

Is Stephen Fry a Racist?

Although it may seem preposterous to ask if Stephen Fry is a racist, someone who on QI frequently apologises to various ethnicities on behalf of his guests' unwittingly racist *faux pas* (eg: Alan's Davies' "hilarious" Mexican accent), and who on one recent episode (["Joints" S11E6](#) around the 24½ minute mark) agreed wholeheartedly with Jack Whitehall when he suggested that dentures should be fitted with a device which causes them to clamp shut whenever their wearer uttered the words "I'm not a racist, but...", I nevertheless found myself unable to avoid this uncomfortable question when I happened to hear Stephen Fry interviewed on [the Jonathan Ross show in October 2012](#).

Anti-Australian racism is I guess the petty misdemeanour of the racism world, compared to the grand larcenies of the world's nastier racisms. Yet, as an Australian myself (albeit a dissident one who refuses to even pretend to like sport) who also happens (like so many of my countrymen and women) to be a great fan of S. Fry (despite his lamentable conversion on the question of sport, [as confessed to Michael Parkinson](#)), I had to ask myself: *is* Stephen Fry actually racist about Australians? For like apples in a barrel, just one racism is enough to spoil an otherwise unblemished record: it's no good being opposed to anti-Semitism, anti-Africanism, anti-Asianism etc etc while allowing "just a bit" of racism in the form of anti-Australianism.

What S.F. actually said in the Jonathan Ross interview was this. In the context of discussing one of his visits downunder, he was singing the praise of the New Zealanders (and rightly so, for they are by and large a lovely bunch of humans). Then after his visit to NZ, SF said that he went on to Australia, and happened to say to some unspecified specimen of Australian humanity something along the lines of "aren't those New Zealanders nice people?" The reply he received was: "Yes, but a little bit *too* nice, don't you think?" The anecdote then ended with this observation: "Only an Australian would think someone could be *too* nice," while adding *sotto voce* that he had some lovely Australian friends who were of course exceptions to this rule. In other words, "I'm not a racist, but...". Unfortunately, S.F. Was not in this instance fitted with a set of Jack Whitehall's racism-censoring dentures.

Were this an isolated comment, it would hardly merit comment, for Stephen F. is definitely someone who has earned the benefit of the doubt. But this comment was in fact the most recent instance of what can only be described as a trend in the ever-expanding Fry cannon. This trend goes all the way back to [an old interview with the "Carry On" movies' Kenneth Williams](#), in which Fry calls Australia "a very peculiar place" and Australians "extraordinary" (and not, one senses, the good kind of "extraordinary").

Then there's Fry & Laurie's admittedly hilarious "Neighbours" parody from [the 1987 pilot episode of their classic sketch comedy show "A Bit of Fry and Laurie"](#). Certainly, "Neighbours" deserves a good parodying, and this one was brilliant and hilarious. But it also belongs to the cannon of English jokes at Australian expense, going back to [the Goodies' 1975 Rolf Harris parody](#) and [Monty Python's famous "Bruces" sketch](#) of 1970 set in the philosophy department at the "University of Woolloomaloo".

There's a fine line between a well-humoured parody (*à la* the S&L "Neighbours" send-up) and an actually racist attitude hidden behind the mask of humour (as in The Goodies' attitudes to Australians in general and Aboriginals in particular). If the Monty Python sketch walks this tightrope nicely, it's largely because the Python team did not single out Australians as the sole target of their scorn, but also in the majority of their sketches directed it reflexively upon the English themselves, self-deprecation being the one saving grace of other-deprecation, and self-criticism the

essential preliminary to any other-criticism. It is really the absence of this reflexive dimension in his comedy which is at the root of my criticism of Stephen Fry, who is apt to come over all patriotic whenever he mentions England and the English, as, for example, when he has mentioned at various times the instances in which England has given France “a good caning” in military history, or likewise despatched Australia in the cricket (see the eleven and a half minute mark and the twenty-two and a half minute mark of [the Julia Zemiro “Jeopardy” episode](#)).

Then there's another old appearance on an '80s TV show called “Room 101,” now posted on Youtube in 3 parts. Fry's point regarding Australians comes at around the eight minute mark of part two, and continues on into the start of part three – the question of the so-called “Australian Question Intonation” or “AQI” - a rising inflection typically applied only to questions, but extended according to Stephen Fry by Australians to most if not to all locutions: [part 1](#) ; [part 2](#) ; [part 3](#) .

