

HAVING A VOICE

Stephen Hancocks OBE
Editor-in-Chief

The BDJ Upfront section includes editorials, letters, news, book reviews and interviews.

Please direct your correspondence to the News Editor, Kate Quinlan at the BDJ, The Macmillan Building, 4 Crinan Street, London, N1 9XW or by email to BDJNews@nature.com

Press releases or articles may be edited, and should include a colour photograph if possible.

It often happens that in attempting to explain or describe something to someone you accidentally hit on a meaning that had hitherto been hidden to you, or that you had never thought of. A few years ago I was trying to answer a Finnish colleague's bewilderments about Prime Minister's Question Time and in the process found myself realising that the word parliament had been derived through Middle English from the French 'parlement' or speaking, from the verb parler; to parley.

A talking shop is what parliament is often dubbed and this makes perfect sense. In the party system the side with the majority has the greatest number of voices and so, in theory at least, has the strength to literally drown out their opposition. The temptation is to say that that really isn't fair and yet in order to have arrived at that situation a party has had to have been able to attract to its policies or philosophy more people, or voices, than anyone else. It is also commonplace to protest that that is not the best way of running a country, and were it not for the other pieces of the parliamentary jigsaw such as the Committees and the House of Lords one might be inclined to agree. Nevertheless, seen in the light, or heard on the airwaves, such an explanation is, I think, helpful and explanatory if not insightful.

We often speak too of the need for various people, causes and organisations to have a voice; to be heard, to be taken seriously. Dentistry is no different. We too recognise from time to time that someone needs to hear what we have to say. Indeed in recent years the BDA has made great strides in

'As a group of dental professionals who does speak for us?'

creating connections within Westminster and establishing a presence in parliamentary and political circles. This proved to be very advantageous in the debacle last year of the General Dental Council's (GDC) unlawful actions and the consequent Select Committee hearing. The BDA's voice was used to great effect during the Annual Retention Fee (ARF) outrage and it was only because of the Association's collective strength and its ability to metaphorically shout that the GDC, the profession's regulator, ended up being answerable in the High Court, and losing.

However, as a group of dental professionals who does speak for us? Perhaps the clue to the answer is in the description of us as a group. Rather than being unified by the interests of our profession we are separated by our professional interests. Given that the BDA mounted the ARF campaign with a membership in the region of 20,000 when

one considers that the total number of registered dental professionals is nearer to 100,000 it helps to put this into perspective. The wiliness of the GDC in exacerbating that divide by lowering the ARF for Dental Care Professionals (DCPs) while increasing it for dentists serves only to highlight the fissures that run through professional world of dentistry and the ease with which even the body charged with protecting the public can drive chasms between us.

DCPs similarly have their own associations, some of which are very successful and supportive of their members. But there is no sense of a cohe-

sive whole, each enclave wishing to maintain its own identity but also its own separateness from the other categories of colleagues. What might the answer be? Some have called for a College of Dentistry, indeed with the ultimate dream of a Royal College of Dentistry, as in Nursing and other fields of medicine. While a very laudable vision, it is hard to comprehend how our profession as it currently sees itself could even begin to agree on a representative structure to form the foundations of such an organisation, let alone raise the necessary funding and infrastructure. 'Why would we want yet another organisation within dentistry?' the cry would go up, which at one and the same time identifies the problem and highlights the need.

Another clue may be one which emerged with the ARF campaign, the fact that for once we had a common purpose, unfortunately one has to write in this instance a common enemy, to help galvanise us into a cause. Adversity breeding unity. Perhaps in dentistry we do not have a sufficiently strong adversary against which we feel the need to unite or perhaps we feel that such a construct would at best be not worth the trouble or at worst be awkwardly ineffective.

PMT as an abbreviation for Prime Minister's Question Time is the shorthand of the moment in parliamentary speak. Perhaps though we might appropriate it for our own purposes and start to think about the dental Profession's Motivation Time? Would we be able to go further, reach higher and be heard more often and more distinctly with one voice? If so, where do we begin? Does it start with a whisper or does it die with a cynical aside? Why not have your say? Parley.

DOI: 10.1038/sj.bdj.2014.298

