



Richard Carleton

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APOLOGIES DON'T COME EASILY TO Richard Carleton, nor do they to *60 Minutes*, the program which gives him his licence to roam the world like a maverick lawman.

Late last year, however, the unthinkable occurred when Carleton acknowledged solemnly to the nation that in the wake of the John Newman murder and the subsequent media coverage about crime and drugs in the Cabramatta district, he had impugned the reputation of Dr Naga Siva, a general practitioner in the area. (Carleton had falsely implied that Siva was a 'known easy touch' for drug addicts.) It was the first time in the 15-year history of *60 Minutes* that such an abject apology had been aired on the program and it was one of the few times—if not the only time—in Richard Carleton's controversial career that he had publicly shown contrition. The apology was part of a settlement between Dr Siva and *60 Minutes*, and Carleton volunteered to read it out. For a television program so unrepentant about pot-stirring and its unquenchable drive for ratings, this was truly an act of atonement. But was it enough, and could it ever be?

Siva declined to talk to me, but his receptionist says: 'They just came and destroyed a man, I don't think he will ever get over it.'

The Siva episode crystallised some of the more appalling features of commercial TV current affairs (from which newspapers and magazines are not immune): its trivialisation of significant issues; its pandering to xenophobia and racism and its capacity to intrude on and sometimes damage the lives of innocent people. The episode also focused again on just how corrupting a program such as *60 Minutes* can be on a man once hailed as the best political interviewer in Australia.

The Whites of their Eyes

For the better part of 20 years working on ABC-TV's *This Day Tonight*, *Nationwide*, *The National* and the *Carleton-Walsh Report*, Richard Carleton was TV's Mr Rude, the most impudent but supremely effective braggart that had ever squared off against politicians. He was the gadfly that bit the hides of our prime ministers, the man with the unctuous smile and the killer one-liners who could roil and intimidate anyone just by leaning forward in his chair. According to Ian Carroll, Carleton's executive producer at *Nationwide* and *The National*, and now executive producer of ABC's *Four Corners* program, Carleton was 'one of the best down-the-barrel reporters in the world', the like of which he has not seen before or since. 'What Richard was great at was telling the story of politics, intrigue and numbers,' Carroll says. 'He described the rough-and-tumble in a way that no-one has matched.'

Carleton's famous 'blood on the hands' question to Bob Hawke after Hawke had rolled Bill Hayden for the leadership of the Labor Party in 1983 still ranks as one of the boldest political questions in recent history. His showdowns with Billy McMahon and Malcolm Fraser were scintillating, as was the time John Howard, when Treasurer, demanded a right of reply on *The National* after a damaging report had gone to air. 'You've got something to say, what is it?' Carleton demanded as soon as the interview began. It was devastating television, all the more so because it revealed the courage of someone who was prepared to savage politicians publicly, knowing full-well he would have to deal with them in the future.

The courage is not so evident today. While he can do powerful stories on some of the world's most venal and corrupt leaders—Zaire's President Mobutu, Romania's Nicolai Ceausescu, the Ivory Coast's President Boigny—he can also host a studio debate where gays are pitted against homophobes, racists are thrown in against Asians, blacks set up against each other, and simply walk away from the whole sordid spectacle and proclaim it good television.

Challenge him on the proposition that his studio debate on Cabramatta following the death of NSW Labor MP John Newman was nothing but an 'Asian-bashing rating exercise', as described by Ted Grace, the Federal MP, and Carleton replies: 'Look, there's a lot of racial hatred in Australia. I think it is better out in the street than under the covers. People are out there talking about it—they don't like Vietnamese, well let 'em say it.' He also denies that any racists were sprinkled throughout the otherwise moderate audience for him to provoke. 'Well that's just not true,' he says. 'It's just not fact,'—even though more than one former *60 Minutes* producer says it is the standard technique for creating a desired fracas. 'Divide the nation; multiply the ratings', is how one sums up the prevailing

Richard Carleton

60 Minutes credo; or as American author Janet Malcolm wrote: 'The narratives of journalism, like those of mythology and folklore, derive their power from their firm, undeviating sympathies and antipathies. Cinderella must remain good and the stepsisters bad.'

