

The burdens of office and the problems of straight talking

MPs are often accused of pulling their punches or not telling the truth. In practice an MP is always speaking as an MP and may anytime be picked up for what he or she has said, even if it were a private observation born of frustration, anger or whatever. When you talk you need to bear in mind the views of your constituents, the view of the government, and the views of your party. If the government, party and constituents all hold broadly the same view it is easy and you are lucky. Where they differ, you need to tread a careful path understanding how each will criticise you. You must of course exercise your own judgement and provide a lead, but it must be a lead informed by your view of the greater good. Sticking with the party line can leave you looking stupid or forced to do a U turn. Listen to the difficulties for Labour interviewees over the Diane Abbott saga. How to answer if you want to be loyal but do not know whether she is out or in?

My best advice to a new MP is your word needs to be a strong reliable currency. Repeat too many twists, turns and U turns you are given to say and soon your word is debased. Those who put you in a hole may not rescue you.

I always felt very responsible as an MP even though I was usually having to defend or criticise others for doing and saying things I would not have said. It was a rare event to be given a straight interview on my own views. The interview particularly if from the BBC usually plunged into getting you to condemn a fellow Conservative for a foolish statement or deed. Often the BBC just wanted you to play a role in their script and frequently cancelled when they realised your view was not the one they wanted. I increasingly responded by saying they should interview the out of line speaker, not me if that was their main interest.

I did feel bad about the way various public services let people down, and did work hard behind the scenes with my staff to remedy. Whilst I had clear views and opinions of my own, often the task was to distil the best or the consensus amongst my constituents to frame a response. It is frustrating to have to repeat public sector promises of better conduct and improved service, when you have heard them before and doubt whether this time will be different. You do not want to condemn the many public staff that do a good job and mean well, but you do need to speak out for improvement when well paid senior public sector managers fail to deliver a good service. I often used the formula that the service has said/ promised, adding I would try to get them to deliver if necessary.

Talking straight is a difficult balance. Not having a view and principles leads to weak and contradictory speech which is bad. Just having a strong view of your own means you do not represent many of your constituents much of the time and places you in regular dispute those you need to work with. The skill lies in backing the right causes and campaigns, and in dealing fairly with constituents of all persuasions. It also lies in finding ways to express

problems and propose their resolution that wins over more people than it upsets. Politics may indeed be the art of the possible, but that should not become an excuse to settle for the mediocre or bad.