

## THE GOOD WORD

Ian Jones on the history of Nationwide

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**For all its subsequent ubiquity, *Nationwide* sidled onto TV screens at 6pm on Tuesday 9 September 1969 with an absolute minimum of publicity. The Radio Times not only failed to afford it any special coverage whatsoever, but rather ungraciously omitted to mention both the days of its transmission and its very name – merely noting how "a new early-evening programme will be taking a look at events at 6pm, BBC1, most weekdays."**

Such a hazy, nervous fanfare seemed to echo the attitudes of much of BBC management, who appeared just as vague and not a little suspicious at what this technically-complex and ill-defined endeavour sought to prove. That they were prepared to ultimately sanction its existence spoke much of the high regard in which its creator, Derrick Amooore, was held.

By 1969 Amooore had spend 10 years in TV journalism and, at the age of 32, the youngest person ever to hold the rank of Assistant Head of Television Current Affairs. He was one of that particularly charismatic and ambitious group of producers, along with Donald Baverstock, Alasdair Milne and Antony Jay, who had made their name working on the seminal early-evening *Tonight* programme, and who subsequently enjoyed much influence within the Corporation. Amooore had already been responsible for devising a late-night replacement for *Tonight* in 1965: *24 Hours*. Four years later, he now saw it his task to bring some order and consistency to teatime once again.

### "London doesn't know what is going on anywhere"

*Nationwide* was conceived out of Amooore's enduring passions: lofty idealism (the country should know about itself), everyday topicality (ironing boards were just as relevant as inflation) and challenging broadcasting conventions, both presentational and technological. He saw his task as an attempt to: "Put back into television some of the things we haven't been noticing for the last four or five years. There are things going on in the country, not world-changing things, that no-one is talking about. Scotland isn't being told what is going on in Wales. And London doesn't know what is going on anywhere."

When management learned of Amooore's plans, they cautiously dictated the new show would run Tuesday – Thursday only. As regards a frontman, however, Amooore knew exactly whom he wanted: *24 Hours* presenter Michael Barratt. An assured screen presence and experienced journalist, Barratt was quickly enthused by the challenges this new role would involve. It was his face greeting viewers at 6pm on 9 September and who explained how this brand new programme was to "present the facts, the people, and the background of the country we live in."

*Nationwide*'s launch was timed to coincide with a major re-structuring of all the BBC's news and current affairs output. The same week saw the main evening news extended from 10 to 20 minutes, and *24 Hours* reformatted around new host David Dimbleby. Early evenings now began with the national news and weather at 5.50pm, running up to the junction point at 6pm when, ostensibly masterminded by Barratt, BBC1 went, literally, nationwide, first for local news, then back to London for a further mix of regional-based features transmitted en mass across the entire country. The idea, however, was that the regions would stay "on-line" once Barratt had taken over, to provide guests and features to be scrutinised by viewers across the country. In time this would encourage all kinds of jovial banter between the respective regional hosts (most notably Mike Neville in Newcastle, Stuart Hall in Manchester, Ian Masters in Norwich, Alan Towers in Birmingham, and Hugh Scully in Plymouth) and countless in-jokes, such as the patented "passing" of a chocolate cake from region to region.

Yet all of this was, in the early days, balanced upon an extremely fragile technical system prone to multiple error and collapse. Sound and pictures were frequently lost. Derrick Amooore obviously wanted *Nationwide* to showcase the wonders of his multi-regional structure as much as possible, and was blessed with an illustrative case in just the second week on air, when the whole programme went live to Cardiff to show a Welsh Nationalist MP giving evidence in front of a city council commission – an event perhaps rather tame, but never seen on national television before.

But these early shows also entertained both some eccentric editorial decisions – for example, a three way discussion on equal pay being suddenly cut short for some footage from Arnhem in Belgium – and a necessarily pedestrian feel, as the format, its production team and host all found their feet. Then, when the rest of BBC1 went colour from Saturday

15 November, *Nationwide* had to remain black and white so as to accommodate the still mostly-monochrome regional output. This lent the fledgling show a rather rickety and archaic image, only slightly offset by its distinctive opening titles: a chirpy, cod-jazz theme decorated with an instructional "here's-where-the-regions-are" animated map.