RICHARD CARLETON IS NOT AN easy man to interview. Ask him a question that he doesn't like and his voice becomes a musical instrument of self-righteous indignation, varying in tones of huffiness the more you challenge him. Remind him of things he's said or done since his move to the Nine Network and he'll either defend them with a breathtaking rigidity; wager bets with you that he never said it like that or wave it away with a sulky ill-humour.

Suggest that Paul Keating might have been right when he accused him five years ago on *60 Minutes* of having given up an important place in Australian society on the ABC to become a 'pop star with a big cheque' and Carleton responds initially with a huge dollop of sarcasm and then more pique. 'Keating? This is the fellow who was once the world's greatest Treasurer, who gave us 10 to 12 per cent unemployment? ... Now what is it that is expected of me? That I would have stayed in Canberra infinitum? I've got my life to live and I have a broader interest in my 51 years than simply Canberra. I mean Canberra was simply a stage in my life. I'm remembered widely for it but there was no way in the world that I was ever going to become for all of my years an Alan Reid figure and know where every body is buried in Canberra.' (Alan Reid was Australia's foremost political journalist and author from the late 1930s to the 1980s. He died in 1987, the same year that Carleton signed a contract with *60 Minutes* for a reported fee of around \$250,000 a year. It is now thought to be more than \$300,000.)

More's the pity. Carleton is, of course, perfectly entitled to have a life outside the ABC and be paid handsomely for it, just as each of us is entitled to turn *60 Minutes* on or off. But there is no escaping the conclusion, especially after the Cabramatta fiasco, that in having joined Nine's flagship current affairs program he has sometimes sunk below the Plimsoll line in the name of a story. And that begs the question that in an age when the power of the media is greater than ever before, who keeps a check on them (us) to see that they (we) haven't lost their (our) ethical moorings? Who dares take on the new philosopher/kings?

Stuart Littlemore does on ABC-TV's *Media Watch* but when I called to ask him what he thought about Carleton's brand of journalism he was less than helpful. He said he deplored these kind of profiles. He then accused

The Whites of their Eyes

me of being a 'prick' who goes sneaking around in the dark looking for dirt to dump on people.

IF RICHARD CARLETON WERE PREPARING a typical *60 Minutes* profile on himself, what sort of person would emerge? And would Carleton want to watch it? Probably not, because for an intelligent individual such as Carleton the portrait would either be so superficial that he wouldn't give it the dignity of his time or it would be so damaging that he might not recognise himself.

We might learn from such a profile that Carleton is regarded by some as the most conceited reporter in the *60 Minutes* stable; that his attitude to those around him is imperious and arrogant and that he believes in a kind of *Upstairs Downstairs* world where people are divided into two camps—those born to serve and those born to be served. (No prizes for guessing which camp he occupies.) We would learn that on location he often refuses to talk to people before he interviews them. That's the producer's job. We would discover he refuses to travel business class with the rest of his crew, insisting instead on flying first class; and that wherever he is going—be it Bosnia, Beirut or Brisbane—he likes to make sure the hotel concierge has organised his daily round of tennis with a local pro.

When not covering a war, Carleton may be seen interviewing superstars such as Billy Joel and Michelle Pfeiffer, but if it were Carleton doing the story on himself he might say something like: 'Isn't it ironical that a man reporting for one of the most popular programs on TV knows absolutely nothing about popular culture; that before his interview with Billy Joel he couldn't name one song the superstar had written, nor could he recollect having seen one film starring Michelle Pfeiffer.'

Then the camera might cut to Carleton challenging the person—in this case himself—as to whether he got his producers to write his scripts for him. After an excruciatingly long pause and a circuitous explanation he'd eventually admit (as he does): 'Yes the producers write the scripts word for word and that's the way it has been from the very first story I did in Seville in Spain with Gareth Harvey [a *60 Minutes* producer] on a chess tournament up there.'

