

Nobody's safe when TV's most famous chat show host turns Narky Parky. New Man, Sue Lawley, lager lout presenters and even interviewers all get a tongue-lashing, as Jane Dimond finds out

Yorkshire bitter

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Parky is in rant mode, and loving every minute of it.

Having remarked early on in our 'heated debate' that he wishes he hadn't been 'dragoned by the BBC into doing the interview', things do not augur well. He frostily declines to talk about the man behind the interviewer on the grounds that 'I'm 65, know who I am and don't care what the public thinks of me. Frankly, I'm past the point where I have to worry about it.'

And so the hostile vein continues for the next few minutes, but an opinionated Yorkshireman can't remain stonily unforthcoming for long. One mention of his pride in his 'typical Yorkshireman's chauvinism', and it unleashes an impassioned discourse on relationship mayhem and the disintegration of the two-parent family. The root of much of this trouble, he argues vehemently, is New Man.

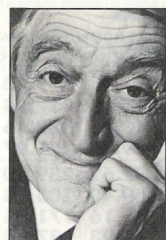
'I'm not a male chauvinist pig,' he asserts, pointing out that 75 per cent of the staff on his show are women.' When I say I'm a chauvinist, I mean that I am not a New Man. A New

Man is someone who pretends he's a woman, basically. He's a cross between Lord Byron and Tiger Woods, and he's got a degree in domestic science and enjoys sewing and darning.

'New Man was invented to accommodate the desires of modern women - this romantic bloke, in touch with his inner self, lovely to women, the ideal guy. They've got what they wanted, this touchy feely man - but if things are so good now between men and women, answer me this: Why all of a sudden do we have this situation where we've got the highest divorce rate in the Western world and a tragic, tragic number of one-parent families?

'Why? Because men have got bloody confused about what's happened to them, poor buggers. That's what New Man is - confused.'

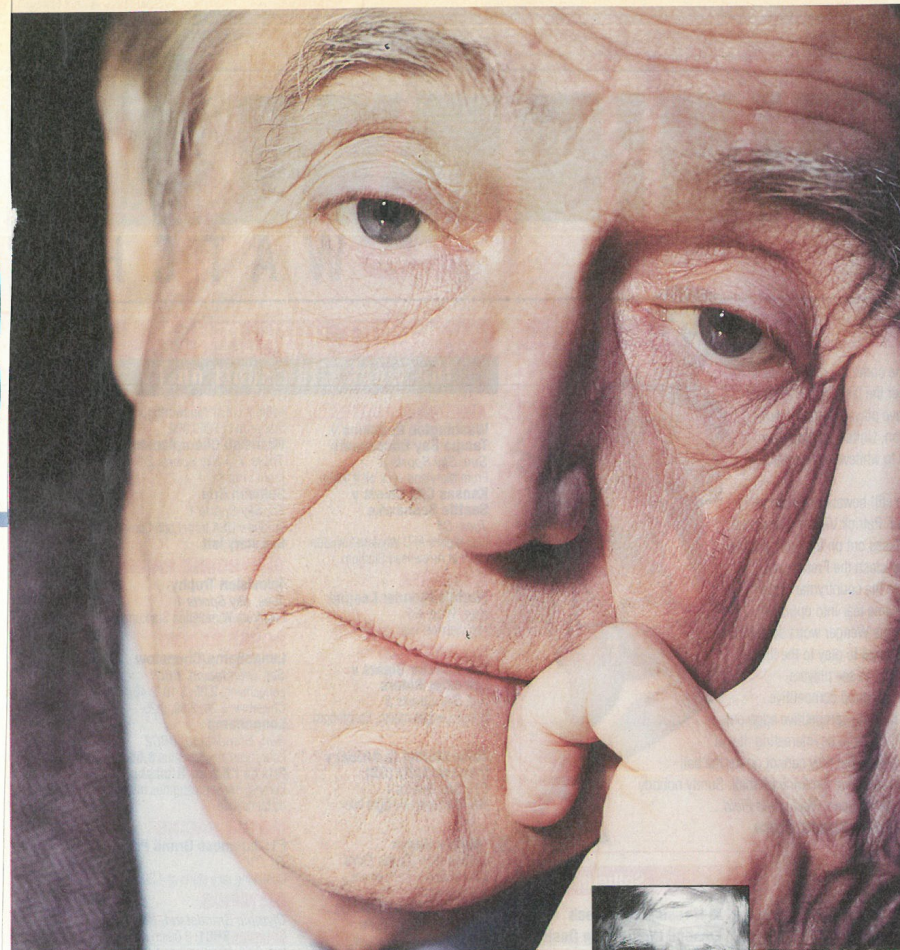
Life for Mr Parkinson has been without such perplexities. 'I was brought up in a very old-fashioned way and married an old-



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fashioned woman, thank God, who brought up the family and looked after the house - and later had a career herself too. It's worked out perfectly well. If people want to try a different route, let them. I don't give a bugger. But we're still together after 41 years of marriage, so maybe we've done something a bit right. I make no judgments, but New Man, that doesn't seem to be working.'

Back as one of the BBC's leading lights, Parkinson makes no secret of his pride that he is still around when most of his rivals have long since hung up their earpieces. 'When you look at the number of people who have tried to host a successful long-running chat show and failed, it's astonishing. It's a graveyard, a boot-hill of lost



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ambition' - especially, he says, for women. 'In the entire history of British TV no woman has succeeded in doing a talk show, yet a staggering number and range have tried,' he says, and you can't disagree with the facts. What is less apparent is why.

Parky has his own theories. 'One of the problems women have had is embracing what a talk show actually is - it's a journalistic exercise, certainly, but it's also showbusiness and you have to occasionally put on your dancing shoes. I think one or two women have come adrift because they've been too strait-laced. Certainly the most eminent one was Sue Lawley, and part of the problem, again, was that she wanted to be more serious, but a chat show is a feature page.'

The trend to hand celebrities chat shows, including Ian Wright and Melinda Messenger, came in for scathing criticism from Parkinson earlier this year - and it's still a bugbear he can't resist talking about. 'I get very cross about it because these lazy producers don't go, "Let's take this celebrity and turn them

into a stand-up comic, or let's turn them into David Attenborough", but they do think, "Let's give them a chat show, it'll be a piece of cake" and history proves the exact opposite.

'It's very sad because some of the presenters you see now... what we've got are these bloody lager louts, that sort of in-ye-face, Loaded magazine kind of creature. They all talk estuary and point all the time. I look at it and think, well that's very ugly, but sadly there are a lot of people who think it's the way they ought to be.'

As for his own chat show, Jane Horrocks, Patrick Kielty and Nigel Hawthorne guest this week and future celebrities include Robbie Williams, Elton John, Billy Connolly, Chris Tarrant and Betty Boothroyd. 'We don't have

a problem with guests - it's more or less a matter of deciding who we want,' he says proudly. 'The most fun I get out of the show is in blending people and making it appear as if they've been lifelong friends.'

My allotted time with Parky is now long expired, but his tone has changed. He's laughing and flirting and we part on the warmest of terms. 'I enjoyed our talk, it was interesting. I'm sorry we got off on the wrong foot, love - it can't have been nice having this grumpy old sod talking to you like that... if I was horrible I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be.'

Steady on Michael, you're almost starting to sound like New Man - and that wouldn't do. Abrasive, arrogant, blunt and irascible he may be, but he wouldn't be Parky any other way.

'Every morning I get up and say, "You handsome old sod, you!" he teases. 'I get out of bed with a merry step in my feet and say, "Parky, away you go!"'