



## Factsheet M3 Members Series

Revised March 2009

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House of Commons Information Office

# The Father of the House

The Father of the House is a title that is by tradition bestowed on the senior Member of the House, which is nowadays held to be the Member who has the longest unbroken service in the Commons. This **Factsheet** discusses the duties associated with the post and its history.

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March 2009  
FS No. M3 Ed 3.5  
ISSN 0144-4689

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## Introduction

The title of Father of the House is held by the Member who has the longest unbroken service in the House of Commons. Currently the Father of the House is the Rt Hon Alan Williams, who was first elected in October 1964 and has served continuously since that date.

The term Father of the House is not defined in House of Commons Standing Orders, although Standing Order No 1 uses the same qualification. This Standing Order determines who presides over the House at the Election of a Speaker at the beginning of a Parliament or if the previous Speaker has ceased to be a Member of the House (see *Factsheet M2*):

(1) Whenever it is necessary to proceed forthwith to the choice of a new Speaker in consequence of the Speaker having ceased for any reason to be a Member of this House, the chair shall be taken by that Member, present in the House and not being a Minister of the Crown, who has served for the longest period continuously as a Member of this House.

This is the sole duty of the Father of the House under House of Commons Standing Orders although there are unofficial duties that he may be called upon to perform (see below). Occasionally the Father has been a Minister, who therefore would be excluded from presiding at the Election of a Speaker under the provisions of the Standing Order.

## Seniority of Members

If two or more Members enter the House at the same Election, each with unbroken service, their seniority is determined by the date and/or time they took the Oath. After the 1983 General Election, two Members remained who had been first elected in 1945 and had continuous service. Mr (later Sir then Lord) James Callaghan took the Oath on 2 August 1945, Mr Hugh Fraser took the Oath on 15 August 1945. Mr Callaghan therefore assumed the title of Father.

After the 1987 Election, both Sir Bernard Braine and Mr (later Sir) Edward Heath had been elected in 1950. On 2 March 1950, new Members were asked to report for oath-taking at different hours according to the initial letter of their surnames, and as a result Sir Bernard Braine took the Oath around 5.45 pm, and Mr Edward Heath took the Oath around 6.50 pm. Therefore, Sir Bernard Braine became Father in 1987. Mr Michael Foot had been elected in 1945, but he had a gap in service. Tony Benn and Julian Amery also entered the House in 1950, but did not have continuous service. Sir Edward Heath became Father of the House after Sir Bernard Braine's retirement in 1992 and was succeeded by Tam Dalyell on the occasion of his own retirement in 2001. The current Father of the House is Alan Williams who succeeded after Tam Dalyell stood down at the 2005 General Election.

## Duties of the Father of the House

Since 1945, the Father of the House has generally, but not always, been a member of the Select Committee on Privileges, although the committee has always included a long serving Member. On certain occasions the Father of the House may also be called upon to:

- Move or speak in motions of a ceremonial nature in the House.
- Debates where historical precedents are required as evidence.
- Debates where a historical perspective may be required.
- If the House agrees a Resolution to present a congratulatory address, he may well be made part of the group appointed to 'wait upon' the person concerned.

Alan Williams MP, the current Father of the House



## History

### Origin of the term

The description "Father of the House" was probably an inexact term at first and does not appear to have deep historical roots. The word "father" was sometimes used to denote a senior member of the fellowship of Oxbridge (i.e. Oxford and Cambridge Universities) colleges, and in certain learned societies and associations. Therefore, it may have come to apply informally to senior Members of the House of Commons.

### Early usage

**1816** A reference to the term is in an engraved portrait of Whitshed Keen MP by Charles Picart, dated 1 February 1816, subtitled "Father of the House of Commons". This example only became known in 1990 through the discovery of a printing plate in a shed in Downham, Norfolk.

**1852** Disraeli, in his biography of Lord George Bentinck (Vol.I, p.9) describes Joseph Hume as "still the most hard-working Member of the House, of which he is now father".

**1853** The grand-daughter of Benjamin Bathurst MP referred to him (in the memoirs of her father,

Dr Henry Bathurst) as "father of the House of Commons, whilst his brother, Earl Bathurst, was the father of the House of Lords". Benjamin Bathurst was an MP from 1713 to 1767.

