

The Speaker of the House of Commons: The Office and Its Holders since 1945

Matthew William Laban

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ABSTRACT

The post-war period has witnessed the Speakership of the House of Commons evolving from an important internal parliamentary office into one of the most recognised public roles in British political life. This historic office has not, however, been examined in any detail since Philip Laundy's seminal work entitled *The Office of Speaker* published in 1964. This thesis updates Laundy's work and brings the examination of the Speakership right up to the election of John Bercow as Speaker in June 2009.

The manner by which the Speaker is elected and how this process has changed since 1945 is explored as is the way in which a Speaker contests a general election if he or she wishes to remain in office for longer than one parliamentary session. The powers and responsibilities of the Speaker are identified and the way in which these have changed and developed are discussed. Each of the post-war Speakers is examined to see what his or her personal contribution has been to the ongoing development of the office.

The thesis concludes with an analysis of how the Speakership is viewed today compared with the start of the period. The office has always been held in high esteem by fellow parliamentarians but now it enjoys similar recognition by the wider general public thanks to the introduction of radio and television broadcasting of the House of Commons. Whilst the task of chairing the debates in the chamber remains the same, a modern Speaker must also rise to the challenge of being a skilled administrator, diplomat and media personality.

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INTRODUCTION

THE SPEAKERSHIP OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS: A PRE-EMINENT BUT UNDER-STUDIED PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE

Excepting only the Sovereign herself, no personage throughout the structure of British parliamentary government occupies a higher pinnacle of prestige than the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Philip Laundy, author of *The Office of Speaker*, 1964.¹

I suppose that there is much more interest in the relative success of various political forces in relation to the exercise of executive power than in the story of Parliament's effectiveness in holding Executives to account.

Former Clerk of the House of Commons, Sir Clifford Boulton, 2001.²

Despite being one of the most high profile positions in British political life, the Speakership of the House of Commons is a parliamentary office which has received very little academic attention during the post-war period. Moreover, the Speaker of the House of Commons is one of the oldest public offices in the United Kingdom and can trace its origins to 1258 when Peter de Montfort presided over 'The Mad Parliament' of that year. It was not until 1376, however, that Peter de la Mare was elected as Parliament's first official spokesman and in 1377 Sir Thomas Hungerford was the first person to be given the title of Speaker.³ The office's prestige and status is reflected by the fact that the Speaker now ranks seventh in the official order of precedence after the Queen and the Royal Family.⁴ Although the Speakership is an ancient and important office, very little research has been written on the subject and there is, in certain areas, a scarcity of primary material. The aim of this chapter is to examine what academic work has been undertaken on the post-war Speakership, what primary sources exist and

¹ Philip Laundy, *The Office of Speaker*, (London: Cassell, 1964), p. 7.

² Letter from Sir Clifford Boulton, 19 March 2001.

³ See Philip Laundy, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, (London: Quiller Press, 1984), pp. 12-13.

⁴ See Laundy, *The Office of Speaker*, p. 8.

finally the topics that need to be covered and the questions posed in order to produce a study that looks at the office of Speaker and where it sits in the much wider context of parliamentary post-war history.

This thesis will cover the Speakerships of the following occupants of the Chair:

Speaker	Political Party	Period in the Chair
Colonel Douglas Clifton Brown	Conservative	1943 - 1951
William Shepherd Morrison	Conservative	1951 - 1959
Sir Harry Hylton-Foster	Conservative	1959 - 1965
Dr Horace King	Labour	1965 - 1971
Selwyn Lloyd	Conservative	1971 - 1976
George Thomas	Labour	1976 - 1983
Bernard Weatherill	Conservative	1983 - 1992
Betty Boothroyd	Labour	1992 - 2000
Michael Martin	Labour	2000 - 2009

It will end with the election of John Bercow, the Conservative MP for Buckingham, as Speaker on 22 June 2009.

