

I met someone in the street who asked if I was the same Karen that wrote for the paper. I confessed and we had a joke about how she would need to watch what she said to me in future in case it got reported back. It's safe to pour your heart out to hairdressers and publicans, but hold back with therapists and anyone who writes.

There is another way in which people react to me having this column - they suggest what I could be writing about next. Now this can present me with something of a quandary. Maybe what they suggest is a good idea, in which case I am tempted to follow their suggestion and then they might accuse me of stealing their ideas or worse still, demand payment. If it's not something I want to write about they may be offended if I ignore their suggestion.

Worst of all is when they suggest a topic - such as how to deal with minor criminals or what Highland Council should be spending its money on - and then go on to tell me the answers at great length with opinions directly opposed to mine. I usually smile and nod as they talk, far too polite to put forward an alternative view, but all the time wondering what they would say when I next meet them if they've read what I really thought about their pet subject. I do enjoy hearing what people think, even if only so I know who is in the firing line come the revolution.

There are occupations where people must dread the question "and what is it you do?" The obvious ones like traffic warden or tax assessor can be real conversation stoppers, but consider the doctors ("You couldn't have a look at my back, could you? I've had this niggling pain for months now." "Why can I never get an appointment on a Monday?"). Or police officers ("Can you get my gun licence renewed? How come you never see a policeman when you need one?

What are you going to do about all this dog mess?"). Even when people are only joking, it's not as if they will not have heard it all before.

What about being the local councillor or chair of the community council? They can hardly walk down the road without being accosted by someone with a question or helpful suggestion. No-one bothers going to the meetings or surgeries, but prefer to express their views in the post office queue. Especially if they have an opinion about the post office. There is no relation between the relevance of the topic to the powers of the person being accosted. If the community council can't do anything about nuclear disarmament, that is no reason not to make your views known.

Can you imagine being the first minister or a football manager? Not only do they have a lot more people with a lot more opinions to listen to, but they don't even have job security to compensate. It seems as though they only need to make one mistake and they're out, and sometimes not even that many. I do think we are a bit more forgiving in Scotland than they are south of the border, where you can get your team to the cup final, and still be sacked if you lose. There is a big question mark over how much of public opinion is led by the press and how much press opinion is guided by hidden agendas. At least it beats state-controlled newspapers and television, and we should give some credit to people to be able to interpret what they read, and make up their own minds about, for example, how much the Prime Minister is to blame for the world economy.

So if our paths do cross in the coming weeks, please let me know what you think about everything. I promise to protect the innocent and only to steal your thoughts if they are really, really good ones.

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