### **"Storytellers, hidden stars, unusual talent or achievers"**

The programme soldiered on until June 1970, when it was taken off for the World Cup and Wimbledon. But it was always set to return, Amooore perceiving of it as "like *Panorama*, a self-perpetuating institution." He himself had only intended to devote one year editing *Nationwide* before returning to his full-time management job. Consequently when the programme returned on Tuesday 28 July a new editor was in charge: Michael Bunce.

It is Bunce who deserves most credit for developing *Nationwide* into one of the most confident, distinctive and iconic TV institutions of the 1970s. He did this chiefly in two ways, firstly by wilfully encouraging the pursuit of a more idiosyncratic line-up of features. For him the show should be able to jump between items both quirky and downbeat, offsetting unseemly mood changes by carefully filtering everything through the personalities of *Nationwide's* presenters. This tied in with his second approach: to very deliberately play up the roles of individual reporters and presenters with a view to ultimately assembling and sustaining a recognisable family of *Nationwide* faces. Consequently from autumn 1970 a regular reporting team began to take shape in the guise of Bob Langley, Lynn Lewis, Jack Pizzey and Philip Tibenham. Barratt was still sole host, but now seated behind a noticeably larger desk and a bank of eight shimmering TV screens. The titles were revamped as well, replaced with a split-screen montage of the *Nationwide* "faces", and featuring, crucially, that famous distinctive "NW" logo and spinning mandala.

Bunce was also keen to evolve a more dynamic relationship with the show's viewers, and in January 1971 launched the first of what would become an epic succession of features designed to directly involve the public within the programme. This debut campaign, to celebrate previously unsung "storytellers, hidden stars, unusual talent or achievers" was a primitive but canny opening gambit in the long process of establishing *Nationwide* as what it had always meant to be: simply, a mirror for the reflection of the absurd, contradictory and engaging mosaic of British society.

That the show could presume to be so bold and far-reaching was a product of its growing confidence, buoyed by viewing figures now reaching 8 million. But the programme was still pieced together pretty much single-handedly by Bunce, Barratt and a small group of researchers. Each morning they'd hold an elaborate conference via intercom with all the BBC regional offices to formulate the line-up for that day's show. Producers across the country would flag up forthcoming issues or events, and suggest items and features that could complement those of a neighbouring region. One such contribution, a story on a local vicar who refereed ladies wrestling matches in his spare time, was consequently amplified with other "wacky clergymen" from around the nation. A largely parochial agenda prevailed: particular stories ran during the spring of 1971 included the ergonomics of kitchen equipment, a rise in the price of Polaroid film, and, because Barratt knew there was always mileage in the price of stamps, a man who, on receipt of an unstamped letter, was charged 8p, only for said mail to have actually been sent from the GPO itself. In April the first proper *Nationwide* competition was also launched: *Cook of the Realm 1971*, compered by Stuart Hall and judged by Ronnie Corbett, Hattie Jacques, Katie Boyle and Ernest Marples MP.

After its now familiar summer break, Michael Bunce added another crucial element to the *Nationwide* mix. Bob Wellings, previously host of the London regional bulletin, was elevated to the rank of co-host alongside Barratt. Meanwhile an entire edition came direct from the International Motor Show at Earls Court; Fanny Cradock began hosting occasional cookery spots profiling different foods from around Europe; and a dieting campaign, titled *Slim '72*, was launched, fronted by the decidedly non-svelte Donny McLeod. However both he and Bob Langley were to be shortly reassigned to help launch the BBC's new lunchtime magazine, *Pebble Mill at One*; and their departure was to accompany another major overhaul of the whole *Nationwide* format.

### **"I dunno what a folly is. Bob, what do you think a folly is?"**

Almost three years after its birth, the show was still airing Tuesday – Thursday night only. Bunce wanted to expand the programme to run every weeknight, and go full colour across the country. Barratt, however, enjoyed his three day week – besides, he had other engagements now, including hosting late night *Right to Reply*-style show *Talkback*. So Bunce looked around for another high profile front-man of similar stature to Barratt to help anchor for the full five-nights a week; Bob Wellings, after all, was still only a famous face to London viewers alone. He needed somebody already well-established nationally as a natural Beeb frontman. The answer was obvious.

