

## **Interview with the Lord Speaker**

**The House of Lords elected Baroness Hayman as its first Lord Speaker on 4 July 2006. Here she explains her role and responsibilities and the importance of the House of Lords today.**

### **Why was the role of Lord Speaker created?**

It was created as part of a wider constitutional reform affecting the position of the Lord Chancellor. The Lord Chancellor used to bring together things that would normally be kept apart under the doctrine of the separation of powers - the judiciary, the legislature and the executive – because he was the Speaker of the House of Lords, the head of the judiciary and a member of the Cabinet.

The Government decided that it was not appropriate for the Lord Chancellor both to be a member of the government and the Speaker of the House of Lords. It was then for the House of Lords to decide how to deal with that dilemma.

A House of Lords select committee was set up to consider the speakership of the Lords, which involved people from all over the House – and the recommendation was to create an elected post for five years for someone who would give up party membership, be independent of government and party and represent the House as a whole.

### **What are your responsibilities and how do they differ from those of the Lord Chancellor?**

I have absolutely no executive responsibilities, I'm not a member of the government and I have no responsibility for the legal system or the judiciary.

I have responsibilities in the chamber for sitting on the Woolsack (which is what we call the chair in the House of Lords) and presiding over debate, but I clearly recognise that this is a self-regulating House, and that my role is very different from that of the Speaker of the House of Commons: I don't call people to order, I don't decide who should speak next in debates, I don't select amendments etc. I have a much more formal role in putting motions and amendments to the House for the House to decide – so it's a limited role in the chamber.

I have a role in representing the House, so, at the State Opening of Parliament I was part of the Queen's procession. I went to the Cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday to represent the House of Lords and I go to international meetings of Speakers, as I did in September in Prague when the Speakers of Senates across Europe discussed the role of second chambers.

I chair the House Committee, which decides major issues of expenditure – so that Committee brings together a lot of the work of the other domestic committees of the House. I sit on the Procedure Committee, because I have an interest in that through my responsibilities sitting on the Woolsack.

I am also developing what we call the "outreach" role: trying to ensure lots of different groups and people are interested in Parliament, making Parliament more easily understood and accessible to people, and engaging people with Parliament. I'm very interested in citizenship teaching, in making sure young people understand why Parliament is there, what it's for, how the House of Lords functions and what it can do for them. So I'm thinking how I can play a part in that whole agenda.

### **What is your relationship with the Speaker of the House of Commons?**

Though our roles are very different, the relationship is extremely cordial. We've met on a couple of occasions just to discuss my role, and on a practical, business level, we are working out how we work together.

We recently had a joint meeting with the Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and that worked well. I think it helps that there are two of us for incoming delegations, foreign visitors etc.

### **So that's not something the Lord Chancellor would have done previously?**

He did some of it, but the Lord Chancellor had less time, because he had all his executive responsibilities and work as head of the judiciary. I have more time than he had: time to be in the chamber, to act as a sort of sounding-board – for example, I've met all the peers that have been created over the last 12 months, to talk to them about their experiences and to get some feedback.

### **What is the role and importance of the House of Lords today?**

That question takes me into the area of whether I have views on specific issues – which is quite a delicate one as I have to represent the whole House. On a wide range of issues it's extremely difficult to tell what the whole House thinks because there are 700-odd members, and they all have different views about the role of the second chamber in the 21st century. So I'm feeling my way on this.

I would not have been an active participant in the House of Lords for the last ten years if I didn't think there was an important role for the second chamber. If you look across the developed democracies, they tend to have second chambers, as there is a large amount of legislation that needs to be scrutinised, not only domestic legislation but also European legislation. I think there's a lot of work to be done and probably room for two chambers to do it.

I believe in two chambers that are complementary rather than rivals. I think that having a House that adds value, that has a distinctive flavour, that does something different, but is additional to the first chamber is very important.

I guess that for most countries that have second chambers - though not all - its role is to bring together experience and expertise and to be a little step back from day-to-day party politics. Of course in the House of Lords we have the crossbenchers: independents peers who have a very strong position.

### **What plans do you have to promote this message?**

I'm hoping that over time the Parliamentary website is going to be an important way of doing that: my homepage will have speeches, messages and news.

There are plenty of invitations to go and speak to various audiences outside about the House of Lords and I'm very anxious that we do more work with schools and with the citizenship curriculum.

Now I can't do all of that myself, but there are a lot of members of the House of Lords spread all over the country who are very good ambassadors for the House. I want to see something based on the Hansard Society's "MPs in schools" programme – so we can have peers going into schools as well as talking to people when they come and visit Parliament.

I also take the opportunity to talk to the media about the role of the House whenever I can. I've done quite a lot on the BBC parliamentary programmes in the last few weeks, particularly around the State Opening of Parliament.

### **Are there limitations on what you can talk about?**

I am in quite delicate territory as I have to be careful not to espouse a particular view on the composition of the House, for example. However, I do think it's terribly important at a time when there is a debate about the future of the House that it isn't only an internally focused, Westminster debate, but that it involves the people who are going to be affected by it - the citizens of the country.

I can talk about the changes that have already happened in the House of Lords. A lot of people have a stereotype that the House of Lords is still as it was pre-reform: that the membership is basically the hereditary peerage, that it's very male-dominated, that it's very elderly – all sorts of things like that.

