



Glenda Jackson MP

Freedom of Information Bill 21st May 2007

The Pantomime season came very early to Westminster this year. In fact, it was last Friday, May 18th, to be exact. And the title of this ‘fun for all the family’ presentation? ‘Freedom of Information (Amendment) Bill’. This is the Private Members Bill which, if it goes through all its Parliamentary stages, will effectively exclude this, the Mother of Parliaments, from meeting the legal requirements placed on, at the last count, 110,000 public bodies. Such requirements are the existing statutes within the Freedom of Information bill.

The conservative MP for Penrith and the Border, David Maclean, who presented and moved the Bill, claimed that it was a necessary amendment to the existing legislation in that it would protect an MP’s correspondence, on behalf of their constituents, from being passed to a third party. He disputes the fact that such correspondence is already covered by the Data Protection Act, but without evidence to support his disbelief. On the confidentiality issue, the point was made by Labour MP Mark Fisher that if correspondence by MPs on behalf of their constituents had, indeed, been passed to a third party without permission, the Information Commissioner, Richard Thomas would have received complaints, but, and I quote, “he has not had a single complaint or query from any other Member of Parliament. He does not recognise the issues as a problem. If he does not – what on earth is the Bill about?”

Well, some of my colleagues and certainly some political commentators think its about bringing down the curtain, only recently raised, which would hide from public view how MPs spend the public money otherwise deemed for travel, incidental expenses, office costs, communication etc etc. All legal, but if this, as one honourable member put it on Friday, “discreditable and squalid little Bill” goes through, such detailed information as is now published annually, will still be in the public domain because the present Speaker, Michael Martin, also Chairman of the Members Estimates Committee, has given an absolute commitment so to do.

But as the Conservative MP Richard Shepherd said, “I do not detract from the statement by the current Speaker of this house, but who is to say what conclusion a future Speaker may draw? The assurance the public have is that this is by statute required”. And that, of course, is what is so odious about this Bill. If passed, it will mean that Parliament has made a law which effects pretty well all public bodies save that public body otherwise known as Parliament.

There were 121 MPs in total when 2nd Reading vote came in at 2.13pm. Unfortunately, I was on the 24 bus heading for my constituency, but had certainly voted against the bill in all the various preceding votes. As I said, there was certainly an element of the pantomime in the utilisation, all, I hasten to add, within our Standing Orders, of the arcane procedures of this place, beginning with the motion ‘that the house does sit in private’. The vote for such being nil and the anti-s 52.

Then there was what would be deemed in panto parlance ‘the front cloth scene’, something which entertains the audience while major set changes go on behind the curtain. To wit, the presentation of eight petitions on a variety of subjects, to be swiftly followed by concerns over a bucket placed in the middle of the ‘No’ lobby constituting, according to the member who raised it, a ‘substantial trip hazard’! The presence of the afore-said bucket was occasioned by a drip of water, I feel I should say! These shenanigans were all, of course, to try to delay passage of the Bill. Unfortunately, it didn’t succeed. Nor were there any laughs, and the set hadn’t changed.



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Now their Lordships will be debating this piece of proposed legislation, which has done nothing to date to improve the standing of Parliament and politicians and less than nothing in restoring trust.

Yet again, the House of Commons has delivered a custard pie into its own face.