

Mystery of the Speaker

I wrote a month ago (p 538 above) about how successful the new Speaker of the House of Commons, Michael Martin, had been. I said that MPs agreed that the right man had been chosen, and that he would be re-elected without opposition when the new Parliament met after the forthcoming election. It seems that opinion may need revising following Prime Minister's Questions on May 2.

Mr Martin, the Labour MP for Shettleston, had a bad press. In the Daily Mail Quentin Letts, who rudely calls him Gorbals Mick, said he lost it completely. "Dooon't tell me how to do mah job", he shrieked at the Opposition benches. Letts was surprised at the way he "so comprehensively lost his rag" and felt MPs on all sides were stunned by his incompetence. In the Times Matthew Parris said the Speaker "blew his top". In the Daily Telegraph Frank Johnson, in a reference to the anarchist riots on May Day, reported that "renewed anti-Speaker rioting" had broken out, while Benedict Brogan, political correspondent, said Mr Martin, has lost the confidence of Conservative MPs. "They see him as biased towards the Government and say he is not up to the job".

It is a mystery how the unanimous goodwill to Mr Martin displayed only a month ago in the debate on the new method of electing the Speaker seems to have evaporated. The trouble on May 2 started when, instead of answering a question from Mr Hague on the Wembley Stadium fiasco, Mr Blair read out bits from an obscure Conservative candidate's leaflet attacking his leader. As this was clearly out of order the Conservatives thought the Speaker should stop Mr Blair, which he failed to do. They showed their feelings with shouts of "Order!".

It is the Speaker's prerogative to keep order, so he got annoyed at this. When Mr Blair resumed by saying his Government had put a record amount of money into schools, hospitals, transport and police, adding "and it is the Conservative party that would cut the money", Gerald Howarth MP (Conservative, Aldershot) yelled "Disgraceful".

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr. Howarth, I hope that you were not referring to me. I know how to conduct my affairs and I hope that you are not attacking the Chair.

Mr Howarth: I shall raise a point of order at the end of Prime Minister's questions.

Mr Speaker: You are perfectly entitled to raise a point of order, and I will not deny you that, but no one will shout at this Chair while these proceedings are going on.

Later, raising his point of order, Mr Howarth said that during the episode in question there were a great many cries of "Disgraceful" from Conservative Members. They were aimed not at the Chair but at the conduct of the Prime Minister, who had been gratuitously abusive to his Party leader Mr Hague. Such behaviour tended to bring the House into disrepute with the public. Mr Blair should be answering questions instead of trying to score cheap points off Mr Hague on matters that did not relate to Prime Ministerial responsibilities.

Mr Speaker: Certainly, Prime Minister's Question Time this afternoon was very lively; I think that we can both agree with that. At all times, I must be able to use my judgment. The Prime Minister does not change the rules of the House. The House changes the rules. I am the

custodian of those rules. I heard many hon. Members shouting, "Disgraceful." I did feel that some of those remarks were directed at me. I accept the hon. Gentleman's explanation that they were not directed at me - that is fine - but some were telling me to intervene and to stop the Prime Minister. I will use my judgment at all times in the House. It is for me to use my judgment. Let me put it on the record that the worst thing that can happen is for hon. Members to tell me to intervene, because in doing so they are telling me how to do my job. Believe me: I will stay put and I will not intervene in those circumstances. I will use my judgment.

Mr John Bercow MP (Buckingham, Conservative) then added his two-penn'orth, raising as a further point of order, the fact that "on several dozen occasions in recent months" MPs had been busily been chatting to the Speaker while he was presiding. He added-

"It would be extremely helpful to the efficient dispatch of business and the retention of good order if they did not do that, because we wish, of course, to have the full benefit at all times of your personal attention and of your intellectual resources".

Mr Speaker: That is a bit like the kettle calling the pot black, as the hon. Gentleman is one of the chatterers.

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