

Whitsun adjournment debate

If, as I do, you believe in the value of the House of Commons as the tribunal of the people you should pay some attention to its adjournment debates. This is difficult, because they are ignored by the national "media". However they show our elected representatives talking about what concerns them personally, regardless of what ministers and whips think. What concerns them personally is likely to be what, as transmitted to them in "surgeries", personal letters and otherwise, concerns their individual constituents. In other words you and me.

We are not told about adjournment debates because we are in the grip of a "media" who earn their money (and money is mostly what counts) by stirring up trouble on a national scale. What does not stir that up does not interest them, so adjournment debates are beneath their notice. They are not beneath mine, so this week I give you a brief account of the Whitsun adjournment debate held on May 25.

Mr Gareth R. Thomas, backbench MP for Harrow West, kicked off. He raised what he admitted to be three entirely different subjects: alcohol misuse, the siting of mobile phone masts and the social responsibility of corporations. That scattering of shot is what tends to happen in adjournment debates, when ministers and whips are absent and backbenchers are freed to let off steam.

On alcohol abuse Mr Thomas gave us some worrying statistics. One in six people who attend accident and emergency units do so as a result of alcohol-related incidents or problems. 31,300 hospital admissions are due to alcohol dependence syndrome. 70 per cent. of men convicted for assault on their partner committed the assault while under the influence of alcohol. Heavy drinking by parents is a factor in 50 per cent. of child protection cases. 65 per cent. of suicide attempts are linked to excessive drinking. One in five men and one in six women admit to having unsafe sex after drinking too much. Alcohol consumption by 11 to 15-year-olds rose from 5.3 units in 1990 to 9.9 units in 1998. 20 per cent. of excluded pupils were suspended for drinking at school. Between 20 and 30 per cent. of all accidents are alcohol related. 15 per cent. of drownings and 39 per cent. of deaths from fire are linked to alcohol. Half the rough sleepers are alcohol dependent. And so on. Depressing indeed, but there was no countervailing mention of the magnificent job alcohol does in oiling the wheels of social interplay.

Mr Stephen Day MP (Cheadle) also had three disparate topics to address. Mrs Ann Cryer MP (Keighley), who followed him, made a valiant attempt to provide continuity where none existed by beginning: "It is appropriate that Mr Day should have spoken about a long, dark tunnel because I want to talk about our railway heritage". In support of the Keighley and Worth Valley Railway, of which she is a shareholder, she went on-

"I want to say a few words in praise of railway preservers or preservationists . . . They are not, as they are sometimes described in the media, railway buffs, anoraks, amateurs or people playing at trains . . . They simply want the pleasure of preserving the nation's industrial, transport and, often, architectural heritage, so that we and future generations can understand and appreciate what went before."

Next came Mr Mark Oaten MP (Winchester), who first entered Parliament in 1997. He showed none of the natural diffidence of the new boy. On the contrary, he was highly dissatisfied with the way he found the House of Commons functioning. It should, he said,

adopt a fixed working week with fixed hours, preferably finishing at 7 p.m. Instead of trooping through the division lobbies (where much essential socialising is done), MPs should engage in instantaneous electronic voting. There should be no bobbing up and down to catch the Speaker's eye, but MPs should be allotted a timed slot. Instead of having to refer to "the Honourable Member for Winchester" one should be able to talk about "Mr Oaten". And so on. Altogether a crass exhibition of the failure of a new boy to grasp the workings of the assembly he has been fortunate enough to be elected to.

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East) raised the case of Mr. Whittaker, a now elderly gentleman who served this country in uniform in a largely forgotten episode. Dr Kumar said that unbelievably, though Mr. Whittaker and his colleagues were conscripts in what was essentially a war zone, they have never received official acknowledgement of their service and bravery by the award of the General Service Medal.

That Dr Kumar should take up his precious slot in the adjournment debate by raising that particular matter really seems to me a striking example of multiculturalism in action.

Francis Bennion
www.francisbennion.com

2000.032 150 NLJ 869 (9 June).