

The news that two TV stars were pregnant was swiftly followed by rumours that they had lost their jobs as a result. So why no outrage? Sali Hughes reports

Dannii and Denise

- a cautionary tale

Five years ago, when I was heavily pregnant with my first child, a neighbour spotted me getting into my car and asked if I should be driving in my condition. I said firmly that sitting down, tapping my foot and listening to tunes on the stereo would be perfectly manageable, thanks, and slammed the door before I did him an injury. It's a shame Denise van Outen can't do the same without committing career suicide, since her job as judge on *Over the Rainbow* would involve the same level of exertion and little or no jeopardy. Yet this week, Van Outen has apparently been ousted as judge on the weary-looking Andrew Lloyd Webber franchise for daring to be heavily pregnant by the time it finishes its (please God, let it be last) run.

The BBC deny that Van Outen's pregnancy had anything to do with her dismissal (they point out that the entire judging panel has been replaced, though Van Outen is reported only to have lost her place at the last minute) and will presumably leave the scant complaints to gather dust in an in-tray marked Moira Stuart and Arlene Phillips. Meanwhile Talkback, the producer of *The X Factor*, is refusing to confirm or deny rumours that pregnant Dannii Minogue is about to be kicked off the show's judging panel. Minogue (the unmistakable hit of the last series) has yet to comment on whether she even wants to keep the gig, but Van Outen, talking at a Sport Relief press call this week, said she felt "let-down and disappointed" and confirmed that during talks with the BBC, "It was mentioned to me that being pregnant was an issue. If I was having a tough pregnancy I could maybe understand the decision, but I feel perfectly fine." In any business but showbusiness, this, if true, might be grounds for an open and shut tribunal. But most TV stars are contracted without employee rights - a postroom worker at the Beeb would have more of a fighting chance than a host on its flagship programme.

But legal entitlements aside, what is perhaps more dysfunctional is how the news about Minogue and Van Outen has been greeted only by breezy discussions as to which flat-stomached starlets will replace them. When Minogue's pregnancy was confirmed (and without her making any comment on her future plans), I stared agog as *This Morning* hosts Phillip Schofield and Holly Willoughby - who herself worked throughout her pregnancy and returned to work as host of *The Xtra Factor* soon after the birth, carrycot in hand - immediately began chatting giddily about who would take her place on *The X Factor* panel. The tabloid press has cheerfully adopted the same approach. Similar assumptions in any other profession would be unspeakable.

But while it is clearly monstrous, immoral and legally dubious that any woman should have to sacrifice her job to what is an entirely natural state, the celebrity version of pregnancy and motherhood does raise the question as to whether the star mummies are colluding with the TV execs. Once pregnant, most go away before things get too hefty, and come back six weeks after birth to slide into a size eight body-con frock with unfeasible ease. And they do it with such aplomb that their bump eclipses the day job. A pregnant celebrity is now almost guaranteed some kind

of endorsement deal. Dannii's unborn is already hanging out with Twiggy on a Cape Town beach for M&S, there's Emma Bunton and her Mamas & Papas maternity wear, Myleene Klass's Mothercare range, Van Outen for very.co.uk - the array of baby bumf to have been questionably skimmed with celebrity influence is dizzying - a celebrity yummy mummy can hit paydirt during her 40-week reign. It's worth taking the time out to reap the rewards.

Celebs are visibly much better at motherhood than the rest of us. They enjoy immaculate pregnancies, perfect births (Kate Winslet even admitted to having hidden her caesarean delivery because she felt ashamed) leaving barely a trace on their perfect bodies. While the rest of us treat our pregnancies as something to just get on with - as wildly exciting, joyous or downright inconvenient as they certainly can be - stars often present theirs as some higher state that adds mystique to an already unattainable brand.

Back in the real world, we are at a point when about 7% of the pregnant workforce are pushed out of their jobs because they're expecting (the true figures are likely to be higher given that lodging a grievance can wreck a career). No normal women have the fallback of setting up a line of massage creams and lambskin papooses. And in a society that looks to celebrities for role models, it would be naïve not to assume that seeing high-profile pregnant women sidelined, usually without complaint or comment, has an impact on how pregnancy is perceived across the board.

There are some notable exceptions. Davina McCall has been massively, burstingly pregnant during three series of *Big Brother*, to the point where you almost hope the housemates have been selected for their St John Ambulance certificates as much as their single-digit IQs. McCall famously squeezed her imminent arrival into a T-shirt crystal-studded with the words Big Mutha for the 2002 final, yet her pregnancies - loud and proud though they are - always seem to be a secondary condition to the business in hand, rather than a commodity in their own right. The fact that she is always resolutely herself helps - returning to work with a bit more junk in the trunk and gradually shedding it the old-fashioned way (her fitness DVDs outsell the competition by a large margin) - as opposed to living for six weeks on *SmartWater* and banging out 600 ab-crunches while a nanny does the 6am feed. While McCall may well be blessed with reasonable employers in Endemol, I don't accept that it's a stroke of luck she escapes the expectation that she'll go and do the mother thing somewhere else, like a Magdelene girl in a Marc Jacobs smock. McCall waddles to her own tune.

But perhaps the unspoken deal is struck earlier on in the chain of employment. In theory, pregnancy changes very little in our job performance. A doctor remains the same doctor when pregnant, a teacher remains the same teacher, but when most female TV hosts

are now hired predominantly on looks, then a condition that alters their appearance so dramatically does compromise what they're being paid to bring to the party. Which rightly brings the issue back to the suits doing the hiring and firing. As sure as Lloyd Webber's face will never be HD-ready and Simon Cowell will ultimately lose his battle with moobs, their female panel-mates will probably have babies, and get a few stretchmarks too. Isn't it about time we had the balls not to buzz them off?

Pregnant pause: Dannii Minogue (left) and Denise van Outen

