

How Not To Get Hung, Drawn And Quartered By A Select Committee

The grilling of Kids Company founder, Camila Batmanghelidjh, and her Chairman, Alan Yentob, by MPs on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee afforded a masterclass in how not to handle such occasions. But what can we specifically learn from their appearance?



First. Most Committees operate a short, consensual and discursive style of questioning designed to unpack or help the committee understand an issue. But you may need to think of your witness session not just as a Parliamentary event but a media event. In recent years, some of those appearing before Parliamentary Select Committees have felt they are on trial before a public court - no longer witnesses but the accused.

Second. If you are a senior executive, you may feel ill-at-ease. You're not in charge here; nobody is genuflecting to you. Yentob often projected an expression of world weariness and talked down to MPs. In an exchange with Committee Chair, Bernard Jenkin MP, who noted that he too has been involved with charities, Yentob retorted: "Has your charity lasted 20 years?". Jenkin shot back: "My charity's been going for about 400 years actually."

Whatever your view of politics and politicians, you are now on their turf. When Batmanghelidjh turned on Jenkin: "On what basis do you describe this as a failing charity?", his answer was in the best traditions of a politician dealing with a heckler: "Because it's gone bust". Every journalist picked up on that exchange and it shattered her credibility.

And third, don't become frustrated

and annoyed by the process and the questions. If that happens, you need to reframe your emotional response, accept that it isn't fair and move on. The more assertive the Committee becomes, the calmer you should become. Batmanghelidjh didn't. She became confrontational,

blustered, didn't address questions, provided contradictory answers and interrupted MPs. This led to one Labour MP accusing her of providing "non-stop spiel, psychobabble" and a "torrent of ... verbal ectoplasm". Another defining moment for the audience.



Learning Points

- **As in media interviews, plan your narrative and practise; use examples and simple language; be concise but not monosyllabic; be engaged not detached. Don't try and memorise answers to lots of questions - you'll end up confused or robotic.**
- **While subservience is unattractive, you want to come across as transparent, informed and helpful. Do prepare a nice turn-of-phrase - a soundbite - but never be disrespectful or flippant.**
- **For non-controversial witness appearances, the same rules apply. Remember that a high proportion of Select Committee recommendations are taken up by Government. Appearing in front of a Committee is an important opportunity to directly influence its members and the political discourse.**