruinous.

This may sound rather abstract, but for daily reporters it's anything but. As the stories of reporting personalities and performance-enhancing drugs have shown in recent years, most people start out by denying everything and sending a letter threatening to sue.

But at that point a newspaper does face a risk, even under the law as it stands. Is the individual bluffing? Do we call a possible bluff? If an allegation can't in the end be substantiated in court then we'd be going down a potentially expensive road. But so won't the journal, which would have to pay costs if their suit fails. Each party, in short, would have to pay costs that for smaller papers (most of them) can be ruinous.

It's the way we tell 'em

One of my secret passions is the music of Pete Atkin and Clive James. It is secret not because I have it kept so. It's just that not many people have taken any interest in it.

Among the most-played albums in my collection is Pete's work of the early 1970s, with Clive as brilliant as anything he has written. His words sparkle and each song tells a story. About the My Lai massacre, say ("And all the dead were strangers"), or falling in love with a beautiful girl on a train ("And so my heart trembled and broke in the course of an hour").

This week there is a new book, Loose Cannon by Ian Shircore, that celebrates their songs. Shircore's book publishes some of Clive's best lyrics and it's good to see them written down.

I'm not very good at making out words, having for years thought that in Bohemian Rhapsody Queen sang "spare him his life from these warm sausages" rather than monstrously�: t heard from the Atkin and James book that the protagonist in one of my favourite stories, an author loved "a chick" rather than loving chicken.

I was writing in a Times leader in which I contrived to sneek in a reference to Atkin and James. I was very proud of this piece of fandom but I heard afterwards that Clive thought it utterly ridiculous. So I say it nervously, but with feeling — you've got to listen to their music if you can.

Silence is golden

I am often asked to act as a public foil for somebody who has a book out.

I learnt early on two rules. The first is to prepare carefully, really getting on top of the subject. The second is to let the author speak. The audience has come to see them rather than me.

When I interviewed Sir David Attenborough we talked about evolution and it went well enough that he asked me to do it again. A few days before our second encounter I discovered that this time short, needs to talk about birds of paradise. I had to take a full day off work to learn about plumage.

This week, after another similar event, I wasn't sure whether to be proud orcrestfallen when a member of the audience said how much he had enjoyed the event. "You kept quiet," he said. "Which was great." It's the way we tell 'em.

Among the pleasures of being Jewish is finding that the perfect moment to deliver a Jewish joke has arrived.

A friend reported his delight when the chairman of a committee he was attending informed members that the meeting would last twice as long as usual, before adding: "Are you all comfortable?" This allowed my friend to reply: "Well, I'm not sure I'd say comfortable, but I earn a living." Expectations sink

Making my way through the rubbish dump and building site that is Luton airport, I spotted a sign. "Did our washrooms meet expectation?" I was able to say that they did.

Thanks, but no Tanks

I was on the team behind my Fink Tank football column, where we exchange stories about our attempts to explain statistical analysis to football players. Let's just say that most people in the game are sceptical about concepts like randomness and regression to the mean.

A colleague showed the goalscorer Ian Wright that data demonstrated the worst time to concede a goal was not just before half time. Nonsense, he said. "It was about the worst time. The Arsenal manager George Graham would shout at them."

It's a bizarre story when the Fink Tank team tried to explain their model to Andy Gray. He looked manly and more irritated before angrily exclaming: "So who did your computer play for, then?"

@DANNYTHEFINK

Daniel Finkelstein Notebook

Little-known lyrics that make me wax lyrical

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