Existing literature

The only general pieces of research that have been conducted on the office of Speaker since the Second World War have been written by one of the former clerks to the Canadian Parliament, Philip Laundy. Two books have been written by Laundy; *The Office of Speaker*, which was published in 1964, and *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, which was published in 1984.⁵ There is also a piece by Laundy entitled ‘The Office of Speaker in the Twentieth Century’, in a Study of Parliament Group volume called *The House of Commons in the Twentieth Century*,

⁵ Laundy, *The Office of Speaker* & Laundy, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*.

edited by S. A. Walkland and published in 1979.⁶ Laundy's first book is most definitely the seminal work on this topic. However, it was published nearly fifty years ago with the two later publications both being more than twenty-five years old. Laundy's works do not cover the Speakerships of Bernard Weatherill, Betty Boothroyd or Michael Martin and his coverage of the Speakerships of Dr Horace King, Selwyn Lloyd and George Thomas are only brief as they are part of a much wider looking analysis of the Speakership throughout the Parliaments of the Commonwealth.

In 1946, the Hansard Society published a pamphlet called *The Speaker of the House of Commons* which was written by P. M. Briers.⁷ This very short booklet explains the election of a Speaker and describes his duties and powers. Thanks to its brevity, this small book gives only a limited insight into the office of Speaker at the very beginning of the post-war period.

A very thin book entitled *Speakers and the Speakership* and edited by Paul Seaward was published in 2010 for The Parliamentary Year Book Trust.⁸ This book is made up of a collection of essays covering the entire history of the Speakership since the Middle Ages and the only chapter relevant to the post-war period is the one written by Baroness Boothroyd. This chapter only covers Boothroyd's tenure as Speaker and is not an analysis of developments since 1945.

Only three of the post-war Westminster Speakers have published written personal accounts of their time in the Chair: Selwyn Lloyd, George Thomas and Betty Boothroyd.⁹ These books are crucial to the understanding of the execution and development of the post-war Speakership because they give the insight of those who have held the office. Lloyd's book gives an analysis of the history and responsibilities of the office of Speaker whereas Thomas and Boothroyd only really write about their

⁶ Philip Laundy, 'The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century' in S. A. Walkland (ed.), *The House of Commons in the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1979).

⁷ P. M. Briers, *The Speaker of the House of Commons*, (The Hansard Society, 1946).

⁸ Paul Seaward (ed.), *Speakers and the Speakership*, (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

⁹ Selwyn Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), George Thomas, *Mr Speaker: The Memoirs of Viscount Tonypanody*, (London: Century Publishing, 1985) & Betty Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, (London: Century, 2001).

own time as Speaker and do not attempt to examine the office they held. Lord Maybray-King wrote a book intended for school children entitled *The Speaker and Parliament* which was published in 1973 but this only explains the powers and responsibilities of the Speaker and does not give an account of his time in the Chair.¹⁰ King did, however, write an unpublished account of his time as Speaker which was used to compile an again unpublished biography entitled *A Boy Called Horace* by Minnie Horton and these transcripts are held in the Parliamentary Archives.¹¹ The same three Speakers who wrote memoirs are also the only ones who have had biographies written. D. R. Thorpe published *Selwyn Lloyd* in 1989, E. H. Robertson published his book on George Thomas in 1992 and Paul Routledge wrote an account of the life of Betty Boothroyd in 1995 which was later up-dated in 2000.¹² There is a biography of John Bercow written by Bobby Friedman but this work mainly falls beyond the scope of this thesis.¹³ There are no memoirs or biographies for Speakers Clifton Brown, Morrison, Hylton-Foster, Weatherill or Martin. Betty Boothroyd does give some comments on the Speakership of Bernard Weatherill in her autobiography when she recalls her time as one of his Deputy Speakers although the information is limited in its scope. The fact that there is so little on at least five of the nine post-war Speakers covered in this thesis demonstrates that this is an area worthy of academic attention.

Secondary material

General material on the United Kingdom Parliament also covers aspects of the Speakership. Books such as Ivor Jennings's *Parliament*, John Garrett's *Westminster: Does Parliament Work?* and Peter Riddell's *Parliament Under Blair* also contribute to

¹⁰ Lord Maybray-King, *The Speaker and Parliament*, (Birmingham: Tom Stacey, 1973).

¹¹ Parliamentary Archives, HC/LB/1/131, Part 1 *Journal as Speaker*, a first person account of his tenure by Lord Maybray-King, c.1970 & Part 2 *A Boy Called Horace*, an unpublished biography of Mr Speaker Horace King by Minnie Horton, c.1980.

