

We Should All Be Champions For The Excluded

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Parliamentary visitors and watchers are often keen to experience PMQs, oral questions to the Prime Minister that are now heard on sitting Wednesdays. Years ago there were PMQs for fifteen minutes on Tuesdays and Thursdays; on balance I prefer that though prime ministers may not.

Other things happen too on Wednesdays. This week we elect the new chair of the Northern Ireland Select Committee. I hope and expect that Maria Caulfield MP for Lewes to be chosen. By pleasant chance, on Wednesday morning I took Communion at the rail of St. Margaret's church, Parliament Square, in front of a small carved memorial to John Rathbone MP who was one of my predecessors as parliamentary warden when he died in the RAF shortly after the Battle of Britain.

His son Tim had served as MP for Lewes for 23 years. John's mother, aunt and grandfather had also been MPs. My favourite was Eleanor Rathbone: she did much for Jewish refugees and her relentless campaigning brought in family allowances for children in 1945, overcoming decades of resistance from Labour and Conservative governments.

Most people now understand why I have stood by victims of the antiquated residential leasehold system. It can work properly, with responsible freeholders and honest open managing agents. The troubles multiplied when bad people did terrible things. On Tuesday in a short debate on consumer protection, I called for effective action to deal with greed, crookery and exploitation.

Since I allied with the campaigning charity Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, and now with the National Leaseholders Campaign, there has been welcome action by ministers, by the Law Commission, by the House of Commons Housing Select Committee and now by the Competition and Markets Authority which this week opened an investigation into mis-selling. People on low incomes buying a lease, the right to occupy rather than to own a home, could find that their low value home could be very expensive while dropping in value. With others, I have been their champion.

When I am invited to visit a constituency school, recently in Ferring and Durrington, I hear and see the efforts, usually successful, to support girls and boys and to avoid pupil exclusion. I value the work in Pupil Referral Units and the specialist Alternative Provision schools. This week with peers and other MPs I heard Kiran Gill talk about her great education charity 'The Difference' – see www.the-difference.com and read some of the archived four point bulletins.

When I thanked her on behalf of colleagues, I spoke about the challenge of attracting many of the most talented teachers to the most challenging educational situations. We expect the best senior police leaders to have been successful in the most stressful localities; we take it for granted that senior church leaders have given significant time to serving the excluded, the sad and the vulnerable.

I count it valuable that my pre-parliamentary voluntary and paid work and much of my first constituency experience had me alongside people whose lives were often a struggle on or below the waterline. Now, in addition to direct assistance, I want to spread the examples that work, of people and of practice and of policy. 'The Difference' information really does matter.

Effective early intervention can make a great difference. Even so, there is the need to make later actions work too. For example, when a child is in school in Worthing and Arun, there are systems and links that can bring together a multi-agency approach. When excluded, too many children have no effective champion with the experience and the role to help, to continue education, to ensure worthwhile activities and to lead to better outcomes.