What S.F. doesn't seem to realise (or at least didn't realise in 1981) is that this “accent” (or more rightly, verbal habit) is not at all universal, but is rather characteristic of the way in which Australians tend to speak to the English. What Stephen Fry had neglected to reflect upon was that the rising final intonation is actually a sign of psychological insecurity, an insecurity in fact induced by Fry's own formidability, a situation which condemns him to a kind of observation paradox. The final-rising-intonation phenomenon he described is due in fact to the insecurity that his very presence induced, and is not actually the way in which Australians talk to each other when not in the presence of an individual perceived to be culturally superior. In short, what S.F. failed to appreciate in 1981 was that he was hearing this tone so often in Australia for the exact reason he elaborates so eloquently around the ten minute mark in [his appearance on “Meet The Kumars”](#) - a kind of cultural [observer's effect](#) (related to but not exactly the same as the [Heisenberg principle](#), which actually states that you can't know everything all at once about subatomic particles).

If *esse* is indeed *percipi* (not necessarily in Berkeley's solipsistic sense, nor even in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein's, but rather in the phenomenological sense of Husserl, but also presaged I would maintain in the insight Nietzsche propounds in *Twilight of the Idols* that “the inner world is an appearance too”), then the prevalent British perception of Australians as inferior is itself in fact constitutive of the Australian inferiority complex, a complex which leads to the familiar overdecompensation paradox of the loudmouth Aussie abroad petulantly proclaiming that they are not inferior, thereby demonstrating ironically enough that they actually are – namely, the inferiority of insecurity compounded by stupidity. As a library's full of self-help books have proclaimed for decades, confidence which is able to stop short of arrogance is the key to garnering respect, and knowing what not to say is no less crucial than knowing what to say. A not insignificant quantity of Australians do know this, and travel the world quietly, not drawing attention to themselves, and so going, as it were, unnoticed. But as I said, a few rotten apples ruin the barrel. But surely Australians, in this regard, are by and large more to be pitied than censured. As Fry pointed out in [his 1992 interview with Clive James](#), the Australian preoccupation with Australian-ness belies a deep cultural insecurity which can only be described as a permanent and ongoing identity crisis leading to a tiresome self-preoccupation, as warned against in [this brilliant half-hour of thoughtfulness](#). Here Fry aligns himself with Gustav Klimt's motto “I am not interested in myself,” thereby setting himself squarely against the Freudian plague of self-preoccupation which has dragged the collective consciousness of the Western world down into a mire of terminally tedious navel-gazing. (More wise words from Fry on the closely related perils of self-pity are [here](#)).

It is a mark of Fry's excellence that he himself provides us with an analysis able to shed light on this problematic English attitude to Australians which he at times uncritically reflects. In [his interesting interview in Robert Llewellyn's “Carpool” series](#) in May 2010, Fry made a very significant comment concerning a word which is lurking behind these anti-Australian sentiments; that odious attribute we call “snobbery.” Around the nineteen minute mark of that interview, Stephen cites [Alan](#)

[Bennett's](#) distinction between two types of snobbery: a snobbery which “looks up” and a snobbery which “looks down,” describing the former as “amiable,” and the latter as “disgusting” and “unforgivable” (which is I suppose why he called himself in [a 1991 interview with Clive Anderson](#) a “Tweed Socialist”).

The question thus formulated in Fry's own terms is this: does Stephen Fry *look down* on Australians in general? The *prima facie* case would appear to be a strong one – both the Kenneth Williams and the Jonathan Ross interviews would seem to constitute instances of precisely such an uncharacteristic and perhaps even unconscious condescension – unwitting lapses into “vulgarian” and “classless” snobbery by Fry in order to garner a laugh from the respective live audiences. Fry's implementation of Bennett's distinction thus demonstrates its problematic nature – that the line between the two is too permeable, too punctuated, and frankly, imaginary. Respect ought to be called respect, and disrespect be admitted to and defended if it is defensible, and otherwise denounced and disowned. But never having been discriminated *against*, Stephen F naturally remains unaware of the odious nature of such discrimination, invisible to those like himself who are continually *looked up to*.

