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### Newspapers support recycling:

Recycled paper made up 80.6 per cent of the raw material for UK newspapers in 2006

## Wham! Bam! Thank you, George

Cumbrian PR and media adviser **Alan Air** detects a softening of media attitudes towards 'cruising' in his latest column on what the papers say



It is a sign of the times when pop star George Michael's latest indiscretion in a toilet on Hampstead Heath does not receive blanket condemnation in the British press. After all, it's not that long since his rendezvous with a 'pretty' policeman in an LA public convenience prompted one of the *Sun's* wittiest-ever front page splash headlines, *Zip Me Up Before You Go Go*.

Although the former Wham! singer's new urinal bust was widely reported, media outrage was noticeably muted. A far cry from newspapers' concerted attacks on terrified British gays in the 1950s. Then, thanks to regular 'outings', high-profile scandals linking clandestine lifestyles to espionage and cowardly articles on 'How To Spot A Possible Homo', British newspapers from the *Sunday Mirror* to the *Sunday Pictorial* greatly added to a terrifying climate of fear that drove many gay men – including Alan Turing who helped break the Nazis' Enigma code – to suicide.

So has the traditionally anti-gay British press had a permanent change of heart? I doubt it but right-leaning papers, probably confused by the candour of openly Conservative homosexuals like MP Alan Duncan, seem fearful about being out of step

with post-Diana Britain and alienating gay readers, even those who are not in the least aroused by the aroma of yellow disinfectant blocks.

Over at the normally indignant *Daily Telegraph*, writer Neil McCormick was utterly relaxed, cheekily suggesting that the pop star buy his own public lavatory to indulge his al fresco sex fetish. Even pantomime homophobe Richard Littlejohn in the *Daily Mail* wasn't really worried about who might be behind him, largely ranting about how the rich and famous are treated differently to the rest of us.

It took Deborah Orr in the right-on, pink tinged *Independent* to boldly assert that, "some members of the gay community have obsessed about their own rights for so long now that they've forgotten that anyone else's might be deserving of respect as well."

### CREDIT CRUNCH

Suddenly, everyone in the media is an expert on the global monetary crisis. And whilst the *Daily Telegraph's* very own Mystic Meg, business correspondent Jeff Randall, sniffed the fetid financial air some time ago, most newspapers are now desperate-

ly searching back copies for the words credit and crunch (not necessarily together or even on the same page) as evidence of remarkable journalistic foresight.

Readers too are not immune to selective amnesia, self-righteously tutting at articles about music hall legend Fannie Mae, derivatives and the sub-prime US housing market, whilst conveniently forgetting how only a year ago they gleefully booked a luxury world cruise against the rising equity locked up in their modest post-war semi.

As someone addicted to the Shakespearean mantra – neither a borrower nor a lender be – and thus baffled by incomprehensible explanations about the root cause of the international credit crunch, it needed the journalistic clarity of *FT* writer Nic Cicutti to clear my own fog. "For years, banks offered mortgages to people with poor credit histories," he explained with childlike simplicity. "The loans were set at low rates – but only for an initial period. As soon as those rates started to rise, so did borrowers' inability to pay." At last, *comprendo* (kind of). While Ruki Sayid at the *Daily Mirror* helped me realise just how out-of-touch I am with

modern-day poverty indices made worse by the cash squeeze. Up to a third of British families now have to recycle previous meals to make the weekly shop go further, he reported. As a lover of bubble and squeak, re-heated Bolognese sauce and cold toast I hadn't realised just how desperate my economic situation had become.

### BIG BANG

And finally... the media's biggest non-event of the year was surely the switching on of Geneva's Large Hadron Collider. Hyped by every news provider from the *Sun* and *Guardian* to the BBC as the day our planet could be swallowed up by a metaphysical black hole – as opposed to its financial cousin, the Big Bang – turned out to be a whimper of proton-smashing proportions.

Needing Hawkins-esque intelligence to actually understand the damned experiment, and with nothing to actually see apart from the impressive *Stargate* machinery, the desperate attempt to turn this into a frenzied media event that would captivate millions of readers was doomed from the start.

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Published by Cumbrian Newspapers Ltd, Newspaper House, Dalston Road, Carlisle, Cumbria CA2 5UA