

The Spectator – 17 October 2023

In defence of Steve Bell

Our great tradition of British satire is at stake

By Fraser Nelson, editor



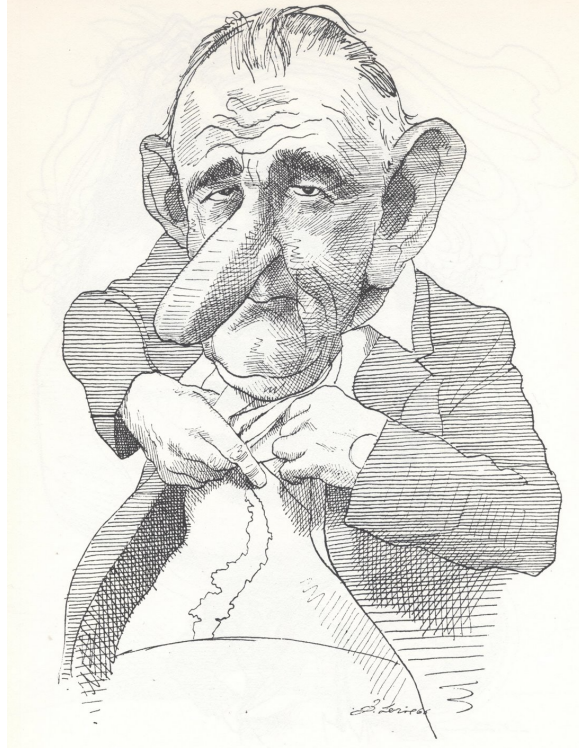
One of Britain's best-known cartoonists, Steve Bell, says he has been 'effectively sacked' by the *Guardian* after drawing Benjamin Netanyahu. It wasn't published, but he released it on Twitter (above). It depicts Netanyahu operating on his own stomach, showing a cut in the outline of the Gaza Strip. Bell then used Twitter to say what happened next:

"I filed this cartoon around 11 a.m., possibly my earliest ever. Four hours later, on a train to Liverpool I received an ominous phone call from the desk with the strangely cryptic message 'pound of flesh...' I'm sorry, I don't understand, I said and received this even more mysterious reply: 'Jewish bloke; pound of flesh; anti-Semitic trope'. Clearly it was self-evident, anybody could see it..."

He says he has now been dropped. 'It is getting pretty nigh impossible to draw this subject for the *Guardian* now without being accused of deploying antisemitic tropes,' he said. This is part of a wider trend.

Bell's intended reference was not Shylock's pound of flesh but Lyndon B. Johnson and Vietnam. You can read the words 'After David Levine' on Bell's cartoon, a reference to the cartoonist whose work was synonymous with the *New York Review of Books*. In 1966, LBJ posed for the cameras, revealing a foot-long

scar from gall bladder surgery. Levine satirised this, depicting the mark with a Vietnam-shaped scar, a defining physical mark engrained on the man. It was one of his most famous cartoons:



It seems a fair analogy: Netanyahu will be defined by what happens next in Gaza just as LBJ was by Vietnam. A bit of an oblique reference? Perhaps. But a good many *Guardian* readers, certainly of their print edition, would have got it. Could idiots on Twitter have taken the Bell cartoon and said ‘A-ha, Shylock, pound of flesh, anti-Semitic trope!’ Probably. So what to do? Publish and dismiss them as idiots? Or spike the cartoon?

At stake here is the British tradition of satire. Cartoonists exaggerate features and shock: ever since Gillray, we have been depicting and mocking world affairs through these cartoons. But the new enemy of this trend is Twitter, where non-readers of a publication take offence at a cartoon they don’t like. Outrage piles upon outrage, a Twitterstorm is started, *Der Sturmer* is mentioned and cartoonists like Martin Rowson end up getting the flak or the sack. I wrote about him [here](#) and it seems Bell has been next in line for the chop.

Bell’s politics are different to mine, his cartoons are a bit dark for my taste and often take aim at people I like. On right-wing Twitter, there is rejoicing at his sacking: a leftie bites the dust! Behold, the left’s humourlessness is now devouring its cartoonists! But there is nothing to savour here. A long and distinguished career has ended in this way because a flagship newspaper was unable to defend his style in the new age of digital censorship. It’s a depressing sign of our times.

The *Guardian*, I suspect, has been paranoid ever since the Martin Rowson debacle, where he too was accused of anti-Semitic gags. It’s hard to avoid such risks: art is always open to interpretation. Any cartoon

looking at Israel could be interpreted by the outrage squad as anti-Semitic, rather than simply satire aimed at Netanyahu.

I do have sympathy with the *Guardian*, too: these are difficult waters to navigate. Cartoonists are artists. It should fall to the editorial desk to make judgements about whether something crosses the line. To stop jokes, rhetorical flourishes, or artistic points would drain a publication of its life. But to publish everything without thinking could invite huge trouble for the artist, let alone the title. Let's remember Mark Knight, an Australian cartoonist, who had to go into hiding after Twitter decided his Serena Williams cartoon was racist. My hunch is that the *Guardian*, now overwhelmingly a digital publication, has had to make more concessions to the digital outrage mob. Hence the departure of the *Guardian's* against-the-grain big names: Suzanne Moore, Hadley Freeman and, now, Steve Bell.

There will have been other factors. Bell, 72, had a modus operandi that is unusual by today's standards. He was staff (most cartoonists are freelance) so would have been expensive. He seldom submits ideas ('roughs') before filing and his sometimes grotesque style is open to misinterpretation – including from editors who hadn't discussed the idea with him beforehand and think 'OMG! Shylock!!' rather than 'Ahh – LBJ'. Perhaps with the Israeli war, they just pressed the panic button. Perhaps they were annoyed at his taking to Twitter to vent. But losing him over this cartoon was a mistake and sets a dangerously low bar for what counts as unacceptable satire. It will embolden trolls who will now come after other cartoonists.

So Bell's enforced retirement can be seen as part of a bigger trend, that of the parameters for humour and satire being tightened. If they become so narrow as to make both impossible, then our national debate and our culture will be the poorer for it.

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