

DENNIS SKINNER



UK HOUSE OF COMMONS

THE BEAST OF BOLSOVER

He's a conviction politician, he's an unrepentant, old school socialist, he represents the place where he grew up in Derbyshire and he once did a real job for a living (he was a coalminer) – any one of those qualifications makes Dennis Skinner a rare specimen in British politics these days.

He once said that he would retire at the age of 65, that to do otherwise would be to 'take another man's job', So far, he's gone 18 years beyond that, but nobody could ever accuse him of riding the gravy train: Skinner has arguably had the best attendance record in the House and yet frequently listed as claiming the least in expenses. He's always spurned paid trips abroad, anything smacking of patronage and even the House of Commons bars – he prefers to meet visitors in the canteen.

He's also democracy's most prolific and vituperative heckler and his sneering harangues have become legendary. Sometimes they're funny; often they're just bile and battery acid. He called one former cabinet minister 'slimy' and 'a wart' and another a 'pompous sod'. He accused Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of being the sort who would bribe judges 'to save her own neck'.

Skinner's staunchly against the monarchy, and the annual opening of Parliament has always triggered a response – usually directed at 'Black Rod' the liveried official sent to summon MPs to the House of Lords for the Queen's speech. When a new Black Rod, the diminutive retired general, Michael Willcocks, made his first appearance, Skinner cried: 'They've short-changed us! He's nowt but a midget!'

For decades he was something of a hate figure for everyone who didn't share his politics. Now that's changed as the Brits are increasingly disposed to see their legislature as a bland, self-serving tribe, and after his 44 years in the House, even his annual anti-monarchy quips have become as much a part of the cherished parliamentary ritual as the braying of the royal fanfare. 'I shall miss you Dennis,' said Willcocks on his last day in office as Black Rod, seven years after the 'midget' jibe. And the truth is: so will they all.

