



When morals clash

Something rare and refreshing took place at Prime Minister's Questions. It was a genuine moral clash.

As it happened, it took place about grammar schools. On the one side, Theresa May was arguing for their reintroduction. At present, she argued, the only way to get a really good school is to go private, or to move house to live near an excellent comprehensive. This situation is giving better educations only to those who can afford it: either the fees, or the house prices.

To reintroduce grammar schools enables the possibility that someone from a poorer background can get an academically outstanding education, which they cannot at the moment.

Not only is this the right thing to do, to her view, it is actively immoral to stop it. She knows how much she personally benefitted from a grammar school. She feels morally obliged to use her position to give others the great opportunities she had.

On the other side, there was Jeremy Corbyn, himself a grammar school boy, but one uncomfortable with the principle. To him, selection at eleven fatally undermines the life-chances and the confidence of the 80% of the population who do not go to grammar school. The cost of giving an outstanding education to a privileged few is borne by the less privileged many. And after all, most grammar school children don't come from the backstreets anyway; they are middle class children whose parents have themselves invested in private tuition. It is not just a mistake to rein-

roduce grammar schools, it is morally abhorrent.

For once, there wasn't a politician in the House who had to resort to a script to help them out; no one was sticking to a carefully formed sequence of words that obfuscated the truth or covered up muddled thinking. They stood opposite each other like Ali and Frazier trading blows, and it was impressive because on each side their view came out of genuine moral conviction. Each of them believed they had morality on their side.

The problem is: what then? The fact is, they've both got a point. Both believe they are fighting for the rights of those who are less privileged. Both see themselves as fighting the good fight. Yet they disagree.

For one thing, at least, they were discussing something fundamentally worth discussing. For another thing, the argument was strident, but it was also respectful. This is what politics should be about. But still, what then? At some point, one has to make a judgement call about what to do, and sometimes it is not a case of one side protecting itself, or scoring political points, or spinning to stay in power. It is a case of genuinely trying to see the best way forward for the country.

Personally, I err on the side of thinking grammars are a bad idea, but I love the fact that, whatever happens, these politicians are genuinely trying to do that which they hold to be morally right.

September 2016. Thought for the Train is a short column written by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train, or elsewhere. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at www.surbitonchurch.org.uk.