

Column—16 December 2004

Offside, 16 December

The Semantic Inquisition haven't yet had their fill of Big Ron.

by Duleep Allirajah

'Sorry seems to be the hardest word', Elton John once sang. If there's one person who really ought to be saying sorry for his musical crimes it is Elton John. But what does he get for torturing innocent civilians with the nauseating schmaltz of *Candle in the Wind*? Only a bleeding knighthood, that's what.

Ron Atkinson on the other hand has been in a state of perpetual contrition ever since he called Chelsea's Marcel Desailly a 'fucking lazy thick nigger' in April. But the more the big orange fella says sorry, the more opprobrium seems to be heaped upon him. There's so much inconsistency in the way we treat our national treasures isn't there?

A few weeks ago I jokingly suggested that Brian Cole, the Charlton PA announcer who was sacked for his 'Crystal Palarse' jibe, should be sent to apologise in person to the people of Croydon just as *Spectator* editor Boris Johnson had been dispatched to Merseyside to apologise for his magazine's rather crass comments about the hubcap-thieves, er, I mean good citizens of Liverpool. This week the BBC aired a documentary, *What Ron Said*, in which the now-disgraced football summariser agreed to undergo a strikingly similar act of penance.

Big Ron was sent to America for a crash course in black history and to learn why the n-word is so taboo - as if he hadn't twigged already after finding his broadcasting career in tatters for using the word. Ron visited the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia in Michigan where he learned about the cultural significance of golliwogs and sambo dolls. Far from experiencing a racial epiphany Ron was just nonplussed. What on earth did the programme-makers think they would achieve by this? That learning first hand about slavery and segregation from a black man (albeit a sociology professor) would help 'cure' his racism? Perhaps they hoped that Ron would achieve closure in his televised quest for self-discovery by acknowledging his inner Ku Klux Klansman. An increasingly irritated Ron, however, refused to admit that he was a racist. 'Politically incorrect, yeah, but who isn't?' he chuckled.

Back in England Ron was subjected to further indignity, enduring chastisement by the self-righteous Darcus Howe, and undergoing race awareness training with a group of white pensioners (one of whom made the astute observation that political correctness, rather than bringing people together, only creates further division). If the programme-makers had hoped that Ron would tearfully confess: 'My name is Ron Atkinson and I am a racist' they would

have been disappointed. Ron stubbornly continued to reject the charge of racism and felt that he had apologised enough.

*What Ron Said* reminded me of Father Ted's ham-fisted attempt to atone for offending the local Chinese community by organising a multicultural celebration ('It's a great honour and privilege for me to present this celebration of the wide diversity of cultures that exists today on Craggy Island, namely Chinese people and people from Craggy Island'). Big Ron probably calculated that this public humiliation would aid his rehabilitation. But, as he is discovering, while saying sorry might be in vogue among disgraced public figures, it does not necessarily salvage your career. Ron's problem is that he hasn't signed the 'I am a racist' confession that his interrogators demand. It's the wrong kind of sorry and consequently his exile continues in the broadcasting wastelands of Channel 5.

The programme has provoked a vexed debate about the correct length of Ron's banishment. Has he been punished enough or should he serve a longer sentence? Frankly I think this is a bullshit debate. The whole sorry saga shows that the meaning of racism has become twisted beyond recognition. Racism used to denote the unequal treatment of black people. Today it is has been reduced to a question of what people say and think. Anti-racism is no longer about forging an egalitarian society but about minding one's racial Ps and Qs.

That Ron Atkinson should become the latest high-profile victim of the Semantic Inquisition is the ultimate irony. Ron Atkinson was the first British football manager to practise equal treatment - the essence of anti-racism. At a time when black footballers were dismissed as flair players who lacked discipline, Atkinson built his West Brom team around the trio of Lawrie Cunningham, Brendan Batson and Cyril Regis. But while he was colour-blind in his team selection, Big Ron never learnt the PC racial etiquette that has since become compulsory and that was to prove his undoing.

At the end of *What Ron Said* celebrity Baggies' fan Frank Skinner lamented the fact that, if Ron were to die tomorrow, he would not get the tributes he deserves but would be remembered as 'Ron the racist'. Sadly, thanks to the degraded and trivialised way in which racism is now understood, *What Ron Said* may forever eclipse *What Ron Did*.