

### **The Commons at its best**

The Commons is at its best when the whips are off and it is debating a true House matter. That was the case on March 22, when it debated how the Speaker should be elected.

The method of election of the present Speaker on October 23 2000, following the resignation of Betty Boothroyd, was felt by many to be unsatisfactory. So a select committee chaired by Nicolas Winterton MP (Conservative) suggested improvements. Gordon Prentice MP (Labour), who had organised a hustings for that election, said this.

“The report [of the Winterton Committee] touches on the hustings that I organised. There was a tremendous pressure for change. When the number of candidates ballooned from five to seven, eight, eleven and twelve, I asked myself why we were getting so many candidates. The Speakership brings instant celebrity, nationwide recognition, a nice house and probably quite a big salary, but something has happened recently. It might have something to do with the way in which Betty Boothroyd carried out her role as Speaker, but no one envisaged that so many candidates would compete for the Speakership. Within a few hours, down on the Terrace, I had more than 100 names of Members - more than one sixth of the membership of the House of Commons - calling for the system to be changed and for an opportunity to quiz the individual candidates.”

The point was not that the wrong man had been elected, and this is one of the remarkable features of the whole business. Everyone agreed in that Commons debate that the right man was now Speaker and that the same man would also be elected under the new system.

The man in question, Michael Martin, used to be a sheet metal worker in a factory. He is a Roman Catholic, born and bred in Glasgow. His recreations are hill walking, local history and piping. He made his name as a shop steward and trade union organiser. He has the gift of being popular.

There is something magnificent about the way this unlikely man has captured the hearts of MPs. He successfully exercises that most difficult function of controlling Commons debates with impartiality and authority. In his achievement one glimpses the reality of the British constitutional genius.

The House of Commons has been called the best gentleman's club in Europe. Mr Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) said: “If there is anything that I dislike about the House, it is the smug club atmosphere that is cultivated here - the notion that this place is a gentleman's club and that debates such as this one, as distinct from party political debates, are conducted within some sort of cosy consensus”. The House disagreed with that.

The big issue was whether there should be a secret ballot for Speaker, or whether as universally happens with House of Commons votes, and has hitherto happened with the election of the Speaker, the names of those voting should be disclosed. The arguments are nicely balanced, and so was the vote. 92 voted for retaining the present system. 94 voted for a secret ballot.

A feature of the debate was Tony Benn's farewell speech. MPs of all parties joined in praise of this superb orator and parliamentarian. I conclude with some extracts from his acclaimed address.

“Years ago, when I was canvassing in Bristol, I asked a woman to support me and she replied, ‘Mr. Benn, the ballet is secret’. I thought of her dancing alone in the bedroom, where no candidate was allowed to know about it . . . [I]n the course of my life I have developed five little democratic questions. If one meets a powerful person - Adolf Hitler, Joe Stalin or Bill Gates - ask them five questions: ‘What power have you got? Where did you get it from? In whose interests do you exercise it? To whom are you accountable? And how can we get rid of you?’ . . . [T]he establishment has seen Parliament as a means of management: if there is a Parliament, people will not cause trouble, whereas, of course, the people see it as a means of representation.”

That is all very well, but I regret Mr Benn’s way of glorying in illegality. In his final speech he told the Speaker he intended to wander far out of order, and expected this to be allowed. Then he ended his speech with a boast of his unlawful conduct in the House.

“I have put up several plaques - quite illegally, without permission; I screwed them up myself. One was in the broom cupboard to commemorate Emily Wilding Davison, and another celebrated the people who fought for democracy and those who run the House.”

It is sad that a man who has spent his life as a legislator should have so little regard for law.

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