¹² D. R. Thorpe, *Selwyn Lloyd*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), E. H. Robertson, *George: A Biography of Viscount Tonyandy* & Paul Routledge, *Madam Speaker: The Life of Betty Boothroyd*, (London: Harper Collins, 1995 & Politico's, 2000).

¹³ Bobby Friedman, *Bercow, Mr Speaker: Rowdy Living in the Tory Party*, (London: Gibson Square Books Ltd, 2011).

the academic research on the Speakership.¹⁴ Anthony Sampson's last *Anatomy of Britain, Who Runs This Place?*, gives an excellent account of events at the close of the twentieth century involving the Speakership giving particular attention to the Speaker's role in relation to the Executive's neglect of Parliament.¹⁵ The latest edition of *How Parliament Works* by Robert Rogers and Rhodri Walters devotes a short section to the role of the Speaker and is another quick reference guide to the powers and responsibilities of the office.¹⁶ The two editions of *Parliament: Functions, Practice and Procedures* (first one by J. A. G. Griffith and Michael Ryle and the second one by Robert Blackburn and Andrew Kennon) contain sections on the powers and responsibilities of the Speaker within the wider context of the workings of Parliament.¹⁷ However, the office of Speaker only receives a mention in all these works because they are bigger tomes dedicated to explaining how the whole of Parliament works.

There is also relevant material when looking at the Speakership from a political science perspective. In addition to S. A. Walkland's book, members of the Study of Parliament Group have published other works that set the Speakership in the broader context of the overall development of the House of Commons. Peter G. Richards's various books on the role of the backbencher not only look at the job of the Speaker but also look at how the office works with that group of MPs.¹⁸ In 1970, Anthony Barker and Michael Rush published a book entitled, *The Member of Parliament and his Information*, which analyses a survey of MPs which asked them questions about their duties and their

¹⁴ Ivor Jennings, *Parliament*, Second Edition, (London: 1969), John Garrett, *Westminster: Does Parliament Work?*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1992) & Peter Riddell, *Parliament under Blair*, (London: Politico's, 2000).

¹⁵ Anthony Sampson, *Who Runs This Place? The Anatomy of Britain in the 21st Century*, (London: John Murray, 2004).

¹⁶ Robert Rogers & Rhodri Walters, *How Parliament Works*, 6th Edition, (London: Pearson Longman, 2006).

¹⁷ J. A. G. Griffith & Michael Ryle, *Parliament: Functions, Practice and Procedures*, (London: Sweet & Maxwell, 1989) & Robert Blackburn & Andrew Kennon with Sir Michael Wheeler-Booth, *Griffith & Ryle on Parliament: Functions, Practice and Procedures*, (London: Sweet & Maxwell, 2003).

¹⁸ See Peter G. Richards, *Honourable Members: A Study of the British Backbencher*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), Peter G. Richards, *Honourable Members: A Study of the British Backbencher*, Second Edition, (London: Faber & Faber, 1964) & Peter G. Richards, *The Backbenchers*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1972).

opinions about their work and their place in the British political system.¹⁹ This study provides a useful background of how MPs viewed their work when looking at the Speakership in that period. Bernard Crick published his *The Reform of Parliament* in 1964 and, along with A. H. Hanson, he also edited a collection of essays by academics and officers of both Houses called *The Commons in Transition* which looked at parliamentary reform in the late 1960s.²⁰ More recently, the political scientist, Philip Norton [Lord Norton of Louth] has also written about the changes to Parliament and its role and significance in the British political system.²¹ Whilst these books do not look at the Speakership in any depth, they nevertheless set the office within the wider context of the parliamentary reforms that have taken place during the post-war period.

Other secondary sources

The journalist Michael Cockerell put together a BBC documentary on the life of Speaker Boothroyd on her retirement in 2000.²² This programme contains interviews with Boothroyd along with conversations with politicians and friends about her career and gives an overview of her life with a more specific treatment of her time in the Chair and the most important and difficult episodes during that period. BBC Radio 4 also put together a two part documentary entitled *Bernard and Betty Speak Out*, which examined the Speakership through interviews with Lord Weatherill and Baroness Boothroyd.²³ The BBC's *Politics Show* also did a piece on Michael Martin which included a rare interview with the then Speaker and a look at his role.²⁴ Of course, one has to be careful of bias, both from the makers of television and radio programmes and from the

¹⁹ Anthony Barker & Michael Rush, *The Member of Parliament and his Information*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970).

