

Speech Delivered at UK Column, Bristol, October 2024

Thank you. It's really good to be here and I'm very grateful to UK Column for inviting me. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank them for supporting me, and my work, throughout the last four years.

In my old life, as precocious ambassador for the mainstream, I spent time in the offices of the BBC, ITV, The Guardian, The Sunday Times and The Telegraph. More recently, as hardened renegade cartoonist, I spent time in the UK Column studio in Plymouth. The most striking difference, of course, is that none of those other media outlets have pictures of Michelle Obama's penis on their walls. But another distinction is that the small, quiet headquarters of UK Column is a place where real journalism happens.

It's ironic that despite working in newspapers my whole adult life. I didn't understand what real journalism was. In as much as early on, I understood journalism to be a mechanism by which the truth is filtered to the public. Many truths never reach the public at all. I accepted this. I'd expected it. I liked being an insider. The truths I saw being withheld or drip-fed were small details. Gossip. Plans for the budget. When a snap election would be called. Things learned over long lunches or hushed phone calls. But suddenly, the truths being played with were fundamental moral truths, truths that were supposed to underpin everything about our society and way of life. And their deliberate obfuscation was going to cause unimaginable suffering and death.

That didn't seem as fun. To me. Perhaps that's what distinguishes the real insider. Someone who revels in being privy to more and more gossip. The intrigue, the chicanery. Like so much dinner party chat. As if the wider consequences can always be kept at a safe distance.

It was when I understood I wasn't a real insider, that I became a real satirist.

I was never very interested in politics or journalism as a child. We weren't a political family. While there were hundreds of books in the house, there was rarely a newspaper.

I loved to draw. From the moment I could hold a pencil I drew. I drew what I saw. And I always saw the world, and the people in it, in this glorious way, that we know as the cartoon.

When I discovered you could make a career of cartooning, I knew that's what I had to do. That the cartoonist exists in the pages of newspapers was fine with me. It meant a bigger audience for my jokes. I started at The Telegraph at 25. What a jammy sod. I'd made it. I guess my dream was to die at that desk.

It didn't work out like that.

It worked out better.

I'm here today to share my book. An illustrated record of the strange times we've been living in. And my thought process in this period.

The book is dedicated to my parents. My first victims. They can't take credit (or blame) for teaching me *how* to draw – most of that goes to Rolf Harris – but they can take credit for my understanding of what to do with this strange gift. The pictures I've created over the past four years all illustrate simple values. My parents take credit for those. And for giving me the courage to defend my principles.

People have been asking me to do a book since 2020. I was reticent. I didn't want to bring it out too early. What man does? And besides, everyone already has a Giles annual in their loo. Not that I mind where you choose to keep this book – it's up to you. The paper is conveniently strong and smooth. But I did want to make something special, that reflected how much some of these images mean, the significance of this period, and my appreciation for everyone who's helped to share my cartoons around the world. I hope it was worth waiting for.

Countless subsidiary industries have sprung up around publishing. This is all well and good until it isn't. Some of these industries are creative. Others are entirely parasitic. Our current cancel culture is probably an inevitable effect of PR. If you can generate publicity and guide sales with controversy, something of nothing, then in time this will ripple out across the board. The "controversies" can be generated from less and less. And will impact an agent, a publishing house, a distribution deal. Everything becomes another layer of bureaucracy, of sensitivities, of anticipation of potential sensitivities; all these mechanisms of censorship form the "household names" that then form the opinions of the household.

I didn't want to censor my images. My audience has stayed with me because I don't compromise. My cartoons resurface because truths remain the same. I didn't create this book because I want to garner a rave review in *The Guardian*, or to find a new audience next to David Walliams in Waterstones – but to create something for the people that have supported me. My supporters like the provocative, "dangerous" images (*usually*), they do not want a catalogue where an editor has said their favourite images can't be included. And I don't either.

I didn't always understand the machinations of journalism, and it turned out I knew even less about publishing a book. There are practical issues in putting a book together; layout, typesetting, page numbering, what paper to choose, and all the other technical details I had absolutely no clue about. I had help from friends that agreed with me, and from friends that didn't. I am grateful for this common respect for the creative space. Our freedom of expression, conscience, and association, relies on people that do not necessarily agree, recognising sincerity of intention.

