



Drinking in the Albion

by Patrick Wright

(published as 'The Bottle Thrower', the *Guardian*, 22 February 1993)

AUBERON WAUGH, who was named columnist of the year by 'What The Papers Say' in both 1979 and 1988, once remarked that the role of the journalist was really only to 'tickle things up a bit'. Richard Littlejohn, the *Sun* columnist who was named Irritant Of The Year at the same ceremony last Friday, does not subscribe to that influential view, which enabled so many foppish commentators to go along with Thatcherism without ever making the vulgar error of actually signing up for a ticket.

As Littlejohn sees it, 'the job of someone like me is to sit at the back and throw bottles'. His targets are many and his aim can be far from true. But though his bottles crash down all over the place, he is at his most fulfilled when lobbing them at celebrities and, better still, politicians. They, after all, 'employ an entire industry' - often using public money - to present themselves as favourably as possible, and 'I certainly don't see it as my job to inflate the egos of little men'.

We met up in the Albion pub in the Hammersmith Road. It's a hardworn, rather mortal kind of place, quite untroubled by airs or graces. Charlie Catchpole, television critic for the *News of the World*, was drinking bottled beer from Bohemia. Richard Littlejohn, who came in a little later, opted for draft Guinness.

We had spent the morning on the other side of the road, in the shiny headquarters of LBC Newstalk, the commercial radio station where Littlejohn hosts a popular morning current affairs show - pumping it out from 9am to 12, five days a week. He was recently censured by the Radio Authority for describing the royal family as 'a tax-evading bunch of adulterers' and telling a caller: 'I'm no royalist, I'd string 'em all up tomorrow.' But as a broadcaster Littlejohn depends less on such robust tabloid opinion than on a rude outsider's laugh.

It breaks out early in the show: an irreverent chuckle, which starts in the back of the throat and crackles in anticipation of the countless imperfect car radios that will receive it, and then stretches through the morning - a stream of coarse smirks, low hoots and splutters of incredulity. Littlejohn guffaws at the follies of



government and opposition alike, rewarding the freeborn but sadly put-upon English folk who phone in to air their views with a fetching 'Who would have believed it?' wheeze that often comes with a cute little 'Oh dear' draped over its rear end.

Littlejohn's laugh is an instrument of class war. It is withheld - a silence suggesting contempt rather than respect - during the plummy speech of Lord Rees-Mogg, who puts the case for banning Red Hot Dutch, a satellite station transmitting hard-core 'Europorn' but it gusts back in for the weekly discussion of television, movies and theatre. One of the invited critics provokes a snort of hilarity by mentioning German Expressionism and Littlejohn wastes no time passing the gaffe over to his old friend Charles Catchpole, saying 'the only German expression you know is *Jawohl!*'.

Standing at the bar in the Albion, Catchpole and Littlejohn are still chortling - this time at the thought of a national paper like the *Guardian* including such a thing as a 'media' page. It was the real world that mattered in Catchpole's day. 'We went to shorthand classes,' he remembers, and learned to file copy by phone.

Littlejohn comes from the real world too. At the age of 11 he was offered a scholarship to public school but turned it down - largely, he recalls, because the school in question didn't play football. He attended a grammar school in Peterborough and left at 16 to work on local papers in the Midlands and East Anglia. He spent a couple of years as industrial correspondent on the *Birmingham Evening Mail* and then did a long stint in a similar role on the *Evening Standard*.

His *Sun* column, which has been appearing twice-weekly for the last three and a half years, is briskly opinionated. Littlejohn speaks up for the badgered Briton. He is against bureaucracy, the European Community and traffic bumps. He can still get mileage out of the 'looney left' antics of his local council in Haringey, north-east London. He's the scourge of 'daft judges' who impose long jail terms on those who rob the rich of money but have nothing to offer the louts who beat up an old working-class lady in a bus shelter except 'a ticking off and a social worker'.

