Summer Adjournment: Hope Cove

Debate

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes Conservative)

Many Members this afternoon have laid claim to the industrial revolution. Totnes cannot lay claim to that, but it undoubtedly has the finest beaches and countryside in the land, and I hope that many Members will visit us over the summer.

If any of our visitors get into deep water or find themselves drifting off to France, they will doubtless believe that they can rely on the coastguard to protect them. I want to draw to the House’s attention a serious incident in that regard. On 28 June, four teenagers went swimming shortly before 8 am, and they got into difficulties in a rip current. A call was made from Bigbury coastguard to Brixham coastguard requesting the attendance of the Hope Cove lifeboat. The reason for that request was that the Hope Cove rescue boat was just 3.1 miles away and could have covered the distance in 14 minutes, including muster time. The coastguard chose not to send it out, however, because the Hope Cove rescue boat has had unilaterally imposed upon it an arbitrary and very small distance in which to operate.

That decision was not taken on the grounds of cost. In fact, it costs far more to send the lifeboat from Salcombe, which is 11 miles away and takes 27 minutes to get there. Nor was the decision based on a sensible worry about the cost of operating the Hope Cove rescue boat, because a generous benefactor sent a cheque for the entire running costs to the coastguard, which was returned. The decision had no basis in common sense. Had it not been for a person passing in a kayak who pulled one of the teenagers unconscious from the water, that teenager would, sadly, have died rather than just spending a day in intensive care.

The local community has requested, through a solicitor, to see a transcript of the recording of the call from the Bigbury coastguard to the Brixham coastguard. After all, we are not talking about a passing member of the public making this recommendation; it was made by the Bigbury coastguard itself. That request has been refused, even though the information was requested under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. I would like to know what is the point of that Act if it is not to call public bodies to account, to cut through and say, “Where is the decision-making process and what was it based on?” I am calling—and I hope the House will support me in doing so—for Her Majesty’s coastguard to release that information.

I know that many other Members wish to speak so I will be brief, but the other point here is that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend Mike Penning, has kindly offered to visit and see the situation for himself. He has given an assurance that he will not close down the rescue boat without doing that. There is no substitute for seeing conditions in person on the ground. I hope that the Minister will give us a date for his visit. We are expecting at last the barbecue summer that was promised us last year. We are expecting many visitors to the South Hams and we would like them to be safe. In the interest of public safety, we call for the rescue boat at Hope Cove, which is so valued by the entire community, to be safeguarded and not to have the Maritime and Coastguard Agency wash its hands of its responsibility in this regard by seeking to devolve all responsibility for safety
at sea to the Royal National Lifeboat Institution.

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