



Muddle in the middle!

Charles Kennedy apparently promised when elected as Liberal Democrat leader to 'kick a habit that was endangering his health'. He was actually referring to his smoking habit. How ironic that on 7th January 2006 he resigned largely as a result of an alcohol problem, an admission forced out of him after years of official denial.

Charles Kennedy had a reputation as a convivial and engaging political personality. This, coupled with his considerable leadership skills, humour and down to earth style, seemed to enhance his political appeal. Indeed, Kennedy was voted the most popular of the party leaders on several occasions and was at the head of the most successful politically liberal party in the UK for over 80 years, having increased its parliamentary representation to 62 MPs.

However Kennedy's denials, added to his later admission of guilt, have inevitably tarnished his reputation as a straight-talking, truth-telling politician. The public expression of party angst, which saw his parliamentary colleagues flying in the face of party activists with whom Kennedy was popular, was not an edifying spectacle. Mr Kennedy was likened to being the Julius Caesar of British politics - stabbed in the back by men in sandals. The lasting impression is that they can plot with the best of them.

His colleagues' increasingly obvious frustration with Mr Kennedy came to a head following the election of David Cameron as Conservative Party leader. Lord McNally publicly observed that Charles needed to have 'good days followed by good days, followed by good days', a likely reference to the perception that Mr Kennedy appeared 'less than fresh' compared to the dashing new Conservative leader as a convincing alternative to the redoubtable Blair. Charles Kennedy's achievement in further

increasing the Liberal Democrat vote in 2001 and 2005 was not enough to counter the negative impressions held by Lib Dem MPs. Their leader's laid-back style, though popular with the public, left MPs feeling that they would have been more successful with a more aggressive leader. Kennedy was much criticised for his admission that he preferred to see himself as the 'chair' of his party rather than its 'leader', but perhaps this skill was essential to keep together a party notorious for being both 'left' and 'right'.

Kennedy's statement on 5th January seemed designed to pre-empt media reports about his drinking. However, his

The Julius Caesar of British politics - stabbed in the back by men in sandals

announcement of a leadership race in which he would stand cleverly foiled those front ranking potential leaders who had each declared they would not challenge Charles for the leadership. This was, of course, to show their loyalty credentials.

Intentional or not, the effect of this was to annoy the parliamentary party who perceived that Kennedy was attempting to go over their heads by appealing direct to the Liberal Democrat membership in the country. Mr Kennedy's critics responded with a vigorous briefing campaign. 25 of the party's 62 MPs issued a statement calling on Mr Kennedy to step down, citing his drink problem and dwindling political authority. Including 19 frontbenchers, they declared they would no longer serve under Kennedy and demanded immediate resignation.

Accordingly, Charles Kennedy stepped down on 7th January, handing over the reigns of power to temporary leader Sir Menzies Campbell. Sir Menzies simultaneously announced his own

candidacy, with a succession of frontbenchers queuing up to endorse him. It seemed like the party would by consensus back a 'Michael Howard' figure - too old to last more than one election, but considered a reliable, effective and safe pair of hands. Sir Menzies, 64, is believed to have the backing of more than a third of the party's 62 MPs and has support from ex-leaders Lords Steel and Ashdown.

Any such consensus was short-lived as the party in the country reacted to an apparent Westminster 'putsch' involving their popular leader. Respected Home Affairs spokesman, Mark Oaten, was first to respond by throwing his hat in the ring. Sir Menzies then suffered what is widely considered a 'David Davis' moment with an embarrassing and stumbling performance at Prime Minister's Questions, and doubts surfaced over whether the race to succeed Kennedy was as open and shut as predicted.

Simon Hughes as expected launched his leadership bid the following day. He rapidly became the new favourite in the country to win the prize. It remains to be seen, however, if Hughes enjoys sufficient support amongst MPs to unite the party at Westminster.

A suddenly crowded field has now also been joined by Chris Huhne, the Liberal Democrats' respected but almost unknown economic spokesman.

It seems that the Liberal Democrats can now choose from a wide range of effective and experienced politicians. However the party has some big decisions to make, not least how the new Lib Dem leader will position his party in the light of a Labour - Conservative centre squeeze. The decision on Charles Kennedy's successor will be announced on 2nd March. Will it help resolve or simply add to the muddle in the middle of British party politics?