One of the things that really fascinates people is that 50% of the membership has come in during the last 10 years. In terms of diversity, we have a higher proportion of black and ethnic minority peers than are members of the House of Commons; the participation rates of women are very high; and we have very distinguished peers with disabilities who speak and contribute to debates.

So I can talk about who are members of the House at the moment, the diversity in our membership, what we do, and I can talk a bit about the things I think people should consider in the debate about reform. I can talk about the views that come out of public opinion surveys on the Lords: people seem to value its experience, its independence and its distance from day-to-day party politics. And then you have to balance the other things that people value, like democracy, elections and accountability. Once you've done that you can ask how we come to a settlement, or a decision, about the composition and powers of the House of Lords.

Is it possible to constrain the powers of the second chamber and to add to its legitimacy? What's the interface and interaction between the restraints that are there under the Parliament Acts and the restraints that operate by convention? How would those conventions be affected by having an elected majority or element, or anything else, and then how would that affect relations with the House of Commons? I think we need to look at Parliament and the legislative process as a whole if we're going to have a second chamber that is complementary rather than rival.

### **Is it challenging to communicate the modern aspects of the Lords to the public when the media image is of ceremony?**

Well, it is challenging, but at least you get people's attention. The media have a certain image of the Lords, but what did Enoch Powell say? "A politician complaining about the media is like a sailor complaining about the sea." It would be better if you had a picture of a working day in the House of Lords used when there was a story in the newspapers or on the news, rather than everyone in their ermine at State Opening.

On the other hand, I am something of a traditionalist about ceremony – I think marking out that Parliament is significant at the start of the legislative year is important; parliamentary democracy over centuries is to be celebrated, as is a constitutional monarchy. These are things that have been very important to the United Kingdom and we should properly recognise them

The important thing is that the ceremony should not get in the way of understanding Parliament. We have to get the balance right between historical homage and the day-to-day reality.

**So, thinking like that, would you want to get rid of your robe? Do you wear it in the chamber?**

Well I don't wear that big gold robe in the chamber! I wear a black gown, which I think if you went to any parliament in the world you would see the speaker wear something similar. It's court dress, the same as women QCs wear. I certainly don't wear the gown if I'm not in the chamber. If I'm on parliamentary business in Parliament I tend to wear the rest of my court dress but not the gown; otherwise I wear my civvies.

**What is your background, prior to this role?**

I was an MP from 1974 to 1979. After that I did not stand for another parliamentary seat. I had 17 years when I was bringing up a family and doing all sorts of part-time things, a lot of them in the public sector, such as chairing boards of school governors. I got involved in the health service and ended up chairing an NHS hospital trust. I came into the House of Lords at the beginning of 1996 and have been here 10 years. I had a year first on the backbenches in opposition, and then on the frontbench in opposition speaking about health, because I'd spent a lot of my career in the health service and the voluntary sector.

I did three ministerial jobs in the first Blair administration, ending up with perfect timing at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (now the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) during the foot-and-mouth outbreak. I decided then that it had been a fantastic experience being in government, but I didn't want to continue. I then spent three years chairing Cancer Research UK, which brought together the two big cancer research charities in this country to form the biggest UK charity. Then I took over as chairman of the newly-created Human Tissue Authority, created by the Human Tissue Act 2004, which I had participated in debates about when it was passing through the Lords. I had a number of other interests – as a trustee of Kew gardens, various charity and voluntary sector activities – until my election.

**Are you continuing that work or retaining your membership of the Labour party?**

No, I've had to give everything up, including my party membership. I was a member of the Labour party for nearly 40 years.

I cannot be parti pris in any way in this job. I have to be wholly independent, as responsive to any member of the House as I am to any other member, regardless of party.

You don't change your personal, deeply held political convictions overnight because you give up membership of a party. But you do have to put them into a deep bunker inside you and ensure they don't affect the way you do your job. In a way it is easier to do this in the House of Lords than in the House of Commons - because Speakers in the Commons face this dilemma - as there are a lot more cross-party friendships in the Lords; it is less divided on party lines than the Commons. Moreover, the existence of the crossbenchers means that people have friends who are not in any political party.

I've been going round all the party groups, talking to backbenchers about my role and hearing from them what they think I should be doing. I have had a lot of good feedback from these meetings.

**How should members of the public address you?**

I'm not too fussy. People like to be correct, so "Lord Speaker" is the proper title. They can write "Dear Lord Speaker", but they can write "Dear Baroness Hayman", "Dear Lady Hayman", they can write "Dear Helene" as far as I'm concerned.

**How was your first State Opening of Parliament?**

It was fantastic. In the run-up to it I hadn't been that worried, because you worry about things where you have to speak, or where you have an important role to play. I didn't have to speak, and I didn't have to give the speech to the Queen or anything like that, so I was quite relaxed about it – until we had the rehearsal the night before. Then I suddenly realised how great an occasion it was, how many people were involved, the precision of it - and just how many people would be watching.

I'd never worn the gold robe before, (which we hired for the day, may I say, because it is very expensive to buy) and it was very heavy so I was quite worried about tripping and falling down the stairs.

But thankfully none of those things happened, and it was a wonderful spectacle and a huge privilege to be involved in. I still pinch myself about what I'm doing.