

## Speaker Boothroyd's valedictory speech

When I first entered the House [in 1973], the Speaker was Selwyn Lloyd, and I recall his leaving speech. He paid very generous tribute to the Members of those days, but he went out of his way to mention what he described as their "collective faults". He summed those up as long-windedness, sedentary interruptions, points of order that are not points of order, and an inability to scrutinise Bills and statutory instruments as they should be scrutinised. Things do not change much, do they?

One of the privileges of the Speaker is to be able to represent this House abroad, both at Speakers' Conferences and on bilateral visits. I am glad to have been able to accept invitations to represent Westminster in every continent, and to have visited many countries, both large and small, on your behalf. What has always come across clearly to me is the respect felt abroad for the British system of parliamentary democracy. It comes across especially among the emerging democracies of central and eastern Europe, where there is a very keen desire to learn from our experience as they develop their own systems of government. I know that the advice and assistance that we are able to give at both parliamentary and staff level is enormously appreciated.

Sadly, however, I have to say that the high reputation of Westminster abroad is not entirely reflected at home. I know from my postbag how much disillusionment about the political process there is among the general public. The level of cynicism about Parliament, and the accompanying alienation of many of the young from the democratic process, is troubling. It is an issue on which every Member of the House should wish to reflect. It is our responsibility, each and every one of us, to do what we can to develop and build public trust and confidence.

Let us make a start by remembering that the function of Parliament is to hold the Executive to account. [HON. MEMBERS: 'Hear, hear.'] That is the role for which history has cast the Commons. It is the core task of Members — not merely to act as representatives of their constituents, important though that certainly is. It is in Parliament in the first instance that Ministers must explain and justify their policies. Since becoming Speaker in 1992, I have made my views known about that, both publicly and behind the scenes, to both Governments. I have taken action to ensure that those who advise Ministers should never overlook the primacy of Parliament. This is the chief forum of the nation — today, tomorrow and, I hope, for ever.

Question Time offers a prime opportunity to hold Ministers to account, and I share the disappointment at the slow progress that is made. Too many Back-Bench Members are

being deprived, by the long-windedness of colleagues, of their chance to question Ministers. We are not moving down the Order Paper as we should. There is also an issue of quality as well as quantity. There is, from time to time, a risk that engagement with the real issues is seen to be overshadowed by political point scoring simply for its own sake.

Parliament's other prime function is the scrutiny of Government legislation. There is, I believe, throughout the House a general recognition that that is an area ripe for improvement. Committees of the House, as well as outside bodies, are making a substantial contribution to the debate. The issues are serious and complex, and there is no simple solution. The debate should not be conducted, however, on party lines — nor on the simplistic basis of the Executive versus the rest of us. The objective, to my mind, must be improved scrutiny leading to better legislation — perhaps through the greater use of pre-legislative arrangements; I think that they might be useful to us. In addition, the issue is as much one of quality of scrutiny as of quantity.

Furthermore, the House must be prepared to put in the hours necessary to carry out effective examination of the Government's legislative programme. If that means long days, or rearrangement of the parliamentary year, so be it. Of course, I have been here long enough to recognise the importance of enabling parliamentarians to enjoy a domestic life; it should not be impossible to meet both objectives — but where there is a clash, the requirements of effective scrutiny and the democratic process must take priority over the convenience of Members.

Those of you who were here when I submitted myself to the will of the House in 1992 will recall that I said, in all honesty, that for me the Commons had never been just a career; it had been my life. Now, after eight and a half years as Speaker, that is more true than ever. Quite apart from the honour of being Speaker and the many fascinations of the work, I have enjoyed the job, every minute of it — well, almost every minute of it. That has been helped by the fact that I have presided over a House containing so many characters and so many stalwart Members, on whom it depends so much. I have not had a boring day in my working life, and for all that, I am grateful to all of you.

When I came to the conclusion that it was right for me to go, my thoughts went to that famous passage in the book of Ecclesiastes, about there being: 'A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance'. Well, my dancing days are long past — [HON. MEMBERS: 'No!'] — and I promise the House that I shall not weep, but I shall certainly mourn the fact that an all-important phase in my life has come to a natural end. However, it is time for laughter as well, as we remember all the lighter moments that we have enjoyed —

**Mr. Chris Ruane** (Vale of Clwyd): Name them.

**Miss Boothroyd**: There's an old sourpuss over there!

I say to you, rejoice in your inheritance, defend your rights and remember always that the privileges the House enjoys were dearly won and must never be squandered. You elected me in the springtime, and I shall retire in the autumn, which marks a fitting seasonal conclusion to my period in office. Therefore I say to you all, in a phrase that you all know well, but which has never been more true than now: 'Time's up.' [Applause.]

**HC Hansard, 26 Jul 2000, 113–115**