The more reasons we are given not to work together, the easier we are to divide. In some ways taking the opposite path to the mainstream is simpler, because it is clearer. As *UK Column* has, as I have. But it is also important to remember that we are a society. The only people that benefit from our divisions is an elite group of the exclusively compromised.

Their agenda can only be enforced on us by our neighbours. Our neighbours might not (yet) see our fight as theirs, but by keeping our lines of communication open, perhaps we can dissuade them from making our fight harder. At my wonderful printers, Henry Ling's, I found, on the floor, that ordinary people, who know something is up, even if they're not sure exactly what, enjoyed this chronicle. We can forget, because of the voices that are amplified, that there are many silent observers, who we can reach out to in friendship.

Personally, it's been wonderful for me to see my pictures in a book. I create my work in a traditional way. I draw and ink and paint my cartoons on watercolour paper. And I love the process of making a physical object. But in order to share them with the world I scan them on my computer and post them online. Most people only know the digital version of my work, and have only ever viewed it on a backlit screen, often surrounded by all the other digital content we choose to bombard ourselves with every day. It's a different experience seeing them printed. And even if they're not true to size, my originals are sometimes bigger sometimes smaller, this is much closer than their digital reproduction. I immediately understood on seeing the first proofs come off the press that we engage with images in a different way when we are holding them in our hands, printed on paper. Even I noticed things in my pictures I had forgotten or hadn't spotted before. Including some mistakes. I think there is great value in producing something by hand, in the time it takes, and the thought it demands, which we forget in our hurry to "get with the programme". We instinctively appreciate an object created with care and attention. We are at risk of losing this.

The subtle but inescapable imperfections between brain and brush are part of what makes something beautiful, that gives it soul, that makes it human.

This is why I hate AI. It's not just that artificial intelligence sells itself on the premise that hands are obsolete, it's that it can't do hands, or faces, or feelings. Artificial intelligence is artificial. True intelligence is to understand how to look at something and see beyond the superficial. A likeness, a character, a mood, those intangible qualities that we know as our consciousness. AI is not able to see the world as we see it, but our enthusiasm for the technology might be able to condition us to respond to the world in this limited way. It's not about how AI might improve but how quickly we can fall. I look at the content people make and share with these programmes, and I think we are falling faster than we realise.

I spend hours labouring over and worrying about a picture. I think everything through. It's a conversation I'm having with the viewer, who will also play their part.

The most difficult decision for any artist is deciding when you've finished.

All this disappears with digital content creation. At least a meme maker might spend a moment considering the wording of their speech bubble. AI Art only requires a request: Keir Starmer riots. Kamala Harris communism. Bob Moran's George Orwell cartoon. This level of mindlessness is degrading. It's beyond degenerate. It is the nadir. I understand that its popularity might be another illusion generated by an algorithm. But algorithms do guide taste, they do form opinion. I believe that if we don't make a conscious effort to resist this shit its popularity could become real. And we will surrender the greatest gift we have; creativity. This gift doesn't only belong to

those that can make things of beauty, it belongs to those who appreciate beauty, and grow from it.

But back to my book. I have obviously benefitted hugely from the internet. But as someone who knows that an audience can be removed from them, I wanted to be able to share a physical copy of my work. A book can't be deleted at the click of a button. It has to be burned.

Boris Johnson's book came out last week.

Coincidentally, it's also exactly three years since I was sacked by The Telegraph. My audience, the prestige of a brand, financial security, political affiliation. Gone. It was supposed to be the end of my career. All I had was my skills, my messages, and faith that that would be enough. It was more than enough. It's true that if I want to dress up in a suit and drink champagne with the neat and the elite, I now have to write the invitations myself. But when I was damned to the periphery, I discovered that that is where satire flourishes. It is from the outside that you are able, *that you allow* yourself, to consider the bigger picture. It is from the outside that I came into my own. Because it is only with independence that you can attack any angle without fear or favour. My thoughts develop, my tone shifts, the topics I cover change, but my principles remain the same. This is what has made the last four years special to me. It's what presenting my pictures together shows.

