

Comment

A Little Local Difficulty

The tapestry of British democracy is shot through with grand parliamentary occasions. Those who studied history in the 1960s or before would still be able to cite the odd phrase from Canning, Palmerston, Gladstone or Churchill. It would also appear that politicians were able to take the rough and tumble of debate in much better part than many of their modern counterparts. In 1835, the young Benjamin Disraeli denounced Daniel O'Connell, the hero of Catholic Emancipation, as 'an incendiary and a traitor'. O'Connell, quite undisturbed, replied that Disraeli was 'a lineal descendant of the impenitent thief on the Cross'. Disraeli was greatly satisfied by the reference and wrote in his diary, 'Row with O'Connell in which I greatly distinguish myself'. More memorable is O'Connell's description of the smile of his old opponent Robert Peel. It looked, he remarked, 'like the silver plate on a coffin'. The huffings and puffings of Sir Norman Fowler, the Conservative Party Chairman who has suddenly and unaccountably decided to spend much less time with his family, at the recent oratorical performance of Norman Lamont in the House of Commons strike the seasoned political observer as slightly overwrought.

Amongst Mr Lamont's criticisms of the Prime Minister, and by implication the other members of the Cabinet, was the charge that they were dominated by 'shorttermism', a particularly graceless neologism which seems to be code for: incompetence, ineptitude, indecision, lack of courage, absence of imagination and a fairly deep-rooted amnesia when it comes to faithfulness to manifesto promises. One memorable phrase in Mr Lamont's speech held all of these ideas together. 'We give the impression', he said, 'of being in office, but not in power'. Everybody else in the country realised this some time ago, but nobody seems to have informed the Cabinet. Mr Lamont's conversion to this view appears to be of fairly recent vintage. His 'road to Damascus' experience seems to have been accomplished on the brief journey from 10 to 11 Downing Street after the Prime Minister had summarily dismissed him.

It doubtless gives some satisfaction to the members of the opposition parties to see senior figures in the Conservative Party dashing round television studios and parliamentary lobbies crying 'Don't panic' in panic-stricken tones. However, they should not fall prey to the same thirst for short-term advantage which has been the

hallmark of the present Conservative administration. Mr Major may, in his disarming and disingenuous way, have tried to defuse the present crisis by describing it in the words of his predecessor Lord Stockton, as a 'little local difficulty', but Lord Stockton showed himself to be a skilled political assassin. In one night, it will be remembered, he dismissed a large proportion of his Cabinet. As someone observed, he was not slow to lay down his friends for his life. Compared with Lord Stockton Mr Major is a Casca with a rubber dagger. We are not in the midst of a local difficulty but in the throes of serious crisis of political credibility. This crisis does not simply affect the Conservative Party but threatens the entire parliamentary system of this country. Why is it that over the past decade our most memorable parliamentary performances have been resignation speeches? The House of Commons is often described as the cockpit of the nation. In recent years it has come to resemble more a bear baiting ring in which personal scores are settled amongst the oligarchs.

During the anti-Thatcher coup, Mr Mark Thatcher was asked as he left 10 Downing Street having seen his mother what she was doing. 'What she is always doing on a Friday morning' he said 'running the country, of course.' Mr Lamont's charge that the government gives the impression of being in office but not in power prompts the question, 'who is running the country?' Not, it would appear, Mr Major. The parliamentary correspondents were quick to point out that his reply to Mr Lamont's speech was largely drafted on the government front bench by Mr Kenneth Clarke and Mr Michael Howard. Once it was typed up and returned to the chamber Mr Major delivered it, to the enthusiastic disinterest of his own colleagues and the delight of the opposition. The Prime Minister's willingness to entrust the composition of one of the most important speeches of his political career to the two candidates heading the queue for his own position is a testimony either to a touching trust in colleagues or an alarming naivety.

Who is responsible? It is true that in the current world economic climate the range of political options is narrow. It is true that the economy appears to be undergoing a slight up turn. However, it is also true that the recovery was largely a result of the complete collapse last September of an economic policy forged by Mr Major with Mr Lamont's assistance. What the government has not the courage to tell the people of this country is that there will be tax increases and there will be massive cuts in public expenditure, that the manufacturing base of this country has been so decimated that there will not be a return to full employment in the foreseeable future and that the only way the economic situation will improve is by a massive investment in education

and training resources. The economy needs to be entirely redesigned. However, with a massive deficit of f50 billion per year there is no prospect of this happening. Who is responsible? When anyone in authority is held to account they answer 'Not me gov. I was there but I didn't see anything. If only the nasty media did not whip up these unfair campaigns everything would be alright.' Nobody would need even to think of resigning. If nobody is running the country then nobody is responsible.

What we are seeing in the twilight days of the political settlement established by the 'Glorious Revolution' is that breach of covenant between word and reality. Speech is too cheap. Language too loose. Vaclav Havel, the President of Czech Republic, has pinpointed the crisis of our time as a crisis of truth. He says the threat to our civilization is perhaps not just that we speak untruthfully, that we tell lies, but that we speak easily words that have become empty. This is more than a little local difficulty.

Vincent McNabb OP 1868-1943

Robert Ombres OP

Fr Vincent McNabb was a friar who tried to make more or less all that he did into a sermon. This must be why he was so striking, so memorable. People speak of his firm and fierce love. He has been described as a firebrand Irishman whose face grew increasingly red as he swung a sickle under the hot sun at Ditchling. He appeared a strange figure walking the streets of London, with his distinctive habit and boots, and he could seem a visitor from another century who had strayed into our modern world. It was said he had a zeal unparalleled in the history of our Order in this land.

At his Requiem, the Provincial told the outside world of the hidden, daily life of Fr Vincent: the utter self-abnegation, the rigid asceticism, the complete unselfishness, that chair in his room on which he never sat, that bed on which he never slept. Yet at the same time he was the