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Simon Hoggart's sketch

MPs sniff out the scents of occasion

The Commons yesterday had its first chance to discuss the revelations of appalling behaviour of a once highly respected and admired public figure, whose name has over the past few weeks become synonymous with abuse.

MPs also talked about Jimmy Savile. But there are no votes in his crimes, so they were happy - at least Labour MPs were happy - to talk about Andrew Mitchell first.

The chief whip, who is due to account for himself to leaders of the Tories' 1922 Committee, sat in his place at the end of the front bench. He looked, if that is possible, even more like a very stern codfish who has been on the slab for too long. For most of the time he stared straight ahead while various Home Office ministers sort of defended him.

Labour MPs were performing a delicate balancing act. They want to remind the voters about what Mr Mitchell may or may not have shouted at the police as often as possible. In the jargon, it fits in with their "narrative", which is that the government is composed of arrogant toffs (another word, like "pleb" which you almost never hear in real life) who despise mere public servants.

At the same time, they want him to stay, a permanent reminder of the narrative, a sort of "memento toffee" as the Roman plebs might have said.

At first the job of reviling Mr Mitchell was left to backbenchers - all female, for some reason that eludes me.

Catherine McKinnell asked what the effect would be on police morale of a "cabinet minister verbally abusing" officers. Damian Green said crisply

that Mr Mitchell had apologised to the officer, the officer had accepted it, "and for most people that would be enough".

Barbara Keeley chipped in. She accused the chief whip of "ranting and raving." Theresa May, the home secretary, said that this matter had been dealt with, "and that is an end to it." This fell somewhat short of a stout defence, and a look of slight anxiety crossed Mr Mitchell's fishy face, as if he had spotted a waiter arriving with a jug of Mornay sauce.

At this stage we assumed that Labour was leaving the job to the troops while the officers kept quiet. But suddenly Yvette Cooper, the shadow home secretary, was up, quoting Theresa May back at her.

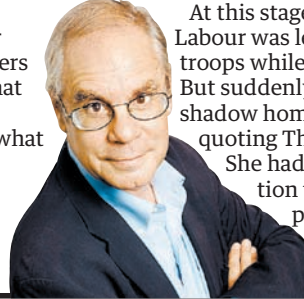
She had told the Police Federation that she believed the public should always give them the respect

they deserved. Her implication was clear.

"I have already answered that question," said Mrs May. "No you haven't!" Labour members bellowed back. Seema Malhotra said that in her constituency people were arrested for abusing the police. Did this mean a different law applied in Whitehall?

"No," said Mrs May, looking increasingly unhappy.

The session ended and Mr Mitchell disappeared. We were on to Jimmy Savile. Whatever you think about his loathsome attacks, there is something faintly distasteful about the hunting mentality of some MPs. They want him stripped of his knighthood and OBE, even though those died with him. I half-expected someone to demand that the wretched man be dug up so that furious crowds could tear to pieces whatever is left of him.

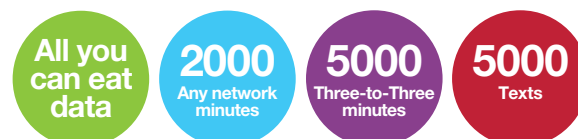


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UK accused of helping to arm loyalist killers

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with the conflict, and as the death toll mounted the IRA came under increasing pressure to call a ceasefire.

There is reason to believe that a number of the paramilitaries connected to the attack were police informers.

There are serious concerns about the way the Loughinisland killings were investigated, with a subsequent inquiry by the police ombudsman establishing that police failed to take some suspects' fingerprints or DNA samples. Police have admitted that one key piece of evidence - the getaway car - was destroyed. There is no evidence that any officer sought or gave permission for this to be done.

The families of the dead men are also bringing civil proceedings against the PSNI after the police ombudsman in Belfast examined the initial investigation, and then produced a report which was widely criticised for refusing to acknowledge whether police informers were involved in the massacre. Murphy said: "The experience of these six families demonstrates that the current mechanisms for truth recovery do not work."

It appears likely that the case will be heard under the terms of the controversial secret justice proposals, which will allow government lawyers to keep such evidence secret, disclosed only to a judge behind closed doors, where it cannot be examined or challenged by the families' lawyers.

Although ministers maintain that the Justice and Security Bill is intended to protect intelligence sharing with foreign governments, its critics insist its true purpose is to conceal evidence of government wrongdoing in cases such as this.

An MoD spokesman said: "There is not much we can say at this stage beyond confirming that a claim has been made. This will be dealt with in accordance with the normal process - gathering evidence and presenting it to the courts."

A spokeswoman for the PSNI said: "We would be unable to comment as this is an ongoing legal case."

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