



Factsheet M2 Members Series

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House of Commons Information Office

The Speaker

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It is hard to imagine what the House of Commons would be like if the Speakership had not evolved into its present form. The direction and guidance the House receives from its chairman (Speaker) is central to the House's whole way of life. This Factsheet aims to summarise the principal aspects of the Speakership.

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Introduction

Most people have an idea of the duties of the Speaker either from watching or listening to broadcasts of the House or from attending a debate. This Factsheet aims to outline the principal roles and duties of the Speakership and their historical context.

Roles of the Speaker

Chairman

The Speaker acts as Chairman during debates in the Commons Chamber, and sees that the rules laid down by the House for the carrying on of its business are observed. Current practice is for the Speaker to take the Chair for the first two hours of each day (except Fridays), for an hour each evening, and occasionally at other times. For the rest of the time, one of the deputies will preside. The Speaker selects (or calls) Members to speak in the Chamber, acts as the House's representative in its corporate relations with outside bodies and the other elements of Parliament: the House of Lords and the Crown. The Speaker is also responsible for protecting the interests of minorities – those with interests or opinions which are not represented by the main parties – in the House.

In the House of Commons Chamber, the Speaker ensures that debates run smoothly and are conducted in an orderly way. The selection of those who are to speak is therefore a very important role for the Speaker, and one that has to be handled with tact and discretion. In a debate, official spokesmen or women for Government and Opposition usually take part, as well as those for the other parties, Members with constituency interests, those who specialise in the subject under discussion and those simply with a general interest. The Speaker, therefore, has to balance all these requirements when working out who should speak (“be called”) next. Members can either “catch the Speaker’s eye” by briefly rising from their seat to indicate that they want to speak during a particular debate, or they may inform them in advance. However, the decision rests solely with the Speaker. Similarly, the Speaker can call Members to ask supplementary questions during Question Time.

The Speaker has three deputies. The Chairman of Ways and Means¹ takes the Chair when the House is in Committee or discussing ways and means resolutions, such as those in the Budget, and there is also a First Deputy Chairman and a Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means. The Speaker and three deputies do not vote in divisions of the House. If, however, there is a tied vote, the occupant of the Chair must exercise a casting vote. For more details of this, see **Factsheet P9**.

The Speaker must also exercise discretion on a number of matters prescribed in the standing orders of the House.² Examples include decisions as to whether an application for an emergency debate (under Standing Order 24) is proper to be put to the House, whether to allow an urgent question, and whether a complaint of breach of privilege can legitimately be pursued in the House. At the beginning of certain debates, the Speaker may decide to invoke the “short speech” rule prescribed in Standing Order 47, which limits the length of individual speeches. By using Standing

¹ “Ways and means” refers to the provision of revenue to meet national expenditure through ‘charges upon the people.’ Taxation is an example of this.

² Standing Orders of the House are the printed rules which regulate procedure, debate and the conduct of Members in a legislature.

Order 32, the Speaker may decide which, if any, of a number of amendments to a motion or a bill before the House will be selected for debate. In the case of a committee of the whole House, the Chairman of Ways and Means or one of the deputies exercises this power.

When in the Chair, the Speaker may also be called upon to rule whether or not a certain action or point is in accordance with the rules and precedents of the House (a "point of order"). A ruling is made either on the spot or at a later date as circumstances dictate: in either case the Clerks at the Table can be called upon for advice if necessary.

Maintaining Order

The Speaker must preserve order in the House and ensure that its rules of debate are observed. For instance, a Member who alleges dishonourable behaviour by another may be directed to withdraw the remark concerned. The Speaker has the power to suspend the sitting in the case of grave general disorder. In the case of wilful disobedience by a Member, the Speaker can suspend them from the House for a day or invite the House to approve expulsion for a longer period. This is known as "naming" a Member.



Mr Speaker, Rt Hon
John Bercow MP,
dressed in state

The Speaker has to protect the rights of minorities in the House and must ensure that the holders of an opinion, however unpopular, are allowed to put across their point of view. This is especially important when deciding whether or not to allow the closure to be moved - that is, whether a debate can be brought to a close. If minorities have not yet been allowed to speak, the Speaker may decide to keep the debate open.

The Speaker periodically sends letters to all Members of Parliament on conventions and courtesies of the House, setting out his role and reminding Members of what they should and should not do.³

Impartiality

The Speaker must be above party political controversy and must be seen to be completely impartial in all public matters. All sides in the House rely on the Speaker's disinterest, and understand that he or she must stand aside from controversy. Accordingly, on election the Speaker resigns from his or her political party. During a General Election the Speaker will still need to be re-elected, but is unlikely to be opposed by any of the major political parties. Speakers do not stand on political issues, but as "the Speaker seeking re-election" and do not campaign.

Assuming the office of Speaker will, to a great extent, mean shedding old loyalties and friendships within the House. The Speaker must keep apart from old party colleagues or any one group or interest and does not, for instance, frequent the Commons dining rooms or bars. Even after retirement, a former Speaker will take no part in political issues, and will sit as a Cross-Bencher if appointed to the House of Lords.

