

17th November 1989

VICTOR A. LOWNES

Dear Lynda Lee-Potter:

As an ex-employee of Playboy and a regular opponent of Mary Whitehouse, I have, of course, a decided bias in the argument that you raised in your column today (Friday, November 17). Nevertheless, I think you have, as a journalist, made a serious error of judgement in siding with the would-be censors.

First, you show Playboy Magazine grouped with magazines which offend you by their explicitness but your own reporter, in an adjoining column, describes Playboy as "containing glamour nude photos none explicit." True, Playboy is a men's magazine but is the censor's brush now going to obliterate all show of human nudity in whatever art form it might appear?? Or does the censor now decide what is art and what is not?

After you think about how you moved over from the material that really offended you to sort of smear Playboy "just a smidgin" think about how a truly dedicated censor wafts his brush around. It was once the law in Rome that a citizen could be arrested for obscenity and, surprise-surprise, during the reign of Caesar Augustus it became obscene to criticise the Emperor.

Ah, you say, but that was then and now its different. Is it? In Mary Whitehouse's own words she condemns "...late night satirists who ridicule and denigrate our political leaders, the church, the family, authority in all its forms, which are often anti-British, blasphemous and obscene".

You "looked through a pile (of magazines) that can be bought by any child, any pervert, any disturbed adult in any small town and the impact it might have on them is just frightening." A couple of days ago your own paper reported on the front page how some mother in Maryland had been so effected by a TV drama that she killed her three children and herself. How about people who are spurred to commit copy-cat crimes by stories they read in newspapers? Where does it all end?

The idea of freeing children from exposure to harmful ideas and images is a key argument of the theocrat advocating censorship whom you seem to be supporting in your column. After you give it some more thought I think you'll agree that this is absolute baloney !!

The idea of reducing the reading or viewing material of everyone to the level of sophistication of a ten-year-old is a peculiar concept of how to run a society, and I think it is a lousy way to prepare children for adult life. There is very little evidence to support the notion that children who are exposed to pornographic material are apt to be more delinquent than others. In fact, what evidence there is shows that delinquent children tend to read less of everything than other children.

In the U.S. the Supreme Court has ruled that it is illegal to censor literature on the basis that it may harm minors. Judge Felix Frankfurter spoke for the unanimous Court when he said, "The State insists that by thus quarantining the general reading public against books and magazines not too rugged for grown men and women in order to shield innocence, it is exercising its power to promote the general welfare. Surely this is to burn the house to roast the pig."

I have some serious questions for you to think about. How do you define pornography or obscenity? You throw these words around with happy abandon in your "Special Report" but they are very subjective terms. How would you like the law changed to deal with these magazines which you find offensive?? Come on lets hear the exact wording of your suggested changes in the law or do you want this dealt with by vigilante boycotts and book burnings, Clare Short style?

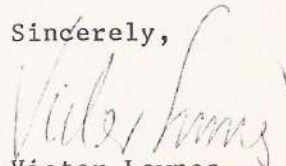
The existing law defines obscenity as anything which has a tendency to deprave or corrupt. One entirely subjective term defined by two other subjective terms. A situation that Lord Goodman describes as "an utter nonsense." And, while we are on the subject, how come you haven't been depraved or corrupted while inspecting this material? Has Mary Whitehouse? Have the police?

Demanding that obscenity laws be tightened, Mrs. Whitehouse wrote the Prime Minister calling for "Immediate and effective action. We want to emphasize that a wise and effective law is liberating and not repressive since it defends the freedom of those who would choose not to come in contact with material which they find offensive."

You might agree with me that it is often necessary in a truly free society for people to be shocked, disgusted, outraged -- let alone merely offended.

I'm sorry to take up so much of your time, but I know you are an intelligent woman who writes genuinely thoughtful and witty pieces which we much enjoy. I believe that after you think over the serious ramifications of what Clare Short and other feminist extremists are proposing you will give them the short shrift they deserve.

Sincerely,



Victor Lownes
1 West Halkin Street
London SW1X 8JJ
Tel: 235 2867
Fax: 235 8001

Ms. Linda Lee-Potter
"Daily Mail"
By Fax 937 3745