



THE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

A PERILOUS OFFICE

The position of Speaker has not been without danger in times gone by. Since the appointment of the first Speaker in 1377, nine of his successors are known to have died violent deaths, of which seven were beheaded.

SPEAKER'S CONFERENCES

These conferences are convened by the Speaker on the invitation of the Prime Minister to examine issues within the electoral system. The most recent, in 2008/09 examined the representation of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people in the House of Commons.

Who is the Speaker?

The Speaker is the highest authority in the House of Commons, chairing debates, keeping order and calling Members of Parliament (MPs) to speak. The Speaker also represents the Commons to the Sovereign and the House of Lords, and chairs the House of Commons Commission.

The Speaker is elected to the post by other MPs and is politically impartial. When elected the Speaker resigns from their political party and remains separate from political issues, even in retirement.

The current Speaker is John Bercow, MP for Buckingham. He was elected using a secret ballot system, the first time such a procedure has been used to elect a Speaker.

What does the Speaker do?

During debates the Speaker keeps order in the House, ensures that its rules are kept and decides which MPs will speak in a debate. The Speaker also decides which amendments to a motion or a bill are debated.

In the Chamber, if an MP alleges dishonourable behaviour by another, the Speaker may request that they withdraw their remark.

If an MP misbehaves, the Speaker can suspend them for a day or ask the House for a longer period. This is known as 'Naming' a Member. The Speaker can also suspend a sitting in the case of serious general disorder in the Chamber.

The Speaker usually sits in the Chamber for the first two hours of each sitting day, for an hour each evening and occasionally

at other times. When the Speaker is not in the Chamber, debates are chaired by one of three Deputy Speakers.

The Speaker no longer wears the traditional outfit of knee breeches, silk stockings and a full-bottomed wig. Instead, on normal sitting days, the Speaker wears a suit and black robe. On state occasions, the Speaker wears a black satin damask robe trimmed with gold.

Speakers and general elections

The Speaker still stands in general elections, but by convention, is unopposed by the major political parties, who will not field a candidate. This includes the party for which they were originally an MP.

During a general election, the Speaker does not campaign on any political issues but simply stands as 'the Speaker seeking re-election'. As a sitting MP, the Speaker has the same responsibilities to their constituents as any other MP.

The Speaker's procession

Before every sitting of the House, the Speaker leaves his official residence at the Westminster Bridge end of the Palace of Westminster preceded by a Doorkeeper and the Serjeant at Arms who carries the Mace. The Trainbearer, Chaplain and Speaker's Secretary follow behind.

This formal procession walks along the Library Corridor, through the Lower Waiting Hall and Central and Members' Lobbies to the Chamber.

The present route was adopted during the Second World War when the Commons used the House of Lords Chamber after their own was destroyed in a bombing raid. It is still used in preference to the shorter pre-war route as it allows visitors in Central Lobby to witness the procession.

Historically, the role of Speaker could be dangerous. This may be one reason for the Speaker's formal procession and entourage.

Wider role

The Speaker acts as spokesman for the House on ceremonial and formal occasions, including presenting addresses of congratulation to the Queen on her Silver Jubilee in 1977 and Golden Jubilee in 2002.

Today these formal occasions are usually happy events but in past centuries a Speaker might have been called upon to deliver unpopular messages to the Sovereign, for example, the reasons why the Commons had disagreed to raising a tax for the royal revenues.

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