All Bets are Off

The first week after New Year is usually a quiet period in politics, so the press usually try and wake us all up with a 'scoop'. It was Peter Dean, the new Head of the Gambling Commission, who made the kind of New Year splash in *The Times* that spin doctors dread.

The new Gambling Commission was set up under the Gambling Act 2005. It has taken over the role previously occupied by the Gaming Board in regulating gambling - including casinos - but not the Lottery.

As the Gambling Act is implemented, the Gambling Commission's remit will include Tessa Jowell's stated 'number one priority to protect children and vulnerable people. One could be forgiven, however, for pointing out that everyone might be vulnerable to gambling - given the right circumstances.

The gambling industry is extremely wealthy and influential. Its understandable objective is to maximise the returns on its investments. What made Peter Dean's interview with *The Times* so interesting was the impression (however much he subsequently claims to have been misrepresented) that he is a 'light touch regulator' who was apparently 'mildly dismayed' by the ferocity of the opposition to the Gambling Bill. Apparently this gentle man does not want casinos saddled with 'onerous regulation'. But shouldn't casinos be held to account? Let's not forget that this is supremely a leisure industry that trades in subtle practices - like not having clocks on walls. Contrast practise in Switzerland, where regulations go so far as to stipulate that casino operators are obliged to have trained care personnel on hand to detect and

approach potential problem gamblers.

The Evangelical Alliance has questioned the Gambling Commission over Mr. Dean's reported comments. In particular, it has sought clarification regarding the whereabouts of the Government's much vaunted and promised 'independent research' into problem gambling, especially with regard to examining the nature of its supposed rigour, independence and fairness.

Some moderate reassurance has consequently been given. The Gambling Commission will now commission a new baseline prevalence study into the incidence of problem gambling in the UK starting in mid-2006, to be conducted by the National Centre for Social Research.

However, the Commission also highlighted a key point that the Government need to clarify about the promised research. They observed, 'the Government has committed to doing research into the impact of the regional casino as well as problem gambling as a result of the casino. But it has not yet been decided who would carry out the research or the details'. Sometimes it can be easy to forget that the new casinos were presented to Parliament as being 'pilot casinos', i.e., created for the very purpose of research! Tessa Jowell and the Department for Culture Media and Sport urgently need to clarify the other half of the promised research, namely what comparative research work will take place on the new casinos after they have been constructed. But perhaps there has been no clarification since problem gambling is likely to rise and the Secretary of State admitted that the Gambling Act would have failed if that occurred.

A Plague on Both?

Celebrity Big Brother (which is currently being aired on Channel 4) has a rather controversial occupant - the MP for Bethnal Green and Bow, George Galloway. Galloway's occupancy in the Big Brother (BB) house is cause for much concern and debate within the media and amongst politicians. They have reacted, firstly, to his decision to enter the house and then to his antics as they have been aired nationwide.

Galloway defends his decision to enter the BB House by stating that he is attempting to engage with the public, in particular with the 18-34 age group who are notoriously apathetic when it comes to voting in elections and engaging with politics. Politicians, however, have spoken against his decision to enter the BB House and point to his disregard for the needs of his constituency. Cabinet minister Hilary Armstrong has even launched a constituency petition against MP Galloway's appearance on Celebrity Big Brother. As Galloway survived the first eviction from the house he could not vote in the House of Commons on the issue of the Crossrail project, which has serious implications for his constituency if approved.

Previously, links have been drawn between the House of Commons and the Big Brother House primarily because they are both televised houses in which a popularity contest takes place. Both Houses tend to function well when voters care enough to participate by voting their preference. Their involvement is encouraged when voters feel that their personal participation makes a difference and is linked to actual outcomes.

Our democracy, it has been suggested, is divorced from the

rhythm of the age - the age in which people have access to continuous entertainment, information and communication, especially the rise of mobile phone technology and the Internet. We answer more emails in one day than we used to receive letters in a week. We send and accept text messages instantly - people today expect and are accustomed to constant communication.

We are a nation that defines itself through the goods and services that we purchase; consequently, we have become practised and daily consumers. Politics notably does not offer continuous engagement with the public in the sense that the country is only given the opportunity to vote in a general election once every four or five years. Politicians are often seen to be out of touch, unrepresentative of the population and uninspiring.

