

Stupidity News

Bill Bryson

I would like to say a few words about stupidity in America.

Now before I go a single word further, let me make it categorically clear that Americans are not inherently more simple than other people. America has the largest economy, the most comfortably off people, the best research facilities, many of the finest universities and think-tanks, and more Nobel Prize winners than the rest of the world put together. You don't get all that by being stupid.

Even so, you do sometimes wonder. Consider this. According to an opinion poll, 13 per cent of women in the United States cannot say whether they wear their tights under their knickers or over them. That's something like 12 million women walking around in a state of chronic foundation garment uncertainty. Perhaps because I so seldom wear ladies' clothing I don't fully appreciate the challenges involved, but I am almost certain that if I did wear tights with knickers I would know which was on top. More to the point, if a stranger with a clipboard came up to me in the street and asked how my underwear was configured, I don't believe that I would tell him that I didn't know.

Which raises another interesting point: why were they asking? How did anyone think up such a question, and what were they hoping to do with the data? You see, all this points to a much larger kind of dumbness, not just among the 13 per cent of women who are underwear underaware, to coin a nifty phrase, but among those who set and disseminate public opinion polls.

One thing is certain, and that is that there is an awful lot of dumbness about. I know this for a fact because a friend in New York recently sent me a collection of stupid quotes made by notable Americans. Here, for instance, is the actress Brooke Shields, without any help from grown-ups, explaining to an interviewer why you shouldn't smoke: 'Smoking kills. If you're killed, you've lost a very important part of your life.'

Well said, Brooke. And here is the singer Mariah Carey getting to the heart of Third World troubles:

'Whenever I watch TV and see those poor starving kids all over the world, I can't help but cry. I mean I'd love to be skinny like that, but not with all those flies and death and stuff.'

Whatever is the stage beyond the mind boggling is the stage I reach each time I read that quotation. My favourite, however, was the answer Miss Alabama gave in a Miss Universe contest when asked if she would choose to live for ever: 'I would not live for ever, because we should not live for ever, because if we were supposed to live for ever then we would live for ever, but we cannot live for ever, which is why I would not live for ever.'

Call me unkind, but I would bet good money that Miss Alabama not only would not know whether

her tights were under or over her pants, but would not be entirely certain which limbs to insert in the holes.

The unfortunate side of all this is that it is relatively easy to prey on people who have lost the power of thought. Once or twice a week, like nearly every household in the nation, we receive a letter from a magazine subscription company saying something like 'Congratulations, Mr W. Bryson. You Have Won \$5 Million!' Just above this promising statement, in much smaller letters, it says: 'If your sweepstakes number matches the prize draw number, then we will say to you...' You don't have to be terribly on the ball to work out that you haven't actually won \$5 million. Unfortunately, lots of people are not terribly on the ball.

The papers carried a story recently about a man called Richard Lusk who flew from California to Florida clutching a prize letter telling him, as he understood it, that he had won \$11 million and had just five days to claim his prize. The company showed him the fine print and sent him home. Three months later Mr Lusk received another, essentially identical letter, and flew to Florida again, just as happy and expectant as he had been the first time. According to the Associated Press, at least twenty other people have flown to Florida in the past four years in the same ecstatic but mistaken belief.

That's a rather depressing thought, so let's finish with the story of my favourite dumb person of the moment — namely, a would-be robber in Texas who covered his face with a balaclava in order to rob a grocery store, but forgot to remove from his breast pocket the clip-on badge that bore his photograph, name and place of employment, which were duly noted by something like twelve witnesses.

I am sure there is a moral in this somewhere, and I will let you know as soon as it occurs to me. Now if you will excuse me, I am going to go and check my underwear in case anyone starts asking questions.