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Has BT got it right by plumping for plummy Sir Christopher?

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Observer

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The board of BT have obviously been impressed by the performance of the BBC during the five-year chairmanship of Sir Christopher Bland but, even so, I wonder if they have picked the wrong man to restore confidence in their troubled company.

Bland, after all, has been very much a part-time chairman, putting in only two days a week at Broadcasting House. The man responsible for the BBC's performance during that period is his friend and colleague John (now Lord) Birt, who introduced a whole new system of management for the BBC, not to mention an internal market system and other exciting novelties.

Lord Birt ought rightfully to be the man appointed to take over BT. He is said to be a close friend of the Prime Minister who awarded him his recent peerage and until only the other day employed him to advise on what to do about rising crime. Unlike Sir Christopher, he is not doing much these days and his appointment would not have given rise to any accusations of conflict of interest.

Sir Christopher's position on the other hand is more complicated. Not only did he support Lord Birt at a time when he was subject to almost universal contempt and derision inside and outside the BBC, he also appointed his successor, Mr Greg Dyke, a man who is now busily dismantling the whole Birt management structure and denouncing all the perks that went with it (of which both Birt and Lady Birt had their share).

In overlooking the claims of Lord Birt, the BT board may have been impressed by the apparent ability of Sir

Christopher Bland to be flexible and move with the times, to see good in the Birt and also the Dyke approach. It is only unfortunate that, as the share price revealed, City traders were less impressed, possibly even concluding that Bland was a plummy-voiced prat unable to distinguish one part of his anatomy from another.

Number crunch

and I take no pleasure from the chaos and confusion which will result today from the change in all the mobile phone numbers.

The change comes at a bad time for the industry when workers are being laid off and share prices are tumbling.

Various explanations are put forward for the collapse in confidence. The most frequently expressed is that almost everyone who wants a mobile has now got one. The market is saturated, in other words.

Another more interesting suggestion that has been made is that a very large number of people have bought or have been given mobiles but never actually use them. This would suggest that the mobile, in many cases, is either a Christmas present when you can't think of anything better or just a status symbol or fashion accessory which serves no useful purpose.

The industry, I predict, will now do two things to get itself out of the hole. It will make the phones with built-in obsolescence so that they have to be replaced after a suitably short interval.

And they will hire an advertising agency at great expense to persuade people to make calls on their mobiles that they don't really need to make. This is what BT has been doing for some years, though it doesn't seem to have done them much good. Whether the skills of Sir Christopher Bland will make any difference to the situation I very much doubt (see above).

Rude health

Interviewed by readers of the Independent last week, the novelist Martin Amis said he regretted the way he was so rude to so many people in his youth. He had now seen the error of his ways. 'Insulting people in your middle age,' he said, 'is undignified and looks more and more demented as you head towards the twilight.'

Perhaps, as so often, he had his late father in mind. Because it is true that Kingsley became more obnoxious as he got older. But that, I would maintain, had nothing to do with age and a lot to do with drink, which, taken in excess, tends to make people irritable and angry for no very good reason.

As one who would be considered undignified by the middle-aged Martin, I take issue with his views. It is perfectly true that as one progresses towards the twilight (to use his moving phrase), there is a regrettable tendency to mellow and to try to see good points in those one instinctively find so objectionable.

Such tendencies, I would strongly maintain, should be resisted. Progressing towards the twilight one has, I believe, a more vivid sense of the absurdities and the pomposities not only of politicians but all public figures, including some famous novelists.

The frustration comes from the almost universal indifference which greets one's sallies. Only very occasionally, as one rattles the bars of the various cages in the zoo, there is an angry growl. Last week, for example, the Daily Mirror editor Piers Morgan named me as one of the top names on his personal hate list. At such moments it all suddenly seems worthwhile.



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