

Beatrix Campbell meets Esther Rantzen

That's Lifelines

How far is the agenda of *That's Life* defined by the idea that you're on the side of the individual?

Absolutely. I was brought up journalistically to believe that individual experience sheds a brighter light on general principles. If I want to know about child abuse, I will learn from a survivor of abuse, or a family where abuse occurs. Then I will take that experience to a professor or the paediatrician. For me the expert is the person it happens to.

So it's not just about the individual but also the authority of their own experience?

Yes. And I think that widens our field. We are a consumer programme, yet we deal with transplantation, old people with insufficient heating, mobility allowances for the disabled.

Isn't another appeal of the programme that people like to watch success — getting results?

Once we have told a story of failure or injustice, we do try and find a direction to go in. When you deal with subjects like the plight of the old in winter, or the homeless, or the mentally ill, or the abused, there are no simple answers, and I hope we aren't stupid or naive about this. But even so we try and find some way through. And of course, the viewers want to know what happened next.

So people establish a relationship to the issues as well as to the individuals?

Yes, and that causes problems. From within the layers of the BBC, sometimes the message comes down: 'You are getting boring, get off that campaign.'

How do you feel about the way the politics of consumerism have emerged in the 80s?

When I started in consumer programmes, it was all about the washing machine, the pair of boots, the double-glazing salesman. The programme has moved to safer playgrounds for children, mobility allowances, random breath-testing. We've moved into the protection of life and the real quality of life, rather than only doing objects or products.

I had always hoped that the left-of-centre newspapers and periodicals would regard us as being champions of people who are not in the big battalions. I once asked Roy Hattersley: 'How is it that the Labour Party does not identify with protecting the consumer? Because people who have very little money want to get value for that money.' And he said to me, 'I suppose it's because consumer programmes are regarded as the defender of the fan heater.'

You'd like left-of-centre politics to take

consumerism seriously?

I do, I do. I don't want to be regarded as a Tory programme!

How do you explain the Left's indifference?

I don't know. Unless there is a puritanical feeling that really, we oughtn't to own anything individually, so if your car breaks down, tough luck. But if we go into the quality of people's lives, a television that doesn't work actually very adversely affects the arthritic pensioner.

I remember once I was at some meeting at which there was a senior trade-union official, and we were discussing whether a particular lipstick contained lead, and he was just contemptuous. It didn't matter, it was off the agenda entirely. Well, actually, safety of cosmetics, safety of medicines, safety of food, is on everybody's agenda.

The programme is rooted in individuals' experience. How far would you be inhibited from confronting very general experiences of discontent?

There is a sort of anger in some journalists, like John Pilger, or campaigners like Des Wilson, which I admire. But the truth is, when things get bad in my life I do tend to sit in the middle of the floor and laugh.

So you're not that driven?

No. Until I discovered the reality of child abuse. And there I found an anger.

But to take an example: public transport in our capital city is a nightmare. That is a major consumer issue. Sometimes it's a life and death issue, such as King's Cross.

Yes, you're absolutely right. And safety - on a ferry, in an aeroplane, at a station - is terribly important. But these things have to be taken as individual cases. It's a question of trying to act before a disaster happens, and you need to be able to prophesy that the conditions are really that dangerous.

There were transport workers who were worried about the conditions of those places. If they'd come to you and said, 'We don't think King's Cross is safe. We passed resolutions in our union branch and nobody takes any notice,' what would you have done?

We would have said, 'Show us.'

Have you ever been approached like that?

Not on an organised basis.

Let's move on to child abuse. Why did that get under your skin like nothing else?

Because I love children. The adult is in a

position of almost complete power, unaccountable, in a closed world. The child has almost no rights.

Have you changed your mind since Childline was set up about the forms of intervention that it has generated?

No. I know from adult surveys what happens if the abuse continues. You may get a permanently damaged child.

There are two points here. The first is that you have to accept that the abuse happens. And secondly, you have to handle your own anger and recognise that the best solution for the child is to maintain the family but stop the abuse.

There would be some debate about whether, in all circumstances, that is the best solution.

No doubt in many circumstances it's not possible. Of course, most abusers must go to jail for a long time.

But we aren't solving the problem by putting them in jail. When they come out, they usually re-offend. For many abusers, part of their sickness is that they so loathe what they are doing, they can't accept themselves. There's the terrible self-justification, blaming the wife, blaming the child.

Sexual abuse of children is not a single crime, but a range of crimes, and we need to design a range of responses.

When Childline opened the lines and thus opened the floodgates, you were very toughly criticised by professionals in the field who felt that it was worse to do that and then not be able to cope adequately with the complex burdens of response. In a way they were saying you were compounding the children's sense of powerlessness.

I'm happy to tell you that they were completely wrong. The anonymity of Childline is, from the child's point of view, its greatest strength. They ring up to describe pain and distress of all kinds. Whatever it is, we are the only opportunity they have of sharing this pain in the knowledge that nobody is going to arrive with hob-nailed boots on their doorstep.

So you are saying that the professionals didn't grasp how sussed the children were about using the phoneline?

Right. There are still people who say to me, 'How can you possibly believe anonymous children?' But these anonymous children are talking about their own feelings, they are not identifying the abuser. They are not identifying their school. The reason they are ringing us is that they have the possibility of seeking confidential advice. What we then do is try and move the child on.

In an interview with Brian Walden, he put to you that it's about male abuse, and you didn't answer. Do you feel that people would turn off if you said, 'Yep, it's men'?

I think people would turn off the subject. Importantly, I think men would be shocked by having them all tarred with the same brush. You see, what crime is it not true of? Are we going to say burglary is a male problem?

Is there a failure of nerve here?

We need men to take responsibility and if they will not listen they will not take responsibility.

What did you think about the Butler-Sloss report into the Cleveland case?

I think they were quite right not to come to any decision about how many of those children had definitely been abused.

The report was criticised for not saying the parents were all innocent. I hope and pray someone will do a confidential survey of those children when they are 20. I don't know what it would discover but I think it would be deeply, deeply important information.

You are critical of Dr Higgs and Dr Wyatt.

I don't know what motivated them. If it was anger then I think that is a bad motivation. I do know it was concern for the children, unquestionably.

But I remember before we ever started Childline, we opened helplines after a *That's Life* programme, and they were jammed with anonymous children describing sexual abuse and I was horrified. I said, 'Why didn't you make them give their names?' And a social worker said to me, 'Remember, Esther, this is *your* crisis, the child has been living in this situation. If you go in fast now you may make life intolerable for that child.'

Both you and Marietta Higgs have been criticised for doing - albeit differently - the same thing, which is intervening.

Marietta Higgs and I have discussed this and I hope I am not doing her view an injustice. She believes it is utterly wrong to pass the power, the responsibility to the child. Hers is the traditional doctor's view that they must take decisions for the good of the patient.

Why do you think you became a heroine and she became a devil?

I think Marietta suffered from advice which silenced her during the controversy. You do have to explain your actions even if people disagree with you. But I will say that I was warned against crisis intervention in those very early days and I took that lesson aboard.

