

Title:

Cashing the Czech

Word Count:

837

Summary:

Virtually every captain of industry is a stickler for detail. That should have been the first clue that the late Robert "Cap'n Bob" Maxwell wasn't qualified for the title, even though he thought he was. An innocuous incident occurred in the mid-80s that underscored this point, and in the process, symbolized why the demise of his fraudulent publishing empire was inevitable.

Keywords:

Robert Maxwell, Cap'n Bob, business ethics, celebrity anecdotes, celebrity vignettes, famous fraudsters, celebrities, Cyberiter

Article Body:

Whether Robert Maxwell committed suicide or was murdered may never be known to the public ...

Suffice it to say the disgraced publishing magnate cheated so many people and financial institutions to such an extent that there wouldn't be a paucity of suspects if it was the latter. Born in Slatinske Doly to poor parents as Jan Ludvick Hoch and Anglicizing his name when he migrated to Great Britain during World War II, Maxwell used the fog of combat to his advantage, picking off a scientific journal distributorship at a bargain rate. He soon parlayed that into more literary acquisitions and doing so with such aplomb, he even gained election to Parliament.

However, a trail of deceit began soon thereafter, which led to a High Court censorship, then to possible war crime allegations and, ultimately, to an amazing web of falsified balance sheets and deceptive bank loan collateral which masked Maxwell's mass looting of his own publishing empire's coffers. When all was about to come crashing down upon him, Maxwell was reported to have fallen overboard while yachting along the Canary Islands. His extensive double-dealing earned him the posthumous title of The Bouncing Czech.

Maxwell's bombastic ego, though, was authentic. He ached to be larger than life and to outdo any perceived rival, such as Australian billionaire Rupert Murdoch, whose own publishing empire spans the globe. Ironically, Maxwell tried to seize

any opportunity to portray Murdoch as a low-life, casting himself as a higher-minded alternative to the conscientious consumer. Thus, to counter Murdoch's titillation-themed, Tory-leaning tabloid, the Sun, Maxwell ran his Daily Mirror as a seemingly kinder, gentler, Labour-oriented purveyor of similar stories.

Maxwell always ran a distant second in the United Kingdom's tabloid wars, so he was constantly looking for an edge with which to tweak Murdoch's operations and further convey the image --- however cynical --- of his holding the higher social and ethical ground. I can attest that, at least once, a blend of this obsession and his blowhard personality got the better of him.

It was a summer day in the mid-80s, and the prospects of secondary smoke being a health issue in the workplace were beginning to be accepted as fact. It was surely noble for Cap'n Bob --- as Maxwell was derisively known --- to be among the first to attempt an office-wide smoking ban. The Mirror's headquarters was no doubt better served, but it was clear his motives were for self-promotion rather than a genuine concern for his employees' welfare.

The first clue that this was the case was the boisterous manner by which Maxwell arbitrarily enforced the policy. Specifically, he loved to make a scene if it showed him in an authoritarian and positive light. Thus, when Cap'n Bob proclaimed a ban, he did it for maximum effect. In this instance, he decreed that anyone caught smoking in his building would be fired on the spot.

On this day, Maxwell was holding court for visitors of some dignified nature. He was guiding them through the Mirror facilities when a man hunched over a nearby photocopy machine caught his attention. The man had a cigarette dangling from his lips.

Cap'n Bob summoned his guests to follow him over there. Puffing his chest as he approached the man puffing away, Maxwell began his diatribe within steps of his quarry and gained decibels with each successive step.

"Sir!" he exclaimed, "How much do you make a month?"

The target of his wrath was caught off-guard. It took him a moment to confirm that Maxwell was speaking to him; actually, 'at him' would be more accurate.

"I asked you a question," Maxwell pressed, making sure that his guests totally understood who was in charge of the moment, "And I expect a prompt answer. How much do you make a month!"

"2000 quid," was the nervous response. "Why do you ask?"

"You're smoking!" was the roared retort. Cap'n Bob then reached into his pocket in preparation for the coup de grace. He pulled out a wad of bills, quickly sifted through £2000 and jammed it into the surprised man's shirt pocket.

"There's a month's wage! You're fired! Now, get out!"

Maxwell then stormed away, his cotillion of impressed guests following dutifully behind. A strong boss had surely made a firm point.

Left in the wake, the stunned man retrieved the stash of cash from his pocket, looked at it and then shook his head in amazement.

"I was just called here to repair the copier," he shrugged. He put the money in his pants pocket, flicked a few ashes to the ground, headed toward the front door and proceeded to his van. Perhaps he had more calls to make that day, but he probably opted to cancel them and make his way to a pub, instead.

The incident capsulized Cap'n Bob's act in a nutshell. He was all show, with little attention to detail. It was a harbinger that whenever someone paid close heed to his affairs, he'd be sunk.

I just didn't think it would happen so literally.