²⁰ Bernard Crick, *The Reform of Parliament*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964) & A. H. Hanson & Bernard Crick (eds.), *The Commons in Transition*, (London: Fontana/Collins, 1970).

²¹ Philip Norton, *Does Parliament Matter?*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), Philip Norton, *Parliament in British Politics*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) & Philip Norton, *Parliament in British Politics*, Second Edition, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

²² *Call Me Madam: A Profile of Betty Boothroyd* by Michael Cockerell, BBC Television, first broadcast on BBC2, 16 December 2000.

²³ *Bernard and Betty Speak Out*, (BBC Radio 4, Part 1 first broadcast on 13 May 2007 & Part 2 first broadcast on 20 May 2007).

²⁴ *BBC Politics Show*, BBC Television, broadcast on 11 February 2007.

contributors, but as long as this is taken into consideration then the programme can be used to put more flesh on the bones of the subject.

The main secondary source is, of course, the printed press. Articles from newspapers and magazines on the Speakership throughout the post-war period are a valuable resource when looking at how events which affected each of the Speakers or their office were reported. Press reports on Speakership elections, comments on the way in which a Speaker has handled a particular debate and articles on the conduct of the Speaker demonstrate what the immediate reaction to events were. Columns written by parliamentary sketchwriters and political commentators are essential in gauging the mood at the time they were written. So long as one takes on board the angle or bias of the story, then the press is an important resource to any contemporary historian who is looking into a subject which lacks vast swathes of primary sources or published material.

Diaries and memoirs

The only other literature that can be used to supplement the memoirs of former Speakers already mentioned are published diaries and autobiographies of other politicians and commentators who had some dealings with the Speakership during the period.

Tony Benn's diaries are an invaluable source for looking at the different Speakerships since 1945 as the former Labour Cabinet Minister sat in the House of Commons under nine different Speakers.²⁵ The former Conservative Cabinet minister, John Boyd-Carpenter, comments in his memoirs on the Speakership of Colonel Clifton Brown.²⁶ Harold Macmillan's diaries, both published and unpublished, refer to different episodes

²⁵ See Tony Benn (edited by Ruth Winstone), *Free at Last: Diaries 1991-2001*, (London: Hutchinson, 2002).

²⁶ See John Boyd-Carpenter, *Way of Life: The Memoirs of John-Boyd-Carpenter*, (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980).

relating to the Speaker as do the volumes of his memoirs.²⁷ Harold Wilson's record of his first administration is an important source of information when discussing the selection and election of Speaker King.²⁸ Horace King's period in the Chair is also recorded in the published diaries of the Labour Cabinet Minister, Richard Crossman.²⁹

Edward Heath's memoirs cover his time as Father of the House of Commons (the MP with the longest unbroken service) when he presided over the election of Betty Boothroyd as Speaker in 1992.³⁰ Michael Heseltine's autobiography comments on the Speakership of George Thomas and his dealing with the issues surrounding the occasion when Heseltine seized the Mace during the debate on the Aircraft and Shipbuilding Industries Bill in May 1976.³¹ Robin Oakley's book, *Inside Track*, records this political commentator's take on the Speakership election of 2000 which saw Michael Martin elected to the Chair.³²

More recent publications include the diaries of the former Labour frontbencher and MP for Durham North, Giles Radice, which give an account of Betty Boothroyd's period as Speaker and a good overview of the election of Michael Martin with some comments on concern about the new Speaker's ability compared to his predecessor.³³ The former Conservative Cabinet minister, John Biffen, devotes an entire chapter of his memoirs to the election of Betty Boothroyd as Speaker.³⁴ The former Liberal Democrat leader, Sir Menzies Campbell, gives an account in his autobiography of the Speakership election in 2000 in which he was one of the defeated candidates.³⁵ Robin Cook's account of his time as Leader of the House of Commons gives some insight into the Martin

²⁷ Peter Catterall (ed.), *The Macmillan Diaries: The Cabinet Years, 1950-1957*, (London: Macmillan, 2003).

