

A lecture on decent behaviour

Being a turncoat MP is not new. The eighteenth century satirist Peter Pindar described William Windham MP as "Turncoat Windham, to no party true". There have been numerous successors.

The latest of this changeable kidney is Mr Shaun Woodward. At the general election in 1997 he stood as a Conservative and was enthusiastically elected as such by the honest burghers of Witney, a market town near where I live in Oxfordshire. To the grief of the said burghers, Mr Woodward has just declared that he is after all the *Labour* MP for Witney. His constituents, protesting that they were not consulted on this interesting transformation, have been told to lump it.

Mr Woodward might have remembered some predecessors. There was Bruce Douglas-Mann, elected as Labour MP for Merton, Mitcham and Morden. In 1982 he felt obliged to defect to the Alliance. He thereupon resigned his seat and offered himself to the voters all over again under his new insignia. At the resulting by-election they rejected him. Still, he had done the decent thing. When Dick Taverne (now Lord Taverne), then Labour MP for Lincoln, left his party in 1972 he too resigned his seat and stood again in the resulting by-election. He was successful in being re-elected. Again, he had done the decent thing.

Mr Shaun Woodward has not done the decent thing. He has rejected requests that he should follow in the footsteps of Douglas-Man and Taverne. Taking now the Labour whip, he clings still to his safe Tory seat, his parliamentary privileges, his comfortable salary, and his pension rights. He is unmoved by the predominant opinion in Witney, which is that he should at once apply to become Steward of the Chiltern Hundreds (an expedient whereby MPs are excused further attendance in the House).

Mr Woodward's first Commons speech as a defector to Labour was delivered on the second reading (March 9) of the Race Relations (Amendment) Bill, brought from the Lords. The Bill's main purposes are to extend the Race Relations Act 1976 as respects public authorities and to make chief officers of police vicariously liable for racist acts by their officers. In his speech Mr Woodward delivered a lecture on decent behaviour, assuring us that "the pursuit of decency is a moral quest".

In the course of this he attacked my old friend Gerald Howarth, the Conservative MP for Aldershot. He quoted with opprobrium what Mr Howarth had said in the Commons last March, during the debate on the Stephen Lawrence inquiry: "no Government have ever received a mandate to turn the United Kingdom into a multicultural society". If he had cared he might have added that if any Government had sought such a mandate it would have been refused. By sleight of politics, our supposedly democratic society has been peaceably revolutionised by a change the majority never wanted. It is a tribute I suppose to British phlegm.

Mr Woodward criticised Mr Howarth's statement regretting that some people from abroad are not content to learn and accept our native customs and traditions, but wish to assert their own. Here he might have cited Mr Justice Singer's recent statement as to the law's need to protect ethnic youngsters from parents who, motivated by cultural or religious values deriving from overseas, seek to subject them to coercion by forced marriage or forced residence abroad (*Re KR (a child) (abduction: forcible removal by parents)* [1999] 4 All ER 954). The learned

judge warned parents of ethnic children to understand that they may face considerable difficulties if they hope on the one hand to bring them up in an English educational system and society but at the same time to retain every aspect of their own traditions and expectations.

The Conservative MP Dr Julian Lewis countered Mr Woodward's sentiments: "Unlike the honourable Gentleman, I am a third generation descendant of an immigrant family. My family recognised that it was incumbent on us to adapt ourselves to some extent to the history and culture of the country to which we were coming. It is not unreasonable to ask that of people who have chosen to make their lives here".

Mr Woodward gave us all our orders. We must not, he said, fear multiculturalism: "we have to desire it". When his turn came to speak in the debate, Mr Howarth rebuked Mr Woodward, saying his speech was "particularly nauseating . . . [h]e campaigned vigorously for the Conservative party, attacked this Government and then, overnight, switched and suddenly found that everything that the Conservatives had done was nauseating and anathema . . ."

So not everyone is prepared to take lectures on decency from Mr Shaun Woodward MP.

Francis Bennion

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