

## Radio – Mary John listens in

## BUNKING OFF – BUT WHO'S STUCK IN A BUNKER?

**M**AY saw the United Nations' Special Session on Children taking stock of the progress on the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It was a shame that UK radio gave it so little attention, perhaps reflecting how little progress has been made on children's rights in the popular consciousness.

The Convention (which provides a common legal framework for the care, protection and participation of children) has been ratified by every country in the world except two: Somalia and the US, the latter partly because of concerns from the family lobby about interference in family life. The Special Session is the first global discussion in over a decade devoted solely to children, who now make up 40 per cent of the world's population. The UN was stating that 'by speaking directly to children we can discover what they believe to be the issues affecting their lives'. But radio reporting in this country seemed largely preoccupied with issues such as the responsibilities of UK parents to coerce their children to go to school, and problems of control in the classroom. One could be forgiven for thinking that children were still regarded as 'the new dangerous classes' David Ingleby was characterising in the eighties.

We all heard that Pauline Amos had been sent to prison for 60 days for failing to ensure that her children attended school. This conviction fed a rash of programmes pontificating on whether this was an appropriate action, with *Any Questions?* pundits and *Any Answers?* correspondents expressing strident views about the responsibilities of parenthood. I found it intriguing that when the UN were allegedly 'taking children seriously', so little attention was given to what was so very aversive about school. What were the views of the Amos children and other children who truant, misbehave or are excluded? Keith Mitchell (leader of Oxfordshire County Council) made it quite clear that he felt that a prison sentence was appropriate and that it was the education authority's responsibility to ensure that children get an education. He said 'it is our duty' to do this. What a pity that the BBC did not seize the moment, if only in the interests of balance, to capture the climate of the global stocktaking on the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 12 of the Convention requires States to guarantee the right of children to express a view and have that view taken into account in any matter that concerns them.

To reiterate old resistances and abiding worries about threats to parental control that arise in any talk of children's rights seemed to miss an opportunity to raise consciousness. This could have been a time when children's lives, their culture, concerns and aspirations received long-overdue full attention in a medium uniquely placed to present young voices so that they are heard.

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## Television – Nick Neave looks on

## What's it all about?

**I**N BBC1's *Test the Nation* Anne Robinson, not content with humiliating small groups of people, decided to have a go at the whole country. The idea was that everyone would sit round their computers or interactive remote controls and answer 70 IQ questions in order to gain a detailed and comprehensive measure of national IQ. The fact that the most intelligent people would of course be spending their Saturday evening out having fun and not cooped up in front of the telly didn't seem to occur to the programme planners.

A cliché studio audience of builders, blondes, students, and so on, plus a ragbag of celebs, were roped in to give Anne someone to patronise in person. Question setter Colin Cooper (Queen's University Belfast) and Sylvia Herbert (director of MENSAs) bravely showed up, behaved with considerable professionalism (unlike the presenters), and seemed to be genuinely enjoying themselves.

The questions were split into five categories (language, memory, logic, numerical and spatial reasoning) and were pretty much as expected (e.g. rat is to aardvark as marmalade is to... prostitute/whelk/Jupiter/cremation), and were just as irritating as I remembered them from my 11+ exam. Still, I gamely pressed my buttons along with about 100,000 others with nothing else to do, and the results were fairly unenlightening. Apparently people in Leicester (any coincidence that this is the home of the BPS?), males, left-handers, and West Brom supporters did very well...or perhaps this was just one left-handed West Brom-supporting bloke from the BPS. I'm still unsure about what these scores

mean – didn't someone once say that IQ tests measured the ability to do IQ tests?

As a prelude to *The Experiment*, BBC2 showed a documentary looking back at the infamous Stanford prison experiment of 1971. Reading accounts of this study in the textbooks suddenly seemed rather dull when faced with actual film footage of the former 'peacenik' students turning into swaggering sadists – one guard came to be known as 'John Wayne' from his macho posturing. Zimbardo himself admitted that he had 'lost the plot'; as the experiment continued several 'prisoners' had to be 'released' and one even went on hunger strike. The psychological scars as former 'prisoners' were interviewed remained apparent for all to see.

After this chilling reminder I tuned in to *The Experiment* with interest. Nine prisoners and five guards were put through their paces in a high-tech 'prison' overseen by psychologists Steven Reicher (St Andrews University) and Alex Haslam (Exeter University). All participants seemed fully aware that their every move was to be scrutinised on national telly; the 'prisoners' acted up the part of bolshie inmates and the 'guards' obviously didn't want to come across as sadistic martinets, so the prisoners ruled the roost. While this may have made decent viewing for some I remain to be convinced that psychological understanding of group dynamics has been advanced significantly.

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