



It's the show that's shaken up daytime TV (and left men quaking) with oh-so intimate admissions from its female stars. But one question makes the *Loose Women* worry... are they sharing TOO much?

Why we confess to it *all*

From far left: Andrea McLean, Denise van Outen, Nadia Sawalha and Janet Street-Porter. Right, from top: Katie Price, Penny Lancaster and Ruth Langsford

PHOTOGRAPH BY RAC

BY LOUISE GANNON

Come the next election, *Loose Women* is going to be more important than *Question Time* in deciding the future of the nation.'

So says Janet Street-Porter, shouting above the noise of hair-dryers, shrieks of laughter, tea orders and the general hustle and bustle that occurs when four presenters from the award-winning, groundbreaking ITV daytime show – Andrea McLean, Denise van Outen, Nadia Sawalha and Street-Porter – get together for an exclusive photo-shoot for *Event*.

We are talking politics and the power of a TV juggernaut that has in the past few years been transformed from a rather messy 'hen-night' affair (where several hosts, including Denise Welch and Carol McGiffin, were better known for drinking than debating) into a feisty issue-led show that won an award from *Mind* for its coverage of mental-health matters.

'And that's the point,' says former newspaper editor Street-Porter. 'It's the only show on TV where women discuss things from their sex lives to the divorce laws, and it's relevant to people's lives because we are not just talking facts and figures but how it affects them and us.'

'So when we start on politics, we talk about it in a way that no one else does on TV. We have the power to educate and inform in a way that is entertaining and relatable and far more inclusive than any political show.'

Street-Porter becomes even more animated as she warms to her theme. 'What people don't realise is who watches our show. When I met David Cameron, Sam Cameron told me she was a massive *Loose Women* fan. She wasn't just saying it, because she kept talking about various outfits I'd worn

on the show. And the Duchess of Cornwall loves it because she told us. They all do.' It is also the show that regular guest Simon Cowell says he wishes he had come up with. Oprah Winfrey gave it her seal of approval by appearing on *Loose Women* in 2013.

So would they like to have Theresa May as a guest? 'Yes,' the four presenters chorus.

Jeremy Corbyn? Van Outen pulls a face. The 43-year-old West End star, who made her name hosting *The Big Breakfast* in 1997, says, 'To be honest, I prefer talking about more fun stuff. I like it when we all have a real laugh.'

In these times of #MeToo and Time's Up, with revelations of widespread sexual misconduct towards women in the workplace and the thorny issue of equal pay, it might seem like there isn't a lot to laugh about for women today.

But *Loose Women*, which is watched by five million

people over a week and recently celebrated its 18th anniversary, is riding the crest of the women's wave, mixing highly emotional discussions on abuse with celebrity interviews and topics ranging from Syria to shoes.

'And the menopause,' chips in Scottish presenter McLean. 'I'm most proud that we talk about something no one else on television really does. We never get sick of talking about it because millions of women in this country are going through it.'

McLean recently admitted to wearing sanitary towels under her arms before going live on air because her hot flushes have been so extreme. And when she revealed in 2016 that she was taking time out to have a hysterectomy after struggling for years with endometriosis, 10,000 viewers contacted the show to applaud her 'honesty and openness'.

Meanwhile, former *EastEnders* star Sawalha has talked about losing so much pubic hair due to the menopause that she now has to do a 'pubic combover'.

What makes *Loose Women* work, according to the show's editor, Sally Shelford, is the distinct and different personalities of the 15 women who make up the five-day-a-week panel and the ethos of 'absolute equality among the presenters', from Street-Porter through to reality star Katie Price.

'The women who appear on the show bring their lives with them, and that's what makes it special,' says Shelford. 'We start having a discussion about something that's going on in the news and these women will open up about how it affects them. We have created this incredible environment of trust, where people feel they can be open.'

The programme has aired some notable confessions. Last year, Rod Stewart's wife, Penny Lancaster, admitted for the first time how she had been sexually assaulted as a young model. And when Cliff Richard chose to give his first interview in the wake of sexual-abuse allegations against him being dropped, it was on *Loose Women* that he chose to discuss his sexuality and suicidal thoughts, and how he had tried to clear his name.

'We don't just try to talk about the news – we make and break news,' says McLean. 'The whole vibe is extremely female: we get things done, we show our weaknesses and strengths, we are supportive. It's the opposite of bitchiness. It's women at their best. We will push ourselves right out of our comfort zone if we think we can send a message that we believe in passionately.'

Last year's headline-grabbing Body Stories campaign, shot by rock star photographer Bryan Adams, saw nine of the show's stars un-airbrushed in bikinis and swimsuits to send a message of

body confidence to their viewers. 'I was completely terrified about it,' says Sawalha. 'I was refusing to do it until I had a word with myself about practising what I preached and setting an example to my daughter. Afterwards I felt totally empowered.'

'So did I,' adds Street-Porter. 'Because I went out and bought a very expensive swimsuit for the shoot and it looked fantastic. I'm 71, I'm in a swimsuit, there was no way I was going to look like a pile of s***.'

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The show has 15 regular presenters but only four appear at any one time, with McLean, Ruth Langsford or Christine Lampard acting as anchor. Other guest presenters occasionally feature, alongside celebrities such as Bryan Ferry, Robbie Williams and Bette Midler. Topics up for discussion are decided at a pre-show morning meeting based on that day's news, and every show is filmed before a live – mainly female – audience. The other ►► extraordinary thing about *Loose Women* is that every presenter gets paid the same, regardless of their age, experience or star appeal. 'There's total and absolute equality,' says Sawalha, 53. 'And that's how it should be.'

