

## The Queens Speech 2002

Wednesday, 13 November 2002

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I second the motion. It is a particular pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes).

Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): Well said.

Ms King: I was coming to that. I have taken some time in preparing my speech, most of it spent practising saying the name of my right hon. Friend's constituency.

My right hon. Friend is one of the longer serving Members of the House. Traditionally, the parliamentary honour of moving and seconding the Queen's Speech falls, so I am told, to two types of MP: the younger whippersnapper MP-type and the old&mdash;l should say older&mdash;and wise, but not weary, parliamentary sage MP-type. It is up to us to guess who is who. My right hon. Friend needed all his sage-like qualities when he became an International Development Minister. All politicians say that they want to make the world a better place, but my right hon. Friend did not just say that, he did it, when he worked with the Secretary of State for International Development. For that he deserves our thanks.

It is also traditional, when seconding the Queen's Speech, for MPs to say that their constituency is the jewel in the crown. I hate it when MPs get proprietorial, but there is only one constituency that has the jewel in the crown&mdash;indeed, it has the Crown jewels&mdash;and it is mine; it is the beautiful, the bountiful, the historical Bethnal Green and Bow. A collection of picturesque hamlets nestled around the Tower, we are Tower Hamlets.

Though not without our problems, we have what any estate agent will say is the most important thing: location, location, location. On top of that, we have education&mdash;l will not repeat the mantra&mdash;and since the Government came to power in 1997, the young people of Tower Hamlets have made the greatest educational improvement of any young people in this country. As we have the highest density of poverty, I hope that everyone shares my pride and pleasure in that improvement.

It is just as well that improvement has taken place, because London's centre of gravity is moving east. We have the transport infrastructure to sustain that: City airport, Stansted, the docklands light railway and the Jubilee line extension. In addition, we are hoping, Mr. Chancellor, for the long-awaited Crossrail. I hope that local east-enders will benefit for the first time from that prosperity. To summarise, in my humble opinion, east London is the future of the planet.

When I became an east London MP, one of my predecessors to second the Queen's Speech, Neil Kinnock, gave me some advice. He said, "Oona, if you want to succeed at Westminster, you've got to do three things. First, you must specialise. If you don't, it'll set you back 10 years. Second, you must stop swearing. Third, you must stop wearing micro miniskirts." I stopped wearing micro miniskirts and finally specialised in two areas: housing and genocide. Like all MPs, I worked on many other issues, but the cry went out from my office to any journalist who rang, "Housing or

13 Nov 2002 : Column 11 genocide. Housing or genocide. She'll talk about anything as long it is housing or genocide." The phones went dead.

Why housing and genocide? Housing because it is the issue that affects my constituents most, and genocide because it is the issue that affects me most, and gives me most sleepless nights. It is apt that just 48 hours ago we commemorated the end of the second world war and the horror of the holocaust. When soldiers returned from the first world war, they were promised homes fit for heroes. I must congratulate the Liberals&mdash;l hope my hon. Friends do not lynch me for it&mdash;[Interruption.] I shall tell the House why. It was a Liberal politician who came out with the phrase "homes fit for heroes".

Of course, that was all spin and no trousers, and a Labour Government had to be elected to deliver those homes, which we did with the Wheatley Act in 1924. It has always been thus: if people want more money to be put into affordable housing, they have to elect a Labour Government. It was recognised after the second world war, as it must be recognised today, especially in our debate about public services, that housing is the most fundamental public service. Again, a Labour Government are introducing legislation to increase the amount of decent, affordable housing, and I warmly welcome the measures outlined in the Queen's Speech.

Most of the constituents who come to see me say that their biggest problem is housing, followed by, and often inextricably linked to, antisocial behaviour. In areas such as mine, a lot of antisocial behaviour is linked to race. Frankly, I am sick to death of race, but if you are black, it is a bit like having a stalker, and you cannot get away from it. I have been very lucky; I have not suffered much racism. I am very light-skinned, to put it crudely, and I had to wait until I became an MP before I got death threats because of my race.

I remember, however, the first time I was materially affected by my race. I was 18 and staying in a very down-market youth hostel in America&mdash;\$6 a night for a mattress and \$4 if people shared. For no apparent reason, the owner of the hostel suddenly marched up to me and shouted, "We don't have niggers like you here." He went upstairs and threw all my belongings out of a first-floor window. First, there was the humiliation of having my things scattered all over the

street; secondly, I had a problem in that I had nowhere to sleep that night; thirdly, rage engulfed me and started to drive me mad.

