



INDEPENDENT

OBITUARIES Geoffrey Dickens

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"Falstaffian" was the word once chosen by John Biffen to describe Geoffrey Dickens. And indeed he had a number of the characteristics of Shakespeare's rotund, indulgent, genial and ultimately disappointed knight.

Nobody thought more highly of his capacities than Dickens himself. But he was puzzled with his inability to convince either the House of Commons in general, or the Tory Party in particular of his sterling qualities, and unique insight into all manner of political difficulties. He was once described as the original "rent-a-quote" man, and you could always be sure that, whatever the subject, Dickens would have a view on it, and be convinced that his was the only view that any sane or moral individual could hold. Over the years, he called for bans on cross-bows, dangerous teddy bears, and tabled a Bill to restore capital punishment for some categories of murder.

But it is all too easy to dismiss Dickens as an amiable (or not amiable, as the taste took you) buffoon. He was a man of highly serious and dedicated intent. He once told me that the proudest moment of his life came in May 1984, when the diplomat Sir Peter Hayman was sent to jail after being convicted of paedophilic practices. Dickens had first named Hayman in the House of Commons, thereby making use of his parliamentary privilege: Hayman could not sue him for libel. The Foreign Office, naturally, defended their man. The Conservative Party leadership was unwilling to make itself an ally of so improbable a crusader. And most of the Labour opposition, however revolted by the practice and encouragement of paedophilia, did not care to offer themselves on the same side as an MP who wanted to end the ban on playing sport with South Africa, birch young thugs, and return immigrants to their countries of origin in a peremptory way. But, in the end, Dickens won, none the less.

Dickens had, certainly, suffered a deprived childhood. He was fostered until he was eight years old. He never heard from his mother again and was, in middle life, movingly to say that he could not even find out whether she was alive or not.

He was born in London in 1931 and educated at schools in Harrow, west London, and at Acton Technical College. He was struck down with polio at the age of 13 and spent two years in hospital and had to wear callipers. His childhood clearly left a mark on him, and produced a personality that combined bluster, sensitivity, and a dedication to an extravagant variety of causes.

Dickens was a heavyweight boxer of some renown in his youth. He sparred with Don Cockell and Henry Cooper, and had some 60 bouts, losing 20. He was a member of St Albans Rural Council from 1967 to 1974, and chairman in 1970-71, and served on Hertfordshire County Council from 1970 to 1975. In 1972, he was awarded the Royal Humane Society's Testimonial on Vellum for saving the lives of two boys and a man who had tried to rescue them from drowning off the coast of Majorca.

But he could not explain - to himself or to others - why he could raise little more than laughs and jeers in Parliament. After all, he reasoned, it was not merely that he had been in advance of his party's policies on a number of subjects, but he had a proven record of electoral efficiency. He had been a good local councillor. He had fought two seats in the Tory cause, Teesside in February 1974 and Ealing North in October 1974, and lost. He fought another, Huddersfield West, and won, in 1979. That seat, however, disappeared as a result of a boundary review. So he found another, Littleborough and Saddleworth, in 1983. He held the seat with a majority of 4,494 over the Liberal Democrat candidate at the last election. Nobody could deny his doggedness, nor his success. Once in the House of Commons, he served on the Commons Energy Select Committee and was vice-chairman of the Association of Conservative Clubs.

None the less, he could make a fool of himself. He decided that he understood the Middle East, and had a complete solution to that unhappy part of the world. Foreign Office ministers treated his lack of knowledge with contempt; and the Labour MP Greville Janner launched a highly successful, if decorously cloaked, accusation of anti-Semitism.

In March 1981 Dickens, a self-professed paragon of family virtues, a tireless critic of any sexual departure from the traditional norm, called a press conference to announce that he had had two extra-marital affairs, and that he was hopelessly in love with one of the women involved. "I have a skeleton in my cupboard," he said, "and I thought it best to be honest." He also announced a rather quaint liking for the the dansant. Floods of ridicule poured over him then; and even more arrived when, a fortnight later, he announced a reconciliation with his wife. His baffled attitude to those who thought him hypocritical was wholly genuine. And he set out on the last journey of his long illness still wondering why he had never been made a minister.

But whatever might be said about Dickens, he was a man of colour, verve and dedication who stood out - often for the wrong reasons - among the dull Parliamentarians of our time.

Geoffrey Dickens was a larger than life character: a funny, jovial man who spoke for popular England, writes Michael Brown. Although the press thought his fellow MPs were laughing at him, we were laughing with him.

Underneath it all Dickens was a superb constituency man who held down a Tory majority in difficult northern, working-class seats. And when we had to go for new constituencies after boundary changes, in 1983, he was the first of my intake to get a change.

He was also the first MP to show that it was possible to recover from being done in by the tabloid press - over the the dansant affair in 1981 - and become a popular member of parliament, with all parties. Over the years the response to that booming voice became more cheering than jeering. What Dickens expounded always read very well in Middle England, and certainly even better in Northern England. As a constituency MP he always brought home the bacon. He was no-nonsense, great fun, and one of the best of all after-dinner speakers.

When I was his whip and I pressed him on an issue on which he felt strongly he would not budge. But on occasions when the party really needed his support he was always there.

There was something almost Shakespearean about Geoffrey Dickens. He performed with Bottom-like assurance on the floor of the House of Commons, and in the tea-room, writes Tristan Garel-Jones.

At times he was ludicrous, even disgraceful. Who can forget his announcement to an astonished House of Commons, "I want to do a favour for every woman in this country"? But I can think of few colleagues more welcome to sit down with. Despite the conscious self-deprecation, he was shrewder than he let on and funny and agreeable colleague who carved out for himself a unique place of affection in the House and, I suspect, beyond.

Like the mechanicals in *As You Like It*, there was more to Geoffrey Dickens than met the eye. He belonged to the Trad right. He was an old-fashioned British patriot. I, amongst others, failed to convince him that today's patriotism involves Britain's playing a leading role in Europe. He was not a Euro-enthusiast or an instinctive admirer of Jacques Delors. But my last recollection of Geoffrey was his dogged stamp through the lobby, in his final illness, in support of his government's policy on Europe.

Geoffrey Kenneth Dickens, politician: born 26 August 1931; Chairman, Sandridge Parish Council 1968-69; Chairman, St Albans Rural District Council 1970-71; Councillor, Hertfordshire County Council 1970-75; MP (Conservative) for Huddersfield West 1979-83, for Littleborough and Saddleworth 1983- 95; married 1956 Norma Boothby (two sons); died 17 May 1995.

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