Littlejohn is a hard man. He has no pity for Sandra Gregory, currently facing drug smuggling charges in Thailand: this 'educated English language teacher' should have thought about the bars and the rope and the sex-starved lesbian inmates before she stuffed '£24,000 worth of heroin up her backside'. And last



Friday, in the wake of the Jamie Bulger murder, he launched his own cockeyed assault against the nation in which such terrible things take place. Let this go down in history, he called, as the week when the decent people of Britain rose up and rejected the 'perverted morals' of hand-wringing liberals who have 'infested our society'.

As far as Littlejohn is concerned, they should all be packed off to a new penal colony on the Falkland Islands: the 'criminal scum' and the do-gooding social workers who only want to offer them counselling.

'I never write anything I don't believe,' Littlejohn says, raising his glass and adding: 'I've never had so much as a line dictated to me by Murdoch or Kelvin MacKenzie.' As for his critics, Littlejohn rebuts them all by saying: 'An attack on the *Sun* is an attack on the working class.'

The *Observer's* Michael Ignatieff may regret the paper's 'porno-populism' but Littlejohn was there first, mocking the broadsheets which chide the tabloids for going public on, say, the 'Paddy Pantsdown' affair while then running their own long articles in which every salacious detail is faithfully reproduced.

How, he asks, would Auberon Waugh fill his *Telegraph* column without the *Sun* he hates so assiduously? He reckons the *Guardian* Diary would also be a sorry affair if it didn't have the tabloids to rely on for gossip. And then he takes aim at upper-class snobbery: the first article about Essex Man was intended as a tribute but in the hands of the *Sunday Telegraph* and, later, the *Guardian*, it became a derisive sneer.

Littlejohn has never entirely conformed to the liberal stereotype of the tabloid hack: he opposes hanging, he tends to avoid racist innuendo and he is proud of not talking down to his readers. In recent months, however, this bottle-throwing columnist has launched into a scathing and comprehensive attack on the British establishment that seems to have left Rupert Murdoch and even his editor Kelvin McKenzie running to keep up.

Littlejohn was in the vanguard of the recent assault on the monarchy. He likened Fergie and Princess Diana to Antonia de Sancha, adding, somewhat implausibly, that kiss-and-tell operators give the good cause of feminism a bad name. And though the *Sun* may have taken the credit for seeing off Kinnock ('Nice chap. Thick as a post') and ensuring Major's election victory, nobody has turned on the Tories like Richard Littlejohn. Indeed, we must credit him with some of the



guilty unease with which a minister like John Patten now wriggles in his seat on the television screen as he suggests that the nation really must recover some of the deference that is properly due to authority.

Littlejohn may crack predictably crude jokes about Tories and dandruff, but his crashing bottles cut far deeper than that. He has called repeatedly for the Prime Minister's resignation, denouncing Grey John Major as an incompetent failure who recites broken clichés and 'sounds more and more like a Dalek every day'. 'There is apparently no limit to the Prime Minister's stupidity and lack of judgment,' he said in a recent piece taking the side of the *New Statesman*.

He is no kinder about Michael Heseltine, ridiculing his fake patrician airs and his pompous insistence on being referred to as 'President' now that he's in charge of the Board of Trade: he thinks he too should have resigned over his shabby treatment of the coal industry. Chancellor Norman Lamont is manifestly incompetent and on the take too - or so Littlejohn concludes from the fact that he used taxpayers' money to remove a sex-therapist from his basement.

But Littlejohn takes David Mellor to be the Tory Party's most repulsive sign of the times - cheating on his wife to suck the toes of a 'gruesome old slapper', indulging in free holidays and then, after his enforced resignation, stepping out to cash in as a media star. He may in his vanity think that the editors and producers are queuing up out of respect for his 'dazzling wit' and 'razor-sharp' intellect, but, thanks to Littlejohn, the *Sun's* famous '10 million readers' know that Mellor is really only in demand as a laughing stock: the Minister of Fun has become 'The Mellorphant Man' - a prize exhibit in the freakshow that is modern British government. If John Selwyn Gummer, the pious minister of ornamental ponds and controversial home improvements, feels left out, he can rest assured that he's got it coming too.

So one week gives way to the next, and the survivors raise their glasses in the Albion. I asked Littlejohn what he meant by all this. John Patten and the unaccountable right-wing think-tankers who now control the National Curriculum try to blame the nation's decline on the sixties but Littlejohn points his finger at the Cabinet. The 'Loadsamoney' tendency is now ruling the country.

