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Celebrity crusades no substitute for people standing up for themselves



Jayne Dowle

EVERY THURSDAY

THE vilification of Mary Portas is not a pretty sight.

Hauled before MPs to account for the disappointing outcome of the Portas Review, her campaign to transform the retail fortunes of 12 towns suffering from high street blight. Accused of misleading those same MPs over a £500,000 fee for presenting her Channel Four series, *Mary Queen of the High Street*.

And if this wasn't bad enough, her fancy ideas have been dismissed as hopelessly nostalgic by Bill Grimsey, former boss of DIY chain Wilkes and supermarket group Iceland.

Those who live by the dazzling glare of publicity must also be held to account under its penetrating gaze.

Much of what Ms Portas suggested was common sense. However, too much of what she came up with to bring back life to our town centres was downright silly and out-of-touch. Bicycle rickshaws, guerrilla gardening and something called yarn bombing should never

Ministers should no longer be seduced by celebrity. Westminster is not an outpost of *The X Factor*.

have been considered serious replacements for proper policy based on investment, job creation, utilisation of empty shops and sensible car parking.

Although Ms Portas has her faults, this mess is not entirely of her own making. She has become a victim of a modern phenomenon. In place of strong political leadership, inspirational role models in community life and self-reliance, we find ourselves turning to an army of TV friendly "experts" to advise us on everything from where to shop to how to clear out our cupboards.

What did the Government think it was playing at? Shouldn't it be the responsibility of Ministers to undertake serious matters of policy-making themselves? To give a matter as important to the economy as the future of retail their full attention instead of sub-contracting the job to a woman off the telly? And although such "consultants" might offer



FAMOUS FACES: Clockwise from top, Mary Portas, Jamie Oliver, Gok Wan and Kirstie Allsopp

MONTAGE BY GRAEME BANDEIRA; PICTURE: GUZELIAN

their time for free, we give over our taxes to fund any ideas these gurus might come up with.

The best thing we can do is to draw a line under the whole affair and hope that everyone has learned some serious lessons.

The most important one is that Ministers should no longer be seduced by celebrity. Westminster is not an outpost of *The X Factor*.

Politics might prove highly entertaining from time to time, but it is not the job of government and its associates to entertain us.

It is patronising to assume that we will only be able to summon up interest in difficult subjects if they are fronted by someone vaguely famous.

Remember TV property show presenter Kirstie Allsopp getting

drafted into Number 10 to talk about house prices? I always thought we employed erudite government economists for that kind of thing.

I am pleased that Nick Clegg proposes free dinners for every child in the first three years of primary school. I'm not sure how the country will afford it, but if the money can be found it will help

thousands of children in need who don't technically qualify for free meals. And it will encourage healthy eating. But was it really necessary to bring in restaurateur Henry Dimbleby to sort out school food?

Dimbleby's a good chap. His fantastic restaurant chain, Leon, proves that fast food can be all about fresh ingredients. But did

we really need him to spend his time coming up with the School Food Plan? It is already blatantly obvious to anyone – or it should be – that school food needs to be as nutritious as possible. That it should be cooked on the premises. That children shouldn't be sitting in lessons hungry. And forgive me, but I thought Jamie Oliver told us all this five years ago with his television series, accompanying campaign and his trip to Rotherham to embarrass the people of Yorkshire. Shouldn't something have been done before now?

That's the problem with celebrity-led crusades. However serious the subject matter, they become ephemeral in the end.

They turn into just another vehicle for personal publicity, instead of digging in to bring about root and branch reform. Also, I suspect they make us rather lazy in our thinking. Why bother to engage directly with a tricky matter such as talking to our daughters about anorexia when we have "celebrity stylist" Gok Wan to launch his own body

We stop speaking up because we think no-one takes any notice of what the little people think.

image campaign in schools? I'm sure that much of this celebrity advice is well-meaning and not simply craven attention-seeking. However, the knock-on effect is that we gradually lose confidence in our own individual judgment. And when people lose confidence in themselves as individuals, communities begin to suffer. We stop speaking up because we think that no one takes any notice of what the little people think. Before we know it, we find ourselves incapable of coming up with solutions to our own problems and disengage ourselves from the democratic process.

Let's launch a campaign of our very own then. The Portas Review might not have taught us how to rescue our high streets, but surely what we have learned is that the best way to move forward is to start by standing on our own two feet.

Clampdown on clubs that bring sex trade to high street



Diana Johnson

Diana Johnson is MP for Hull North and Shadow Home Office Minister.

IN towns and cities across Yorkshire – Leeds, Hull, Sheffield and elsewhere – lap dancing clubs have become an increasingly familiar sight, as they have elsewhere in the country.

Lap dancing clubs are relatively new in the UK. The first club opened in 1995, but since then they have proliferated. Their number is now a matter of legitimate concern to many.

It has taken some years to refine the regime for controlling their operation, to recognise the special nature of these establishments and the problems that they may cause for local communities.

As a part of the sex industry there are valid reasons why people object to the existence of such clubs, especially in certain locations, such as near schools or where families gather.

It is, therefore, vital that we allow communities to have a say as to if, and where, these clubs are allowed to open.

Powers were introduced by the last Labour government to allow local authorities to designate premises being used as strip clubs, "gentleman's clubs", pole dancing clubs or lap dancing clubs as "sexual entertainment venues".

If councils adopt these powers, both the local authority and local residents will have a much greater say over the operation of lap dancing clubs, with annual reviews and allowing local people to object to the opening of a club if it is deemed inappropriate for the character of an area.

