

SACKWATCH

The Turn Of The Screws

IN 2003, under the editorship of Andy Coulson, the *News of the Screws* launched its **Helping Hand** campaign to combat bullying in the playground. "We are determined to stamp out this evil that blights our youngsters' lives," it declared.

This has become a recurring theme. An editorial in November 2006 ("Let's Beat All Bullies") rejoiced at the news that 75 percent of secondary schools had signed up to the paper's Anti-Bullying Charter. Another editorial three months later vowed that "the *News of the World* will not hesitate to name and shame those that fail to shield pupils from this evil". Columnist Ulrika Jonsson added that "horrendous as child bullying is, in some ways it's almost worse among adults if only because we should know better".

While the paper thundered against bullying at school, however, it was turning a blind eye in the workplace. In the week before Christmas, an employment tribunal upheld a claim for unfair dismissal from sports hack Matt Driscoll, who was sacked in April 2007 while absent from the office with stress-related depression. The tribunal found that the *Screws* subjected Driscoll to "a consistent pattern of bullying behaviour... with the intention to remove him from their employment", and that Coulson himself was "the original source of the hostility".

It all started late in 2004 when the editor gave Driscoll a tip that Arsenal FC was planning to play in purple shirts. Driscoll rang the club's press officer, who denied it, and so he didn't write the story. But the *Sim* ran it three months later. "Coulson will be on the warpath over this," sports editor Mike Dunn told Driscoll. "We are dead." Sure enough, the editor began persecuting Driscoll – and, to save his own skin, Dunn joined in. Driscoll was "disciplined" for stories that provoked complaints from football managers, even though the stories turned out to be true. These disciplinary actions, according to the tribunal, "were a pretext for a desire to get rid of him as an employee".

The dishevelled Dunn, now head of sport at the *Sim*, cut a moronic figure in the witness box, using words such as "fuck" and "bastard" during his evidence. When cross-examined about a protest from Arsenal FC concerning a Driscoll exclusive, Dunn exclaimed that he was "completely appalled when Matty handed me a couple of pages of scribbles" to back up his quotes from an Arsenal player in the disputed piece. After almost a minute of stunned silence, Driscoll's barrister, Matthew Sheridan, said: "I think you will find that is what is called shorthand."

The tribunal also heard Dunn claim that "I don't think Matt has ever had any kind of a personal relationship with Paul Ince", as further evidence of his uselessness as a sports hack. It is

widely known in Fleet Street that Driscoll not only went to Ince's 30th birthday party but was also pictured holding the FA Cup with the former England captain at his wedding. And, as Dunn would surely have known, it was because of Driscoll's relationship with Ince and Sir Alex Ferguson that the *Screws* was able to use both as star columnists for six years.

Andy Coulson left the *Screws* in January 2007, after royal correspondent Clive Goodman was found to have illegally hacked into Prince William's mobile phone, only to be appointed as David Cameron's chief spin doctor four months later. But the campaign against Driscoll was continued by Coulson's lackeys. In March 2007, when the *Screws* ran yet another editorial about the "scourge" of bullying, they were bombarding Driscoll with emails and phone calls while he was off sick on his GP's instructions. A month later they axed him.

All the *Screws* executives who appeared in the witness box are now branded as knaves or fools by the tribunal's judgment. Managing editor Stuart Kuttner gets off quite lightly: "His responses were evasive." No such euphemisms for his deputy, Paul Nicholas, who is flatly accused of perjuring himself when answering questions about the Max Mosley affair, and particularly about the seedy *Screws* hack who supervised the story, Neville Thurlbeck.

As the tribunal points out, Thurlbeck "was found to have blackmailed one of the prostitutes involved in the case to give an interview; he took no written notes to confirm his quotations; and included an allegation that was plainly false and he must have known to be false" – rather more serious offences than Driscoll's alleged mistakes. Had Thurlbeck been disciplined? The deputy managing editor professed ignorance. "Mr Nicholas's response was more than disingenuous," the tribunal found. "He was, to put it plainly, lying to us."

At least Nicholas and Dunn showed up to give evidence, which is more than can be said for Andy Coulson. This completes a hat-trick since he did not give evidence in the trial of Clive Goodman, and neatly avoided having to testify at the Press Complaints Commission by resigning on the eve of its inquiry into the affair, thus becoming "no longer answerable to the PCC".

The tribunal's verdict that the *Screws* is run by liars and bullies has prompted an urgent inquest at Wapping, though it remains to be seen if anyone will be offered up as a sacrifice. What of the Conservative Party, which now employs the bully-in-chief as its director of communications?

Tory spinners have been in overdrive since Christmas, warning hacks not to run anything on the damning judgment for fear of antagonising "the chap who'll run the next government". Interviewed by the *Sunday Times* last week, George Osborne boasted that his party is looking forward to a general election: "This is not the David and George show. There is a strong team in Central Office." Such as? The first name he cited was that of Andy Coulson.

