

Boaty McBoatface and the hypocrisy of Paul Flynn MP

Someone had to say it sooner or later: *the Boaty McBoatface saga shows that the public cannot be trusted to make a sensible choice so let's override the Brexit vote.*

For the benefit of anyone unaware of this rather amusing story, it all began when the Natural Environment Research Council decided to let internet users choose the name of a new polar research ship currently under construction. James Hand, a public relations professional and former BBC employee, submitted the name Boaty McBoatface as a joke, but it ended up the runaway winner with 124,000 votes – three times more than any other proposed name.

The Council decided, however, to ignore the result of the poll and the new vessel is to be called RRS David Attenborough, which actually came fourth in the poll. However, as a concession to those who took part in the poll, a robotic submersible vessel (a yellow submarine, in other words) which is to be carried by the new ship, will bear the Boaty name.

So this is what happens when you let the public decide anything! It shows they can't be trusted. Best ignore them if they don't vote sensibly. A paraphrase, admittedly, but this is the gist of a speech by Paul Flynn. the Labour MP for Newport. "Does not the decision in the referendum deserve similar respect to the public majority in favour of the name Boaty McBoatface?" he asked Theresa May in Parliament last Monday.

Such a suggestion is disingenuous in the extreme, if not downright hypocritical for several reasons.

Firstly, it assumes that the general public are as devoid of a sense of humour as Mr Flynn himself. He seems to forget that

our country has had a long tradition of rather wacky humour. Think back to the Goons, the Goodies or Monty Python's Flying Circus. Not everyone found these groundbreaking comedies fun, but plenty of us did and it was this peculiar British sense of humour which gave us Boaty McBoatface in the first place and then saw it top the poll.

To equate the 124,000 voters who voted for Boaty with over 17 million voters who voted to leave the EU is just plain daft. The public are wise enough to know the difference between a bit of fun and a decision about the future of our country.

Secondly, although this article in the New York Times lists some other examples of voters choosing rather unsuitable names, such as for a bridge and even a city's waste management service, there are plenty of daft names doing the rounds which were not chosen by ballot. I can recall photographing a diesel locomotive graced with the elegant name of *BSC Hartlepool Pipe Mill*, which was not (to my knowledge) chosen by ballot. Other names borne by locomotives in the last few years include *Stratford TMD Quality Assured*, *Top of the Pops*, *First Transforming Travel* and *EMT Customer Service Week #TrainWatch*. Thankfully, most names chosen in the days of steam were much less daft, although in 1920, the North British Railway did name one of its "Superheated Scott" Class express locomotives *Wandering Willie!* Democracy does not have a monopoly on silliness.

Thirdly, Mr Flynn betrays exactly the sort of arrogance which has created such widespread disillusion with politicians. We know best; the public made a mistake. Mrs May soon put him in his place:

"The honourable gentleman and others can try all they like to reverse that decision and to delay the implications and the application of that decision, to find ways to weasel around the decision that was taken. The British people spoke. This Parliament said to the British people 'It is

your choice'. They chose, we now will do it."

You can bet your bottom dollar that if we had voted to remain, there would not have been a single politician saying that you can't trust the public to decide anything!

However, perhaps the biggest irony of an elected politician being so dismissive of the result of a popular vote is that they are only in their position because of a popular vote. If the public can't be trusted with a binary choice of in or out of the EU, how can they be trusted to choose between several candidates in a General Election? 56% of the people of Newport, the town for which Mr Flynn is an MP, voted to leave the EU. By contrast, last year only 41% of his constituency voted for him to represent them. In Mr Flynn's own words, slightly adapted, "Does not the decision by the voters of Newport West in last year's General Election deserve similar respect to the public majority in favour of the name Boaty McBoatface?" Absolutely.