

FIRST PERSON

IN THE JUDGMENT OF PARRIS, £10,000 IS TOO MUCH

A reader has offered £10,000 to the Times Christmas charity appeal in return for a day out at the House of Commons with Matthew Parris. Our political commentator finds his legendary humility stretched to breaking point...



WITH each increase in the price bid for me, my heart sank further.

Ten thousand pounds? I'm not worth it. In Cockney slang, ten grand is 20 monkeys. I'm

not worth one. How can a mere hack possibly live up to the expectations of a generous enthusiast in Switzerland prepared to donate a whole cage-full of primates to charity in return for a canter round the Commons Press Gallery with me?

As the bidding war has raged, I have increasingly felt as Anne of Cleves must have done when, picked on the basis of one flattering oil painting, she was shipped over the Channel to be Henry VIII's fourth wife.

She knew she was going to be a letdown. "They have sent me a Flanders mare," complained the disappointed Henry.

Anybody known better by their photograph or television image than in person will be familiar with the momentary, fast-suppressed look of disappointment that flits across the face of those who meet us for the first time at parties.

I realise, of course, that whatever it may be that this columnist is valued for, it is

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hardly his looks; but what if my mystery bidder has chosen me for charm, wit or conversation? Here, too, I am doomed to disappoint. I have about as much charm as a gecko, and am bereft of conversation because anything remotely interesting I might have to say goes into a *Times* column — often, I fear, more than once.

As for wit, all my best lines (such as they are) are devised and polished during sleepless periods in the small hours of the morning, usually after the event. My bidder, who apparently lives in Geneva, will pardon my French when I say that most of the Parris oeuvre consists of *l'esprit de l'escalier*: please do not expect *repartée*, *bons mots* or *badinage*.

But perhaps (I comfort myself) it is not for me but for a sniff around the House of Commons and the Press Gallery that our too-generous bidder hankers.

I hope so, for this I can arrange. I had planned (and offered) a bite to eat in the press cafeteria, but in view of the bid will up that to luncheon in the press gallery restaurant — and ask an MP pal to join us. Perhaps I shall see what Alan Duncan, who is in the Shadow Cabinet, is doing on the day in question.

And if it is a Wednesday I could try (though not promise) to get a seat in the Strangers' Gallery to watch Prime Minister's Questions. Let us hope that Tony Blair himself does not prove a letdown. I may contact No 10 to warn them that someone is paying £10,000 to watch him.

As for me, I seem to recall that Anne of Cleves's disappointed sponsor banished her to Bletchingley. I trust that my own Geneva sponsor, who is after all doing this for charity, may look upon me with a little more charity than Henry. Paris may have been worth a Mass, but Parris is not worth 20 monkeys.

MATTHEW PARRIS