

The Speakership in the Twenty First Century

1. The Context

The context in which the next Speaker will be elected could scarcely be more serious or challenging. For all that the House of Commons contains a large majority of hard working Members of notable experience and ability, the brutal fact is that the reputation of Parliament is at rock bottom. Of course, there has long been an undercurrent of discontent driven by the public's sense of powerlessness, a belief that politicians are all the same – promising much and delivering little – and a feeling that Parliament is old-fashioned, remote and ineffective. This discontent has been reflected in lower turnouts, a shift from party activity to involvement in single issue campaigns and the rise of fringe parties, including those of dangerous extremists.

Now disengagement from politics and indifference to what we do have given way to outright public ridicule, scorn and contempt. The tidal wave of devastating disclosures about expenses has horrified the public. Massive damage has been done. Only the most decisive action now to bring about permanent change for the better will enable us to restore trust in our probity. This is quite apart from the wider mission to reform Parliament and reconnect with the public. So the next Speaker faces an unprecedented challenge – to help clean up politics, to place Parliament at the centre of an effective democracy and to build a relationship of mutual respect with the electorate. Above all, the Speaker must be part of the solution and must drive the process of renewal.

2. My Own Candidature

Following encouragement from colleagues in all parts of the House, I am putting my name forward as a candidate for election as Speaker. I do so for three main reasons: to bring forward the necessary reforms to the House; to strengthen the role of backbenchers both in standing up for their constituents and in holding the government of the day to account; and to be a public advocate and ambassador for parliamentary democracy.

Ever since I was elected in 1997, I have been passionate about Parliament and almost two thirds of my service have been as a backbencher. I hope that I offer a number of qualities that can be of benefit to the House.

First, I have a track record of political independence. Whilst I, in common with most MPs, have generally voted with my party, I have proved many times that I am ready to speak and vote independently of it when I have judged it necessary.

Secondly, in debates in the Chamber, on the International Development Select Committee and in All-Party Groups, I have long pursued unfashionable but important causes on a non-partisan basis. As many colleagues will know, my consuming passions in Parliament include special educational needs, the fight against global poverty, the drive for constitutional reform, and the need

for equal treatment of people, irrespective of gender, race, disability, age or sexual orientation.

Thirdly, as a member of the Speaker's Panel of Chairmen for the last four years, I have chaired a great many Bill Committees, debates in Westminster Hall and Delegated Legislation Committees. My guiding principle in the Chair has been to facilitate debate and maximise colleagues' chances to participate, intervening only when necessary. I hope that you will agree that I am competent, fair and well-versed in parliamentary procedure.

Finally, I trust that I have some skill as a communicator. By tradition, the Speaker operates internally, chairing in the Chamber and fulfilling a wider role in the House, but he or she has rarely commented in public. The traditional vow of silence outside the Chamber is no longer appropriate. Naturally the incumbent must remain above the party fray but, on a basis that enjoys the consent of the House, the Speaker should be a robust public advocate for democratic politics and the work of Parliament. I believe that I can fulfil this role. Above all, in seeking colleagues' support, I am asking people to vote not for a Conservative but for a Speaker who has what it takes to do the job, to be an effective ambassador and to restore the prestige of Parliament.

This is no time for interim measures or party manoeuvring for future advantage. Opting for short-termism would risk demeaning the office of Speaker and insulting the intelligence of Members who are perfectly capable of sensibly choosing a Speaker to serve for a sustained period. Indeed, the House needs to elect a Speaker who has a mandate to take Parliament forward in the critical years that lie ahead. As a matter of principle, I believe strongly that the post of Speaker should not be a job for life but an opportunity to make a difference within a reasonable period of time. If you do me the honour of electing me, I will serve for no longer than two full Parliaments and, in any event, for no more than 9 years in total. I say this because any Speaker should be able to make a mark in that time and his or her successor should then be elected by experienced MPs in the existing Parliament before a General Election. It should not be done after a General Election, on party political grounds, by newly elected MPs who do not know the candidates.

Below I set out what I see as the key challenges for Parliament. None of them is exclusively down to the Speaker and several issues are well beyond his or her remit. Nevertheless, I have tried to tackle the big subjects head on so that you know where I stand. These are my preliminary thoughts and I should be interested to hear yours.

