

No truck with the tribalists

John Bercow continues to campaign for those with special educational needs, engages in some affectionate mimicry of the new shadow business secretary, and defies the whips on the justice bill



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WED 21 JAN As I was drawn number 19 in the private member's bill ballot, my first stop this morning is to collect my bill, the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Support) Bill. It would seek to improve understanding of SEN amongst school professionals, strengthen the inspections regime and enhance access to specialist support in schools. In practice, it will not become law, but I hope to flag up its key themes.

Next stop is the committee on arms export controls as Ian Pearson, the BERR minister, is giving evidence, supported by his officials. Mike Gapes asks about broker registration. Does the government agree that there should be a register? They have been looking at the matter since 2007, but without conclusion.

The lead official gives a 'Sir Humphrey' response from which the only missing words are 'long grass'. Backing Mike, I appeal for a decision. If they like our idea, say so and get on with it. If they don't, say so candidly, instead of taking refuge in soporific answers about ongoing work, due consideration, looking at the matter in the round, etc, etc. Can we definitely have an answer in 12 months' time? Ian Pearson replies "possibly". The minister, whom I like and respect greatly, stresses the importance of not rushing the matter. I assure him he is in no danger of being accused of excessive haste!

The afternoon is dominated by speech, language and communication services – one of my political passions. I have an excellent meeting with the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists' representative, Alison McCullough, the Northern Ireland policy officer, and the junior minister in the office of the first minister and deputy first minister, Jeffrey Donaldson, who is also of course the MP for Lagan Valley.

Alison and I are frustrated that a report on problems in Northern Ireland, completed a year ago, has yet to be followed with action. We press Jeffrey to commit to publishing an action plan as soon as possible. We are impressed with his positive response and are hopeful that we will soon see some action.

Later I chair the all-party parliamentary group on speech and language difficulties meeting, which is addressed by the

two shadow Secretaries of State for Children, Schools and Families, Michael Gove and David Laws. I am struck that both seem to have done some homework on the subject and, though understandably non-committal about overall expenditure, they make encouraging noises about giving the subject a higher priority in the future.

THU 22 JAN I chair a statutory instrument on the postponement of local elections in Northern Ireland, a decision brought about by local government reorganisation in the province. The subject might not sound racy, but I love chairing sessions. The debate is constructive, and Paul Goggins' unflinching courtesy is appreciated by Laurence Robertson and John Leech.

It finishes quickly, so I have time to do a quick interview with Mark Darcy for *Today in Parliament* about the return of Ken Clarke to the Conservative front bench. It is great news and Mark tempts me to offer a little impersonation of Ken's wonderfully elongated pronunciation of words.

At business questions, I ask Harriet Harman for a debate on the continuing crisis in Darfur. Her reply is sympathetic, suggesting that the situation there and a number of other crises warrant an early debate in the House. Later, we debate the issue of MPs' expenses. The government appears to have dropped its attempt to exempt Parliament from the Freedom of Information Act. It must surely be right that we are transparent and that that transparency is accompanied by a robust defence of the need for adequate allowances, so that you don't have to be rich to be a Member of Parliament.

I then drive to the constituency for the regular meeting of my Executive Council where I talk about the economic crisis, the day's events in Parliament and the excitement of the Obama presidency. We have a good discussion but, unusually, I have to drive back to London for a speaking engagement on Friday.

FRI 23 JAN I speak to a SEN and disability conference about my review of speech, language and communication services, the

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final report of which was published last July and was followed in December by a government action plan. I focus on the five key themes in the report and welcome the fact that the government has announced its commitment to implement the key recommendations and provide £12m for the purpose. The audience gives me a friendly reception and, although we all know that there is still much to do, there is a sense of excitement that at last speech and language has been given the attention that it deserves.

Afterwards, I drive back to the constituency for my surgery. The volume of cases in my constituency does not compare with that

to be found in many urban seats, characterised by large towns and high deprivation, or both. Nevertheless, my constituents face big human challenges and I will try to do whatever I can to help them.

I have a rare weekend free of fixed engagements and enjoy a break with my wife and children.

MON 26 JAN In the morning, I meet the new public affairs officer at the National Autistic Society, Ellen Broome, with whom I discuss the forthcoming Autism Bill which I strongly support. In the afternoon, I toddle into the chamber for DCSF questions and ask Sarah McCarthy-Fry about government plans for children and young people with special educational needs in light of the intended raising of the education leaving age to 18. In post for only a few months, she seems well in command of her brief and reels off a reply about the Foundation Learning Tier, pathways and talks with employers.

After questions, Peter Hain offers a dignified apology for his non-disclosure of donations which led to his censure by the standards and privileges committee. He has already had to resign from the cabinet for an accidental error which he promptly rectified before any complaint was made, and I am glad that the House listened courteously to him. He is self-evidently honest and I trust that this will be recognised across the parties.

The House moves on to debate the Coroners and Justice Bill. It looks like a dog's breakfast to me, but I strongly support clause 58 which will remove the so-called 'free speech' proviso on which the Lords insisted last year (the Waddington amendment), when the government rightly created a new offence of incitement of hatred on grounds of sexual orientation.



Confounding the critics: John Bercow (right) and schools secretary Ed Balls have reached across party lines to timetable improvements for children with speech and language difficulties

My party, unfortunately, seems determined to stick with the Waddington amendment and oppose the government's clause 58. Frankly, there is no threat whatsoever to free speech and, as I say to the House, some of the most vociferous supporters of the Waddington amendment would be unable to spell the word equality, let alone sign up to it. Doubtless my intervention is unhelpful to Dominic Grieve, our superb shadow justice secretary, but as I will vote with the government on this matter, regardless of any whip, there is much to be said for saying so on the floor of the House.

TUE 27 JAN I meet Martin Dockrell from Action on Smoking and Health about proposed amendments to the Health Bill to restrict point-of-sale displays and introduce plain packaging of cigarettes. We are on the same page and agree to keep in touch.

From Portcullis, I hoof over to the committee corridor to chair the APPG on speech and language difficulties, which is addressed by Ed Balls. He speaks to great effect for about a quarter of an hour and then takes questions for almost 45 minutes.

My sense is that the packed audience is much encouraged by his knowledge and engagement. Ed is generally unpopular with my Conservative colleagues, partly I suppose because of his closeness to the prime minister, but he is ferociously bright and that probably adds to his unpopularity.

For my part, we have always got on very well, and the fact is that the government has announced an action plan with real content and an explicit timescale for delivery which have received an enthusiastic welcome from the sector. The key recommendations of my report have been accepted and the tribalists who said it was mad to collaborate with the government have been proved wrong. ■