# Mitchell and the decline in politics [1]

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The new Chief Whip of Britain's Conservative Party, and former Police Minister, Andrew Mitchell MP, had something of an altercation [3] the other day with the police at the gates of Downing Street. The Chief Whip, of course, has an official home in Downing Street, so he probably knows the cops there pretty well. There he was on his bike, trying to leave, but the police wouldn't open the main gate for him. Their job is security, and they like to keep our politicians nice and safe, so they suggested he use a side gate instead. At which point, unfortunately, he lost it, and let off a stream of abuse against the officers.

Shocking, you must agree. But what is even more shocking is how this story seems to have occupied the headlines and the lead slots on the TV and radio news for the last day and a bit. Various opposition MPs and police trade union leaders say the Chief Whip should resign. Commentators have been asking government ministers whether they are not shocked too and whether they agree he should resign. Were Parliament in session, various members would probably be tabling motions even as you read this.

It is a small example of the decline of our politics, and indeed our laws. Police officers are well used to being on the receiving end of ripe remarks, as are most workers who have to deal with customers and the general public, particularly if those customers and members of the public are in a rush or frustrated about something. Police who work in the Palace of Westminster say they are well used to the rudeness of MPs. It's a high-pressure job, and MPs are ? well, let's say confident about their own importance. The sensible reaction is to ask the person to exercise some restraint, and then forget it. We all have these moments of frustration. But here, there are two differences.

First, politics dominates our lives, thanks to the 24-hour news schedule and the proliferation of print, broadcast and online media. Indeed, there is a self-promoting relationship between politics and the media. The media need juicy sensational news, the politicians need headlines, so each provides what the other wants. As a result, on almost every issue or indiscretion, no matter how petty, we get too many sensational claims, counter-claims, demands for resignations, expressions of outrage, and other posturing by self-promoting politicians. And too many media strories which take the reactions too seriously and as a result just magnify molehills as if they were mountains.

The second problem is more subtle. Our legislators have been so anxious to protect us from genuine abuse ? racism, for example ? that they have attempted to restrain us beyond our human nature. People do, on occasion, lose their temper. There is a difference, though, between incidents that should be settled with an apology and incidents that constitute a breach of the peace, or threaten violence. But politicians have drawn our laws, and are continuing to draw them, to reflect their notion of an ideal society, not a real one. They don't want us to smoke, or drink much, or eat fatty foods, or swear, or give other people a mouthful on occasion. These are 'unacceptable'. Well, being rude to other folk certainly is 'unacceptable' in

a moral sense. But should there be a law against it? And if everyone who ever did it had to resign the job, how many of us would be in work at all? Laws and attitudes need to realise that the human beings they deal with are not perfect.

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