



## Ted Heath and uncertainty

There is something inherently dissatisfactory about the reports of Ted Heath, former Prime Minister, and his crimes of sexual assaults against boys and young men.

Firstly, the alleged offences are twenty to fifty years old; secondly, Heath cannot defend himself and thirdly, the bizarre decision of the police to hold the initial press conference outside his former house feeds the idea that it was a media spun witch hunt. As his godson, defending Heath yesterday, put it:

“If you make a mass appeal for victims, you are sure to get them.”

The problem with this argument is that it isn't necessarily true. There was a similar press briefing about Cliff Richard, yet only a trickle of people came forward, none of whom were convincing enough for the police to investigate further, and they spent £800,000 on it. By contrast, forty men have come forward to testify against Ted Heath, and seven of the accusations were credible enough for the police to say they would have brought Ted Heath in for questioning had he been alive.

If you were one of Heath's friends, it leaves you in a very difficult position. Clearly, his friends both want to be loyal but also knew nothing about this behaviour and find it very difficult to believe: but then, that's not surprising. Heath would hardly have publicised it. And who wants to believe their friend was a

paedophile?

If Heath is innocent, then it is a tragedy that his name is besmirched by these allegations, which are of a horrible crime. If he is guilty, the tragedy is less that the offences are in the public domain now, but that they did not come to light before, at a time when he could have been stopped from further offences.

I am not sure we will ever know. The Church of England is haunted by its own historic allegations here, most notably of George Bell, the former Bishop of Chichester. For his heroic efforts at fighting the worst brutalities of the Second World War, he is as close to a saint as the Church of England has produced. Or at least that is how he was regarded until a recent historical allegation came to light of sexual abuse by him against a young girl in the 1950s.

His defenders have pointed to the impossibility of verifying this claim after such a time. Unlike with Heath, it has remained a single accuser, even though there has been a great deal of publicity. They feel his name has been unnecessarily besmirched.

As against that, the victim's testimony is plausible. One cannot know, but I for one am inclined to believe her allegation is true, reluctant though I am to do so.

For individual cases, we may never know. As an overall phenomenon, it is undoubtedly, horrifically true. And the sins of the real abusers take further victims when the innocent are accused.

*October 2017. 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](http://www.surbitonchurch.org.uk).*