

In honour of Mrs Dunwoody

As readers well know, this column is neutral when it comes to party politics. We stand fair and square behind each and every back-bencher. Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody, who first entered the House of Commons in 1966 as the Member for Exeter, is one of their champions. Her high ability and character would be expected from the daughter of the late Morgan Phillips, ablest of post-war Labour Party secretaries.

I have two reasons for celebrating Mrs Dunwoody just now. One is that on October 23 she bravely stood for Speaker. The other is that on November 7 she held out against her own party in the worst piece of buffoonish chicanery to have been inflicted on the House in recent times.

Mr David Davis, a former Conservative whip, proposed Mrs Dunwoody for the office of Speaker. He said he wanted a Speaker of strength, independence, integrity, passionate commitment to the Commons in its role of scrutinising Government and holding them to account and, within that, a relentless commitment to the rights of back-benchers. The Speaker must be not just independent of the Government of any persuasion, but determined that that Government will subject themselves to the democratic will of the House of Commons. "The hon. Lady has the experience: she has served the House for a total of 30 years; 26 of them continuously. She has served in government; she therefore understands only too well the pressures and imperatives of office. However, it was long enough ago for her not to be biased by it today".

Mo Mowlam, Minister for the Cabinet Office, seconded. "With a strong Executive, it is crucial to have an independent, gutsy, hard-hitting Speaker to stand up for the House, its Members and the people whom it represents . . . Hon. Members should be in no doubt about how hard my hon. Friend will work on their behalf, irrespective of their attitudes, beliefs or individuality. In the 13 years that I have spent in the House, I have come to respect her many qualities and singular character. She has been thoughtful and attentive to me and other hon. Members across the political spectrum and to the many staff who work here. She does not do that in public. When the going got tough in Northern Ireland, she would call, not necessarily to agree with what I was doing, but always to offer solidarity and support from one Member to another. I also like her direct, honest and straightforward approach to life in the House. She is a hard-working Member who does the business. She stays late for division after division. She is never seen slipping out; she is always seen standing in the taxi queue after voting and doing her duty to the House".

Mrs Dunwoody herself said she was disturbed by the gradual erosion, under many names, of the rights of back-benchers. Sadly the House rejected her by 341 votes to 170.

It was because she believes it right to "stay late for division after division" that on November 7 Mrs Dunwoody voted against her own party on the nonsensical proposal to defer divisions to a later date if they fell after 10 o'clock at night. This notion, which was coupled with another to facilitate guillotining of debates on Bills, originated with the select committee on modernisation. On the guillotining proposal, Mrs Dunwoody objected that the ability of back-benchers to speak for their constituents would be reduced to a series of administrative decisions. "Although many people may deeply disapprove of hon. Members expressing views that are not regurgitated from their Front Bench, that is fundamentally what Parliament is about". She also objected to the fact that under the proposal the views of the official

Opposition would be taken into account in drawing up a timetable, but not those of back-benchers. Mrs Dunwoody voted against her Government in all three divisions on the iniquitous modernisation proposals.

To underline my impartiality and balance I end with Mr Dominic Grieve MP (Conservative). In the modernisation debate he echoed other Conservatives in saying that separating the process of debating from the voting process, especially for short debates, would degrade the House of Commons. It would, he said, remove the chance that one's vote could be influenced when matters are fresh in one's mind, and it would prevent the Chamber from being a focus for any informed or sensible debate in which people could be influenced by what was said. "One thing that I have learned since I came to the House is that if one bothers to spend six hours listening to a debate, one learns an enormous amount, usually from one's opponents".

This deployment of reason proved useless, and the voting steamroller trundled out. New Labour finally put paid to the House of Commons as a debating chamber.

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