

Ageism and beardism

One of the agreeable things about the numerous isms to which political correctness has introduced us is that each person can find at least one of them that applies to herself or himself (note the scrupulous correctness of that order of pronouns). As a pensioner of hoary standing I myself glory in the protectiveness of those such as Lord Janner of Braunstone who get anxious about ageism. On March 5 he asked the Cabinet Office Minister Lord Falconer whether the Government would take steps to end age discrimination in the Civil Service.

The reply was that the Government have already taken such steps. The Cabinet Office has issued age diversity guidance to all departments and agencies, and monitors implementation each year. It is also working with departments and agencies to review their policies in the light of the recommendations of the Performance and Innovation Unit's report, *Winning the Generation Game*.

How snappy with their titles the present lot are; so very different from the days when I was subject to Cabinet Office rule as one of the parliamentary counsel. Of course the range of choice has narrowed. It is now always necessary to be telly-orientated, so that the intended audience will catch the drift. All part I suppose of the dumbing-down process we are getting so used to. Perhaps Mr Bruce Forsyth is an honorary member of the Performance and Innovation Unit.

Lord Falconer added that the Cabinet Office is considering a scheme for the flexible deployment of senior civil servants aged over 50 aimed at offering a wide range of career and retirement options. These will include increased opportunities for some civil servants more easily to extend their careers beyond the age of 60. Departments and agencies are also considering the feasibility of change in their retirement policies for staff at more junior level.

After further questioning by Lord Janner it was revealed by Lord Falconer that the Government has signed up to an anti-age discrimination directive and is working to try to make that a reality within the Civil Service. They are also considering a scheme whereby from 50 plus a Civil Service career path which does not necessarily end at 60 can be mapped out.

Then came the kind of totally irrelevant interjection for which the House of Lords is notorious (in that respect, nothing has changed).

Baroness Greengross: My Lords, is the Minister aware that there is age discrimination in professions other than the Civil Service, one of them being the Bar? Although there is no fixed retirement age in many parts of the legal profession, the Bar stands accused of age discriminatory practices. Is he aware that it is difficult to get a pupillage even if one is a mature student of about 35?

Lord Falconer easily side-stepped that one, whereupon the former Chingford polecat chipped in.

Lord Tebbit: My Lords, does the Minister think that it is a sign of increasing age that both questions and answers elongate?

Lord Falconer apologised for the length of his answers. Another peer then brought things back to the question before the House.

Lord Mackenzie of Framwellgate: My Lords, as regards discrimination in the Home Office, when I was a young detective inspector I sported a full beard when I was a member of the drugs squad. I applied for a job at the Home Office as a superintendent and I was required to shave it off. Will the Minister assure me that "beardism" does not still exist in the Home Office?

Lord Falconer tiredly replied that the question was about age discrimination rather than facial hair discrimination. It seems that beardism has not yet become a PC fetish. There is still time for a revival of the game of beaver that flourished around a century ago (a little before my time, but my mother used to talk of it). Skittish young girls would rush up to a bearded man in the street and tug his beard, yelling "Beaver!".

I was glad to see, by the way, the recent case where a bearded chef, refused a job in the food department by Waitrose because beards apparently harbour bacteria, lost his case before the employment tribunal. Thankfully, there are still some vestiges of common sense around.

Then came another irrelevant intervention.

Lord Mowbray and Stourton: My Lords, while being in complete agreement with the noble and learned Lord's answers, how will he deal with the many members of the clan Buggins?

Here Lord Falconer gave up, saying he was not sure what the question meant. Evidently this modernising young Cabinet Office minister has never even heard of what used to be a basic feature of our Civil Service: Buggins' turn.

Perhaps there is something to be said for Mr Blair's modernising tendencies after all.

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