Ceremonial Role

The Speaker acts as the spokesperson for the House on ceremonial and formal occasions. For example, the Speaker presented addresses of congratulation to The Queen on the occasion of her Silver Jubilee in 1977 and Golden Jubilee in 2002. Nowadays such occasions are usually happy events; but in past centuries a Speaker might have been called upon to deliver an unwelcome message to an autocratic and even despotic Sovereign a message which might be much less welcome - the reasons, for instance, why the Commons had disagreed to raising a tax for the royal revenues. Historically, the role of the Speaker could be rather perilous: seven Speakers were executed by beheading between 1394 and 1535.

Speaker's Procession

It has been suggested that the historical dangers of the Speakership are the reason for the Speaker's procession, which continues to take place every day while the House is in session. The Speaker leaves Speaker's House at the Westminster Bridge end of the Palace of Westminster preceded by a Bar Doorkeeper, the Serjeant at Arms with the Mace, and followed by the Trainbearer, Chaplain and Secretary. They undertake a formal procession through the Library Corridor, the Lower Waiting Hall, Central and Members' Lobbies to the Chamber before each sitting of the House. This route was adopted during the Second World War when the Commons used the House of Lords Chamber after their own had been destroyed. This daily procession

³ See Conventions and Courtesies of the House:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmselect/cmproced/333/33309.htm>

has been retained in preference to the shorter pre-war route so that visitors in Central Lobby can witness the ceremony.

Official Dress

On normal sitting days, the Speaker wears a suit, over which a black robe is worn. The Speaker no longer wears the traditional outfit, which included knee breeches, silk stockings and a full-bottomed wig. Rt Hon Betty Boothroyd first decided not to wear the wig and Rt Hon Michael Martin, her successor, chose not to wear knee breeches, silk stockings or the traditional buckled shoes.

On state occasions (such as the Opening of Parliament), the Speaker wears a robe of black satin damask trimmed with gold.

Constituency and Administrative Role

The Speaker continues to be a Member of Parliament and therefore deals with constituents' letters and e-mails like any other. The Speaker also has an administrative role, as ex-officio Chairman of the House of Commons Commission. The Commission is the employer of all permanent staff of the House. The various domestic committees of the House make recommendations to the Commission on matters concerning the control of accommodation, services and facilities to Members, including their financial implications. (See **Factsheet** G15 for more details on the House of Commons Administration.)

Election of a Speaker

Speakers are elected at the beginning of each new Parliament (i.e. after every General Election), or when the previous Speaker resigns, retires or dies. New procedures for the election of the Speaker were agreed by the House on 22 March 2001⁴ (Standing Order Nos. 1A and 1B).

The House is presided over by the Father of the House (see **Factsheet** M3). If the Speaker at dissolution is still a Member following a General Election, the Father of the House ascertains whether he is willing to be chosen as Speaker again. If this is the case, the Father of the House calls on one Member to move the motion that the former Speaker should take the Chair as Speaker-elect. This is the procedure that was followed after the 2001 and 2005 General Elections.

If a Speaker dies or retires, or does not return after a General Election, a new Speaker is elected by the House. As part of the new procedures, put in to practice for the first time on 22 June 2009⁵, an exhaustive secret ballot system is used. Only Members of Parliament are able to vote for a new Speaker. Before voting begins, each candidate addresses the House, explaining why they believe they should be elected. At each round, Members are given a list of candidates and place an "X" next to the candidate of their choice. The votes are then counted. The candidate with the fewest votes is then eliminated, as are any candidates who received less than five per cent of the votes cast. Also, any candidate may withdraw within 10 minutes of the announcement of the ballot. This process continues until one candidate gains more

⁴ http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200001/cmhansrd/vo010322/debtext/10322-10.htm#10322-10_head2

⁵ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansrd/cm090622/debtext/90622-0001.htm#0906222000001>

than half of the votes.

The situation where there has been more than one candidate has occurred only five times since the beginning of the twentieth century. Most recently this happened on 22 June 2009, when Mr John Bercow was elected as Speaker by the House. On this occasion, there were ten candidates. Proceedings began at 2:30pm and the Speaker-elect took the chair at 8:30pm, following three rounds of voting. At the final ballot, Mr Bercow won 322 votes and Sir George Young 271.

Under the old procedures, a Speaker was elected through a series of divisions. One candidate would be proposed as a Speaker in a motion and additional candidates would be presented as successive amendments to the original motion. Each amendment would be voted on through a series of divisions until a candidate was finally chosen.

Royal Approbation

The procedure is completed when the Speaker-elect is called to the House of Lords to receive the Royal Approbation. The choice of a Speaker is therefore not entirely a matter for the Commons alone, reflecting the Speaker's constitutional role as spokesperson for the House, with rights of access to the Sovereign. At this time the newly confirmed Speaker lays claim on behalf of the Commons to "all their ancient and undoubted rights and privileges." These procedures are followed even when a Speaker seeks to continue in office in a new Parliament, although they are often a formality only.

