

## Jokes and the Queen's Speech

For those who know it the House of Commons is a rare and precious flower of our country, to be cherished. That is why I ransack Hansard to show you some of its many felicities, ignored usually by what used to be called Fleet Street.

Jokes are important in the House of Commons, feeding as they do the camaraderie that is a feature of the place. On 6 December 2000 we had the debate on the Queen's Speech, which featured many jokes. As usual on such occasions the two front benches faced each other cheerfully, mouthing good-humoured putdowns with appropriate gestures. I will give you some of the jokes delivered first by the Leader of the Opposition and then the Prime Minister.

Mr Hague started - this is another tradition - by remembering MPs who had recently died. Sir Michael Colvin, he recalled, had many interests. He was even a pub landlord - a qualification much praised in the modern Conservative Party (first joke). The late Donald Dewar, Mr Hague recalled, was only happy when he was thoroughly depressed (second joke). Mr Hague then congratulated Sir John Morris on his speech opening the debate. Although an MP for a continuous 41 years, Sir John has said he does not regard himself as a professional politician. This, said Mr Hague, is quite a statement for someone who has spent 33 years on the Front Bench as Minister of Defence, Secretary of State for Wales, Attorney General, etc. With that record, said Mr Hague, he would have to be a professional politician to claim that he was not one (third joke).

Mr Hague then got down to business. The Gracious Speech was so skimpy, he said, that obviously a May election must be in the offing. It was very good of Her Majesty to come down to deliver it at all (fourth joke). He quoted Paddy Ashdown's autobiography, page 276, at the Prime Minister adding 'not many people have reached page 276' (fifth joke).

Mr Hague ploughed relentlessly on. Mr Prescott said about the recent European summit 'I had not been home for three weekends, so I admit . . . wanting to go home that night'. A human touch? Mr Hague was merciless. Why are the Government bothering to recruit the star of 'One Foot in the Grave' when they already have the star of one foot in the mouth? (sixth joke). Very clever ambitious youngsters are chained to dripping stone walls in the Central Office dungeon while they work out these jokes for their Leader. And still they pile mountains on top of Mr Hague's political grave, clearly visible in the very near future. In politics, those elevated too soon to have acquired the necessary experience inevitably die early. So it was to prove with Mr Hague.

The Prime Minister rose to reply. He said the first half of Mr Hague's speech, in which he made his jokes, was excellent. The rest was not so good. Then Mr Blair, following custom, paid tribute to the Member for Aberdeen South, Anne Begg, who had seconded the Loyal Address. 'She was a teacher and used to say that, having taught 15 to 16-year-olds, being in the House of Commons was no problem for her'.

At this point the new Speaker from Glasgow (later to be known as Gorbals Mick) found it necessary to intervene. What he said was not meant as a joke, though some found it faintly risible.

**Mr. Speaker:** Order. Private conversations are going on in the Chamber. [*Interruption.*] Order. If honourable Members find the debate boring, they know what they can do - they can leave. They will not be missed. If honourable Members wish to become involved in private conversations, it is only courteous for them to leave the Chamber. That is the case no matter which hon. Member is addressing the House.

The Prime Minister resumed. He was still on about Mr Hague's jokes. 'As I have said, the jokes were good - they are always good. Probably there is a little debate in his office: 'Do we go for jokes or for policy?' Let me congratulate him on at least one sound judgment. Frankly, I think it is better to stick with the jokes. I think he has taken the right tactical decision in that respect.'

Then Mr Blair sprang a joke of his own. It arose from the tiresome idea that parties can win elections by promising to lop items of government expenditure, when everyone knows this is like the poisonous Upas Tree - lop one branch and a dozen will spring up in its place. 'The right hon. Gentleman says - this is my favourite one - that he will save £205 million from not creating regional assemblies, but there is no £205 million budgeted for regional assemblies, so where does he get it from?'

A good question, to which no answer was given. Mr Blair rammed home his advantage. 'If the Conservatives want to save £1 billion on fraud, they can start with their own programme.'

We may leave them there, battling it out.

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