People may not want socialism but there is still a social revolution going on. Deference is over, says the leading theoretician of this rancorous new movement: 'There will be no more tugging of forelocks to people like Norman St John Stevas.'



Indeed, 'Norman St John Stevas epitomises everything I loathe about the British establishment,' he says, sneering at the thought of this well-lunched grandee in worsted pinstripes. 'Why should anyone look up to a man like that? What's he done for anyone but himself? I bet his real name is Norman Stephens.'

Then there is a swipe at David Owen: so self-important, so naked in his ambition and now, suddenly, he's strutting about calling himself Lord Owen - 'I bet he sent off to Kentucky, or somewhere, and got that title through the mail.' The Archbishop may be too starstruck to recognise it, but the royal family has become 'a front for the corruption of the establishment'.

Littlejohn has a telling phrase about public figures who are on the take. He keeps talking about people who do things because 'there's a drink in it'. So it is, he suggests, with the Tories. Thatcherism may have had its moment (the seventies, after all, were 'absolutely rotten') but it's gone, and we should now be spending on 'railways, the health service and education'. He remembers John Leese, late editor of the *Evening Standard*, telling him that 'an army is to be judged by the way it cares for its wounded'. 'That was the trouble with Thatcher. She forgot the sick and the wounded.'

The Tories have grown 'arrogant, lazy and corrupt'. In a sudden exposition of his own creed, Littlejohn says: 'Equality, no, but equality of opportunity yes.' And the trouble with the present bunch is that they've pulled up the ladder behind them and then handed the nation over to the spivs. John Major's Cabinet is nothing other than 'a bunch of spivs'. The privatised public services - and Littlejohn is quite clear that some things like water and electricity should have been above privatisation - are run by more 'spivs' who wasted no time securing 300 per cent pay increases for themselves, and then dished out lucrative but undemanding places on the board to the further collection of 'spivs' who sit on the Tory backbenches.

Look at Maastricht, he says. The British people don't want it. But all three parties are trying to line up behind it - and all because, for politicians if no one else, 'there's a drink in it'.

So we fill our glasses - with poison, stupor and contempt. Take the BBC, says Littlejohn. 'Why should a little old lady in Barnsley pay pounds 100 per year so that Michael Ignatieff can toss himself off on the Late Show?' As for the national lottery: 'Who is going to be buying into that? Readers of the *Sun*, that's who.'



They should spend the money refurbishing football grounds but Littlejohn imagines the establishment will hijack it and build opera houses all over the country.

Littlejohn pauses to pay passing tribute to Terry Duffy, erstwhile leader of the AEU, the engineering union: there was a man with working-class roots who set out to 'eliminate the differences between white collar and blue'.

This pastoral interlude is brief and he is soon hurling more bottles at the television screen. 'Let's face it: a toolmaker is of more value to society than Michael Ignatieff. Someone who makes kidney machines is worth more than the person who makes the Late Show. And why should an airline pilot be thought more important than a train driver, who routinely carries 700 people?' Norman Tebbit is just 'a jumped up engine driver', Littlejohn remarks, repeating that 'we get our values wrong'.

So we eventually stepped back out into the Hammersmith Road. Perhaps it was the beer, or the disorientating light, or just the depressing sound of all that broken glass. But I wondered what would happen if the fears expressed by people like John Patten and the worried Archbishop of Canterbury came true, and there really was a breakdown in popular deference and respect for authority?

How would Littlejohn react if the royal family really did fall in on itself, dragging the whole rotten edifice of Tory government down with it? Would he stop throwing bottles and fall in behind Tony Blair, Jack Straw, Mo Mowlem and those other critics of 'establishment decadence' that he recently suggested should be running the Labour Party? But Littlejohn claims 'no political allegiance'. He has only voted Tory once, he says, and he doesn't answer this soft-headed, untabloidlike question - except to step round it, saying with a dismissive, pull-yourself-together kind of look: 'It is obviously not going to happen.'

At what costs do we share any of this man's jokes?

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