



**Editorial Complaints Unit
BBC Information
PO Box 1922
Glasgow G2 3WT**

4 September 2004

Dear Editorial Complaints Unit,

Appeal – Alison and Maude

We write with reference to the PCU response dated 31 August 2004, to our two separate complaints sent 17 August 2004. We would like to make an appeal against the decisions made and raise the issue that we believed the response to have been curt, insincere and discourteous.

It may be helpful if we briefly outline our interest in this particular matter. Ligali is a non-profit organisation and is the first African British¹ investigative, monitoring, equality and complaints Board. The collective remit of our organisation is, amongst other things, the eradication of negative and inaccurate racial and cultural stereotypes and to challenge historically ingrained perceptions of our community that stigmatise, marginalise, caricature or socio-economically disadvantage African Britons.

We received several complaints about the racist language used during the Radio Four broadcast *Alison and Maude*. We object to the PCU's condensing its reply to our two totally distinct issues into a single response. Although we were the author of the final submitted complaints this, inappropriate and indiscriminate summary approach indicated the lack of attention and respect given to the diverse merits of each case.

¹ **African British** is the name now used to describe the community previously mislabelled as Afro-Caribbean, Black British, UK Black, Negro, Coloured and Black. It embraces all British nationals with antecedents originating directly from Africa or indirectly via African diasporic communities, such as those in the Caribbean and South America.



Our main grievance refers to the PCU response to our complaint about the racist language used in the radio four 'comedy' Alison and Maude. The curt response and lack of detail indicating why our complaint would not be investigated was discourteous. Our original complaint was;

Alison and Maude – African Children

BBC Radio 4

Mon 23 Aug 2004, 11:30

During the 'Alison and Maude' drama written by Dave Lamb on BBC Radio Four, the character 'Ethel' played by actress June Brown made several offensive remarks about African children.

During an extremely abhorrent rant she remarked that there were far too many African children in the world, and 'we ought to strangle them at birth to stop them coming over here in their thousands when they grow up. [They] look like horrible little monkeys the lot of them....little chocolate monsters, munching on bananas all day'. Her comments made in a public place were left unchallenged by the other characters and implied they agreed that her diatribe was acceptable.

The comments made represented unnecessarily cruel and gratuitous vitriol which disparaged African and African British people. The crude remarks exploited derogatory racial perceptions about vulnerable Africans, the inclusion of the characters preceding comments about the innocence of children was used to set the context of her tirade and convey a sense of superiority of European children over African children.

The single sentence PCU response was;

"And in what "Radio Times" said about the play you mention, the unacceptable nature of Ethel's views was made clear; she was described as "lovely but racist", and I'd be very surprised if this wasn't also made clear in the drama itself."

We believe this analysis to be incorrect and this PCU response to be offensive. The producer guidelines on BBC Value and Standards states that *when [pejorative terminology is] used by characters in drama programmes they are just as sensitive as racial abuse and should be considered accordingly*. The PCU response was very dismissive and unprofessional in its failure to acknowledge this guideline.



Indeed the PCU response caused offense by not rejecting the description ‘lovely but racist’ as a morally untenable position whilst describing the unacceptable nature of Ethel’s views. None of Ligali’s complainants had read the “Radio Times” nor was the comment challenged in the drama itself. This fact that would have been apparent if the complaint had been thoroughly investigated.

The 1990 Broadcasting Act (the 1990 Act) required that "[nothing should be included which] *offends against good taste and decency*" or "[is likely to be] *offensive to public feeling*".

Determining matters of context for these issues are determined by the degree of harm or offence caused by the inclusion of a particular sort of material, the likely size and composition of the audience, the likely expectation of the audience, the extent to which content can be brought to the attention of the audience e.g. by the giving of information, and the effect of the material on somebody who views or hears it by chance.

There was no expectation for any of our complainants (including myself) to hear such offensive rhetoric targeted at African Children. The vitriol went beyond comedy, beyond decency, and had no legitimate reason for its inclusion to be deemed acceptable. We deem this a serious breach of the BBC producers guidelines.

Finally, we would like to add that we find all instances of the label ‘black’ offensive when used in a racial context. It would be appreciated if when replying to our concerns you respectfully referred to all British nationals with antecedents originating directly from Africa or indirectly via African diasporic communities, such as those in the Caribbean and South America as African or African British.

We look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely

Toyin Agbetu
The Ligali Organisation