

The royal pregnancy phone hoax

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The apparent suicide last week of nurse Jacintha Saldanha is a tragedy. It took place in the wake of the prank call by Australian radio presenters to the London hospital where the pregnant Kate Middleton was being treated.

In advance of a post-mortem, unconfirmed reports state that Saldanha was found hanging in the nurses' accommodation on Friday, December 7, and had left a suicide note for her family. She had been dead for some time.

Media commentary has placed responsibility for this terrible incident almost entirely on *2DayFM* DJs Mel Greig and Michael Christian, who had placed the call to King Edward VII Hospital, pretending to be the Queen and Prince Charles.

The call came through at 5:30 a.m. on December 4. Reception was closed, and as duty nurse, Saldanha put the call through to the ward where the Duchess of Cambridge was being treated for acute morning sickness. Greig asked to be put through to "my granddaughter Kate," and Saldanha transferred the call to a second nurse, who confirmed that the duchess was "stable" and "not retching."

The taped prank, when broadcast, caused an international furore over the DJs' invasion of royal privacy and condemnation of the hospital for lax security procedures. Denunciations went into overdrive with news of Saldanha's death.

Accused of having "blood on their hands", the two DJs were suspended from the station and went into hiding. In tearful public apologies on Monday the pair insisted they never believed the call would be successful given their terrible upper-class British accents and taped corgi barking in the background. Christian had earlier described it as "the easiest prank call we've ever made."

There are accusations that the pair have broken broadcasting and privacy laws in Australia and the UK

and suggestions that they could face charges. Scotland Yard in London has made contact with New South Wales police, although no follow-up has yet been requested.

Such stunts are a staple of the now-cancelled program on *2DayFM*, which is not dissimilar to many other radio and TV stations that dedicate shows to the ritual humiliation of members of the public. Rarely do these result in such sad consequences. But heaping blame solely on two DJs serves to conceal the essential fact that, at its root, this tragic event is the outcome of the febrile atmosphere whipped up around the news of Kate Middleton's pregnancy.

As the international media camped out on the steps of the private hospital, world leaders fell over themselves to offer their congratulations to the royal couple. Leaders of all of the UK's official parties as well as religious leaders concurred that the news was "something the whole nation will celebrate". News programmes led 24/7 on the impending addition of another heir to the throne, along with endless speculation on the latest stage of the duchess's nausea—relegating the civil war in Syria and mass protests in Egypt to the background.

The tenor of such coverage was epitomised by Catherine Ostler in the *Daily Mail*. Under the headline, "Queen of the Yummy Mummies and Her Tiny Trendsetter," Ostler exclaimed breathlessly, "Indeed, the little prince or princess will have considerable influence even before they take their first breath in the land over which they'll one day reign."

Ostler probably didn't pause to consider the significance of her statement. A baby, no, a foetus, has "considerable influence" even before it has taken its "first breath." What does this say about a society that allows such a state of affairs, let alone a media that gushes over it?

The monarchy is an affront to every democratic

principle. It has persisted into the twenty-first century not only because it stands at the apex of the British state and its constitutional requirements, but also because it is the human embodiment of a social order based on wealth, privilege and class oppression. Britain's royal family is venerated by upper-middle-class layers like Ostler because, in their feting of the royal family, they are celebrating and justifying their own economic and social superiority over the "common people."

Into this frenzied circus were thrust two unwitting nurses, Saldanha and a colleague.

Great stress has been placed on the possibility that Saldanha, from Valencia, southwest India, may not have been able to tell that the DJs' upper-class accents were phoney. This should not be accepted at face value. She had been registered as a nurse in the UK since 2003 and had worked in Bristol for several years before transferring to King Edward VII four years ago. But if so, the fact remains that an unnamed second nurse was also taken in.

It is worth asking whether any native-born speaker would have responded differently. Even if he or she had doubts, a nurse would have had to seriously consider the ramifications of refusing to put through a call from someone claiming to be the Queen. In this instance, at any rate, deference and "knowing one's place" came back to bite the royals.

Immediately news of the call was out, the British media howled at the "hospital security blunder" that led to "confidential details" being given out and the great distress it had caused the royal couple. One can imagine the fears generated at the hospital—which specifically caters to the royal family and wealthy celebrities—about the impact of this blunder on its prestige, not to mention its finances.

The hospital has denied that it disciplined Saldanha or her colleague over the call, or that they had been subjected to any "significant interview". But the *Sunday Times* reported that management had intended to have "a chat [with her] at some point."

Protocol is that duty nurses do not transfer calls when the reception is closed, the newspaper reported, and that Ms. Saldanha may have felt that she "had broken hospital rules, unwittingly assisting a colleague in breaching the Duchess's medical confidentiality and bringing shame on herself and her employer."

For Saldanha, a professional, dedicated and caring nurse, the accusation must have been devastating. This was someone referred to by those who knew her as one of the "Queen's nurses". She had taken employment at the hospital even though it meant that, for the last four years, she had to leave her two children—now 14 and 17—with her husband in Bristol during the week while she stayed in nursing accommodation.

Her husband, Benedict Barboza, has attacked the way hospital management handled the situation in the wake of the prank call. He was told of the discovery of his wife's body by the police, not the hospital. He says the family has not received any help or even a visit by Saldanha's employers. While the hospital set up an inquiry into the DJs' breach of privacy, no such inquiry has as yet been established into the death of one of its nurses.

The British media is now trying to assume a "balanced" approach to events. In the wake of the Leveson Inquiry into press standards, with its demand for a cordon sanitaire to be placed around the private lives of the rich and famous, it wants to be seen as compliant as it seeks to fend off the threat of statutory regulation.

An editorial in Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper, entitled "Outrage but not to go too far," declared that "anger at the crass Australian radio hoaxers" was justified, but warned against "another witch hunt."

One thing is certain. The British and international public will continue to be force-fed a diet of royal baby propaganda. The social function of the monarchy remains too important for that to end.



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