

### The Carnival Barker

'I'm getting to enjoy these town hall discussions, now,' journalist Sue says. 'These public intellectuals see the world in interesting ways – a bit like Monty Python skits.'

'I'm pleased to hear that,' her balding editor replies. 'Your *Sue Donym* précis pieces are fast becoming the column that the readers wait for. What were they speaking about this time?'

She laughs. 'They called it *The Carnival Barker* – an American term for the announcer of attractions at a funfair or a circus. But their questions were really about the public tendency to mistake the hyperbole for reality.'

'Sounds good. Aim for 1000 words, this time. Provoke some thinking.'

### The Carnival Barker

**Why are we so easily taken in by charisma?**

**Are we so gullible that we believe the patter of smart talkers?**

Last night's town hall with the public intellectuals left us all questioning the world around us. They opened with the two startling challenges above.

Perhaps you, like me, need to have that term, *Carnival Barker*, explained. He or she is the glib-tongued spruiker at fairs or shopping centres who encourages passing people to visit the available attractions or enticements. The barker is usually an entertaining speaker – a combination of clown, salesperson and exaggerator.

The panel's interest, however, seemed to be more about how simple comedy and entertainment could be taken to the next level of **belief**.

We become accustomed to exaggeration as part of regular *tongue-in-cheek* banter – it is entertaining. Then, it is only a small step to accepting the *over-the-top* words as ... maybe true.

Likewise, we watch satirists, comedians and cartoonists taking the mickey out of many bizarre situations in public life. Having a good laugh is part of keeping our sanity, in the complexities of living. That is healthy. But the key to satire and comedy is to take **an odd slant to real situations** – twisting an element of truth – otherwise we wouldn't laugh.

**The challenge is to see the distinction between humour and truth!**

Pop singers and film stars capture the ideal to which we might aspire. To be able to write emotive songs or to star in an epic movie or to dance with polished grace are all talents that let us admire and perhaps put such people on pedestals.

The lure of fame or the ability to move people emotionally is what is sometimes called **charisma** – especially if those people appear on mass media or in front of large concerts.

Sometimes, we might identify with '*heroic*' influencers through podcasts, stadium gatherings ... or through the *very personal relationship* of private social media contact.

Whatever the context, the panel suggested, our need to feel belonging and worth is a human characteristic. Further, feeling part of *like minds* is fun. Having the freedom to be yourself can be another attraction to listen or identify with a charismatic personality.

That close attachment to *an image* can enable some to hang onto every word ... as if any utterance from *our star* would be like a shaft of sunlight clarifying the challenges of life ... and making us feel happy.

But susceptible minds might accept that what is said *must be the truth* ... or ... if they know it is not, then it should be ... in their ideal or delusion.

**That is the powerful effect of star power ... or charisma!**

In the political world, a charismatic personality can have a certain appeal ... particularly if you are dissatisfied with the world around ... which **you feel you could change** with a '*believable*' way forward.

Would you then be tempted to believe the grandiose claims, the hyperbolic promises of a better way forward ... as truth ... or that anything might be better than the present?

**Are you hearing the truth or choosing to buy into a delusion?**

The panel suggested that the '*Let's protest and change*' can become a mantra .... without any serious thought as to truth or consequences.

There are some leaders in society that many would consider to be poor performers. While policies are a matter of opinion, the leadership behaviours might appear to be more like self-promotion rather than for the greater good.

Some, indeed, might be dismissed as *buffoons* – charismatic speakers or shallow public identities ... narcissists thirsting for the importance of lofty recognition ... people that voters might just *pass off* as an irrelevance – someone to be waited out.

**But the leader has the power to make decisions that affect many.**

That's definitely not irrelevant.

One has to feel reassured that the built-in checks and balances of the constitutional processes will keep such a leader within the guardrails of expected behaviour ... and most times, they will. Another consequence of perceiving someone to be *a buffoon in power* is the tendency to dismiss **anything said** by that leader as untrue or at least ill-advised. But it is just possible that one *thought bubble* might lead to an unexpected *right answer*.



The panel was keen to challenge us **not** to assume that all of a *buffoon's* projected actions would be based on false premises. **That could be a trap of misinformation or living in an 'echo chamber' of like views, of distrust ... or, indeed, of blind self-righteousness.**

Misinformation, disinformation, military psy-ops are not innovations of a cyber age. They are as old as spies and wars. They certainly can exercise a **significant control** over how information is received by the public. But governments control and '*spin*' agendas too. **A free press and a critically thinking public are good safeguards against distortions of truth.**

In a world dominated by assumptions of '*knowing what others think*', **without consulting with them** ... can produce an '*us versus them*' culture of demeaning others ... who are then either dismissed with contempt or are branded as robotic enemies. That is the start of war-mongering ... the policy basis of much of the world armaments industries.

Many of the '*Intelligence*' projections of the past 70 years have been **wrong in assumption** (eg Weapons of Mass Destruction), erroneously suiting particular agendas ... and countries have been destabilised or engaged in war, as a result. There are international laws which, when breached (such as invading a sovereign country) require consequences ... but understanding history and speaking with adversaries are useful in resolving difficult situations. Not appeasement ... but asserting the agreed established laws. **When negotiations for peace are conducted by politicians in the media (rather than, quietly, by trained diplomats), the public rhetoric can significantly reduce the chance of a well-informed outcome.**

**Why are we so easily taken in by charisma? Do we fall for the patter of smart talkers who want us to *believe*?**

'That's what the panel was raising with us,' Sue says. 'Belief needs a leap of faith. Do we just **want to trust** what we read or hear ... without rigorous testing to see if we are being duped?'

'Fair questions, Sue,' replies the editor, 'but I note you have not included that last question in your draft. Why not?'

'Yes. Deliberately ... if you approve.' She pauses. 'I think because the panel didn't use all the questions. They tended to pause ... to imply. Acknowledging that smart people should be able to work out what is being suggested. While they pose some surprising questions, they respect the intelligence of the audience.'

'Yep ... and the likely audience at such meetings would probably be made up of thinkers ... rather than *rent-a-crowd* applauders. Fair point.'

She smiles. 'I'd like to think that people who read my column are critical thinkers. I'm keen to read their responses.'

'I expect they will be flooding in, Sue. I'll print this. Well done!'