ATT Welcome, April 2015

Welcomes

01 April 2015

Budget theatre?

Did I tell you that I love budgets? I like the sense of theatre about them. A packed House of Commons and the rising anticipation and the fact that it is the only time that alcohol may be brought into the chamber; albeit only to be drunk by the chancellor!

Records from Victorian times show that members made a great occasion of Budget day – dressing up and wearing their finery – and we still get a sense of that excitement in the chamber leading up to the chancellor's great moment these days.

If I'm not lecturing, I do try to sit and watch the chancellor's Budget speech on TV. Not that we get shed-loads of tax details – more a piece of political theatre – and I can't help but notice that the bookies are keener on betting on the length of the chancellor's speech, than noticing what he may have to say about gambling taxation.
Which brings me to the longest Budget speech, the accolade of which goes, I think, to William Gladstone in 1853. It lasted four and three-quarter hours – and yes, he did fortify himself with a few sherbets along the way (sherry and beaten egg apparently).

The shortest, at 45 minutes, goes to Benjamin Disraeli and I think, Gordon Brown. It was Brown who was the master of the machine-gun approach – spraying facts over the commons at breakneck speed where few of them seemed to me to be rooted in anything that I recognised as reality for most people. It used to remind me of George Orwell's 1984 and the announcements over the radio about the economic successes of Big Brother's state.

The word 'budget' appears to come from the French bougette, meaning a little bag (so it's a diminutive of bouge – a leather bag). When budgets were first introduced in

the 18th century the chancellor, Sir Robert Walpole, I think, was said to ‘open the bougette’.

Of course, we are now used to the media opportunity outside number 11, when the chancellor appears on the doorstep and holds up the red leather Budget box. Perhaps rather less well-known is that the original red box, which was made for Gladstone, was used until 1997 when Gordon Brown became chancellor and had a new one made.

The trouble with holding up the red leather box and showing it from side-to-side is that it shows whether your trousers are too short – I did smile at some media comment on George’s attire this year.

Another strange fact about the Budget is that it is not the speaker of the commons who chairs it – it is normally the deputy speaker (he or she is actually the chairman of ways and means).

Although the speaker has presided over the odd Budget debate, in 1968 and 1989 for example, it is usually the chairman of ways and means that takes the chair as the financial measures contained in the chancellor’s Budget are brought in on ways and means resolutions. You did want to know that didn’t you?

I do think that the introduction of the autumn statement and the three-month rule for draft legislation, which has been a godsend for those of us who have to make sense of it quickly, has removed some of the excitement on Budget day though. And this year’s Budget did seem to be short of a few rabbits.

So, the old days of ‘a penny on a pint and three pence on a packet of cigarettes’, which graced the evening headlines and people rushing to buy a pint before the six o’clock deadline, have largely gone.

But what am I complaining for?

It’s probable that we’ll have another Budget in June, so the missed opportunity for the rabbits may come again – along with another piece of political theatre.