

Tribute to Jim Dobbin - St. Margaret's - January 14th 2015

Those of us who gathered for Jim's funeral at Salford Cathedral and who are here at St. Margaret's tonight were proud to count Jim Dobbin as a colleague and a friend. His many friendships crossed the political divide and encompassed members of both Houses of Parliament and people of all faiths.

Each year, with his devoted and redoubtable wife, Pat, we undertook a sponsored walk for the charity, Right To Life. On one occasion walking across Morecambe Bay we were joined by Ann Widdecombe. At one point Ann found herself up to her waist in water – and Jim, eschewing all party advantage, very gallantly waded in to get her back onto firmer ground – thus preserving Ann for her future role on Strictly Come Dancing.

Ann and Jim may have had diametrically opposed views based on Right and Left but, as so often happens at Westminster, "causes" can often throw people together in most unlikely ways – and Right and Wrong become more important than Right and Left.

Jim and I first got to know one another through our work as members of all party parliamentary groups. He served as Vice Chairman of the All Party Group on North Korea, which I chair, and we established another to promote Human Dignity. With great skill and dedication He chaired the all-party parliamentary pro-life group, championing palliative care for the terminally ill, care for the unborn child and their mothers, and opposing the destruction of human embryos.

His passion for the rights of disabled people was undoubtedly influenced by the disabilities experienced by two of his grandchildren: one of whom, Jim, named for his grandfather, began his undergraduate studies in economics at Baliol, Oxford this academic year.

It wasn't a theoretical issue for Jim when, in 2006, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecology called for a debate on Dutch-style eugenic "mercy killing" of severely disabled babies, Jim said: "This sends the message that only the perfect are acceptable and the disabled can be discarded."

As a microbiologist Jim argued for good science and good ethics to march hand in hand. His final speech in the House of Commons was to urge caution over producing "three-parent designer babies" through the controversial mitochondrial replacement technique.

Jim's principles were rooted in his Catholic faith. Pope Benedict XVI made him a Knight of St. Gregory but there was not a drop of sectarian blood in him. An active member of the Parliamentary Christian Fellowship, it was a sign of the high esteem in which he was held across both Houses, that he was asked to act as Chairman of the annual National Prayer Breakfast.

Mr Speaker Bercow, who attended his funeral rightly described Jim as "a deeply principled and independent-minded parliamentarian".

All of us who were privileged to know him were keenly aware of the unswerving support given to him by Pat, who shared his causes and convictions with equal passion. Their love and commitment to one another gave Jim great strength.

In a climate where there is so much cynicism and criticism of politics and politicians, tonight is an opportunity to acknowledge the vocation and work of a good man, a principled and dedicated parliamentarian, who never forgot his roots or the common good - and to thank Pat and her family for Jim's public service and commitment to his country, his constituents, his conscience and his causes.

Requiescat in pace.

Prof The Lord Alton of Liverpool, KCSG, KCMCO,