Galloway's time in the BB (whether intentionally or unintentionally) is arguably providing the nation with an opportunity to engage with a politician. Galloway's survival of the first week's eviction is telling - he is clearly not as disliked as other Celebrity BB participants and is certainly providing entertainment. Although it is definitely a cause for concern that Galloway is entertaining the nation as opposed to representing his constituents in the House of Commons (to this end a constituency website has been set up called 'George Galloway, why isn't he at work?') it is clear that the public are not completely averse to the idea of greater transparency between politics, politicians and the people. What lessons can be learnt from this at Westminster itself?

Both Houses tend to function well when voters care enough to participate by voting their preference

True Respect

It was inevitable. No sooner had Tony Blair launched a big new push on 'respect' than the doubting columnists swooped in with their counter-examples. As the Prime Minister battled graffiti with detergent spray, some couldn't resist harking back to Iraq, and his 'disrespect' for weapons inspections and UN procedures. Alice Miles in *The Times* suggested that for all their ASBOs, New Labour had themselves disrespected social cohesion by failing to

encourage responsible fatherhood. Characteristically, Melanie Phillips in the *Daily Mail*, went further, insisting that disrespect of dads was symptomatic of a more fundamental disrespect for the married family in New Labour social and economic policy.

In such exchanges there is a danger of 'respect'

functioning as the ultimate 'hurrah' word and 'disrespect' its 'boo-word' opposite. They pack a fast punch, but the more they're unleashed in the culture wars, the sooner that punch loses its force. We sense a triumph of style over substance, of point-scoring over genuine political debate. Yet this is still surely preferable to the malicious, bullying distortion of 'respect' to be heard on all too many a street corner in Britain these days.

Another columnist, Hugh Masingberd, recalled one such perversion of the language on a Christmas shopping trip to West London: 'I suddenly found myself engulfed by a gang of over-exuberant and oddly menacing adolescents. 'Hey, you!' their leader, a well-fed girl of some 12 summers in expensive sportswear, addressed me. 'I like your umbrella – where d'you get it?'...'Give it to me,' she commanded. 'Show some respect.' Her male minions took up the Blairish chant: 'Respect, respect, respect!' I edged my way towards the exit and instinctively, like Jeeves's cab-addicted aunt, hailed a taxi. My jeering persecutors made an elaborate ritual of handing me into the back. Through the open window, the girl said, in a chillingly throwaway tone, 'Hope you die soon.'

What meaning is left in the language of 'respect' when it is subject to such corrosion?

Etymology is not semantics, but sometimes it can help. Modern dictionaries point out the origin of the term in the Latin *respectare* – to look back at, or more generally to look upon something. We might still respect someone if we 'look upon' them as a friend, but we retain a clearer link between seeing and 'giving due' in the French-derived term 'regard': indeed, we may well 'regard' someone with the utmost respect.

Even before the dictionary, however, it is the Bible which

points us through the current linguistic fog to the most wholesome vision of respect. While modern translations of the Bible do sometimes use the word 'respect' itself, looking it up in a concordance only gets us so far. For a properly nuanced theological understanding we must also see it entailed in concepts of glory, honour and reverence.

In the Old Testament, what we call *glory* is frequently denoted by a Hebrew word meaning weight or weightiness (*kabod*). Thus, in Isaiah 42.12, to 'glorify' God is to give him due weight for who he is – that is, to pay him proper respect. The same idea can also apply to human beings: to kings (2 Chron.32.33), or to family (Mal. 1.6). But it is clear that whatever glory or respect humans may enjoy is derived from God as a gift. Contrary to modern-day

debasements of the term, respect is not something to be demanded from others as a right: it is conferred by God's glorious grace. The Greek New Testament word for glory (*doxa*) often also appears in this context. Supremely, Jesus is born as the 'glory' or 'respect' of God's people (Lk. 2.32); and the angels give 'glory' (or respect) to God in the highest (Lk. 2.9).

Recognising the divine source of respect helps us appreciate its close affinity with the biblical principle of 'honour'. Thus 'to honour one's father and mother' is to demonstrate respect not only for parents, but also for God and his law (Ex. 20.12). This law may have come through Moses; but Jesus is worthy of even greater honour – even more respect – than Moses (Heb. 3.3). Of course, in a world blighted by sin such honour is not always shown; the landowner in the parable of the tenants hopes that his servants will 'respect' his son, but instead they kill him (Mt. 21.37). Indeed, the crucifixion of Christ stands as the ultimate act of human disrespect. Yet

because Christ's death atones for sin, it simultaneously demonstrates God's extraordinary respect for us, and demands our respect in return (1 Cor. 2.8).