²⁸ Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1970: A Personal Record*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971.)

²⁹ Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister, Volume One: Minister of Housing 1964-66*, (London: Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, 1975).

³⁰ Edward Heath, *The Course of My Life*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998).

³¹ Michael Heseltine, *Life in the Jungle: My Autobiography*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000).

³² Robin Oakley, *Inside Track*, (London: Bantam Press, 2001).

³³ Giles Radice, *Diaries 1980-2001: From Political Disaster to Election Triumph*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004).

³⁴ John Biffen, *Semi-Detached*, (London: Biteback Publishing Ltd, 2013).

³⁵ Menzies Campbell, *Menzies Campbell: My Autobiography*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008).

Speakership in terms of the carrying out of his procedural duties.³⁶ Moreover, the publication of the transcripts of the former Labour Home Secretary, David Blunkett's tapes and the published diaries of Alastair Campbell, Press Secretary to Tony Blair, give additional information about Speaker Martin's conduct in office.³⁷ Michael Martin's downfall and eventual resignation is covered in the Liberal Democrat MP Vince Cable's memoir, *Free Radical*, and in books which cover the MPs' expenses scandal written by the journalist Heather Brooke and by *Daily Telegraph* reporters Robert Winnett and Gordon Rayner.³⁸ The Labour MP Peter Hain's memoirs deal with his interactions with Speaker Martin when he was Leader of the House.³⁹ The former Conservative minister, Ann Widdecombe, discusses Michael Martin's fall from office and the election of John Bercow in her autobiography.⁴⁰ Chris Mullin, the former Labour MP for Sunderland South, has published two volumes of his diaries which cover the years 1999-2010.⁴¹ The later volume contains Mullin's reflections on Martin's downfall and a commentary on what was going on in the House and behind the scenes at the time.

Primary Sources

The greatest primary source for anyone wishing to study any topic associated with the Westminster Parliament is the Hansard House of Commons Official Report. Reading through the debates is essential when looking at how each of the post-war Speakers have handled the House of Commons in session. Hansard also gives the rulings that the various Speakers have given during the post-war period as well as interpretations of parliamentary precedents. Hansard reports for key events such as Speakership elections or when a Speaker retires provides valuable information because they were

³⁶ Robin Cook, *The Point of Departure*, (London: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

³⁷ David Blunkett, *The Blunkett Tapes: My Life in the Bear Pit*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC 2006) & Alastair Campbell, *The Blair Years*, (London: Hutchinson, 2007).

³⁸ Vince Cable, *Free Radical: A Memoir*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2009), Heather Brooke, *The Silent State*, (London: William Heinemann, 2010) & Robert Winnett & Gordon Rayner, *No Expenses Spared*, (London: Bantam Press 2009).

³⁹ Peter Hain, *Outside In*, (London: Biteback Publishing Ltd, 2012).

⁴⁰ Ann Widdecombe, *Strictly Ann: The Autobiography*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2013).

⁴¹ Chris Mullin, *A View from the foothills: The Diaries of Chris Mullin*, (London: Profile Books, 2009) & Chris Mullin, *Decline & Fall: Diaries 2005-2010*, (London: Profile Books, 2010).

opportunities for Members of Parliament to discuss the office and give their opinions on it.

The Standing Orders of the House of Commons set out the rules which govern the election of a new Speaker or the re-election of a sitting Speaker. They also give the Speaker's powers for maintaining order in the Commons chamber and his other responsibilities whilst in the Chair such as calling divisions. Erskine May's *Parliamentary Practice* is, in the words of Speaker Lloyd, 'the fount of knowledge about the Standing Orders, conventions and practices of the House'.⁴² The one difficulty that arises from *Erskine May* is that it is a document which is open to interpretation by individual Speakers. It is, however, a central source because it contains all the case-law that has been built up by Speakers over the years.