HOW OK! CORRALS READERS

UNTIL recently it was thought that the most misleading claim printed on the front of any publications owned by pornographer Richard Desmond was the *Daily Express's* daily boast that it is "The World's Greatest Newspaper". During 2008, however, the cover-lines on his *OK!* magazine managed to stray so far from the truth that even the Press Complaints Commission noticed.

When a customer complained that a copy of the magazine she had spent £2.95 on as a result of the cover-line "Star-Studded Wedding of Wayne and Coleen" contained nothing on the topic but an advert for the following issue, the PCC leapt into action – ruling, with its customary rigour, that the matter required no further action after Desmond's company offered to buy off the complainant with a free six-month subscription.

Bolstered by this victory, the cover-lies (*surely "lines"?* Ed) on the magazine have gone from strength to strength in recent months...

21 October 2008: "Jordan – Why I Walked Out on Pete. It Looks Like I'll be a Single Mum." Have the golden couple split? "We are not breaking up," they reveal inside, outlining plans to renew their wedding vows. The cover also offers a "WORLD EXCLUSIVE: Dying Wendy Richard's Tearful Wedding Day". Inside, the poorly *EastEnders* star admits she "was deeply hurt when the press sensationalised her plight by suggesting that she was dying".

11 November: "Kym Marsh & *Hollyoaks'* Jamie Lomas: 'Our Wedding Plans' Exclusive." What do these consist of? "We've talked about things like that," the stars reveal. "We'd maybe go abroad or something."

25 November: "Shock Wedding Exclusive: Nikki Grahame Marries Andy Scott-Lee." Grahame, a contestant in the seventh series of *Big Brother*, has not married boy-bander Scott-Lee. Both are single. *OK!'s* feature is simply an illustration of "exactly how" Grahame plans to do things "when I get married for real".

2 December: Finally, the truth: "Jordan's Most Controversial and Unbelievable Interview Ever". And you would indeed be stupid to believe the cover claim from a tearful Jordan that "I Found Pete in Bed with Another Woman", given that it refers only to the fact the pair have posed inside with a blow-up doll. Having shelled out their £2.95, readers can also enjoy "I'm a *Celebrity's* Nicola McLean: My Steamy Nights with Justin Timberlake", in which the model reveals she once met the singer "several years ago" and "didn't respond to his advances".

16 December: "Kerry – Why Mark Walked Out and Left Me" – he didn't, and he hasn't. "Jordan Holiday Pregnancy Shock" – she "may, in fact, be pregnant" if one believes "rumours".

30 December: A "Special Double Issue" has – yes, you've guessed it – 16 fewer pages than the previous week. Its cover brings news of "Jordan & Peter at Home in their Medieval Castle" (it's Tudor, and not theirs), "David Van Day: Scrooge Home Alone at Christmas" (he will be in "Barbados with my daughters") and "Victoria Credit Crunch Shopping" in Lidl (an unconvincing lookalike demonstrating "what would become of David and Victoria Beckham if they were struggling to make ends meet").

6 January 2009: "Being Pregnant Won't Split the Band": Cheryl – Baby Boy Predicted! Exclusive". Exclusive, that is, in the sense that Cheryl Cole is not pregnant, and the only person predicting she "may fall pregnant" in the coming year is, er, "renowned psychic Gavin Cromwell".

Another prediction for the new year: *OK!* will carry on pulling tricks like this until a repeat of its successful prosecution in 2001 by Warwickshire Trading Standards for falsely claiming to have photographs of Madonna's "Beautiful Dress" and "Romantic Ceremony" after her wedding, when the magazine was fined £3,500 – considerably less than the millionaire Desmond makes from fleecing gullible readers every week.

Recessionballs

"Interior designer Kelly Hoppen is offering 'credit crunch seminars' to give a few pointers about how to get through the festivities on a budget. For just £460, with VAT and lunch included, Kelly will help her clients with lighting, flower-arranging and general accessorising with the emphasis on value for money."

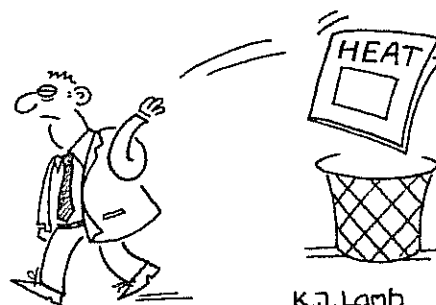
– *Telegraph*, 22 December

"Exclusive to Selfridges the 'Credit Crunch' has been created through collaboration between restaurateur and food writer Laura Santini and The Chocolate Society. 'Credit Crunch' is a more-ish marriage of the very best velvet-rich Valrhona chocolate, thickly coated over hokey pokey honeycomb pieces. It is available covered either in dark or milk Valrhona chocolate (£3.99 for a 150g bag)."

– *Selfridges press release*

"RECESSION FASHION: Celia Walden brings us a selection of longer hemlines and accessories to suit the current financial situation. Leather clutch, £245, Nogoy at Browns... Silk kimono dress, £249."

– *Telegraph website*



K.J. Lamb

Heat Resistant