Salary

The Speaker is paid at the same rate as Cabinet Ministers. Pensions for former Speakers used to be fixed by a special Bill (Mr Speaker ... 's Retirement Act) after they resigned, but are now calculated according to the *Parliamentary and Other Salaries and Pensions Acts*. In September 2009, this figure was £141, 647.

History of the Speakership

The Speakership under its present title dates back to 1377 when Sir Thomas Hungerford was appointed. Equivalent presiding officers before this time were called 'parlour' or 'prolocutor', and have been identified as far back as 1258 when Peter de Montfort is said to have presided over the "Mad Parliament"⁶ held at Oxford that year.

Until the seventeenth century, the Speaker was often an agent of the King, although they were often blamed if they delivered news from Parliament that the King did not like. Many Speakers got into trouble for this, and a few were even executed. (See Appendix B)

During the Civil War in the 1640s, however, the struggle between Crown and Parliament was reflected in the attitude of the Speaker of the House to the King

⁶ So called by the supporters of Henry III but was in fact very businesslike and appointed a commission to draw up plans for parliamentary reform called the Provisions of Oxford. Source: Wilding & Lundy. *Encyclopaedia of Parliament*. Cassell & Company 1972

When King Charles I came to Parliament in 1642 to arrest five Members of the Commons for treason, Speaker Lenthall gave the following reply:

May it please Your Majesty, I have neither eyes to see, nor tongue to speak in this place, but as the House is pleased to direct me, whose servant I am here, and I humbly beg Your Majesty's pardon that I cannot give any other answer than this to what Your Majesty is pleased to demand of me.

After the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, Speakers often had political associations with, and sometimes held posts in, Government. Speaker Arthur Onslow (Speaker 1728-61) was responsible for distancing the role of the Speaker from Government and established many of the practices associated with the Speaker today. By the mid-nineteenth century, it was the norm that the Speaker should be above party.

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Appendix A

Speakers of the House of Commons since 1700

1698 – 1700	Sir T Littleton
1701 – 1705	R Harley
1705 – 1708	J Smith
1708 – 1710	Sir R Onslow
1710 – 1713	W Bromley
1714 – 1715	Sir T Hanmer
1715 – 1727	Sir S Compton
1728 – 1761	A Onslow
1761 – 1770	Sir J Cust
1770 – 1780	Sir F Norton
1780 – 1789	C Wolfran Cornwall (<i>Died in office</i>)
1789	W W Grenville
1789 – 1801	H Addington
1801 – 1802	Sir J Mitford
1802 – 1817	C Abbot
1817 – 1834	C Manners-Sutton
1835 – 1839	J Abercromby
1839 – 1857	C Shaw-Lefevre
1857 – 1872	J E Denison
1872 – 1884	H B W Brand
1886 – 1895	A W Peel
1895 – 1905	W C Gully
1905 – 1921	J W Lowther
1921 – 1928	J H Whitley
1928 – 1943	E A Fitzroy (<i>Died in office</i>)
1943 – 1951	D Clifton Brown
1951 – 1959	W S Morrison
1959 – 1965	Sir H Hylton-Foster (<i>Died in office</i>)
1965 – 1971	Dr H King
1971 – 1976	J Selwyn Lloyd
1976 – 1983	T G Thomas
1983 – 1992	B B Weatherill
1992 – 2000	B Boothroyd
2000 – 2009	M J Martin
2009 -	J Bercow

Appendix B

Speakers - Executions and Violent Deaths

Sir John Bussy.	Speaker 1394-8. Beheaded 1399.
William Tresham.	Speaker 1439-42,1447,1449-50. Murdered 1450.
Thomas Thorpe.	Speaker 1453-54. Beheaded 1461.
Sir John Wenlock.	Speaker 1455-6. Killed at the Battle of Tewkesbury 1471.
Sir Thomas Tresham.	Speaker 1459. Beheaded 1471 (Son of William Tresham)
William Catesby.	Speaker 1484. Beheaded 1485.
Sir Richard Empson.	Speaker 1491-2. Beheaded 1510. (On same day as Dudley)
Edmond Dudley.	Speaker 1504. Beheaded 1510. (On same day as Empson)
Sir Thomas More.	Speaker 1523. Beheaded 1535.

Further reading

The Office of Speaker (1964)
P Laundry
1964

The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments
of the Commonwealth
P Laundry
1984

Speakers of the House of Commons
A I Dasent
1911

Ceremonial and the Mace in the House
of Commons
Sir P Thorne
1980
(for details of official dress)

Procedure Committee, *Election of a
Speaker*, 15 February 2001, HC 40 2000-
01

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Fax 020 7219 3866
bookshop@parliament.uk

Factsheet M2 The Speaker

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