Unfortunately, there are no official archives for the first of the post-war Speakers, Colonel Douglas Clifton Brown (later Viscount Ruffside) although his Great Nephew, Anthony Clifton Brown, is in possession of some newspaper clippings and notes kept by his ancestor. Clifton Brown's successor, William Shepherd Morrison (later Viscount Dunrossil), did not deposit papers in an archive either although his son, Dr Alasdair Morrison, possessed many of his father's papers, diaries, press clippings and speeches. Since Dr Morrison's death in December 2009, these papers have been deposited in the Gloucestershire Archives. Sir Harry Hylton-Foster left no papers in an official archive although his successor, Dr Horace King (later Lord Maybray-King) donated his papers to the Southampton City Council Archives in his old constituency. Selwyn Lloyd's papers are housed with many other eminent politicians in the Churchill Archives Centre in Cambridge. There are files which cover his entire political career, including when he was Foreign Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer, as well as his time as Speaker of the House of Commons. George Thomas (later Viscount Tonypany) donated all his papers to the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth and they cover his time as Speaker. His successor, Bernard (later Lord) Weatherill, gave his papers to the Templeman Library at the University of Kent and this archive contains files on his time

⁴² Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, p. 14.

as Deputy Speaker and Speaker. Betty Boothroyd has deposited her papers, which consist of lists of engagements, letters regarding her election and retirement as Speaker, newspaper cuttings and videotapes, in the Open University Library at Milton Keynes. We will have to wait and see whether Michael (now Lord) Martin makes any of his personal papers accessible to the public.

Officers of the House of Commons are another potential source for primary evidence. The papers and diaries of Brigadier Sir Francis Reid, who was Speaker's Secretary from 1955 until his death in 1970, are housed in the archives of the National Army Museum in Chelsea. Reid was an aide to Speakers Morrison, Hylton-Foster and King and his diaries outline all the various engagements hosted or attended by the Speaker. Unfortunately, they do not give any more insight other than to paint a picture of what the Speaker's schedule is like.

The Speaker's papers in the Parliamentary Archive do not contain a great wealth of material with much of what is there relating to before the post-war period. There is no dedicated archive on the office of Speaker and so other files, such as the Leader of the House of Commons' Office Records are there to supplement this paucity of material.

Minutes and reports from House of Commons Select Committees, in particular the Procedure Committee, which have investigated certain areas of the Speakership are another source of information. For example, the report of the Procedure Committee, entitled *Election of Speaker* and published in 2001, sets out the committee's investigation into the way in which the Speaker is elected. The committee interviewed many people associated with the office, including both living ex-Speakers and senior MPs so the evidence contained in its pages is relevant to any study on the post-war British Speakership. There is also an earlier, but similar, report produced by the Procedure Committee following the contested election when Selwyn Lloyd became Speaker in 1971. The Procedure Committee also produced a report entitled *Procedures for Debates, Private Members' Bills and the Powers of the Speaker*, which was published in November 2003.

The Labour Party History Archive and Study Centre based in the People's History Museum in Manchester contains all the minutes of the Parliamentary Labour Party up until the mid-1990s. These minutes contain all the discussions held prior to Speakership elections and also record times when individual Labour MPs or a group of MPs had a complaint against the Speaker of the day. The PLP minutes give a keen insight into how Labour MPs felt about individual candidates for the Speakership in the post-war period and so are an excellent resource in piecing together the story of how each of the Speakers were elected.

The House of Commons Library is also a source of primary evidence. For example, a Library Research Paper called *Election of a Commons Speaker* was published on 29 November 2000 following Speaker Martin's accession to the Chair. Its role was to explain the method of the election of a Speaker and to give some background to the process. The House of Commons Library has also published the correspondence of Sir Ralph Verney, who was Speaker's Secretary between 1921 and 1955. The final few letters are relevant to the office of Speaker in the post-war period as Sir Ralph was still in post during the Speakerships of Colonel Clifton Brown and W. S. Morrison. One of the letters gives a good account of the occasion when the new House of Commons chamber was officially opened on Thursday 26 October 1950 and the Speaker's involvement in the ceremony. The House of Commons Information Office has published a number of factsheets. Factsheet M2 entitled *The Speaker* sets out the basic powers and responsibilities of the Speakership and is a handy reference guide, Factsheet M3 outlines the duties of the Father of the House and Factsheet P9, headed *Divisions*, gives the conventions that apply to the Speaker's duty when there is a tied vote.