'At the end of this film we were in this wonderful hotel . . . this magnificent suite and [I] sat down to write the script and it was just bloody hell. It was hell from the first minute till the fifth minute. At the fifth minute I said, "It's yours, you give us a yell when it's done and we'll talk about it." And it's been that way ever since.' (Carleton is the only *60 Minutes* reporter for whom it's consistently done.)

Richard Carleton

We would then see one of his former colleagues trotted out with his face darkened to protect his identity who would describe Carleton as a man who uses *60 Minutes* as a vehicle to see the world. 'There is a part of him that doesn't really have any values,' the man would say, 'but the reason he is still there is because he has an extraordinary on-camera personality. He is like an idiot-savant.'

The alternative picture we would get—but not in the same segment as it might confuse viewers—is of a devoted family man who also happens to be one of TV's most accomplished storytellers. Far from being conceited, we would learn of a shy, intensely private man, curious and highly knowledgeable about the world and honest in his dealings with it. We would discover some of his idiosyncrasies, such as building a spiral staircase for his dog, or his predilection for holidaying with his family in warzones, and we might conclude that he was a character in his own journalistic novel.

We would then go back into his past to discover that he was born in the genteel southern highlands of Bowral and schooled at Sydney Grammar. His mother was Daisy Maude Murphy, who bore four children, and his father was George Carleton, a civil engineer who was number two to John Bradfield, chief designing engineer of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

Carleton's personality would then come to life with friends such as Richard Walsh, managing director and publisher of Australian Consolidated Press, and journalist Peter Luck, lauding him for his wit, intelligence, loyalty to friends, obsession for detail and his rabid opposition to anything faintly New Age. We would then see some of his magic tricks—bending forks, disappearing hankies, imaginary cards—and how this love of magic dovetails with his membership of the Australian Skeptics because it shows how easily people are fooled.

JAMES SCOTT BELIEVES RICHARD CARLETON should be president of the Skeptics. Nearly three years ago Carleton reported on the case of this young Brisbane man who had survived 43 days trapped in the Himalayas wearing only light clothes and sandals, on a diet of snow, moss and two chocolate bars. From day one Carleton didn't believe the story.

'There is no doubt in my mind that Richard Carleton never believed that James Scott got lost or was ill and I think it was a despicable state of mind to enter an interview with,' says Harry M. Miller, who acted for Scott. 'Somebody should have really pulled him into line.'

The Whites of their Eyes

Today Carleton calls James Scott a liar. Scott, in turn, calls Carleton an even bigger liar. It all revolves around those infamous chocolate bars. Carleton says his suspicions were aroused during his interview with Scott when he asked him what brand of chocolate bar he had eaten and Scott said he couldn't remember. (Carleton knew already that it was a Cadbury's brand made in India.) He says he then asked him about 10 minutes later the same question and Scott said 'there was no chocolate bar' or words to that effect. It was on the basis of this inconsistency that Carleton branded him a liar. 'If he is going to lie about that,' he says, 'I mean, was it 45 days or 35 days he spent [on the mountain]? Or could it have been 30 days?'

Scott denies Carleton's version of events, claiming that he initially said—half-jokingly—he couldn't remember what chocolate bar it was but then corrected himself, saying he didn't want to answer the question. In fact, he was under instructions from Miller not to discuss the brand of chocolate or his brand of footwear. Miller apparently had merchandising in mind. (A viewing of the unedited interview clearly shows that Scott's version of events is correct.)

When the interview resumed it was with what James and his sister Joanne insist now was a verbal promise off-camera from Carleton that no further questions be asked about the chocolate bars. This version of events is denied. The interview turned nasty, as Carleton began tearing into Scott about his foolhardiness in trekking in snow country in sandals. And then, after a couple of light inquiries about Scott's marriage plans, six more questions about the chocolate bar. Scott erupted and the interview came to a screaming halt.