As we respectfully honour God, we are called to do so with reverence, and even reverent fear. The Greek word *phobos* is sometimes used in the New Testament to denote awed or humble respect for ruling authorities and masters

(Rom 13.7; 1 Pet. 2.18). Yet it is our Maker, Redeemer and Judge who surely deserves much greater reverence. Whether we are politicians, columnists or adolescents, if we are truly to understand respect, we must first respect God.

In such exchanges, there is a danger of 'respect' functioning as the ultimate 'hurrah' word and 'disrespect' its 'boo-word' opposite

Contrary to modern-day debasements of the term, respect is not something to be demanded from others as a right: it is conferred by God's glorious grace.

Christian or not Christian?

Scotland

The head of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, Cardinal Keith O'Brien, in a radio interview last week told non-Christian faiths that they needed to realise they live in a Christian country. The Cardinal said he tolerated people who lived differently, but added that he must take a stand when Christianity itself is questioned in this country. He went on to say what he has said in previous interviews that he was calling for Scotland to be 're-Christianised'.

The interview was leaked to a national newspaper and the Cardinal's remarks have caused some controversial reactions amongst other faith leaders and politicians. Both the Cardinal's remarks and the comments by others raise a number of interesting issues i.e. the so-called 'faith community'. Firstly, the interview will not be well received by many Scottish politicians. Both the Scottish Executive and the Parliament like to dialogue with faith communities, but only where they seem to be one organic body.

The Inter-Faith Council receive funding from the Executive, and is often the first place Ministers go to consult. Politicians want to believe that all faiths are basically the same and can be treated as such. The Cardinal's remarks, however, will be an inconvenient reminder that all faiths are different, and although we may agree on certain issues, how and why we reach those conclusions is often very different.

The second interesting issue that needs to be thought through further is what does the Cardinal mean by calling for Scotland to be 're-Christianised'. Clearly Christianity has had a major impact on Scottish culture since AD397, but those values and beliefs have been eroded over the last fifty years. Even a hundred years ago it might be difficult to argue that Scotland was a Christian country. So in a post-modern country what place has Christianity? What role does the church have to play in society? Evidence would suggest that at a grassroots level the church is playing a massive role with regard to social action throughout the land. The church's voice at a national level is far less, but perhaps that has more to do with the church than with society.

Then, finally, the responses by some other faith leaders seem to be naïve at best. For example, the spokesperson for the Hindu Temple in Glasgow responded by saying how tolerant other countries are, such as India to Christianity. This paints a very rosy picture which does not square with reality. Many Christians are persecuted for their faith in other parts of the world and Scotland is a relatively very tolerant country. Perhaps the Christian community in Scotland need to get their act together, not by undermining other faiths, but by living out the claims of Christ. If that is what the Cardinal is aiming at then, Amen!

Wales and the World

A consultation has just been published by the Welsh Assembly's First Minister Rhodri Morgan on Wales' future role in international development and disaster relief. The overall responsibility for British effort in these fields has rested with the UK government, but new powers being transferred to the Assembly in April this year will mean that Wales could end up playing a much bigger role.

The consultation outlines how Wales' ability to fulfill the UN Millennium Development Goals can be enhanced – it is a combination of suggestions for volunteering, linking with developing countries, learning from experts in the field etc.

Wales has already been playing a very pro-active role in international development and has committed itself, for example, to work with NGOs in the development sector and with partners to make Wales a Fair Trade country.

On a wider scale, the Welsh Assembly has been quietly growing in confidence since its inception in developing international links, often in the form of memoranda of understanding. These have sometimes officially recognized historical links, such as with the Patagonia region of Argentina, where there have been significant numbers of Welsh speakers since 1865, and Brittany, whose Breton language belongs to the same family as Welsh. With recent EU enlargement, Latvia was added, as a nation similar in size and population to that of Wales, as was Silesia, a

state within Poland, as Wales stands within the UK and with a comparable industrial heritage.