"A wave comes along, looks like carrying me along with it in a forward direction, so I travel with it," Frank Bough declared on his appointment as new *Nationwide* co-host. He joined straight after a marathon stint fronting the BBC's 1972 Olympics coverage, noting, "After over 100 hours of that, they may have to wheel me into the *Nationwide* studio

in a bath chair." His first show, on Monday 18 September, was the moment when the programme finally expanded from three to five nights a week. But his debut was not a smooth affair. He was due to interview two pensioners down the line from Birmingham about an imminent senior citizens' march on the House of Commons, but after doing an elaborate introduction was duly told from the gallery "Sorry Frank, they're not there yet." Afterwards Frank exploded at the production team, reasoning: "I looked a fool, but more importantly the programme looked inefficient, and that really upset me."

Still, the show now bristled with self-confidence, and was blessed with its best ever theme, the memorable Johnny Scott composition *The Good Word*, plus equally distinctive titles showcasing the expanding *Nationwide* "team" (now bolstered with James Hogg, Brian Ash, Bernard Falk and Sue Lawley) out and about. From this point, through to the late '70s, *Nationwide* enjoyed something of an imperial existence – supremely assured, with a fully-rounded personality, definite tone, and self-evident purpose to continue to connect with and involve the viewing public through topical current affairs in as instructive, imaginative but above all entertaining way as possible. This was teatime, lest anyone forget, and no place for in-depth ideology or analysis (*Midweek*, the late-night successor to *24 Hours*, served that purpose).

One of the most well remembered elements of *Nationwide* began in October 1973. Valerie Singleton joined the programme as host of the new Consumer Unit spot, ably and often pointedly assisted by Richard Stilgoe. Seated within a separate, fussily "hi-tech" part of the studio, Val and Richard diligently documented the collapse of the British economy through stoicism and through song. A typical exchange ran:

**Richard Stilgoe:** "First the good news – Valerie's back! And now the bad news – Valerie's leg!" (Cut to Val's leg in plaster) "What did you do?"

**Valerie Singleton:** "Would you believe that I fell over on the first day of my skiing holiday?"

**Richard Stilgoe:** "Makes a change for Consumer Unit to have a full cast!"

**Valerie Singleton:** "I knew I wouldn't get any sympathy."

**Richard Stilgoe:** "Well, while our price watcher was impersonating Long John Silver, our nationalised industries took the opportunity to raise prices."

**Valerie Singleton:** "That's right. The price of a first class stamp has gone up (Caption: STAMPS UP) from 4p to 7p."

**Richard Stilgoe:** "That happened yesterday. Now somebody may no longer afford to send a letter to a loved one."

Similarly when the pair reported on a tongue-in-cheek advert for a pocket calculator that promised one free to anybody with six fingers, they received 21 letters and 25 calls all from people supposedly boasting superfluous digits. The same autumn Sue Lawley was promoted to the role of main presenter. "The great thing about this programme is that it caters for everyone," she reflected at the time. "It's very much like a local paper. We're the mouthpiece of the viewers. People stop me in the street and in the supermarket and they treat me as their friend." Lawley proved an effective counterpoint to the rakish and occasionally posturing demeanour of Barratt, Bough and Wellings. Her arrival also coincided with the introduction of a special strand to close each Friday show focusing on the upcoming weekend sporting events. This was initially titled *Sport on Friday*, but soon redubbed, with far more sense, *Sportswide*. Jimmy Hill fronted this for several years, often alternating with David Vine or Ron Pickering, before Des Lynam took over in 1978.

