

The People's Parliament: Corporal Punishment

UK TV political debate series : 1994 : dir. : Channel 4 : ? min
prod: Maggie Sutcliffe : scr: : dir.ph.:
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Radio Times note:

"In this special edition, 80 young people fill the parliamentary benches to debate the motion: "corporal punishment should be brought back into state schools"."

Sunday Times note:

"In today's special edition, 80 young people between the ages of 12 and 16 debate the motion that corporal punishment should be brought back into state schools."

What's On TV note:

"Tonight: 80 young people between the ages of 12 and 16 debate the motion: Corporal punishment should be brought back into state schools."

Broadcast under the ægis of Channel 4's po-faced but essentially patronising "children's issues" week, imaginatively dubbed "**Look Who's Talking**" (which was a more apposite title than they intended), this was a special edition of the "topical" debates programme staged in a mock-up of the Westminster parliamentary chamber, with pre-recorded arguments for and against supplemented by expert testimony in select committee, concluding with a little light skirmishing across the despatch box, umpired from the speaker's chair.

In this case, however, the chosen issue - reintroduction of caning in state schools - was far from being topical, and it's highly unlikely the invited secondary school participants chose this topic for themselves, it would probably figure rather low on their own burning issues list, but that's Channel 4 tokenism for you.

It will come as no surprise that the motion was defeated but - unlike in real parliamentary debates as a rule - the adult speaker in this instance took it upon herself to interrogate anyone who stood up to support the motion - chiefly public school boys - and attack the logic of their positions. Scarcely an even-handed "debate" then. Indeed, the youth proposing the motion fairly leered with relish as he flexed his cane in the school corridor making his opening remarks. Like all the worst proponents of hanging, he would have been only too happy to deal out a bit of stick himself, it seems. While the girl putting the abolitionist case - in terms of "child abuse", naturally - was the very essence of sweetness and light.

Whatever one may feel personally about the merits of the argument on both sides, there was clear evidence here of the programme makers weighting the scales so as not to arrive at a "politically incorrect" verdict. But surely vote-rigging's a bit of a political no-no itself, isn't it? Ah well, they're just kids, you see...

Among the expert witnesses invited to give evidence in select committee - presided over once again by madame speaker - were a private school head who still resorts to a paddle in extremis, but who (and this was considered a crucial point) thought it best not to bring the actual instrument along with him, the inevitable child shrink, who singly failed to persuade, and erstwhile beneficiaries of the cane, now adults, who testified either to its harm or benefit as they personally saw it.

Channel 4, in reaching for a catchy title to their week of "children's *issues*" programming, came up with "**Look Who's Talking**". But the series of films in question, let's not forget, pretended to give a voice to small children (and later a dog – making clear what its estimation of children was) while in fact forcing into their mouths the anxieties and neuroses of adults, as voiced by Bruce Willis and Roseanne Barr. Children are cute mouthpieces for our own fears – was the blatant message of those films, so Channel 4 made a classic Freudian slip there, and chose better than they intended.

For all the reservations so indicated, this still made interesting viewing, if only because school age children (here from 8 to 18) are so rarely seen articulating a viewpoint on TV, and if some of their arguments had clearly been prompted - not to say rehearsed - by the programme makers, some spontaneous opinion did penetrate through after all. A pity Channel 4 didn't have the courage of its pretended convictions and commit to a series of schoolchildren's debates, and not just this carefully-managed one-off.

See subject index under **CORPORAL PUNISHMENT** and **DISCUSSION PROGRAMMES / STUDIO DEBATES**.