Labour councils have been at the forefront in using this legislation, including Swansea who conducted an extensive

consultation before deciding that the maximum number of lap dancing clubs in the city would be zero, reflecting the wishes of residents.

But there is a gap in the current law exempting premises from having to obtain a sexual entertainment license if they hold no more than 11 lap dancing events in a year.

Not only is it a concern that such venues can operate outside of the normal licensing regime, and circumvent the strict controls that councils would place on their operation, it is also understandable that people will have concerns about lap dancing occurring in local pubs.

In a debate at Westminster last week, the Home Office Minister admitted that some venues were abusing this provision, but would

not commit to taking any action. Examples of problems in the seaside town of Newquay were given by the local MP.

The fact that these premises are normal pubs or clubs the rest of the time only makes it more inappropriate that they can host adult entertainment once a month.

Labour thinks this area needs to be reviewed and is calling on the Government to consider closing this loophole.

On licensing sexual entertainment, the Government seems to have dropped previous commitments to give more power back to local communities. Coalition proposals on planning will mean communities losing their right to object to a change of use and potentially make setting up lap-dancing clubs easier. Is this

really allowing communities to have their say?

Labour's "Save our High Streets" campaign has highlighted the dangers of some of the Government changes, which could make the opening of lap-dancing clubs more likely, alongside other undesirable features such as loan shark outlets – blighting our high streets, especially in poorer communities.

There is another aspect of lap-dancing which needs to be considered. Some women choose to become erotic dancers, making that choice themselves – freely.

But studies have shown that there are many working in the different parts of the sex industry for whom the choice is not free. The sex industry is responsible for a great deal of human trafficking – the modern incarnation of slavery

that many thought had been abolished 200 years ago after the long campaign by Hull's William Wilberforce.

The Home Secretary has talked about a new Bill to deal with modern slavery. Any progress in this area would be welcomed by MPs in all parties. Labour has been calling for serious efforts to take on this international trade in misery and exploitation.

However, details of the Government's plans for victims of trafficking are still sketchy.

I will be interested to see whether the Government intends to strengthen the licensing regime on sexual entertainment as part of these plans.

Such changes will be a real step forward for all those wanting to reclaim their communities from the sex trade.

Deal to disarm Assad raises yet more fears



Edward Spiers

Edward M Spiers is professor of strategic studies at the University of Leeds.

THE Russia and US deal on the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons announced in Geneva, coupled with the report of the United Nations weapon inspectors confirming "overwhelming and indisputable" evidence of poison gas attacks in the suburbs of Damascus, raise more questions than answers about the implications for future diplomacy.

Are the proposed arrangements for the declaration, inspection, and elimination of Syria's chemical weapons by the first half of 2014 remotely feasible? Is there scope for the regime of Bashar al-Assad to cheat on these undertakings and retain a stockpile of chemical agents and delivery systems? And are the threats of Presidents Barack Obama and Francois Hollande to use military force credible if the process fails to fulfil the objectives announced in Geneva?

This could not be more serious – UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said "this is a war crime" and "a grave violation" of international law while Foreign Secretary William Hague, the Richmond MP, said the findings were "very, very damning".

The timetable announced by American Secretary of State, John Kerry, and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, is unprecedented: a mere seven days – and not the 30 days normally allowed a new signatory of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) – to declare all its stocks of agent, weapons,



CIVIL WAR: Smoke from shelling hangs over Aleppo, Syria.

PICTURE: AP

production sites, and research and development facilities.

Then Syria must allow international inspectors "unfettered" access to all declared sites in November, with the destruction of production and mixing/filling equipment by November. Thereafter the aim is to remove or destroy all chemical weapons material and equipment by the first half of 2014.

No other state, possessing a stockpile that compares with one that Syria may declare (that is, in excess of a 1,000 tonnes of chemical agents and weapons), has ever destroyed stocks in so short a period of time. And no state has ever attempted to do so in the midst of a civil war, with some suspected sites,

as in Al-Safira, in the centre of a heavily contested region.

Much will depend on the size, composition and location of the declared stockpile but safety concerns, environmental fears, and technological requirements normally mean that the destruction process is slow, expensive, and time-consuming. India and South Korea took three to four years to destroy similar-sized stockpiles.

The United States has already spent \$35bn in building specialist facilities to destroy its stockpile, and will not complete the final destruction until 2023. That will be eight years after the Russian destruction in 2015 but Russia, like Libya in 2004, did not declare all its chemical weapons (Russian special

forces used a fentanyl-based gas to end the Moscow theatre siege on October 26, 2002, killing over 120 terrorists and hostages). So could Assad cheat?

This is exactly what US Republican Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham have claimed in denouncing the deal as "an act of provocative weakness" by the Obama administration. Assad has had the time and the incentive to do so.

In the three weeks since the Damascus attacks of August 21, his military have had ample opportunity to move some chemical agents, weapons, and items of equipment from their suspected sites and to conceal them for their original purpose, namely countering the military arsenal of Israel.

Assad knows, too, that he could appear to co-operate with the declaration, inspection, removal, and destruction process of the Geneva deal, and the accompanying UN Security Council resolution, with little threat of military action thereafter.

Russia, now driving the diplomatic agenda, has consistently opposed any inclusion of such a threat in formal pronouncements, and Obama, having failed to carry Congressional opinion in the wake of the Damascus attacks, will be in no position to do so on the eve of the mid-term Congressional elections in 2014. France will not act alone.

So there is every reason to be wary about future developments in this unfolding drama.

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