*Nationwide* ended the year with a special edition wondering, "1973 – Was It Really That Bad?" The show seemed at times to be deliberately trying to provide a clumsy tonic to the various political, economic and social upheavals of the decade, while on other occasions blithely ignoring everything except its own blossoming obsessions. In 1974, for instance, the programme included an *It's a Knockout* Scoregirl competition alongside a special series on the future of the NHS and the nostalgic strand *Down Memory Lane* fronted by Susan Stranks and Brian Widlake. Helping to cushion these ricocheting line-ups were the ever-present personalities, securing their influence through an expanding roll call of items that more often than not bore their name: *Tibenham's Travels*; *Falk About Britain*; *Casey's Tales*; and, most infamously, *Wellings' Follies*. This last example also provided sound illustration of what Clive James brilliantly dubbed the "I dunno" presentational technique:

**Frank Bough:** "I dunno what a folly is. Bob, what do you think a folly is?"

**Bob Wellings:** "Well Frank, we asked an architectural expert what a folly is, and he told us what a folly is."

The edition of 4 February 1975 was notable for featuring the resignation of opposition leader Ted Heath live on air; while the 1000th show was reached on Friday 9 May and honoured with a 95 minute special. It was on such a highpoint that Michael Bunce left to oversee the relaunch of *Tonight*. Somewhat sneakily, he took Sue Lawley with him. The capable but anonymous Susanne Hall and Dilys Morgan were appointed to take her place; while editorial control was now assumed by John Gau, another rising star of BBC Current Affairs. Gau's tenure was marked by an even greater range of features and items, from the absurdly trivial to the downright audacious. He cultivated a rather cheeky extravagance on the show, but one that marked these as the *Nationwide* glory years, where sometimes even

nine or 10 million tuned in every night to see what Mike, Frank and Bob had been up to.

They found politicians being grilled by viewers across the regions; arrestingly graphic profiles of stud bulls; and live OBs from the Highland Games at Aboyne, the Ideal Home Exhibition in Olympia, and from Blackpool to celebrate the resort's 100th birthday. James Hogg spent 14 days castaway on a remote Scottish island, while Tony Gubba presided over a competition asking viewers to vote for their favourite piece of music for use as the theme to the 1976 BBC Olympics coverage, with £100 in premium bonds for one lucky winner. The show also very purposefully went on the road, spending a week at a time coming completely live from one of the BBC's regional studios, beginning in January 1976 in Belfast. These jaunts gave the main team a chance to indulge in all kinds of adventures, epitomised by Barratt, Wellings and Masters' somewhat ludicrous attempts to sail the *Nationwide* boat along the estuaries of Norfolk. Indeed, other eponymous frippery soon followed, involving the *Nationwide* horse, allotment and greyhound.

But John Gau still realised the value of ringing the changes. Consequently Valerie Singleton was appointed a full-time presenter in spring '76, the Consumer Unit closed down, and Richard Stilgoe given a new correspondence spot called Pigeonhole where he busied himself committing various incidences of pedantry to melody (notably the singular case of the "1861" postmark, which just turned out to be "1981" upside down). New additions to the reporting team included Julian Pettifer and John Stapleton; the latter joined Dilys Morgan in a semi-regular slot from October '76 investigating controversial consumer issues. This became the Public Eye Unit in early 1977, and ultimately *Watchdog* in September 1980, fronted by Hugh Scully. The grand *Nationwide* Yacht Race, meanwhile, saw a flotilla of vessels, each named after one of the regional news bulletins, race over three days across the Channel. The annual *Nationwide* Carol Competition was launched in September 1976; the Good Neighbour contest and the Champion Children Competition followed in early '77; and even Princes Phillip and Charles now made regular visits to the studio to announce numerous worthy schemes and appeals.

After celebrating the Silver Jubilee in consummate style with the lavish *Nationwide* Jubilee Fair, an era ended on Friday 15 July 1977 when Michael Barratt bid farewell to the show. But he wasn't going quietly. His entire final week was given over to a spectacular "grand tour" around the regions aboard a specially customised British Rail exhibition train. The premise was to visit locations that held a particular resonance for Barratt, but in reality it became one long lavish personal appearance with amazing scenes of crowds thronging the train desperate for a glimpse of their teatime hero. The regal journey came to an end at Saltburn By The Sea, where an extremely emotional Barratt signed off for the very last time.