The six questions about the chocolate bar came, according to Scott, after he had informed Carleton that he was tired and wanted to end the interview. He'd been let out of hospital under instructions from his doctors that he avoid stress. The blow-up with Carleton caused his pulse rate to leap from a norm of 70 to 200. One and a half hours later it was still 140. Unbelievably, given the incendiary exchange, Carleton wanted to film him having tests in the hospital. (The request was refused.)

Carleton argued later that because Scott had been proven a liar over the chocolate bars he should not be presented as a hero when the program aired. His view was opposed by others at *60 Minutes* and the final result was a reasonably sympathetic story.

Working on the principle that good money was being paid for the story, Carleton felt he was entitled to ask whatever questions he liked, however he liked. A number of his colleagues disagreed. 'I thought his treatment of Scott was inexcusable,' says one former *60 Minutes* producer who declined to be named. 'It was not as if he was a mass murderer. He was

Richard Carleton

a kid who had been through an ordeal . . . It was like using a cannon to shoot a fly.'

James Scott had an extraordinary story of survival to tell which he and his family felt was never explored properly because of Carleton's attitude. If Scott's experience was an example of the kind of body control that Tibetan yogis are apparently capable of, it was far more than Carleton was ever prepared to contemplate. As Carleton might say, 'It ain't fucking rational.'

WHEN CARLETON WENT TO ERITREA in 1990 with the late Fred Hollows, the two men had blazing rows. Carleton saw Hollows's commitment to the Eritrean people as a naïve and hopeless aspiration. Didn't he know that the Eritrean People's Liberation Front was receiving money from the Arab world and that this was part of a larger geopolitical struggle? Hollows didn't care about that. His mission was simple—he was there to give sight to the blind and to train Eritrean medics to continue his work. 'Fred's complaint was that Richard didn't believe in anything,' says Mike Lynskey, head of the Hollows Foundation and a friend of both men.

To Carleton's credit, his story never reflected the tension between the two men. Rather, it was a compelling and joyous tribute to a man that in Carleton's less bull-headed moments he acknowledged for his greatness. 'He [Hollows] left behind so much that the likes of me or you added together and multiplied by 100 won't match,' Carleton says.

Mike Lynskey believes it was typical of Carleton that he should have annoyed a man he so admired. 'He envies people who are joiners,' Lynskey says, 'because he is constantly on the outside and it causes him to take stands and to be more of a loner than he wants to be. He will admire people but say things and do things that will absolutely piss them off.'

Carleton is not alone. The journalistic profession demands its practitioners observe rather than participate in events. What becomes crucial, therefore, is motive. The motive for telling a story one way, as opposed to another.

A few years ago members of Sydney's Assyrian community were involved in a wild brawl in the NSW Supreme Court building. The community had fractured over an internal church dispute involving their bishop. The court ruled in favour of the bishop and those opposed to the bishop found the ruling difficult to accept.

It was perfect fodder for *60 Minutes*: set up a studio forum with 200 of the bishop's opponents; erect a large screen where the courthouse violence

The Whites of their Eyes

could be replayed; pre-record the bishop's comments (the bishop declined to go into the studio) and bring in the master manipulator.

'Good evening to you, ladies and gentlemen, my name is Richard Carleton. Some of you were in the crowd when punches were thrown and the Middle East cauldron spilt over on to the streets of Sydney. Let's have a look at what you did.' Scenes of violence then filled the screen. A man's face was snap-frozen. Belligerently, Carleton turned on the man and with an accusing finger said: 'That sir is you. Are you proud of your behaviour?'

Assyrian man: 'They were after me. They said, "We are going to kill you."' Carleton then pointed to another man. 'You were there too, weren't you?' And on it went with Carleton hectoring his audience. 'Can you understand,' he said, 'that some Australians, possibly many Australians, couldn't give a damn about the arguments within your church that go back thousands of years . . . and they don't want them on the streets of Australia.'