In terms of TV-broadcasting pay structures, this is almost unheard of, and is perhaps because the show is an all-woman affair, run by a female editor with a largely female production team.

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As a group of women, the presenters could not be more different. There is the bleeding-heart Leftie Sawalha, who home-schools her two daughters and fronts a podcast with her husband, Mark Adderley, about how to survive marriage. There's glamour from van Outen and McLean, who, during her ten-year stint on the show, has been divorced and remarried for a third time to businessman Nick Feeney. And then there's the veteran broadcaster, Mail Online columnist and former *Independent On Sunday* editor Street-Porter. Or rather, there isn't, because having inspected and dismissed the clothes on offer at the photo-shoot, she has gone home to find a dress of her own. 'That's Janet,' says Sawalha, raising an eyebrow.

Street-Porter returns an hour later, brandishing some form-fitting dresses that suit her long, lean body. At 71 she has earned the right to do and say exactly what the hell she wants.

'There are two things I don't want you to call me,' she says. 'One is curmudgeonly – which is incredibly patronising – and the

other is national treasure – which I hate as much.'

Loose Women has brought Street-Porter kicking and screaming to a daytime audience far more used to the touchy-feely style of Fern Britton or Judy Finnigan. Now she gets stopped in supermarkets when she's buying her avocados.

'It happens all the time,' she says. 'But the thing I hate is the touching. People grabbing your arm. The good thing is that because of *Loose Women* everyone knows what I'm like. I just say: "Do you mind not touching me, I don't like it," and they just laugh.'

Street-Porter has also been asked – on many occasions – to stand as a politician. 'I did toy with setting up a grey-power movement,' she

says, 'but then I lost interest. Politics needs a kick up the arse, but I know I'm not going down that route because I don't have the time you need to put into it. Leave it to other people. Amber Rudd – big fan of hers. Leave it to them.'

And for the record – she points out – liking the Tory Home Secretary does not mean she votes Conservative. 'No one knows my

politics,' she says. 'What they do know is I say what I think. In some ways I'm the polar opposite of Nadia, but on some subjects we think the same.' Sawalha adds, 'We just have a very different way of dealing with things.'

The opinions on *Loose Women* tend to be less along party-political lines, more along social ones. And for all that van Outen claims to enjoy the fluffier debates (she recently stripped to a thong to

have a bum lift live on air), she has won a whole new audience of fans talking about her struggles with seven-year-old daughter Betsy's dyspraxia and dyslexia. This saw van Outen relocate from the country to London so Betsy could attend a specialist school.

She has also opened up about her amicable relationship with her theatre-star ex-husband, Lee Mead, who still comes round for dinner once a week and has become friends with her current boyfriend, City trader Edward Boxshall. For someone who has always been careful not to discuss her private life in interviews, it's something of a turnaround.

She shrugs when I mention this. 'When you are on *Loose Women* you feel you are sitting around with your mates,' she says. 'There's no point being guarded and I'm really happy to talk about stuff because you get such positive responses back, and people actually get a proper glimpse into who you really are.'

'The problem with that is that sometimes we are very guilty of oversharing,' laughs Sawalha.

'Janet loves talking about her relationship with her mum and her sex life,' says van Outen with a wink. 'She talks about her sex life A LOT.'

McLean recently came home to be confronted by her teenage son, Fin, demanding to know if she had really told the world that his bedroom smelled of feet. 'He did actually see the funny side of it,' she says. 'But you forget what impact saying something like that has on your kids or your partners. Sometimes you have to stop yourself.' But they rarely do.

There are, they admit, certain

men who have terror in their eyes when they step onto the set of *Loose Women*. Nigel Farage was made mincemeat of by panellist Saira Khan after he defended Donald Trump's Muslim ban. The adventure-junkie Bear

Grylls, who thinks nothing of leaping out of planes into seas filled with sharks and killer jellyfish, admitted to being way out of his comfort zone on the show. 'But he was lovely,' laughs McLean. 'And we had a great chat. I don't know why men would be so scared...'

All the presenters cite other women as their favourite guests – from Oprah Winfrey and Drew Barrymore to Toni Collette. Street-Porter's favourite guest was Bette Midler.

'Love her,' she says. 'I know her husband [artist Martin von Haselberg]. As she sat down, someone asked how I knew her husband, and quick as a flash she piped up: "She had sex with him before I did."' Street-Porter hoots with laughter, then gets up to excuse herself for leaving early. Other fish to fry.

Van Outen is grinning at her across the table as she packs up her belongings. 'She's had enough. – she's going for a lie down on her tweed sofa,' quips van Outen. 'She cracks me up. I love the fact that someone like me gets to do a television show with someone like her. It's just genius.'

It is clearly the reason why *Loose Women* continues to grab the ratings and headlines. But these women are on a mission to be taken very seriously. General election aside, there is no limit to their ambitions.

'What we want next is a Bafta,' says McLean. 'We want to be recognised for what we are doing for women on television and for women in Britain. And we want that award.' ☑

'Loose Women' airs weekdays at 12.30pm on ITV

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Posing for the Body Stories campaign: from left, Stacey Solomon, Linda Robson, Katie Price, Jane Moore, Saira Khan, Nadia Sawalha, Andrea McLean, Coleen Nolan and Janet Street-Porter. Left: top, Stacey Solomon, below, Coleen Nolan