### **"What would you do given two minutes of peak hour television time?"**

Initially the presenting team seemed more than capable of coping with his absence. Bough in particular revelled in the opportunity to become the new "Mr *Nationwide*", though his temperamental relationship with live television showed no signs of ameliorating. On one occasion, due to introduce the final item from the *Nationwide* allotment, Bough was suddenly informed the film had been lost and there were no standby items in reserve. He was left to fill for five minutes, which a man of his calibre would perhaps have relished. It was not to be. Lawley and Wellings had already left the studio, but when word reached them of the crisis Sue dashed back to begin a useful on-air chat with Frank – except it was about an item that had appeared in the earlier South East region-only segment, so the majority of viewers had no idea what she was talking about. Bob, meanwhile, pressed the wrong button in the lift and failed to make it back at all. In the end Frank confessed to camera: "You think I'm in complete control of this crisis, don't you? Well, I'm not. We've nothing left and there's two minutes to go. What would you do given two minutes of peak hour television time?"

Sue had returned from the *Tonight* programme to join Val, Bob and Frank from autumn 1977 onwards. For a time, the same mix of jovial anecdotery, lavish set-piece events and down-to-earth reportage persisted. A *Nationwide* Skateboarding Championship was invented, as was the *Nationwide* Pantomime, promising "a popular story with a topical treatment" and delivering Esther Rantzen and Denis Healey in tights. The team even spent a week coming live from Brussels, examining the impact of the EEC on everyday life around the continent by – what else – taking a steam train ride through the Ardennes, and watching Genesis on tour in Germany.

But as another round of management promotions kicked in, backstage upheavals conspired to impact on the programme in a perhaps unforeseen fashion. When John Gau was elevated to the role of head of Current Affairs in 1978, Hugh Williams succeeded him. Williams had served his time on *Nationwide* but never in a senior capacity; unfortunately his inexperience was not counterbalanced by a surfeit of enthusiasm or imagination. It didn't help he faced the departure of first Valerie Singleton (to *The Money Programme*), then Stilgoe (to his own tailor-made "revue", *And Now the Good News*). This in turn set off another round of personnel changes, resulting in the urbane but humourless Hugh Scully sitting at the top table, while the somewhat shifty Glyn Worsnip took over Pigeonhole.

The programme now began to drift, and become even a bit too smug and flippant. There were still a few features in the "traditional" *Nationwide* mould, such as the *Nationwide*/Radio 1/Daily Mirror British Rock And Pop Awards. But these

were increasingly contrasted with attempts at far more serious and sombre items, which just ended up appearing somewhat out of place. So instead of Bob Wellings contriving to climb the highest peaks in each of the nations' regions, he was now to be found presenting a day in the life of an oilrig. As the '80s loomed, the show's content increasingly rambled – quite literally in the case of "The Ulster Way" (Worsnip sauntering along a 450 mile footpath) – and, worryingly, felt unsure of itself.

### **"Face the facts: it is all a dreadful mistake"**

In light of perhaps both this and that it was a new decade – always a handy excuse for giving long–running programmes a makeover, or the chop – *Nationwide* was given a startling overhaul. Out went the great theme tune and distinctive titles; in came a supremely disappointing "hi–tech" looking montage of presenter–less stills and instantly forgettable military march–style opening music. Reginald Bosanquet was hired for some occasional and rather self–indulgent colour pieces on, well, anything he liked. Pigeonhole was scrapped for the onerous *Dear Nationwide*. Worst of all, Bob Wellings left, to be replaced by the ineffectual Richard Kershaw. Viewing figures slipped; the programme was now being given a serious run by teatime commercial TV regional shows. Not even a guest presenter in the guise of a real member of the public – one Sue Peacock, appearing as part of the fellow BBC1 series *The Big Time* – could prompt a sustained ratings hike.

Further tampering with personnel followed. New "faces" including Laurie Mayer, Pattie Coldwell and Sally Magnusson were added, and Sue Cook joined the main team in autumn 1980. Then another strategy was tried: diluting the content with a rash of lifestyle features, nominally the sole preserve (rightly) of *Pebble Mill*. Now audiences had the pleasure of Alan Titchmarsh's gardening tips, and David Jones' advice on how to care for your pets. Worse was to come, though, when the hapless Williams was quickly replaced, on order of the new head of current affairs Christopher Capron, with the intense, campaigning and rather humourless Roger Bolton. This was a deliberate move by Capron to, as he saw it, beef up the show's content. Previously *Nationwide*'s crusading spirit had been leavened with unpretentious, affable humour and whimsy. Now matters were pitched in the most earnest manner possible. Sometimes this worked – Tony Wilkinson's "Down and Out" series in particular, with the host roughing it for a month with London's homeless; other times intention clashed with the delivery, such as the ill–conceived roadshow in April 1981 with Frank in a suit talking to disabled children and Sue visiting the inmates at Broadmoor.