Grounded by this consistency it's always interesting to me when advocates or detractors really hate an image or see it as out of character. I've heard I don't understand the meaning of my own work. I wonder if this is part of a general delusion, that allows people to pretend something can be meticulously delivered entirely by accident in a fit of incompetence.

I've heard I've got it wrong. I think this is because the relentless drive to uniformity of opinion has left some people unable to carry an idea without the fiction of total concurrence, and they imagine that means I can't carry an idea either.

I've heard my work is dangerous. And I know for certain, this means it's been widely shared. And they don't like that.

There is definitely a push to stop people expressing themselves artistically today. This hydra has many heads; social, legal, basic physical threats. But the more insidious attack on creativity is the (sometimes innocent) suggestion that you can be frightened away from drawing one thing, but should still be brave enough to draw something else. It doesn't work like that. All these ideas are from the same thought process.

I now see everything as part of the same story. But I understand some people haven't noticed anything at all. And those that have noticed something aren't necessarily ready for Big Mike. That's OK. This didn't begin for me with a grand conspiracy. It didn't begin with an intricate knowledge of Agenda 2030 or the administrative intrigues of the World Economic Forum. I came to my position not from the things I couldn't grasp, but from the simplest things I could: our duty to our children, defence of private life, rejection of a state of fear.

We are being persuaded to see ourselves, paradoxically, as insignificant, dangerous and expendable. Our memory and our conscience are assailed at every turn. We are told discernment is ignorance, duty is recklessness, love is selfishness. We are told not to stand firm, but to give way, for a moment, and another moment, while our fear of inescapable physical death condemns us to a worse fate, where we are outwardly alive, but inwardly dead.

We should feel more confident about sticking to small answers. Because they are the corner stone. We are being presented with Stories in a way that suggests there *is* a Story that can justify abandoning our moral foundations. This is the wrong way up. It is an inversion. Our moral foundations must survive any Story. If we can persist in showing things the right way up: *I will not leave my grandmother to die alone*. It is harder to pervert these basics into: *Being with my grandmother as she dies will kill her*.

We are continually presented with the “problem” and the “solution” as if they are the same thing. Rejecting an appalling “solution” does not mean you deny that there is a “problem”. It is that the proposed solution cannot be justified.

There are certain things that all these supranationally coordinated solutions have in common. Vast amounts of money. Collaboration, at a global level, between corporations and governments, and uniformity in mainstream media output. But most significantly all these problems require us to delegate. We are being asked to outsource our skills, our production of food, the care of our family members, the education of our children, the condition of our environment, the drift of our conversations, how we share our information, our thoughts themselves, until we cannot trust what we can see in front of us.

Of course, for many of us here, we don’t accept the “problems” either. It’s true that the response to the pandemic was always wrong. But it is also true that most of us don’t believe in the pandemic. In much the same way, we may reject that the solution to climate change is the carbon collector, in favour of the tree. But we also challenge the climate “problem”. This is more frightening.

We are in a position, whereby for many different reasons, we can see a story other people can’t see. It’s demoralising because this has clearly happened before and probably forms much of what we understand as history. The official stories self-perpetuate. But there is a reason that people come back to eternal truths and that is that they are truths and they are eternal.

I neither want nor expect *every* person that sees my book to enjoy *every* cartoon. That would be really boring. I will be happy if my book starts some memorable conversations. Or at least can be wielded as an excuse for many ruined Christmas dinners.

I hope that a lot of people will have this book in their houses (all year round), or at least have an opportunity to see it and flick through it at some point, because this is a book full of ideas that were systematically and relentlessly labelled as dangerous, controversial, backward. They are ideas that are under attack. But they aren’t just my

ideas, they are noble ideas, and they're shared by millions of people around the world, very strongly. Ideas that people remembered, when they were ordered to forget.

But it is also a record of all our efforts in this period. When people argue "no one could have known" it is simply not true. People did know. And they did speak out. And they kept on speaking out even when they were demonised, and vilified. I am grateful to all those people. I hope our number grows. I want future generations to know that we pushed back against the official narrative, so that when this happens again, they too feel able to stand firm.

Bob
Moran