

10th November 2020

Sexism

“O, whistle, an’ I’ll come to you, my lad!
O, whistle, an’ I’ll come to you, my lad!
Tho’ father and mither an a’ should gae mad,
O, whistle, an’ I’ll come to you, my lad!”

Robert Burns, O whistle, an’ I’ll come to you, my lad

When Robert Burns wrote the words above, he’s likely to have based his thought-process on a prevailing idea among men of his day. After all, John Fletcher, a 17th century English dramatist, had already written in *Wit Without Money*, “Whistle and she’ll come to you.” In wooing and courting, whistling (with the expected response) was apparently the thing to do.

Oh dear, no! An expectation of someone coming at your bidding? Wolf-whistles as a woman passes a building-site? Sexism in any context? No way! *Any* right-thinking person should “gae mad” at such behaviour.

However, whistling *is* useful sometimes. When I was a Football Referee, a whistle was essential. The first game I refereed, my supervisor told me I didn’t blow the whistle loudly enough. So I became the loudest whistler in the division. Whistles were used in the early years of police-forces to summon assistance and to indicate to wrong-doers that the custodians of the law were on hand. Whistles are, I believe, used in some dances, music festivals and raves (though, at my age, I don’t have the relevant experience to confirm that ...) So, whistles are useful for important signals or alarms; to draw people’s attention to what’s different; to offer a warning; to signify a danger; to indicate something crucial is going on.

Fanny Burney, a 18th/19th century English novelist dramatist, wrote in *Camilla* in 1796:

A little alarm now and then keeps life from stagnation.

So, let’s be alarmed at sexism! Let’s blow a whistle for the dangers that exist when *anyone* is demeaned. Let our signals show that we are as mad as we can be when damaging behaviour is evident! Let’s agree to be “the loudest whistler in the division” in the face of *any* stagnating conduct.

A prayer for today

God, give me the courage today to blow the whistle on things that do harm. Amen.

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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