The climax of this, however, and the twist which in hindsight sealed *Nationwide*'s fate, was the enlistment of David Dimbleby as a new host in January 1982. This was solely Bolton's doing. Dimbleby had been wooed by former *Nationwide* producers before, but turned them down; now he made the move, impressed with the expressed intention of Bolton to jettison the frippery and promote hard–nosed investigative journalism. "I think it displays rather a narrow vision for a programme like *Nationwide* not to cover events in, say, Israel or Poland," Dimbleby sniffed. Regardless of the merits of this perception, what was arguably of far greater importance was whether *Nationwide* itself, with its very particular character, history and legacy, was and ever could have been the vehicle for such a stern–lipped agenda. Viewers certainly didn't think so. "*Nationwide* is the only programme that covers matters of interest about Britain which do not necessarily warrant coverage by the national news or even national press. Hands off *Nationwide*, Mr Dimbleby," an angry correspondent wrote to Radio Times. "Face the facts," declared another, "it is all a dreadful mistake. Return the chubby chap to 'Miserama' and give us back Frank and Sue and the rest with their everyday stories of real people."

There was indeed a perversity in filling up a programme structured to "present the facts, the people, and the background of the country we live in" with a stream of foreign news stories. Dimbleby himself displayed a singular lack of charm and viewer rapport that was a trademark of the programme. He was even billed, controversially, above Frank Bough in Radio Times. If that wasn't enough, his arrival was marked by yet another makeover with a further "new" theme – an acutely irritating synthesiser–heavy concoction with little trace of a tune – plus a title sequence that bizarrely harked back to that first ever "here's–your–region" effort of 1969. Ratings slipped still further; and though Dimbleby's "temporary" departure in April '82 became a permanent one, the damage was done. Management decreed the programme unsalvageable.

Robbed of much of its energy, good humour and personality, *Nationwide* stumbled on for as long as it took BBC bosses to figure out what should replace it. A decision was made in August '82, but it took another 14 months for the successor, *Sixty Minutes*, to make it onto the air thanks to countless management, union and personnel squabbles. Frank Bough baled out at the end of 1982, headed for breakfast television. Sue Lawley made it right to the very end, anchoring the last few months with Hugh Scully and Richard Kershaw. There was a late rally of sorts, thanks to the revived letters spot "Speak For Yourself" and the now–infamous spat during an election phone–in between Mrs Thatcher and caller Diane Gould over the sinking of the *Belgrano*. But the decision had been made. It was fitting that all the former presenters made a point of attending the last ever edition, on Friday 4 August 1983, to bring the curtain down in style.

Tellingly, *Sixty Minutes* ended up merely revisiting most of *Nationwide*'s turf with almost exactly the same team of reporters, the same crew, and an identical format, only to even less success, all of which rendered the programme somewhat pointless, and the reasons for *Nationwide*'s dismissal all the more absurd. It lasted less than a year, before making way for the *Six O'Clock News* and separate regional magazine programmes.

The passing of time has been cruel to *Nationwide*. Its enduring confection of topicality and irreverence has inevitably become something of a byword for the absolute apotheosis of ultra-flimsy, filler television; its innumerable parts reduced to the sum total of a skateboarding duck, a pissed snail and a man claiming to be able to walk over eggs without breaking them. But in its day it was one of the greats, a show that evolved a wholly unique relationship with its viewers. It also managed to be both an institution and completely disposable – and best of all its presenters and researchers knew it.

Arguably BBC1 has never recovered from its disappearance. Early evenings are still a hinterland of fly-by-night lifestyle, documentary and celebrity strands. Perhaps there's still a place for something consistent, something uniform, a show that has to be "co-ordinated" as well as presented. Besides, there'll always be estuaries to sail, hills to climb, regions to explore. And there's always the price of a stamp.

**ADDITIONAL MATERIAL: STEVE WILLIAMS**

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