

The Speaker (again)

For the third time this year I devote the parliamentary column to the Speaker of the House of Commons, partly because his office is constitutionally important and partly because at the moment there nothing else to write about. Following the general election on June 7, the first business of the new Commons when it met on June 13 was to elect a Speaker. (The next business was to swear in the new MPs one by one, which takes a very, very long time.)

Back in April (NLJ April 13 p 538) I wrote about the new procedure then adopted for the contested election of a Speaker. This procedure was not needed on June 13, since surprisingly the re-election of Mr Michael Martin was not contested. The grave doubts expressed about his suitability which I recorded in the spring (NLJ May 11 p 695) had mysteriously vanished; and everyone who now spoke was full of praise for the doughty Roman Catholic Glaswegian.

Mr Robin Cook, new Leader of the House, said that during Mr Martin's lengthy service on the Chairmen's Panel (where future Speakers learn their trade) many an awkward moment had been defused by his trademark catchphrase "It's no' nice".

"Since you came to office, your voice has become familiar in households across our country. You spoke for all your Scottish compatriots in the Chamber when you magnificently brushed aside an impertinent question from the BBC on your accent with the retort, 'I don't have an accent; other people have an accent'. Yours is of course an accent which would normally lend authority to one of the traditional roles of the Speaker: the selection of a Scotch whisky for the Speaker's brand. For you, though, as a teetotaler, that selection presented some obvious difficulties. Your solution delighted the Members whom you invited on to an all-party committee to carry out extensive research and tasting on your behalf."

Mr Cook added that if ever in this, the fifty-third Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the media Lobby dared criticise the Speaker it would be because as Chairman of the Administration Committee he had banned Lobby correspondents from the Terrace of the Commons unless personally supervised by an MP. "You thereby liberated a grateful House to relax in privacy on the Terrace in these summer months."

Mr William Hague, reminding Mr Martin that "just as you are about to resume your duties, I am planning to relinquish mine as Leader of the Opposition", said the Speaker is expected to cut himself off from previous party affiliations. "You have indeed cut yourself off from party affiliations and served this House impartially. It has been a tradition of Speakers that they do not visit the Tea Room and bars. You have created a new tradition by being available and visiting the Tea Room and bars, but not having a drink there. That may keep you happy, although it is incomprehensible to the rest of us . . ."

The election of Mr Martin was supervised by Tam Dalyell, new Father of the House in succession to Ted Heath. Tam, the MP for Linlithgow, appeared on crutches. For this he attracted the jeers of Alex Salmond, speaking both for the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru:

"I thought I had seen everything in ten successful, gruelling campaigns involving Mr Dalyell since the 1960s. However, the election tactic of being injured in the service of Linlithgow Rovers football club is breathtaking."

Thanking the House for having re-elected him, Mr Martin said that campaigning as a Speaker seeking re-election was no easy matter.

“There is no party banner, so we had to find a trademark, and it was agreed that the friends of Mr Speaker would put a photograph of me in my formal clothes on every leaflet that was issued. We thought that was a good idea until one of the electors said to me, ‘I hope you don’t mind me asking, Mr. Martin, but were you ever a minister in the Church of Scotland?’ One gentleman said to me, ‘I hope you get the job. It will give you something to do when you’re down in London.’”

Mr Martin, who has abandoned tradition in the shape of wig, knee breeches and silk stockings, will have plenty to do if, as many hope, he upholds another tradition and fights for back-benchers against the ever-encroaching Executive. Mr Hague said he regretted the diminution of the House’s importance and reputation, which had contributed to the disconnection between the public and Parliament that was shown by the low voter turnout in the recent general election. This was a suitable valediction from one who had once held high hopes of a political career, only to see them dashed.

Francis Bennion
www.francisbennion.com

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