That experience taught me two things. First, if people are subjected to racial abuse they will, if they are average, like me, either go mad or try to get even, neither of which we want to happen. Secondly, race is no longer—as if it ever was—black or white. The man who threw me out of the hostel was Asian. The most unprejudiced, non-racist person I have ever met is my mother, who is white. The worst racial abuse that I saw while I was growing up was inflicted on Asian children by white and Afro-Caribbean children together. The icons of the 20th century who did most to inspire respect for universal human rights were black and Asian: Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi. To think that any race has a monopoly on racism, or on virtue, is absurd. Last year in Tower

13 Nov 2002 : Column 12 Hamlets, 42 per cent. of the victims of racial crime were white and over 50 per cent. were Asian or Afro-Caribbean.

As I said, I am sick of talking about race, so I want to ask the House a favour. As long as I am one of only two black or ethnic minority women ever elected to the British Parliament, I am not going to get this stalker off my back. So if there is any chance of having a representative democracy any time soon, I would be really grateful. Not a single Asian woman has ever been elected to this Chamber, and white women are not doing very well either. People ask me, "What's it like now there are so many Labour women MPs?" If we add up the numbers of MPs called John, David or Michael, we find that there are more of them—107—than there are of us. To all those outside the Chamber who are waiting for the revolution, I say, "Don't hold your breath."

I hope that hon. Members will indulge me if my final subject is a recent parliamentary visit to Rwanda, which leads me, predictably, to genocide. Some hon. Members will know that I chair the all-party parliamentary group on Rwanda—the group on the great lakes region and genocide prevention. Last month, six MPs took part in an Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation to Rwanda. None of us will forget the small church we visited. Everywhere inside were scattered items—a shoe, a football, a bag, a jumper, a bone, then another bone—and as we looked, we realised that everywhere we turned there were bones. All I could see were hips, skulls, arms and legs. On a makeshift altar at the end of the church sat a single skull, peering out over former friends and family, now scattered, mingled and crushed in the most diabolical human rubbish tip.

That memorial site is slowly turning to dust. Without preservation, evidence of the crime will disappear. Rwanda does not have the money to build its equivalent of Israel's Yad Vashem. Forgive me for asking, but if there is anyone out there listening who, in the spirit of Remembrance Sunday, could contribute to preserving the memories of those who died in a more recent holocaust, please let me know.

While those 5,000 people in the church and up to 1 million people elsewhere were being murdered, the United Nations did nothing—well, not absolutely nothing. In 1998, with the Select Committee on International Development, I visited a genocide site, where I picked my way through 10,000 corpses. The UN had come in after all the killing was done and put up curtains with the UN logo on them—perhaps to keep off the flies, I do not know: surely the most perverse case of window dressing in history.

The fact is that the UN did nothing because we did nothing. The lesson that we must recall today is that the UN is only as strong as the resolve of its member states. I am the UN's harshest critic, but also its most passionate advocate, because if we had had an effective United Nations, the genocide in Rwanda would have been averted. To have an effective UN, we must do two things: root out the appalling double standards that cripple international relations, and prove that the UN means business. We cannot allow countries—any country—to flout UN resolutions, and we must enforce those resolutions.

I know that traditionally, this is a light, breezy, cheerful little speech, so I will conclude by telling the House what happened in Rwanda four weeks ago when

13 Nov 2002 : Column 13 six MPs, including me, came face to face with a gorilla that made King Kong look like a chihuahua. I have a visual aid here—I know that that is a bit modern, but Parliament is hurtling towards modernity, and I think that our little time capsule here in the House of Commons will be rapping on the doors of the 1950s any minute now, so I trust that hon. Members will not be perturbed if I use this visual aid, which shows the gorilla in question.

When the picture was taken, I was standing about 15 ft away from that huge silverback gorilla. On my left I had a Conservative Front-Bench spokesman, whom I see in his place now, and on my right, I had a Conservative Whip—not necessarily the private militia I would have chosen for my defence in the circumstances. I was terrified—I distinctly remember asking, "Anyone up for getting out of here while we're ahead?" No answer—silence. Twenty seconds later, the gorilla charged. I am not joking, and I do not mean it charged in the other direction—it charged towards us.

The Conservative Front-Bench spokesman on my left was remarkably cool, calm and collected—[Interruption.]

He did not faint. Incredibly, however, the Conservative Whip on my right grabbed me by both shoulders, stood behind me and used me as a human shield—[Laughter.] It is with great regret that I must report to the House that there are elements in the Opposition Whips Office who will not hesitate to use the tactics of the butcher of Baghdad. For that reason, I hope that we will all give the Leader of the Opposition our sympathy if he chooses, as he may well do following recent events, to open up his party to weapons inspectors.

I do not mean to be too harsh, because during my time in Parliament I have made good friends on both sides of the House. Despite our shortcomings, and despite what people read about us in the press, there are some wonderful people in this place who work as politicians. I therefore commend this House of Commons to the country, and this Queen's Speech to the House.