



Robert Courts MP Maiden Speech
Wednesday, 30th November 2016

Mr Speaker, thank you. It is a great honour to catch your eye this afternoon and to follow so many distinguished speakers.

There is an important link between west Oxfordshire and the debate we are having this afternoon. As Colonial Secretary, Mr Winston Churchill was in great part involved in the setting up of modern Iraq. I think it is also right to say that Mr Churchill was responsible for the setting up of the Chilcot inquiry—or perhaps it just seems that way.

We are speaking this afternoon of past Prime Ministers. I wish to speak of a great Prime Minister. David Cameron represented Witney for 15 years. He was a great Prime Minister and a brilliant MP for west Oxfordshire. He found the Conservative party bleeding after three successive election defeats. He picked it up, restored its faith in itself, and returned it to government. I know at first hand the effect that his leadership had upon the party, the country and its fortunes, because I was there, on the streets, and I felt the turning of the tide. There is perhaps no greater tribute that I could pay David Cameron than to say that he made the Conservative party believe in itself again. He made it fresh, dynamic, and able to communicate with modern Britain. He created a new generation of Conservative politicians, and I am one of them. The record in this House speaks for itself— 1,000 jobs a day created while he was Prime Minister and an economy rescued from the brink of ruin. The party and, if I may say so, the country, will forever be in his debt.

In west Oxfordshire, it did not matter who someone was, where they lived or how they voted; if there was a local issue, he was always happy to help them. It is, of course, always the case that we attend with alacrity to constituents' concerns, but when I see a letter from "D. Cameron, Outraged, of Dean" complaining about his dustbin collection or myriad other issues, it may be one letter that I do not leave until the end of the day.

It is a daunting task to sit in this House. Some weeks ago, I was in private practice at the Bar. I am now surrounded by great experts in law, the military, social justice, the economy and the constitution. The range of talent and experience in this House is awe-inspiring. But I do have ties to this House and an example that I can draw upon. In 1945, Albert Stubbs won the seat of Cambridgeshire for the Labour party. He was a famous trade unionist, and he won his seat by a majority of 44 by getting out on his motorcycle, riding around the villages of Cambridgeshire and signing up the workers to the union. He was known for his hard work for the people of that area and his interest in rural issues.

That record is one that I aspire to when I look at the people of west Oxfordshire. Hon. Members need not worry: I am not about to execute the fastest defection in political history. I mention Mr Stubbs because he was my great-grandfather. I must watch my words carefully at this point, because his daughter—my grandmother—will be watching on the television, and if I put a foot out of line I am going to get a very strongly worded letter. I do therefore acknowledge at this stage that Mr Stubbs would be horrified by my politics, but I hope he would at least approve of my work ethic.

I have spoken to the House of my admiration for Winston Churchill, and I thought it would be a good idea if I went back to the records to see whether there was perhaps an exchange between my hero and my forebear. I went to Hansard and I searched for an exchange, and I expected the contrast of the famous parliamentary wit and the working-class warrior. I was thinking of a combination of Pitt the Younger and Charles James Fox, and I found in the "Thanks to Services" debate from 1945 just such an exchange. The great man—speaking from the Opposition Bench, of course—paused in his speech, took an intervention from Mr Stubbs, told him he was "ignorant" and went back to his speech. I do not know who was right or wrong in that exchange; I merely hope that I will manage to avoid such a rebuke in the course of my career.

West Oxfordshire is a landlocked constituency, but it is perhaps best toured by taking a look at its rivers. If we were charting the course of the Windrush downstream, we would start at the beautiful town of Burford—stone-walled, slate-roofed and a glowing gateway to the Cotswolds. The proclamation of Edward IV; the home of Speaker Lenthall, the most famous protector of this House; and the execution of the Levellers—it shines with history.

We could travel downstream to Witney, the famous market town. My predecessor, in his maiden speech, noted that there was only one blanket factory left in Witney and that most of the beer was brewed elsewhere. Sadly, there are now no blanket factories, although the Blanket Hall is well worth a visit. But the Wychwood brewery has an astonishingly high market share of real ale, and there are wonderful ales. It supplies many of the wonderful pubs in west Oxfordshire, where one can go to enjoy a pint or watch the world go by—I will just have to be careful I do not leave my children behind.

