

OFF THE PAGE
Are We Alone?

BBC Radio 4, Friday 3rd March, 2006



At 11pm on Friday 3rd March, the BBC Radio 4 discussion programme, *Off The Page*, dipped its toe into the world of ufology. Victoria Coren hosted the half-hour show and the guests were former head of the government UFO desk, Nick Pope, psychologist, Chris French and comedy writer, Charlie Skelton. Skelton was also a close friend of the host and also the fake contestant on the Channel 4 programme, *Space Cadets*.

Each guest was given the opportunity to read from a written statement that they had prepared and then a discussion ensued.

Nick Pope kicked things off, stating his belief that some UFOs were indeed extraterrestrial craft. He used the 1980 Rendlesham Forest case to affirm his position.

He was immediately pounced upon by Chris French, who began spouting chapter and verse about how the eyewitnesses contradicted themselves, how they saw a lighthouse and how the indentations found in the forest were rabbit holes. Charlie Skelton just made jokes.

Chris French read his statement, reciting from Douglas Adams' *The Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy* and reminding us that he co-edits *Sceptic*

magazine. Although sceptical about UFO claims, he reminded us that he was a supporter of The Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) and that it wasn't just that people like him just poo-pooed UFO stories, it was just that there was no evidence strong enough for them to believe.

French went out of his way to paint abductee experiencers as, well, nutters, despite saying the exact opposite only a few seconds before! He referred to 'a number of studies', which declared that most people who reported being abducted by aliens were 'eccentric' in some way or had a different psychological profile than 'normal' people. Talk about insulting with a smile!

Pope added that all abductee reports could not be dismissed, just as that all UFO reports could not be explained. French fired back, using the Drake Equation as a defence and declaring that even if there were a great many advanced civilisations out there, the distances involved were too great for them to travel – blah blah blah.

Charlie Skelton's was asked by Coren what he thought about alien abduction. He replied: "I'm against it." You can see where we're heading here... To be fair, though, he *did* add that he thought that some sceptics were as obsessed with debunking as believers were with trying to prove their claims.

The host then asked why aliens did not just land on the White House lawn. French reaffirmed his belief that the distances were too great and

that the best hope for proving intelligent alien life was through the SETI project.

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Skelton then presented his case, referring with great jollity about his experiences on the *Space Cadets* show. He said that he was chosen for the programme because of his remarkable ability to lie convincingly. Indeed, he said that the lie was so well-constructed that he almost began believing it himself. Basically, he was telling us that people lie, that they make up stories. Obviously this was to inform us that UFO eyewitnesses were all liars. He said that in the end, it was easier to believe the lie, rather than keep reminding himself that it was all a hoax in an aircraft hangar in Suffolk.

The program can be listened to by going to the following BBC website address:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/offthepage/pip/2evlg/>

When Coren asked Nick Pope the White House lawn question, he replied that he had no idea why aliens would not land there, but added that we could not understand the motives behind a completely alien life form.

The program ended as we should really expect, with a clip from *The Clangers* whistling and hooting and the announcer declaring:

“A dropped clanger ending this week’s edition of *Off The Page...*”

Yet again, the UFO subject is ridiculed in the media, but at least Nick Pope did his best not to allow French and Skelton to completely turn the show into a farce, although the *Clangers* ending did just that, leaving listeners in no doubt that aliens were all a fantasy.