Second Assyrian man: 'Well, you shouldn't open the doors in the first place.' Carleton: 'Well then, should the mistake be corrected?' It was as close as Carleton dared come to calling for their deportation. (Never mind that some of them were Australian citizens.)

And then it was over—12 minutes of prime-time baiting of a community that had been law-abiding and peaceful prior to and subsequent to that event. There was not one millisecond devoted to explaining the intricacies of the dispute and, according to a leading member of the Assyrian community who declined to be named, the community was more divided after the program than before. All heat no light.

Peter Manning, then executive producer of *Four Corners* and now head of the ABC's Radio National, was so appalled by the report that at the Logie awards later that year he said to Carleton, who he has known for years, 'What the hell are you doing shit like that for? It's awful to see.' Carleton's response lasted about 10 minutes and included the declaration, 'Well at least I get to travel the world first class and stay in five-star hotels.'

Carleton denies it. 'I wouldn't have said that at all,' he retorts. 'I mean I just wouldn't. I just don't say things like that.'

Ask Carleton what he cares about and he responds: 'All the things I don't know about. I'm very interested in Eastern Europe, the historic problems there. I've tried my hardest to understand the Balkans. I've read as much as I possibly can.'

Press him on what moves him emotionally and he replies haughtily: 'Well, I don't know that my emotions are on display or are part of the public property.' (Remember this is the grand inquisitor, the Torquemada

Richard Carleton

of Australian journalism, speaking.) Then he says: 'The more experience I've got, the more injustices probably upset me, but the harder it becomes to make a judgment about which side is the more guilty.'

Fair enough, except you still get no trace of what might fire Carleton's sense of injustice or humanity. Geraldine Doogue, presenter of Radio National's *Life Matters* program, believes it was the closure of the ABC current affairs program *The National* in 1985 that robbed Carleton of a 'simple optimism' and caused him to compromise his journalistic standards. 'I think he lost something very big there—a sense of idealistic hope that things could be different,' Doogue says. 'He was an incautious idealist in that way people who are extremely talented are, but once the idealism goes a truly awesome cynicism takes its place.'

Carleton counters that his best years followed *The National* when he joined the *Carleton-Walsh Report*.

Ian Carroll, Doogue's husband and formerly Carleton's executive producer on *The National*, says that the failure of that program created a breach between him and Carleton that has never healed.

While keen to stress his conviction that Carleton was the most brilliant interviewer of his time, Carroll says it was nonetheless a brand of journalism bereft of any interest in policy—the exact opposite, say, of Kerry O'Brien. 'It was about winners and losers,' says Carroll, and it was a guiding principle Carleton applied to the game of politics as well as to their relationship.

'He would be the only individual out of that era that I don't have a perfectly good and reasonable relationship with,' Carroll says. 'I think Richard never forgave me for *The National* not working. He seemed to regard that as a betrayal of friendship and he turned feral and in the end behaved in a way that was treacherous.'

Carleton says his distaste for Carroll has nothing to do with the failure of *The National*. 'It's because he broke his word to me on one occasion,' Carleton says. (Carroll says he has no idea what Carleton is talking about.)

The culmination of this bad blood occurred on September 5, 1985, the day John Howard toppled Andrew Peacock for the leadership of the Liberal Party. When the time came to cross from Sydney to Canberra for a live interview with Fred Chaney, Carleton announced on camera that he wasn't ready—he hadn't had time to rehearse his autocue yet. 'He made his point on air,' says Carroll. 'In my view it was a fit of pique and not only did he let all of us [on the program] down, but it was an assault on me and his producer, Alan Hogan.'

Carleton counters that he had been pressing for months to be given five minutes to rehearse his autocue before going live otherwise he was in the invidious position of seeing it for the first time when the program

The Whites of their Eyes

went to air. He says he warned his producers that he would not tolerate the situation any longer.

Finally, Carleton says the only thing that upset him about the closure of *The National* was its death was so long in coming.