**1862** In the obituary of Sir Charles Burrell, in the Gentleman's Magazine (March 1862), he is described as the "father" of the House of Commons, the inverted commas possibly indicating the informality of the description.

**1888** In Sir Henry Lucy's Diary of the Salisbury Parliament for 10 June 1888 (published in book form in 1892), Mr C R M Talbot (noted as a tall, elderly gentleman ... wearing a long woollen comforter) is described as "father of the House of Commons".

**1893** In a report in the Daily Telegraph of 8 July 1893, the Rt Hon Charles Villiers was described as Father of the House in a report of the theft of his watch.

### Fathers of the House

A list of Fathers of the House over the last 110 years is given in Appendix A, but various commentators have attempted to draw up lists of Fathers as far back as 1700. Long-serving Members were probably called upon to share the depth of their experience as far back as 1700, but there is no evidence which suggests that the phrase "Father of the House" was recognised or indeed in use before the 19th century. A list of senior Members is given at Appendix B for the time up to the mid-19th century, but readers are referred to the disclaimer at the head of it.

The list of Fathers during the twentieth century includes many distinguished politicians. The list includes five ex-Prime Ministers:

Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman  
David Lloyd George  
Sir Winston Churchill  
Sir James Callaghan  
Sir Edward Heath

The list also includes others who attained Cabinet rank, for example:

R A Butler  
Earl Winterton  
Sir Michael Hicks-Beach

Sir Hugh O'Neill had been Speaker of the Northern Ireland Parliament, and several others Fathers had held ministerial office. Since World War II, all Fathers with two exceptions (John Parker and Tam Dalyell) have been Privy Counsellors.

### Qualification

It is unclear as to what qualification was used for the Father of the House in the past. There are four obvious ways to calculate qualification:

1. The oldest Member
2. The Member with the longest aggregate service.
3. The Member with the longest unbroken service.
4. The Member who entered the House longest ago, but may have had broken service.

The third way of calculating qualification is now and was generally considered the correct method throughout the last century. However, it appears that at some time in the 19th century the oldest Member may have generally assumed the title.

Looking at historical examples of the appointment of Father of the House it is clear that there were no exact qualifications for the office and that a combination of the above methods was used. Clearly, the rules of qualification for being Father of the House have changed over time. The method used in the early years is uncertain, but in 1898 a newspaper recorded:

"The House decided informally that the fatherhood rested with whoever had been longest in the House irrespective of constituencies represented."

There has been some question about the calculation of service by continuity, both of time and constituency. The question was certainly not decided on the floor of the House; we assume opinions were canvassed, possibly via the Whips. Some examples to illustrate this are:

- Joseph Hume was 75 years old in 1852 but had only 40 years' broken service compared with the 46 of George Granville Harcourt and Sir Charles Burrell. He would not by modern day convention have ever become Father of the House.
- In 1898 Sir John Mowbray, aged 83, had been recognised Father rather than W W Beach, aged 72, even though Mowbray's service was continuous only from 1868 whereas Beach's had dated back to 1853. In 1899, however, after the "decision" mentioned above, W W Beach succeeded rather than Sir James Fergusson, who entered the House three years before Beach, (though he was 7 years younger), but who had a significant break of service.
- Even as late as 1952 there seems to have been some doubt on the seniority question, since Sir Hugh O'Neill retired "without having accepted the description of Father of the House". His successor, Mr David Grenfell, wrote that he was "next in order of seniority". The difficulty in both 1951 and 1952 was probably that the Prime Minister, Churchill, had served since 1900, with breaks in 1908 and between November 1922 and October 1924, whereas Sir Hugh and Mr Grenfell had continuous service, but only since 1915 and 1922 respectively. Churchill was also older, by several years. It was not, however, until 1959 that Churchill, at almost 85, actually became Father.

### Elections

There are indications that the Father of the House may have been elected at some point. Sir John Mowbray, Father of the House in 1898 and 1899 wrote:

"...the feeling of the House is very much in my favour"

and records another Member saying

"...I shall vote against you on one ground only".