The problem is that, dammit, there is a good deal of truth to what Stephen Fry says – on the whole, Australians *are* harsh, suspicious, cruel and vindictive people to one another. In fact I would go so far as to say that no other people on the planet are quite so harsh on each other as are Australians. This is no doubt rooted in both the the country's foundations as a penal colony, and in the inhospitable nature of so much of the Australian landmass, peppered as it is with the bleached bones of lost explorers, slaughtered squatters and massacred aboriginal tribes. Robert Hughes puts it brilliantly at the outset of his masterwork *The Fatal Shore*, where he says that despite the official story propounded by an uncritical idealism that the patron saints of Australia were Saint Paul and Rousseau, (i.e. that the kindly Christian colonists were bringing salvation to the god-forsaken noble savages), any critical attitude must admit that in actual fact the agenda was set by thinkers such as Hobbes and de Sade (the *terra nullius* being a Devil's playground of the terror of the nihilism of Christianity, a sort of land of The Lord of the Flies). But pointing this out is the job not of the English, nor of any other people, but solely the responsibility of Australians themselves. We ourselves must take responsibility for our failings, and search for those failing's remedies. As an Australian, I must admit that I too feel the pull of the temptation to be harsh, suspicious, cruel and vindictive. Hence the critical need to turn these tendencies first of all back on myself, being above all suspicious of this habit in myself, and always pausing for thought before I speak up in this “typical” way in order to see how such petty and reactive *ressentiments* can be overcome, as Fry so perfectly puts it, by being “dwarfed by kindness.”

An interesting example of the many contradictory forces converging on this issue is [the “Jolly” episode](#). At the start of the show, Julia Zemiro (one of the two Australians who have appeared on QI, both women) correctly guessed “Egypt” as the ancient civilisation worshipping a god called “Hapi.” This had obviously been a stab in the dark on J.Z.'s part, for she was so surprised by her own success that she responded immediately with a characteristic act of Australian self-deprecation, and expostulated “Get stuffed!” By this she meant to express something like “I can't believe that my stab in the dark was right, and I'm worried that I might appear to be too intelligent” - in short, she was telling *herself* to “get stuffed.” But her involuntary self-deprecation backfired in its very delivery, and too late she realised that, in an English context, it appeared that she had just told *Stephen Fry* to “get stuffed.” With consummate tact the überurbane Fry took her smartly to task: “you don't have to insult me every time you get question right” he quipped. All this happened in the blink of an eye, and the whole exchange was over before the two and a half minute mark of the episode. But then, around the eleven and a half minute mark, during the discussion of the phenomenon of the “practical joke”, JZ blithely mentioned the quaint Australian practice of shaving the eyebrows off of someone while they are in an alcohol-induced slumber as a fun practical joke,

and with a shudder of genuine astonishment Fry gasped sincerely: “that's just vile.” Julia Zemiro's answer? “I'm Australian.”

As I said (and here's the pointy part of my point), it is not Stephen Fry's place to be the one to point out and criticise these cultural warts – precisely because Stephen Fry is not himself an Australian. It is Australia's right and indeed its duty to criticise itself, and we here in Australia have a critical need for more culturally self-critical voices, and less of the jingoistic self-congratulatory nonsense which dominates the air-waves downunder (again, a symptom of acute cultural insecurity). Stephen Fry's right, and yes, his duty, is to criticise England and the English. But do we hear any such cultural self-criticism from Stephen Fry?

[Fry's interview with Craig Furgison](#) is interesting in this regard, in that the explicit English self-deprecation which he expresses to the Scottish Furgison contrasts strongly with the implicit (and sometimes explicit) attitude pervading QI, which is more along the lines of the sentiment encoded in the connotations of the very name “Great Britain.” For although the “Great” in Great Britain is supposed to be a geographical designation (i.e. *greater* Britian – that is, not just England, but also Scotland, Wales and Ireland as well), the unconscious or semi-conscious connotation resonates undeniably, and bespeaks an English patriotism which constantly runs the risk of *looking down* upon the rest of the world in general, and Australia in particular. As any regular viewer of QI well knows, we sometimes hear a gentle (or not so gentle) ribbing of both the Welsh and the Scots as somehow inferior to the English – for example, Rob Brydon's tongue-in-cheek lamentation concerning “the institutionalised racism which is accepted when it is directed toward the Welsh” around the six minute mark of [QI Series 3 episode 1 “Campanology”](#); or Fry's good-natured but nevertheless iron-fist-in-a-velvet-glove Scots-baiting (usually *sotto voce*) with [the oddest mix of mockery and respect](#).

