

Mrs Dunwoody triumphs

Last autumn (NLJ November 24, page 1756) I praised the redoubtable backbench Labour MP Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody for bravely standing (unsuccessfully) as Speaker, and bravely voting against her own party's iniquitous proposal to defer Commons divisions until a midweek afternoon. Now I am able to record the belated triumph of Mrs Dunwoody over these forces of darkness. It arose in this way.

We all remember it was Lord St John of Fawsley who first had the bright idea of setting up a select committee of the House of Commons to superintend each major government department, and make sure it behaved properly. This highly democratic check by the legislature on the executive, first implemented in the 1979-83 Parliament, has proved a conspicuous success - even though government whips dislike it. In fact the more successful it has been in calling the executive to account (its prime function), the more government whips quite naturally have disliked it.

Perversely it is the whips of the three main parties who respectively choose the members of these select committees, a fact about which backbenchers of all parties have become increasingly restive. The dam broke on July 16, when the House considered the recommendations made by the Committee of Selection for the membership of most of the select committees. The hapless chairman of that committee, Mr John McWilliam MP, admitted, to howls of rage, that all they had done was rubber-stamp the whips' choices.

Partly this backbench anger was induced by the fact that two Labour MPs who before the general election chaired their respective committees had been sacked by their own whips. They were Donald Anderson, outspoken chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, and Mrs Dunwoody, outspoken chair of the Transport Sub-Committee of the Transport, Local Government and the Regions Select Committee. (It will be understood that "outspoken" here is code for bolshy, bloody-minded, recalcitrant and unbiddable, in the opinion that is of Labour whips).

Mrs Dunwoody said she was astonished by the decision to sack Mr Anderson and herself, even though she did not consider she was irreplaceable on the Transport Sub-Committee. She thought the current Parliament was widely perceived as not doing its job properly. The select committees were regarded by the public as a means of "carefully examining, not only what Whitehall and the Government are doing, but what all the arms of government and their myriad agencies are doing". She added that there was no other way of doing the job.

Mrs Dunwoody argued that although people do not always understand the intricacies of what Parliament does, they do ask it to fulfil the role that voters expect it to fulfil, and that is not simply to go along with everything the executive propose. The House of Commons must never become a great morass of dim people doing what they are told not by the electorate, but by the executive. "What I need is the right to question, to examine and to produce reports on what Her Majesty's Government are doing in the name of government".

The new Leader of the House (Mr. Robin Cook MP) appeared shell-shocked. It was not what he expected on his first outing. Mr Cook whined that the debate had turned out to be more controversial than he would have wished. Some comments, he thought, were "a bit overdone". Labour MPs would be granted a free, that is unwhipped, vote in deciding at the

end of the debate on whether the whips' selections excluding Anderson and Dunwoody would be confirmed. He hoped this would apply to Opposition MPs (it did).

Mr Cook added that the decision about who goes on to a popular select committee could never be made easy. The previous week, with some committees, Labour had faced the challenge of choosing a dozen or fewer members from 50 or 60 applications. There would always be more MPs who were disappointed than those who were satisfied. "But the difficulty in making the choice increases the importance of ensuring that the process is seen to be transparent, fair and under the control of the House". Hear, hear said the backbenchers.

In the division that followed the House made its views clear. The Labour whips' decision to sack Mr Anderson was rejected by 301 votes to 231. Their decision to sack Mrs Dunwoody was rejected by 308 votes to 221. Earlier, Mr Cook had made it clear that the method of appointing members of select committees would be overhauled so as to give more power to backbenchers.

The media hailed it all as a great triumph for democracy, and a huge black eye for the control freak Prime Minister Mr Tony Blair.

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Note Parliament rose for the summer recess on July 20. This column will resume when Parliament reassembles in October.

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