

## Two Rare Talents

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I've long been an admirer of Kerry O'Brien, presenter of the nightly '7.30 Report' on Australia's ABC1. But it was not until his recent conversation with President Barack Obama that I realised the full extent of his enormous talent. It was, for me, the most compelling piece of television of recent years, reminiscent of the best of the late 60s and early 70s when the medium was more actively committed to its own betterment.

But I was never quite certain of whom O'Brien reminded me until I took a book off the shelf last week which I've intended to read for years – the autobiography of the great British journalist, writer and documentary maker, Alan Whicker. Whicker, interestingly, started in television on a similar program, as a roving reporter in 1957 for Britain's 'Tonight' which ran from 6.05 pm until 6.45 pm. The original early evening current affairs and magazine program, it also featured biting satire from Derek Hart; the homely, offbeat regional reporting of the legendary Fyfe Robertson; a topical calypso most nights from Cy Grant; and the superbly off hand anchoring of Cliff Michelmore. It would be far fetched to suggest O'Brien's 7.30 Report is modeled on Tonight – the genre has come much too far for that, and anyway the 7.30 Report has been doing it right in its own right for a very long time. Nevertheless, in many respects Tonight got it so right at the time, on the first pass, that many of its finest qualities still echo around the world in the best 'today tonight' shows, and especially on the 7.30 Report.

The similarities are apparent, too, in a personal comparison between Whicker and O'Brien, where the same dignity, authority and mild mischief are evident. The same impeccable research and preparation. The same ability to push just a little further than the interviewee wants to go, but with such gentility and good humour that no-one could object. The same ease with worldly whimsy, and the same skill in weaving it.

Whicker used to say that everyone has one good television interview in them, and it's immensely rewarding to see the 7.30 Report providing space for O'Brien to present more lengthy, personality-based interviews. The moving conversation with James Taylor recently was a gem, for instance, and the program's website archives others you'd want to watch again. But the conversation with the US President was the best thing of its kind I've seen on Australian TV, perhaps ever. Television as a medium is long past its best and, frankly, not much to write home about in this country. But when Obama leaned forward to shake O'Brien's hand and said "I enjoyed it", you knew he meant it and you knew you'd seen something special.

O'Brien is a quietly compelling presence – the best – in his usual role as a hard nosed political harrier. But as a conversationalist he's also the best thing by far in this country and ranks with any of the more established names of the craft ("...our 'Craft' ", capital C, as Whicker called it with delicious irony). In conversation mode, O'Brien teases and tantalises information from his guests just as Whicker did, self-evidently on equal terms but never dominant or presumptuous.

The Obama conversation combined both approaches and the result was incomparable. In an era of formularized panel programs, where loud people sit around sneering at whoever's drawn the short straw in the news that day, this has become an exceptionally rare talent. Thank-you, Mr O'Brien, for ensuring its survival with such poise.

*7.30 Report* <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/>

*Alan Whicker piece to camera on Papa Doc Duvalier*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JO9sDVGU5HQ&feature=related>