3. Allowances and Expenses

Sorting out the mess of the allowances system is an urgent priority. By delaying too long and doing too little, Parliament has lost public confidence and sacrificed whatever right it thought it had to shape the system. There must now be an end to self-regulation and a start to a new system determined independently of us and accepted by us. The Government has brought

forward interim proposals to remove the worst abuses and other parties have themselves sketched the outlines of a sanitised system.

Almost everyone now agrees that any new arrangement must:

- allow claims against a strictly defined set of costs incurred
- be fully transparent so that the public can see who claims what and when
- be subject to regular audit by qualified professionals who are independent of the House

Sir Christopher Kelly will shortly produce his blueprint for reform. My view is that, whatever Sir Christopher decides, unless there is a public consensus that it is fundamentally flawed, inequitable or unworkable, we must bite the bullet and accept his findings. Whatever scheme is put in place has to reflect the inescapable reality that most MPs have to live in two places and their overall income, including allowances, must be adequate to enable them to do so. Otherwise, only the independently wealthy or the externally sponsored will be able to afford a parliamentary career.

With 24 hour media, the growth of websites focused on Parliament and rising constituency caseloads, the demands placed on Members of Parliament are greater than ever. Members welcome the responsibility but, in cleaning up the system, we should make no apology for the fact that reasonable budgets, subject to proper audit, are vital to our work. Having the right number of qualified staff, paid decently for the professional service they provide, and supported by the necessary technology, is essential if we are to do the professional job which is rightly expected of us.

Every party has a duty to make the House of Commons more representative of the people we are privileged to serve. We must have a 21st century Parliament made up of dedicated, highly motivated, and competent members. We must not take a giant step back to a 19th century Parliament which would be the exclusive preserve of a plutocratic elite.

4. Putting Parliament First

In discussing the plight of Parliament, it is easy to descend into nostalgia for a mythical “golden age” when quaking ministers were held in check by legislative giants who performed their task of scrutiny to perfection. In truth, governments have always sought, largely successfully, to control Parliament, but some reforms, notably the introduction of Select Committees, have made the situation marginally better. Another common fallacy is to claim that it is all the fault of the present government and that every change since 1997 has made matters worse. In fact, successive governments have strengthened the executive grip on the parliamentary throat and some recent changes, including the introduction of Westminster Hall debates, family friendly hours and the advent of some pre-legislative scrutiny have been positive. Nevertheless, there is a clear deficit on the parliamentary balance sheet. In particular, there has been one glaring weakness in the changes made over

the last decade. Too many have been focused on the convenience of the executive and too few on the rights and responsibilities of the legislature.

The dice are loaded more than ever in favour of government. Why?

First, in an age of 24 hour news, ministers are the lead suppliers of items for news coverage. Aided and abetted by the departmental machine, and with no power to instruct that Parliament be the first to be informed, a debate on policy or events is essentially a joust between the media and the minister. MPs become at best bit-part players in the problem, struggling to catch up with what has been released and to probe the minister about it.

Secondly, the modern state is bigger than ever. The scale and complexity of ministerial activity have increased but the time and resources to scrutinise it have diminished. In short, government is doing more but parliamentarians have not kept pace with this increased executive output. In crude tug of war terms, several recruits have been added to the ministerial team but few, if any, to the parliamentary.

Thirdly, the government chooses the majority of MPs who will sit on the Select Committees that scrutinise its work. Similarly, it chooses the bulk of MPs who will sit on the Public Bill Committees that consider its legislation and decides how long they will be given for the task.

Throughout consideration of the issues, certain priorities must remain at the forefront of our minds. We need greater independence for Parliament from the executive; we need enhanced scrutiny both of policy and of legislation; we need better use of time and more opportunities for backbenchers to challenge the government. Above all, we must strive to do not what is merely convenient, but what is right.

We can stop the rot, but we have to act decisively to do so. If the House expects to gain the respect of others, it has to start by showing some respect for its own Members. This means asserting the duty of Parliament to scrutinise the executive and to hold the government to account. Starting from first principles, we need radical reform of the way we operate – from the management of House business to the composition of committees, from the level of scrutiny to the opportunities for backbench members to take part in key debates.

