

# WEARY SHE, DREARY HE AND BLEARY ME GET OUR LINES CROSSED

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THE DAY Mr and Mrs Dreary talked into my life marked the extension of one of the Post Office's lesser known but potentially most valuable services — the Crossed Line Service. Although this service is steadily expanding, it has not yet to my knowledge been included in any formal publicity.

The essence of the service is to enable one person to listen in on a telephone conversation between two other people.

Some months ago the North London telephone exchange to which I am a subscriber celebrated what appeared to be National Crossed Line Week. During this period I was treated to a variety of personalities and situations. I heard little old ladies telling each other of their ailments, incriminating confessions of adultery, previews of the latest insurance company crash and scrambled conversations between (perhaps) Cabinet Ministers.

The real advantage of the Crossed Line Service is that it gives the listener an opportunity to participate. For instance, for those wishing to introduce a flippant note, a few bars from an old rugby song can relax entirely the tense atmosphere of a tough business conversation.

It is sometimes possible to help out in difficulties. One of the conversations I received during National Crossed Line Week was of a pukka gentleman trying to give a postal address to what appeared to be his maiden aunt. He managed to get as far as the street but could not remember the district.

"NW8." I interjected. Without even a tremble from his stiff upper lip he thanked

me profusely and continued with his conversation as though it were the most normal thing in the world to be prompted by an anonymous voice.

Traditional British politeness is stunting the growth of this service. We are all too ready to murmur hasty apologies and put down the receiver.

We could, I feel, enter more into the spirit of it as the Americans have done. In some cities they have discovered that by obtaining an engaged tone and speaking over it, it is possible to communicate with everyone else who has got an engaged tone at the same time. Voices are a little indistinct but clear enough to enable a telephone number to be given. It was estimated that in one mid-Western town over a quarter of all social contacts were started in this way.

However, all may not be lost. I have recently been selected to participate in the Post Office's new de luxe Crossed Line Service.

And that is how I came across Mr and Mrs Dreary. A couple of weeks ago the telephone rang at 7.30 am and I was immediately connected to a tough sounding Cockney talking to his sad and complaining wife. Their name probably isn't Dreary at all but I have yet to establish who they are.

About every third day I am treated to another early morning episode of the Dreary Saga. Usually it is not very interesting, being concerned mostly with how badly the children are behaving and how the toast has burnt itself for the second day running.

But the awful thing is that Mrs Dreary is clearly heading for a nervous breakdown. Every day she is able to bear less and less. Already there have been tears and a threat

to "throw it all in." Help obviously must be got to her. But how? The last time I heard from them I tentatively asked what number I was speaking to but was told sharply by Mr Dreary to shut up.

So every time I hear from them now I listen for some clue as to their whereabouts and anxiously hope that Mrs D will be more cheerful. Sooner or later I will find out enough to locate them; then, perhaps, some local voluntary organisation will be able to go along and see what can be done.

But what of the Mr and Mrs Drearys with different names up and down the country whose plight will not be noticed until the breakdown has happened or the marriage is in pieces? The de luxe service may not have reached them. Their sufferings—like my Mrs Dreary's agonised cry last week: "Here I am all day long in this house with no one to talk to but the bleeding kids"—go unheard by the rest of us.

The problem may be no more serious than a lack of that basic human friendship, the kind of helping hand which in a normal community we would all give each other, but which in crowded cities—where telephone systems are overloaded—we do not give because we do not know of the needs of those around us.

Would it not be feasible for the Post Office to set aside a number on each exchange which anyone could dial if they wanted to talk to others, thus providing officially a service which now only happens accidentally?

Then with luck I can rename the people who wake me up—"Monsieur and Madame Joie de Vivre," perhaps.—**RICHARD BARR.**