The National Archives at Kew contain some documents which are of use when looking at the Speakership. For example, the 1955 file PREM 11/863, entitled 'Possibility of independent opposition at General Election of Speaker of House of Commons: PM's request for support from Clement Davies MP and Clement Attlee MP' deals with the issue of a Speaker seeking re-election being opposed at the polls.

Oral evidence

The accounts of people who were, or are, associated with the office of Speaker are invaluable to any research into the post-war British Speakership. The reminiscences and anecdotes of former Speakers and their families, Deputy Speakers, Members of Parliament, Clerks, officials and political commentators are an important resource to anyone wishing to look at a topic which has received very little academic attention in the way of published material.

The Institute for Contemporary British History has published a witness seminar in which former Speakers, Clerks and Members of Parliament are interviewed.⁴³ The contributors comment on their experience of the Speakership over the post-war period and it is an important piece of work because it contains anecdotes and points of view from a variety of people who have been involved in the Speakership. These include two former Speakers [Weatherill and Boothroyd], former Clerks, long-serving parliamentarians, academics and journalists.

The contemporary historian and biographer Anthony Seldon has noted, when reflecting on the lack of written evidence thanks to the thirty year rule, that ‘interviews can be an essential stop-gap which allows contemporary history to be written’.⁴⁴ The *Freedom of Information Act* does, however, allow for documents not yet thirty years old to be requested and that does now assist the contemporary historian who no longer has to be completely reliant on interviews. Of course, one has to be careful of oral evidence in that it can be biased, be full of omissions or the passage of time could have clouded recollections. The other problem with this topic is that there are more former Conservative MPs still alive who recall the earlier part of the post-war period than there are Labour. This is because there were more younger Conservative MPs in the 1950s

⁴³ See ‘The Role of the Speaker of the House of Commons’, seminar held 25 February 2002 (Institute for Contemporary British History, 2005), <http://www.icbh.ac.uk/icbh/witness/speaker>.

⁴⁴ Anthony Seldon, ‘Elite Interviews’ in Brian Bivati, Julia Buxton & Anthony Seldon (eds.), *The Contemporary History Handbook*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 353.

whereas Labour MPs tended to have worked their way up in the Trade Union movement before being elected. In order to obtain a more balanced viewpoint, papers from the Labour History Archive and Study Centre need to be used. As long as these possible problems are taken on board, interviews with those involved in the Speakership can give additional information that might not be found in printed sources.

Research Questions

The post-war period has witnessed the Speakership of the House of Commons becoming one of the most recognised public offices in the United Kingdom. This thesis will attempt to unravel the mystique that is behind this ancient office and give a greater understanding of a role that is well-known but lacking in serious research into its powers, responsibilities and evolution.

The broad themes that will run through this thesis will be how the office has evolved and how each of the post-war Speakers has shaped the role. It will look at what the job entails and how this might have changed or stayed the same since 1945. It will examine how reforms to Parliament and changes to the way in which MPs and the House of Commons are viewed by the public have impacted on the office of Speaker and its holders.

The greater public exposure of the Speakership since the introduction of sound broadcasting of the House of Commons in 1978 and then television broadcasting in 1989 will feature heavily in this thesis. George Thomas, who was Speaker when radio broadcasting was introduced, wrote in his memoirs that:

as people listened in their homes, or on their car radios on the way to work in the mornings, they began to realise the Speaker played a much bigger role in the running of Parliament than they had realised.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Thomas, *Mr Speaker: The Memoirs of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 188.

The impact this exposure has had on the office and its holders will be a running theme when addressing how the Speakership is viewed by fellow parliamentarians and the general public.

The actual Speakership elections have been the subject of much media interest in the post-war period, particularly when they have been contested. A chapter will look at the rules and procedures behind these elections and how these have changed since 1945. The former Speaker, Lord Weatherill, when commenting on the 2000 Speakership election, said that ‘these days it seems that the Speakership is more or less up for grabs - in my day, if you wanted the job you certainly would not get it!’.⁴⁶ The way in which the choosing of a Speaker has evolved and its part within the ongoing battle between the executive and the legislature will be analysed. The Speaker’s role within the wider context of this struggle between the power of the executive and the rights of the legislature will feature heavily in this thesis as will the office’s place in the debate concerning the power of Parliament and whether or not this is diminishing.