There are many ideas for improving the performance of Parliament. Amongst others we need to consider:

Use of Parliamentary Time

- the case for a Business Committee of the House with a backbench majority. Its role would be to control a proportion of the parliamentary timetable, deciding how much time should be allocated to each bill and debate
- making pre and post-legislative scrutiny the norm, not the exception

- greater use of Urgent Questions and Standing Order 24 Debates
- a formal power for the Speaker to require a minister to make an Oral Statement to the House.

Role of Committees

- election by secret ballot of the whole House of the chairs of Select Committees
- more formal powers for Select Committees to call witnesses and to demand the release of papers, with increased resources as necessary to allow for thorough inquiries to produce reports which can then be debated and voted on in the House
- a role for Select Committees in public appointments, possibly in the form of confirmation hearings
- requiring the membership of Public Bill Committees to reflect opinion in the House as expressed in the Second Reading debate or vote
- a stronger role for Parliament, including Select Committees, in scrutinising the domestic budget process and the substantial volume of EU legislation. The Public Accounts Committee does outstanding work but it is retrospective and greater parliamentary oversight of the whole Comprehensive Spending Review process could be invaluable. Likewise, the European Scrutiny Committee is important but it could usefully be bolstered by additional staff and resources.

Opportunities for Backbenchers

- the arguments for and against Speakers' Lists to give colleagues a better idea of when they might be called. The merit of enabling Members to divide their Chamber and other work more time-efficiently would need to be weighed against the danger of Members turning up to speak and leaving soon after, but the issue ought to be addressed.
- extending provision for topical debates, including on strongly supported EDMs, and ensuring that the method of choosing the subject is democratic and transparent
- ending or restricting the use of the Royal Prerogative in relation both to treaty-making and to decisions to commit our troops. In a 21st century democracy, Parliament must be pre-eminent in deciding on international agreements and on the overriding question of declaring war or making peace.
- protection and improvement of the rights of minority parties and of independent Members.

Accessibility of Parliament

- a stronger lead by Parliament in communicating with the public, with enhanced supply of citizenship material to schools, online communication about Bills, debates and policy issues, better broadcast coverage of Parliament and increased access for visitors

- how to remove barriers to participation faced by Members who have childcare responsibilities, a disability or simply a need for better induction on election.

If the political will exists, some of these issues can be determined soon and changes implemented within months. Others might require a more extensive debate and the opportunity for evidence taking. There may be a case for a Speaker's Conference or a constitutional convention on parliamentary reform. However, this should not be an excuse for protracted navel gazing and the relegation of pressing issues to the backburner. On the contrary, parties should all commit to take part in such a convention and to act on its recommendations early in the next Parliament.

5. Speaker as Ambassador

For centuries, the Speaker has spoken only on procedural matters from the Chair and made little or no public comment outside the Chamber. Some traditionalists will doggedly defend this arrangement, saying that "it has always been this way and it would be dangerous to change". I disagree. It would be dangerous not to change when the world has done so. Parliament has been broadcast on radio since 1978 and on television since 1989. With 24 hour media and in the age of the internet, the Speaker need not and should not be a purely internal figure, shrouded in mystique and forbidden from making any public utterance in all circumstances.

Just as the Prime Minister speaks for the Government and the Leader of the Opposition speaks for the Opposition, why shouldn't the Speaker of the House of Commons speak for the House of Commons? By speaking for the House of Commons, I do not mean breaking the convention of total impartiality in the Chair. What I mean is three-fold:

First, the Speaker should be willing to appear before an equivalent of the Liaison Committee or to conduct a version of Speaker's Question Time in each parliamentary session in order to explain his or her approach to the running of the House.

Secondly, the Speaker should be permitted to put out statements to the media which are authoritative from the perspective of the House as a whole.

Thirdly, the Speaker should be an ambassador for the House of Commons to the society which it serves.

Successive Speakers have supported charities, and hosted a diverse range of groups and visiting delegations in Parliament. The time has come to go beyond this, visiting and reaching out to a range of public institutions and voluntary bodies. This engagement, communication and interaction must be a two-way process. In other words, a Speaker alone is no longer enough. The next holder of the office has to be a Speaker and a Listener – explaining the role of the House and the work that individual Members do to as wide an audience as possible – but also listening to and, as appropriate, assimilating

the views of the public. In the new and challenging circumstances of our politics, the next Speaker will face a dual role, as I have argued in this prospectus: to be the advocate for parliamentarians, especially those who sit on the backbenches, and to be the ambassador for Parliament to the outside world.

John Bercow MP
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