In the 20th Century, there is no evidence that the post was subject to the approval of the House. There are a variety of explanations that demonstrate why there appeared to be no exact qualification to be Father of the House:

If the post was subject to election during the nineteenth century, or, more importantly, if the oldest Member had taken the title, it would account for the fact that most early sources name various people as Father. Their service does not appear to demonstrate a continuity of qualifications for the post during these early years.

Another factor to consider is that before civil registration started in the late 1830s it was sometimes difficult to calculate someone's exact age. Also, it may be that the title was accorded to the most senior Member present at the time; many Members in the old days never or virtually never came to Westminster so this factor may have excluded the rightful Father of House.



Christopher Rice Mandel Talbot, Father of the House, 1874-90 from an autographed and inscribed photograph dated 1883

## Appendix A

### Fathers of the House since 1874

Years as Father	Father	Date Entered House
1874 - 90	Christopher Talbot	1830
1890 - 98	Charles Villiers	1835
1898 - 99	Sir John Mowbray	1868
1899 - 1901	William Wither Beach	1857
1901 - 06	Sir Michael Hicks-Beach <sup>1</sup>	1864
1906 - 07	George Henry Finch	1867
1907 - 08	Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman <sup>2</sup>	1868
1908 - 10	Sir John Kennaway	1870
1910 - 18	Thomas Burt	1874
1918 - 29	Thomas Power O'Connor	1885
1929 - 44	David Lloyd George	1890
1945 - 51	Earl Winterton	1904
1951 - 52	Sir Hugh O'Neill	1915
1952 - 59	David Grenfell	1922
1959 - 64	Sir Winston Churchill	1900, 1908, 1924
1964 - 65	Richard Austen Butler	1929
1965 - 74	Sir Robin Turton	1929
1974 - 79	George Strauss	1929, 1934
1979 - 83	John Parker	1935
1983 - 87	Sir James Callaghan	1945
1987 - 92	Sir Bernard Braine	1950
1992 - 2001	Sir Edward Heath	1950
2001 - 2005	Tam Dalyell	1962
2005 -	Alan Williams	1964

<sup>1</sup> Hicks-Beach was Chancellor of the Exchequer during part of the time.

<sup>2</sup> Campbell-Bannerman was Prime Minister and Father of the House at the same time.

## Appendix B

### "Fathers of the House" from 1700

Calculated in 1907 by Alfred Beaven, the following is a list of senior Members from the beginning of the eighteenth century, it was compiled according to the modern method of choosing the Father of the House, i.e., unbroken service. The period of this unbroken service is given after the name. The writer has seen no evidence (except in the case of Sir C. Burrell) that these Members were actually recognised as Father of the House, and as mentioned above, has encountered several other names apparently reckoned by contemporaries to have been 'Father'.

Members Name	Period of Unbroken Service
Sir J Fagg	1654 - 1701
T Turgis	1659 - 1702
Sir C Musgrave	1661 - 1704
T Strangways	1673 - 1713
Sir R Onslow	1679 - 1716
General Erle	1679 - March 1718
E Vaughan	1679 - December 1718
R Vaughan	1685 - 1724
Lord W Powlett	1689 - 1729
Sir J Isham	1694 - 1730
Sir C Turner	1695 - 1738
Sir R Bradshaigh	1695 - February 1747
E Ashe	1695 - June 1747
T Cartwright	1701 - 1748
R Shuttleworth	1705 - 1749
P Gybbon	1707 - 1762
Sir J Rushout	1713 - 1768
W Aislabie	1721 - 1781
C Scudamore	1733 - 1782
Earl Nugent	1741 - 1784
Sir C Frederick	1741 - 1784
W Ellis	1741 - 1790
W Drake	1746 - 1796
Sir P Stephens	1759 - 1806
C Tudway	1761 - 1815
Sir J Aubrey	1768 - 1826
S Smith	1788 - 1832
G Byng	1790 - 1847
C Wynn	1799 - 1850
G Harcourt	1806 - 1861
Sir C Burrell	1806 - 1862
Hon H Lowther	1812 - 1867
T Williams	1820 - 1868
H Lowry Corry	1825 - 1873
Hon G Forester	1828 - 1874

Source: *The Times* (9 September 1907)

## Further reading

Father of the House: fifty years in politics

John Parker

1982

## Contact information

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