

PCC upholds Clare Balding complaint against Sunday Times

The Press Complaints Commission has upheld a complaint from Clare Balding about a television review by AA Gill published in The Sunday Times Culture section on 25 July.

Clare Balding had complained that the article discriminated against her in breach of Clause 12 (Discrimination) of the Editors' Code of Practice when it referred to her as a "dyke on a bike". She said that this was a pejorative reference to her sexuality and irrelevant to the programme. The hurt was compounded by a mock apology by the columnist for previously saying that she looked "like a big lesbian".

The newspaper defended its columnist on freedom of expression grounds, saying that he was well-known for his acerbic and sometimes tasteless sense of humour. It said that the term "dyke" had been reclaimed by various groups as an empowering, not offensive, term. In its view, there was no reason why – in an age where homosexuality carried little social stigma – the reviewer could not discuss the sexuality of a TV presenter who had no problem with being openly gay.

The Commission ruled that the use of the word "dyke" in the article – whatever its intention – was a "pejorative synonym relating to the complainant's sexuality". The context was "not that the reviewer was seeking positively to 'reclaim' the term, but rather to use it to refer to the complainant's sexuality in a demeaning and gratuitous way". As such, it represented a breach of the Code.

Stephen Abell, Director of the PCC, commented, "Freedom of expression is a key part of an open society and something which the Commission has defended robustly in the past. While the commentator is clearly entitled to his opinion about both the programme and the complainant, there are restraints placed upon him by the terms of the Editors' Code. Clause 12 is very clear that newspapers must avoid prejudicial, pejorative or irrelevant reference to an individual's sexual orientation and the reference to Miss Balding plainly breached its terms."

ENDS

Notes to editors

1. The adjudication will be published in The Sunday Times this weekend. To read the adjudication, please [click here](#).
2. For further information, please contact Jonathan Collett on 020 7438 1246 or 07740 896805 or jonathan.collett@pcc.org.uk

17 September 2010