Churches in Wales have also been focusing on the nations in recent years. While overseas missionaries have always gone out from Wales, there has been a renewed emphasis of late, with many Christians thinking that the collective church in Wales has a responsibility to the nations and not just to denominations and individuals. Also, an extensive audit has been done recently of Welsh overseas missionary work, so that we have a good idea of where God has been sending those Christians whose sending base is Wales.

As far as international development goes, Christian organizations are well placed and well thought of in both Wales and the UK. Oxfam, for example, has recently commended in glowing terms the work being done by groups such as Christian Aid, Cafod and Tearfund.

While it is initially very heartening to think that the Assembly will be focusing on an area in which the church has such a good reputation and strong testimony, we must realize that Christians are not guaranteed the same respect from Assembly Members that Oxfam attributes. Also, the Assembly has an obvious interest in making themselves look very good indeed. Perhaps Christians should just get on with the job!

Wales

Liquor Licensing Review

Northern Ireland

Over-consumption of alcohol has been hitting the headlines. Before Christmas George Best died following complications related to his long battle with alcoholism. Charles Kennedy has resigned as leader of the Liberal Democrats following his acknowledgement of a drink problem. Recent headlines have also highlighted the rising number of females admitted to A & E due to alcohol related incidents and the increased incidence of cirrhosis of the liver amongst adults across the UK.

In November last year the Government announced its proposals to review liquor licensing legislation in Northern Ireland. Given that a similar review in England & Wales established the now infamous 24-hour opening there were concerns that similar plans might be introduced here. However, only a modest extension of opening hours has been suggested with proposals to allow premises to stay open until 2am.

Supporters of the plan suggest that extended opening hours will reduce the pressure to binge drink. They also claim that with staggered closing times the risks associated with a large number of people on the streets at one time will be reduced. In a pre-consultation response the Police Service of Northern Ireland, while expressing support for better enforcement powers, have indicated their opposition to extended opening hours. In their view, this proposal will inevitably allow people to consume more alcohol which in turn could lead to more drunk people at closing time. This will place added pressure on scarce police resources,

requiring more officers to be available at night. In turn, this will reduce the number of officers serving during the day with a decrease in perceptions of public safety.

Given that the Government highlights the promotion of public safety as one of its key objectives within the document, there is certainly a contradiction here. It has been said that these plans serve only to impose a continental culture on a society which is far from continental in nature (or temperature!).

A further underpinning objective is the protection of children from harm. The Health Promotion Agency recently published research sponsored by the Irish Temperance League on drinking behaviour among young people in Northern Ireland. It shows that the most common time to begin drinking is between 11 and 14 years of age.

However, the proposals do little to address this issue, asking only if the existing restriction of 9pm on children in licensed premises should be relaxed for family events.

Licence applications will be decided by district councils under the new arrangements with proposals to introduce local licensing forums. Each forum will include local parties in the licensing process and this might represent one opportunity for local churches to have their voice heard.

The consultation ends on 31 January and it's not too late to have your say. You can access the document on the Department for Social Development website or fill in the on-line questionnaire at www.dsdni.gov.uk.

India

In a year of increased violence against Christians in India, which has continued unabated since the general elections of May 2004, including the murders of church leaders and members, forced conversions, beatings and the vandalism of churches, and the introduction of a bill that could make Rajasthan the sixth state to restrict religious conversions, it seems there is hope on the horizon. In a positive move, in August last year the Supreme Court decided to consider again the crucial constitutional issue of affirmative action in the public sector for Dalit converts to Christianity, refuting the government plea that it be treated as a 'legislative problem'.

Dalit are low-caste 'untouchables', who fall below the caste ladder fundamental to the social structure of India, and who perform the most menial and dangerous jobs, with a very low literacy rate. The Hindu religion considers them to be a polluting influence, so they are forced to live in separation from the upper castes, with many restaurants keeping separate drinking vessels for their use, and this segregation even extended to the relief camps set up following the 2004 tsunami. About 17% of India's population of around 180 million people are Dalits, and around 60% of India's estimated 25 million Christians are Dalits.