I only ever criticise things I love on this blog, and I try above all to make sure that my criticism is based upon a crystal clear distinction between an argument and a fight. To be able to argue the merits of issues with those who disagree with you without that argument becoming a fight is about the best definition of philosophy I know. So in presuming to criticise the mighty Mr Fry, I do so in the implicit knowledge that he is *worth* criticising precisely because he himself is so very excellent. In fact it would not be going too far to say that for me, the difference between a blank wasteland devoid of all meaningful content and the current television landscape is largely Stephen Fry (and I only say “largely” because of a few Davids such as Mitchell and Attenborough). But this is all the more reason to point out that any racist tarnish is an unseemly blemish on Fry's undeniably silver tongue, and to try my hardest to avoid the pitfall which is the flip-side of our harshness upon each other, namely, an uncritical and obsequious veneration of Europeans in general and the English in particular. You might even say that I intend my criticism in the mode of one friend pointing out to another that they have food on their face, which if done tactfully is actually a favour. As for presuming to call S.F. a “friend” (who of course doesn't know yours truly from Adam), I do this on the unshakable basis that any friend of Pelham Grenville is a friend of mine. And as for criticising Australia, one of the great things about this human all-too-human country of mine is that I *can* be a dissident Australian and *not* be thrown in jail for simply speaking my mind within reasonable bounds. I can and do criticise my own country and country-persons in all sorts of ways, and Australian law protects my right to do so without finding myself incarcerated like [Somyot Prueksakasemsuk](#). Now *that's* something worth being proud of.

One very interesting moment arose on [the QI episode featuring the one other Australian who has appeared on the show, Julia Morris](#). A slightly dubious tone had been set by the indomitable Alan Davies making a quip about the “Wrong Brothers” being a Chinese version of the American aviation pioneers the Wright Brothers, when at around the 8½ minute mark Julia M. answered a query concerning the passion for miniaturisation characteristic of the Japanese by pronouncing the

word “Japanese” phonetically (i.e. pronouncing the final “e”, which is in fact the way the word is pronounced in Japan, although it is a foreign word, the Japanese actually calling themselves “Nippon”). Stephen Fry immediately took this to be a mock Japanese accent, and offered one of his trademark apologies to Japanese listeners for Ms Morris's apparent racism. But a moment later Julia turned the tables on S.F., coming out with a sentence of fairly fluent Japanese language in which she informed Fry San that she had in fact lived for some time on Hokkaido, not that he was able to understand what she had said until she translated it into English for him. In a fine example of Fry's unflappable grace, his response was “well, that's got to be worth 5 points.” Some odd banter concerning cows and dubious generalisations concerning body odours followed, and the topic was left at that. (More on the Japanese and the French [here](#)).

The reason I call this passing moment an interesting one is that it brings out a significant point concerning racism. Certainly, the “consciousness raising” aspect of the struggle against racism is a crucial phase of its overcoming, and since the defeat of the Nazis, very few unreconstructed racists are now allowed any public voice, at least in the so-called Western world, where laws have been passed making racial vilification and ethnic discrimination illegal. But as we know, this end of officially sanctioned and consciously espoused racism is itself only the beginning of the ongoing struggle to achieve a world in which racial discrimination is a thing of the past. Today's challenge is not stopping overt racism, but rather understanding the pervasive and unconscious influence of covert racism – hence the rise of the “I'm not a racist, but...” phenomenon. The conscious denunciation of racism is necessary but not sufficient to eradicate the problem: the next step is to fathom the ways in which ideology works “behind our own backs” so to speak. No one, by definition, can see their own blind spots, and we need a climate of healthy and constructive criticism of one another to help us appreciate the ways in which prejudice smuggles itself under our radars of awareness and influences our perceptions and opinions unwittingly.

And so my criticism of Stephen Fry could not be further from the malicious and troll-like nature of an accusation like [the following incredible misquotation out of context](#). Here's [the full context](#) of these comments. Why on Earth someone would pull these comments out of context in this way, making out that Fry's condemnatory *mention* of the Nazi's abuses of language was in fact his own *use* of that very language is beyond me. Nor am I advocating a kind of mere political correctness, in which political thoughtfulness is replaced by a formulaic and slavish adherence to thoughtless norms of speech, so rightly pilloried by Fry [here](#). Fry is himself Quite Interesting because he is such an excellent and rare example of actual thoughtfulness where so often we find mere thoughtless correctness, as exemplified in his own remarkable performance at the Sydney Opera House on Youtube in 6 parts: [part 1](#) ; [part 2](#) ; [part 3](#) ; [part 4](#) ; [part 5](#) ; [part 6](#)

Have I been over-sensitive? Perhaps. Have I over-reacted to comments which were made in good humour and with no real malice in mind? Perhaps. Ought we to worry that [Fry plans to unleash biological terrorism](#) upon Australia? Probably not. Because all things considered, [Stephen Fry's heart is most certainly in the right place](#). But in the endless struggle to overcome prejudice in the world, even paragons of virtue must remain vigilant, for our minds no less than our retinas will always have blind-spots, and these are as deserving of our attention as is our clarity of vision.

Stop press: 5 ½ minute mark of this one! <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0OFXL0jIMR4>