

Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2018

## Censoring the Past

***There is no room on TV for racial abuse but beware the rewriting of history***

Memory plays tricks, history does not. There is an older generation of British television viewers who remember, perhaps with undue affection, the sitcoms of the 1970s in which class and ethnic prejudices were challenged and mocked. Seen today on nostalgia channels, episodes of *Till Death Us Do Part* and *Love Thy Neighbour* are neither particularly amusing nor trenchant in their social criticism. Their value lies rather in presenting an era when television was trying to get to grips with postwar Britain, a country that was becoming more open to the world and at the same time more anxious about immigration.

Ofcom, the communications regulator, should think twice about applying contemporary standards of political correctness to output from those days. One of Ofcom's tasks is to assess whether what is shown on TV causes offence. This is a legitimate function. A new reprimand to an obscure classic film channel, Talking Pictures TV, demonstrates the perils of retrospective censorship. After receiving a complaint from a viewer, Ofcom examined a repeated episode of the 1970s drama series *A Family at War*, which deals with the British army in Egypt in 1942. A scene shows a white British soldier ordering drinks from an Egyptian waiter. "And how's the war going for you, Ahmed, you thieving old wog," says the soldier, "you old thief, you thieving old sod."

After the war the term "wog" became a racist slur to denote any non-white foreigner. Although it is thankfully not much used in Britain today, it is plainly intended to suggest white superiority. Yet even derogatory words in films have to be judged in their historical context. The film-makers were re-creating the atmosphere of the army at war, capturing real cadences rather than the rose-tinted version of British heroism that had been served up since 1945. And the narrative showed the abhorrent behaviour of the soldier being corrected by a more honourable fellow serviceman.

Ofcom decided that it did not meet the standards of today's TV audiences who "regard racist language of this nature as highly unacceptable". The company was held in breach of the code and has been summoned to Ofcom to "discuss its approach". The regulator should instead adjust its criteria according to the quality of the production, its intent and the intrinsic value of showing episodes again. *Till Death Us Do Part* featured the character of Alf Garnett, a working-class bigot. The serious and comedic tension came out of conflict with family members who exposed him as a fool. Its critics at the time feared that his unfettered language would reinforce racial prejudices.

The regulator now seems to believe something similar could happen if the episodes with racial name-calling are repeated today. In doing so it underestimates the sophistication of contemporary viewers and it misunderstands how the potency of some curse words dissipates over time. On-demand television makes a nonsense out of the watershed, the hour at which more adult programming is allowed. The ubiquitous presence of stand-up comedians competing in their use of profanities barely raises an eyebrow. The most straightforward way of dealing with this problem is to preface broadcasts with a warning of language that is offensive. Tinkering with the films of the 1970s is to deny the reality of those times and distort our historical understanding of a cruder, more racist Britain.