

Staying in Touch

Sir Peter Bottomley MP

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Decades past, constituents might have to arrange a conversation with their member of parliament by exchange of letters to agree where and when to meet. Forty years ago, a third of households had no telephone. Mobile radio technology, Clansman and Ptarmigan, was used by the military. Mobile phones for civilians came later.

The Members' Lobby in the Commons had distinguished Badge Messengers who could lodge incoming telephone calls and individual letters. Then they could move around the Palace of Westminster with 'green slips' from people who chose to attend the Commons in the hope that their MP could be found and would be free to come to the Central Lobby for a conversation.

Robert K. Andrews became an acquaintance. For 34 years he came to Parliament to offer his solution to the Cold War. When he lost his work, his wife and his home, he slept on the streets by choice. Each morning he would attend St Martin-in-the-Fields for hygiene, breakfast and Morning Service. He was on good terms with the local street mental health team who understood his trauma at Dunkirk.

For most of the day he would sit with dignity in Central Lobby with his typed notes on how to lower tension between the West and the USSR. Prime Ministers seldom came to talk. I did. In May most years, we gave him birthday cake. When the Berlin Wall fell, when détente came, Robert switched interest to conflict in the Middle East.

He died at Christmas 1997. The day after the Memorial Service for Admiral Sir William Staverley in St Martin's, I spoke at the Service for Robert, with the then Speaker and Tony Benn. There is a lovely BBC radio play by Joe Dunlop 'The Strange Petitioner'. The old Robert explains to the young Robert how his life evolved. It mixes our voices with actors playing him. It may still be available via Radio 4.

I am delighted Tony's first son Stephen Benn, now Viscount Stansgate, is to be elected to one of the remaining hereditary Labour places in the House of Lords. His daughter Emily once stood for the Commons in West Sussex. Stephen has worked for decades to link young scientists with Parliament.

It is because I have sat with people facing troubles that I speak and act fervently on cases of injustice. When I spoke in the Windrush debate, I raised cases of discrimination against people who are black or with Asian heritage.

One of my first constituency cases was a young black man wrongly accused, convicted and imprisoned for an imaginary offence of trying to steal from a woman on the London underground. It took five years for the corrupt officer to be convicted justly and for my constituent to be exonerated. His employer, a leading bank, also believed him; he could return to work. On Tuesday justice came late to a victim of a corrupt public officer.

Each time we receive news that justice, often delayed, is gained in one or more of our cases, our pleasure is restrained because more are outstanding. Like the crisis in residential leaseholder, progress is welcome. It is vital on every injustice.

In parliament, I thanked Sajid Javid for what he did on housing and asked him to do good at health and social care. I asked for cooperation with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland on Covid progress. I recognised the tremendous contribution of teachers during the lockdown.

Care homes staff too have been consistently valiant and dedicated to residents. I thanked those at the Martlets in East Preston and enjoyed good cakes by head chef Robert.