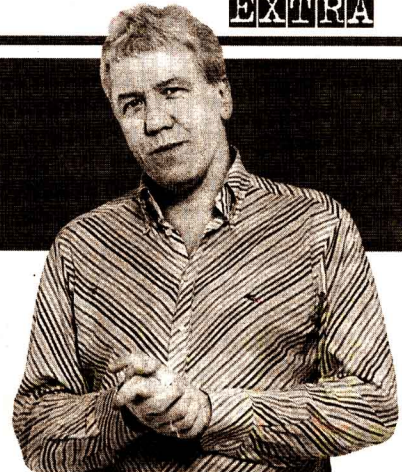


THE INDEPENDENT TUESDAY 20 MAY 2008

EXTRA 7

# John Walsh

## Tales of the City



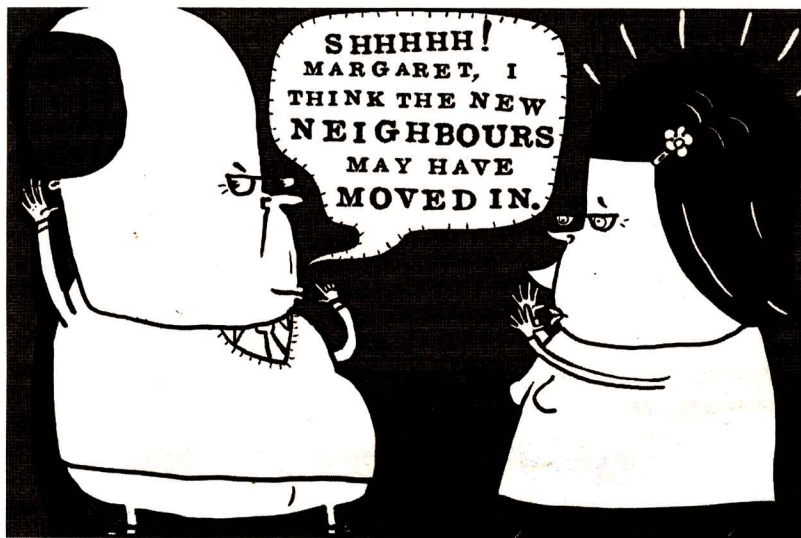
'If we saw next door's Jerry being savaged by rabid lurchers, we'd just raise our eyes to heaven'

Of the many questions asked about the Austrian dungeon tyrant, Josef Fritzl, one concerned his neighbours. Did they never notice, over 24 years, his epic shopping expeditions, his bulk-buying of enough perishables to keep his imprisoned children alive when he was on holiday, his surprisingly chronic need for baby food, clothes and comforts. Did the people next door never gossip about him – about his missing daughter, his depressed wife, his overflowing bins?

British newspapers, in speculating how such things can happen in Austria, carried a smug subtext, that it couldn't happen here. We'd have noticed something was wrong, wouldn't we? We wouldn't have let such exploitation and neglect happen to people in our street. English people would worry, or at least bitch about a local equivalent of the eccentric Fritzl clan, and no domestic cellar-jail monster would be safe from our pitiless but well-meaning inquisitiveness.

Sorry, but it ain't true. According to a survey conducted by iammoving.com, we're rubbish when it comes to neighbourly virtues. Forty per cent wished their neighbours could go and live somewhere else. As many as 21 per cent have never spoken to their neighbours. Seven per cent recall having a chat with Mr and Mrs Next-Door just once – the day they moved. Six per cent utter a grudging "Hello" at Christmas. Five per cent confessed to fighting a *Desperate Housewives*-style feud with the over-maquillaged bitch at No 81, and 4 per cent confessed to being "a bit scared" of the humans they see collecting the milk and papers on the doorstep in the morning.

Time was when neighbours meant more than the cast of an Australian TV soap. "Friends and neighbours" was shorthand for "your intimate circle". The essence of community was to be found in your guardedly respectful relationship with the folks on the other side of your living-room wall. We used



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to get on, once. Now we've become hardened, urban, uncaring. No longer do we chat over the garden fence with Brenda. We seldom pop to No 23 to borrow sugar. When we lock ourselves out, we rarely had the foresight to leave a spare key at No 27. We are not keen on Neighbourhood Watch committees. If we saw next door's Jerry being savaged on his doorstep by a pack of rabid lurchers, we'd do little more than raise eyes to heaven (duh! that Jerry – always making a song and dance about something).

It's obvious we should rethink the whole neighbour thing. It would make good community sense – socially, psy-

chologically and environmentally – to get on better with the people who live beside us. Perhaps we need legislation to insist that homeowners in adjacent dwellings hang out together more.

We could form relationships over exciting green community projects: organising allotments, sharing compost dumps, laying razor-wire traps for the youths burgling our sheds. We could make organic beer together and exchange tips on marijuana cultivation. We could jointly lobby the council about the need for restoring empty properties and the need for everyone to stop using the phrase "going forward".

But then I think of the neighbours with whom I've been saddled over the years. Like the chap in Putney who was always ticking me off about noise or rubbish, and who once told me: "I am thinking of purchasing a Ford Mondeo. There is one for sale in Peckham at 20 per cent off the manufacturer's recommended price. It represents a considerable saving." Then there were the new neighbours in Camberwell, who moved into the middle floor of the house, closed the curtains the day they arrived and never opened them again. Later, I watched as the police came for my other neighbour, at No 121, led him away to a

police car and went back inside to retrieve his bloodied machete.

In Dulwich, my next-door pal was an Irish Republican and his red-haired wife, who used to sing "A Nation Once Again" with what sounded like 200 close friends and several jugs of porter through the wall every Friday night.

These days I'm blessed with charming people on both sides, but when I think of what I've endured, I'm less convinced about enshrining neighbourliness in law. Some relationships are best left at the theoretical stage.

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You'd think there weren't many secrets between a man and his wife after being married for 30 years. Both sides are usually over-familiar with every pore of their beloved's flesh, and know the kind of bedroom behaviour that each will and won't tolerate. But for one unnamed husband, living in Khamis Mushayt in Saudi Arabia, curiosity got the upper hand one night and now he's regretting it. What did he do? I learn from the *Al-Riyadh* newspaper that, as his wife lay asleep beside him, the impertinent swine went so far as to lift up her veil and look at her face for the first time. By an old Gulf tradition, wives in some Saudi villages remain veiled indoors and out, and at all times. His wife awoke as he gazed in rapture at (I'm guessing) her loveliness, hit the roof about the unscheduled inspection, left home and is now demanding a divorce. And no, her picture didn't appear in the news story. And no, he hasn't been telling anyone what his wife looks like, having found out at last. Tantalising or what?

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