The Supreme Court case had been brought to address the injustice faced by Dalit Christians who, together with

Dalit Muslims, remain ineligible for the benefits that are enjoyed by the Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh Dalits, known collectively as the 'Scheduled Castes'. Indeed, the order containing these benefits includes the proviso that if Dalits should convert from Hinduism to Christianity or Islam, they would lose their Scheduled Caste status, and the privileges that this entails. This effectively obstructs their ability to freely adopt a religion of their choice. All the political parties in India, except the Hindu nationalist BJP, have put on record their support for legal and parliamentary action to extend equal rights to Dalit Christians.

The Supreme Court case, brought by the Centre for Public Interest Litigation, had sought to remove much of the discrimination from Dalits who embrace Christianity, but on November 28th the court deferred ruling on whether Dalit Christians can be denied job and education rights for the third time. The case has now been adjourned to the third week in February of this year. A new date is due to be announced imminently. Christian Solidarity Worldwide has observed 'This court case provides a crucial opportunity to redress a heinous injustice against Dalit Christians. It is vitally important that the international community expresses its support for a change in the law which will allow greater freedom of faith to Dalits, and will allow Christians the right to be citizens'.

Religious Liberty

Prayer, Action and Breaking News...

Prayer points: Jeffrey Donaldson MP



Jeffrey Donaldson is the Democratic Unionist MP for Lagan Valley in Northern Ireland. He was first elected to Parliament in 1997 and is also a prominent member of the Legislative Assembly at Stormont where he is a key participant in the ongoing negotiations about the future of Northern Ireland. He is a member of the Presbyterian Church and is involved with 'Christians in Parliament' and chairs the monthly 'Prayer for Parliament' meetings in the Palace of Westminster. Jeffrey lives in Dromore, Co Down, is married to Eleanor and has two children. He asks PQ readers to pray:

- ▶ That 2006 will finally see an end to terrorism and violence in Northern Ireland thus clearing the way for a real and lasting peace and further political progress
- ▶ For the protection of the United Kingdom from further terrorist attacks
- ▶ For all Christians in Parliament, that they would be sustained in their witness for Jesus Christ and have the faith and courage to discern and do His will in each and every situation
- ▶ For a recognition by those in Government who are 'in authority over us' that when they pass laws that are contrary to the word of God, it does not improve the moral condition of our nation
- ▶ For a spiritual revival in the Church throughout the United Kingdom - 2 Chronicles 7.14
- ▶ For the work of Christian relief organisations in Africa, Asia and in other parts of the world who are bringing practical Christian support into poverty stricken areas where famine and disease are rife

The AGENDA Tour: 1st-20th February 2006

The Agenda Tour will be hosted by Rob Frost of Premier Radio and a team of legal and public policy experts from the Evangelical Alliance and Lawyers Christian Fellowship. The purpose of this is to inform Church Leaders and Christians of the implications of the proposed new religious hatred legislation. It will be designed to help Church Leaders and interested Christians on what they can do within the law regarding their preaching, mission, outreach and community activities and to encourage people to continue to evangelise and "do" mission. The aim is to dispel some of the myths that are around surrounding the implications of or confusion concerning this legislation and to avoid any unnecessary scaremongering. The purpose is to give legal advice, clarify issues, give clear understanding and to allay fears.

The team will include Rev Dr Rob Frost, Director of Share Jesus International, Dr Don Horrocks, Head of Public Affairs at the Evangelical Alliance, and Andrea Minichello Williams or other representative from the Lawyers Christian Fellowship. For more information or tickets please go to www.sharejesusinternational.com or call 020 8288 1961.

Tour Itinerary - February 2006

Wednesday 1st
Bournemouth (am)

Thursday 9th
Capernwray College (am)
Durham: St John's College (pm)

Wednesday 15th
Regents College, Nantwich (am)
Stoke-on-Trent (pm)

Monday 6th
London Institute of Contemporary
Christianity (2pm - 4.30pm)

Friday 10th
Darlington (am)
Newcastle (pm)

Thursday 16th
Cliff College, Derbyshire (am)
Sheffield (pm)

Tuesday 7th
Bristol (am)
Newport, South Wales (pm)

Monday 13th
Cheltenham (am)
Helsby (pm)

Friday 17th
Northampton (am)
Norwich (pm)

Wednesday 8th
COVENTRY - Seminar: 3.45 pm

Tuesday 14th
Blackpool (am)
Manchester (pm)

Monday 20th
Exeter (am)
Plymouth (pm)

your chance to get involved...

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