RANDY SAVAGE WAS, IN CARLETON'S eyes, a loser too. When Carleton caught up with him a few years ago, Savage had been on the dole for a decade. Had tried a thousand times to get a job. Always failed. No skills. Just before the interview at Savage's house, Carleton's producer, Stuart Goodman, took Savage aside and said to him: 'Look, Richard will go for you for not having a job so just defend yourself all right?' He said 'yeh', but 'he just lay down'.

Carleton: 'No work in 10 years, you haven't even tried?'

Savage: 'I've tried very hard.'

Carleton: 'Rubbish. Where?'

Savage: 'I'll work anywhere, any time.'

Carleton: 'But can you see how illogical your position is? Ten years have gone by and you haven't done a day's work.'

Savage: 'Yeh it sounds bad, but it's not as bad as it sounds.'

Carleton: 'You agree it does sound bad?'

Savage: 'Yes I agree it sounds terrible.'

Carleton: 'Shocking.'

Savage: 'Hmm.'

Carleton: 'Disgusting.'

Savage: 'Hmm.'

Carleton: 'Disgraceful.'

Savage: 'Yeh . . . '

Carleton: 'You're not really much of a human being, are you?'

LIFE IS COMPLEX. YOU THINK you've got a person's measure and then you're forced to re-assess. You conclude after years of watching Richard Carleton on TV that he's a man so pleased with himself that nothing could ever dent his confidence. Then you start talking to friends, family and former colleagues and what you discover is a web of contradictions.

He was the student leftie who heckled Menzies and opposed the Vietnam War. No, he was always a closet conservative who later reserved

Richard Carleton

his greatest admiration for National Party figures such as Ian Sinclair and Doug Anthony. He has always been cocksure and smart-mouthed. Yes, but he's really a most insecure, loving person and the patrician aura is just a protection. He's incredibly private. No, he's so closed off because he doesn't know his emotions. He does magic tricks because he's just a boy at heart. No, he performs magic because he can't abide small talk and he craves attention. He's courageous because he still travels to trouble spots. No, he never puts himself in danger. He's a wimp because he's terrified of bats; he even screams when he sees one. Well then, he's courageous because he allows people to think he's a heartless bastard. No, it's hard-boiled indifference. He's a happy man who has everything he could ever want. No, he's a sad man who hides from his vulnerabilities and has huge trouble sleeping. He's more in love with life than ever after his quintuple bypass operation a few years ago. No, he has no framework for living and is terrified of his own mortality (and the possibility that one day Channel Nine won't want him any more). He's smitten with his five-year-old son, Oliver (from his second marriage, to Sharon Sullivan), and can't wait to get home to see him (the new Nine promos prove it). Yes, he loves his son but spends up to five months of the year overseas and requests more trips away than any of his colleagues. He cries a lot. Well, yes, but he can make himself cry by blinking and he never cries when the occasion calls for it. He is obsessed with manners and 'correct' behaviour—his children by his first marriage knew what a chilled salad fork was before they could grasp one. True, but he's condescending and supercilious to those he regards as less important and is possibly TV's most impertinent journalist. He's a moral man with an insatiable hunger for knowledge and truth. No, he's a performer with a giant ego, a self-serving pragmatist, a mercenary at large.

And this is why real life (not the program) is so very different from journalism, particularly television current affairs. It is not always in the interests of good television to balance the scales. That's why if Richard Carleton were profiling himself he might choose to wrap up this story with a leading question like: People say you've sold your soul. When are you going to regret the bargain?

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Postscript

In late 1998, to coincide with the 20-year anniversary of 60 Minutes, Richard Carleton told Who Weekly that his lowest journalistic point had probably been

The Whites of their Eyes

his interview with the unemployed Randy Savage, particularly his rhetorical question: 'You're not much of a human being, are you?' 'It was cruel of me,' Carleton confessed. 'It was the silliest question I've asked.'

At the time of writing Richard Carleton still worked for 60 Minutes.