

## Endnote

### *Culture of a Parliamentary Bureaucracy*

#### *Can fiction be fact? A note*

R.L. Cope\*

Fiction, drama, television, radio and the movies have many examples of political intrigue in the legislative arena as their central theme. Often the novel or play is adapted for television and film. High drama (*House of Cards*, *Advise and Consent*, *The West Wing*, for instance) and satire (*Yes, Minister*) are two recurrent elements. But there seems virtually no comparable (serious or satirical) literary or mass media attention paid to the parliamentary bureaucracy and the world of parliamentary mandarins. This probably suits many parliamentary officers, especially those who regard or even promote their job as something of a ‘mystery’ (in the mediaeval sense), to be protected and perpetuated. Admission to this calling is guarded and, once attained, is a source of pride and prestige. However, compared with the robust public nature of parliamentary politics, the less known concerns of parliamentary mandarins offer slim scope to writers and filmmakers.

In 1996 a novel appeared which would have called forth reactions of outrage, disbelief and certainly anger from parliamentary mandarins at Westminster. Philip Hensher’s *Kitchen Venom* has three clerks from the Journal Office of the House of Commons as its chief protagonists and the culture of the parliamentary bureaucracy as exemplified by them is described in some detail.<sup>1</sup> They belong to the chosen few ‘who have understood that truth is secret; that truth resides in secret, and that the fewer these men [i.e. clerks] were, the truer this was’ (p. 43). These words are written about what is entailed in compiling the Journal of the House. It would not usually be worth considering a work of fiction as an appropriate authority on this topic, but the author in this case is, as the work’s dustcover states, ‘a House of

---

\* NSW Parliamentary Librarian, 1962 to 1991.

<sup>1</sup> Hensher, P. 1996. *Kitchen Venom*. London: Hamish Hamilton (also published by Penguin Books). Viii + 260pp. ISBN 0 241 13579 6.

Commons clerk' from the Journal Office. He is presumably able to comment accurately as an 'insider'.

Hensher's depiction of the working ethos of the clerks in the Journal Office and the nature of parliamentary service is unflattering, satirical and damaging. Not even the head of the administration, the Clerk of the Commons, is spared: he could hardly be pleased to read: [John] 'remembered the sickening feeling he had had when he realized that no sense of humour and an ability to bore on endlessly were vital qualities for anyone wanting to be the Clerk of the House' (p. 15). The Clerk of the House is described as

the highest sort of person who works in the House — so high that one can hardly think of him as working in the House, more as nobly devoting a part of his distinguished hours and minutes to sit in the chamber of the House...(p. 40)

Does this read like a pen portrait drawn from real life?<sup>2</sup>

Whilst the clerks are depicted as experts in their field, the three in question are seen as more 'gentlemen than players'. 'What their job was no Member knew; what their purpose was, not even they quite understood. From day to day, they performed small rituals, and they recorded, and they checked what they had recorded . . .' (p. 41). What is striking is the disdain they show for parliamentary representatives as a class and for the parliamentary process:

[The clerks of the House of Commons] have no respect for them [Members]; they laugh at them; they compile lists of the twenty most idiotic Members, and the twenty most debauched ; they do not work for them. . . . they treat Members to their faces with civility, and behind their backs as inferior undergraduates who have mistaken their ambitions. (p. 40)

It is not unexpected that this book led to the author ceasing to be a clerk of the House of Commons.

There are various strands to the book, of which homosexuality is one. Two of the clerks are identified in this way and one actually murders a young Italian male prostitute with whom he falls in love. There is fulsome detail on this aspect of the plot. Parliamentary politics play a very minor role; no politician is personally named, although references are made to a female prime minister and events leading to her toppling. Some passages vividly evoke, on the other hand, the atmosphere of the parliamentary buildings at Westminster.

---

<sup>2</sup> The viewpoint of former Speaker Betty Boothroyd may be cited as offering a counterbalance to Hensher: See *Westminster Women*, by Linda McDougall (1998) at p.184. The quality of advice offered to the Speaker by the clerks is highly praised by her.

Philip Hensher is the author of three novels and is one of the youngest members of the Royal Society of Literature and 'the only author of his generation to be included in *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories*'. These details are from the website of the British Council Russia where further information can be gained. Hensher is obviously an author to watch.

Those interested in the parliamentary institution as distinct from the parliament as a political forum will have mixed feelings about this novel. It cannot be taken to represent more than a fictionalised, possibly tendentious, view on one administrative aspect of the House of Commons. It is not an agreeable picture with its suggestion of unworthy privilege and spurious values in a Dickensian institution. Certainly the reader whose curiosity about the real nature (fact rather than fiction) of the Commons bureaucracy is stirred, does not gain the impression that either the Ibbes Report on House of Commons Services (1990) or the House of Commons Commission itself makes a noticeable impact on the lives of the officers described. Reform of parliament in both its political and its bureaucratic aspects may be something of a beguiling mirage. We may consequently feel the justice of the proposal of Professor Robert Hazell, recently a visiting lecturer in Australia, that parliaments need more openness on their performance and a stronger sense of accountability.<sup>3</sup> Hazell has principally in mind the work of parliamentarians themselves, but Hensher's book would seem to point to the need for a more stringent accountability and tighter management practices in parliamentary administration as well. ▲

---

<sup>3</sup> Hazell, Robert: *The Challenges facing our Parliaments: Can we improve their performance?* Address to the Australasian Study of Parliament Group, Sydney, March 2001. See 5–27 above.