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A Sex Change for Mr. Clean?

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The European Parliament evidently has too much time on its hands. Last week, this glorious and august legislative body voted to warn advertisers and marketers against “sexual stereotyping.” Seriously.

Anyone viewing today’s advertisements is certainly aware of the charged sexual content that is constantly piped into our homes through advertising messages and images. Much of it is pornographic, at least in the fundamental sense of the word. The images are intended to fire sexual interest in hopes of attracting sales and brand interest.



The New York Times reports that some of these advertisements are exactly what the European Parliament is attempting to eliminate. The legislature voted 504 to 110 to “scold” advertisers and call the industry to higher standards.

But it turns out that these higher standards are not intended to produce advertisements that are necessarily less sexually-charged, just free from “sexual stereotyping.”

The clothing powerhouse Dolce & Gabbana was cited as an example of an offending company. The firm, known for its advocacy of liberal causes, was cited for an advertisement that featured “a woman in spike heels pinned to the ground by sweaty men in tight jeans.”

The European Parliament does not like that advertisement. Not one bit. But the concern is not the explicit sexuality, but the sexual stereotyping. The European Parliament wants gender balancing in ads. Next time, perhaps the firm had better feature a man in spike heels pinned down by sweaty women in tight jeans. Fair is fair.

As Doreen Carvajal reports:

The concern, according to the committee report, is that stereotypes in advertising can “straitjacket women, men, girls and boys by restricting individuals to predetermined and artificial roles that are often degrading, humiliating and dumbed-down for both sexes.”

Another target of the European Parliament’s concern — Mr. Clean. The Parliamentary report argued that Mr. Clean, whose image dates from the 1950s, is an example of sexual stereotyping. Mr. Clean’s “muscular physique,” *The Times* reports, “might imply that only a strong man is powerful enough to tackle dirt.”

Does the late Orville Redenbacher’s image on his product’s packaging imply that only elderly men can handle popping corn? Is Wendy’s guilty of demeaning red-headed boys by suggesting that only red-headed girls can cook hamburgers? Should Tony the Tiger be balanced with Tanya?

It is hard to take this report — or this legislative body — seriously. There really is a big problem, but that problem is the fact that so many demeaning images of women are common to advertising. Beyond that we find the problem of so much sexually-explicit advertising content in the first place. But the European Parliament merely calls for gender equity in the images and messages.

This concern for “sexual stereotyping” in advertisements is a perfect representation of the postmodern temptation to

suggest that the utopian ideal of enforced gender equity will bring on a new epoch of human happiness. There *are* serious moral issues involving the advertising industry and the use of images that demean women, but this is not a report that can be taken seriously.

Here we find a presumably responsible legislative body that registers its concern about the iconic image of a cleaning product, suggesting that women are (or should be) insulted by Mr. Clean. The logic must be that the image of Mr. Clean implies that, in order to defeat dirt, women must call upon the assistance of a muscular man in a white t-shirt and an earring.

As Mary Honeyball, a member of the Women's Rights and Gender Equality Committee stated, "The report was passed by a big majority, and so there's obviously recognition that there is a need to look at this. There is unacceptable stereotyping."

So, watch out Mr. Clean. You just might be targeted for a sex change.

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