

THE COST OF SPEAKING OUT

'In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.'

The now near immortalised quote attributed to Martin Luther King Jr. is a maxim I have long sought to live by. It's something that so many of us know all too well to be true, especially those who are stigmatised or vilified just for being who they are – it's always silence that hurts the most.

Liberation Day always causes me to reflect on the story of Major Marie Ozanne, which I read about many years ago in the German Occupation Museum, and of her unwavering courage in speaking out for prisoners who were being ill treated by the German authorities as well as the persecution of Jewish islanders. She turned words into action, and so wrote countless letters to the authorities defending the vulnerable, for which she was eventually arrested and then, following a short illness, died. In 1947 she was rightly awarded the Salvation Army's highest honour, the Order of the Founder and then in 2013 became the first Guernsey woman to be honoured with a blue plaque.

Her story taught me that it can be incredibly costly to speak out, to say what so many others think but dare not say for fear of being branded a 'troublemaker' or in more modern terms, 'woke.' She also taught me that whilst having conviction is important, so too is being able to discern when and how to act - as there is little point speaking out in echo-chambers, where one's voice is only heard by those with whom you agree. Nor is there much point speaking to those who are stubbornly determined not to listen – that would be like 'throwing pearls before swine', a phrase that I'm sure she would have known all too well, although I recognise she did often try and do just that.

All that said, I still believe that it is incumbent on leaders – or indeed anyone in a position of power or influence to create behavioural change - to speak out when they see injustice or coverup. That is why I have been so impressed with the determination shown by our Head of the Public Service, Boley Smillie, in speaking out so openly and frankly about the failings of the MyGov project. His report did not pull any punches, indeed he sought to do what few often have the stomach to do – and that is to be brutally honest about the scale of the failures that led to such significant waste of tax-payers money. He has promised to hold people to account and challenged us, as deputies, to hold him accountable for doing just that. That, I believe, is what courageous leadership looks like.

One of the most disturbing parts of his report, though, was the finding that those *'who raised well-founded concerns were often characterised as resistant or unhelpful. In some cases, they were excluded from discussions or forums and even reprimanded. This created a culture where speaking up was seen as risky, reducing the flow of constructive challenge.'* Sadly, this is something that is common in many large organisations, but is amplified to a far greater degree in close-knit communities such as ours, which have multiple levels of connectivity. The truth is that given we live on a small island, where 'everyone knows each other', we have a deep seated aversion to 'rocking the boat' for fear that we might be vilified or publicly castigated for doing so. So, we tend to take the 'silent' route, the one that causes us the least amount of problems, and in so doing we give a free pass to those who with the loudest voices, whose influence continues to go unchecked.

The uncomfortable truth is that whilst whistleblowing is costly in any society – it can bankrupt those who dare to speak out in close-knit ones.

That is why we need to take care to build in safeguards that ensure we don't 'shoot the messenger', but rather protect those who find the courage to say what others know but are too scared to say. Indeed, before the inevitable pile-ons – whether that be in the media, on social media or via the Guernsey grape-vine – I believe we would all do well to stop and consider the

courage that it must take for people to speak out on matters they know to be unpopular, but where they believe there is deep injustice that impacts vulnerable minorities. For otherwise we only collude with the silence and give legitimacy to those with whom we actually disagree.

The advent of social media has meant that 'news travels fast', especially on an island. However, where it is not founded on accurate fact the risk is that various narratives are created that are based purely on hearsay and speculation, that then snowball in ways that can have very damaging consequences. The whistleblower can be vilified for even trying to speak out, which then stops others from coming forward and doing so. Whilst it is always uncomfortable to hear unpalatable truths, even less so speaking them, I for one believe we need to be open to doing so in order not to risk, as Boley Smillie's report put it, 'reducing the flow of constructive challenge.'

Perhaps we should all resolve to emulate the spirit of Marie Ozanne, by finding suitable and timely ways of speaking truth to power? The challenge, as always, is to try and find a way of doing so that doesn't lead to us paying the ultimate price. One thing is clear, though, that defending what is right is always preferable to staying silent, which can sound deafening for those under attack.