Alongside the Evenlode, we see the beautiful town of Charlbury and, at Cornbury Park, a world-beating charity, SpecialEffect, using video games and technology to enhance the quality of life of people with disabilities. Alongside the Evenlode, the Dorn and the Thames, we see a wealth of wonderful wildlife—for example, at Chimney Meadows—that inhabits the stunning countryside of west Oxfordshire.

But it is the thriving market towns of Witney, Burford, Chipping Norton, Charlbury, Carterton and Eynsham, and the villages that connect them, that give west Oxfordshire its distinctive character. These are filled with clever, industrious, creative, hard-working people creating world-beating industries in IT, Formula 1, travel and clothes, and each year hosting thousands of visitors from across the world. If the rivers are the lifeblood of west Oxfordshire, the market towns are the beating heart.

I pause at this stage to fly, as it were, to proud, modern Carterton and nearby Brize Norton—home of the Royal Air Force's transport fleet and centre of transport operations. It is, of course, from there that so many flew to Iraq, and, sadly, many have flown back having given everything. Their sacrifice is remembered in the moving repatriation garden at Carterton.

My grandfather and my great-uncle were Bomber Command veterans, and the care of elderly veterans is a particular concern to the people of west Oxfordshire, and particularly those in Carterton, whose very lifeblood is tied up with the wellbeing of that thriving airbase and the people who have served in it. Such veterans are people who have asked for little but given everything; they are the people to whom we owe our freedom, and the care we give them now tells us much about not only our compassion but our sense of duty, and we must not let them down.

I also pause to pay tribute to the men and women of today's Royal Air Force. They are the heirs of those who fought in canvas and wood machines above the trenches of Flanders 100 years ago. They are the heirs of those who formed the few in 1940. They, together with the Army and Royal Navy, are the people whose strength and bravery makes possible the civilised debate that we have in this House.

We must not forget that those who defend our freedom now are no less requiring of our care than their forebears. Sometimes the scars are visible, and I commend the charities that do so much to help those whose injuries are physical, but we should not forget that, so often, the wounds are not visible—that a person may leave the conflict, but the conflict will never leave the person.

I have met many people in my work at the Bar whose lives are blighted by psychiatric illness, and I urge all Members to remember all those who need a little more understanding, both in the armed forces and in the wider public. That underlines the importance to everyone of the health services that underpin this care: the surgeries in our towns and, in my constituency, the hospitals in Witney and Chipping Norton.

I have spoken of rivers that seem to surge with history, and it is perhaps the Glyme that has the most fame—flowing down through famous Woodstock, royalist-garrisoned in the civil war and now with the world heritage site of Blenheim Palace.

Lastly, at the close of our tour, I come to the quiet little village of Bladon, where I live. The sun climbs slowly to illuminate the village in the shallow valley, as it has for 1,000 years. The local red kite floats lazily over the church tower. The river flows through Blenheim Park, round past the yellow sandstone cottages. It is an attractive but typical small west Oxfordshire settlement, with one pub, an active pop-up shop and the thriving church community of St Martin's, which is where I was married and where my son, Henry, was baptised. But it is also the reason why this small Oxfordshire village is world-famous. I rise for the first time in this House on the birthday of Sir Winston Churchill. He now lies in Bladon churchyard. I walk past his grave every Sunday morning—my house is a stone's throw away—so his words resonate particularly with me.

Winston Spencer Churchill loved this House and, throughout his long career, defended its strengths and traditions. So, as we come to the end of our tour, following the Thames from the southern bank of my constituency to outside the door of this palace, I would like to pause to consider his words about what it is that we do here. He said: "The object of Parliament is to substitute argument for fisticuffs" and that the House of Commons "is the citadel of British liberty; it is the foundation of our laws...I do not know how else this country can be governed other than by the House of Commons playing its part in all its broad freedom in British public life."

If I may say so, we must all remember that. No matter how great the issues or how strong the passions, the very fact that we can have these debates is proof positive of why our system of representative democracy works.

I am acutely aware of the trust set in me by the people of west Oxfordshire. I will ensure that the voice of the Windrush is heard loudly on the banks of the Thames, and I will strive every day to deserve their trust. Every day that I set foot in this Chamber, I will remember that to sit on these Benches is to breathe fresh life into Churchill's words—an honour without measure.

Robert Carter