The Speakership’s reach beyond Westminster must also be looked at. The fact that so many of the Commonwealth Parliaments have emulated the British Speakership and look to it for guidance must be examined. The experiences of creating new Speakerships for the devolved legislatures in the United Kingdom must be set in the context of looking at which elements were copied and which were not copied from the much older office at Westminster.

The former Conservative Member of Parliament, Sir Teddy Taylor, who was first elected to the House of Commons in 1964, believes that the Speakership ‘depends a great deal on the character of the Speaker’.⁴⁷ Indeed, during the debate before Betty Boothroyd was elected Speaker in 1992, the veteran Labour MP, Tam Dalyell, said that the ‘personal qualities of a Speaker and his or her attitude towards Members are all important’.⁴⁸ It is, therefore, necessary to look at each of the post-war Speakers in turn

⁴⁶ Letter from Lord Weatherill to Nicholas Winterton MP, 6 December 2001.

⁴⁷ Interview with Sir Teddy Taylor, 26 October 2004.

⁴⁸ HC Deb 27 April 1992 c5.

and analyse how they managed to make a personal impact on the office. This would certainly add to the research that is currently available because there are no in-depth studies of the Speakerships of Clifton Brown, Morrison, Hylton-Foster, King, Weatherill or Martin. Placing the Speakerships of Lloyd, Thomas and Boothroyd within the context of comparing them with their fellow post-war Speakers is also a new area that has not been covered by other political or parliamentary commentators.

All this should bring together the history, execution and evolution of the office of Speaker during the period since the end of the Second World War and produce a piece of work which goes some way to addressing the large gap in British parliamentary research that has existed for several decades. The conclusion will bring all this study together and evaluate just how much the Speakership has changed and evolved during the post-war period.

CHAPTER ONE

DIVISIONS AND BALLOTS: ELECTING AND RE-ELECTING A SPEAKER

a convoluted parliamentary version of pub skittles.

Robin Oakley, former BBC Political Editor, describing the Speakership election of 23 October 2000, 2001.¹

The Speaker does not change with a change of government.

Sir Roger Sands, former Clerk of the House of Commons, 2004.²

The procedures surrounding the way in which the Speaker of the House of Commons is elected have undergone several changes during the post-war period. The manner in which each of the Speakers has been elected will be examined and the reforms to this process and the way in which these changes were decided require analysis. The unwritten conventions and cross-party agreements for both the way in which the Speaker is elected as well as for the Speaker's position during a general election when he or she wishes to continue for a further term in office will be discussed.

Electing a Speaker

The Conservative MP for Hexham, Colonel Douglas Clifton Brown, who had been elected as Speaker in 1943 following the death of Edward Fitzroy, faced re-election after the Labour landslide of July 1945. The first act of any new Parliament is to elect, or re-elect, a Speaker because without a chairman the business of the House cannot be conducted. Despite the historic Labour victory, Clifton Brown, managed to retain his parliamentary seat. He did not, however, believe that he would be allowed to continue in the Chair because he assumed that the new government would want a Speaker from its own benches.³ Philip Laundy mentions that Lord Pannell, the former Labour MP for

¹ Robin Oakley, *Inside Track*, (London: Bantam Press, 2001), p. 385.

² Interview with Roger Sands, 29 July 2004.

³ See Philip Laundy, 'The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century' in S. A. Walkland (ed.), *The House of Commons in the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 139.

Leeds West, told him that ‘Clifton Brown came to London with a pile of suitcases expecting to pack up’.⁴ However, the new Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, did not see the need for a change and, at the meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party held on 28 July 1945, it was recorded that:

The Prime Minister reported on the discussions which the old Administrative Committee had recently had in regard to the Election of Speaker, and gave their reasons for the recommendation that Col. D. Clifton Brown should be re-elected to this Office.⁵

Clearly, Attlee did not want to break with the convention that allows the Speaker from the previous Parliament to continue in office if re-elected as an MP and it is reported that Clifton Brown wept at what he described as an act of ‘amazing political generosity’.⁶ The decision not to replace Speaker Clifton Brown in 1945 is an extremely important episode which has set the standard for the rest of the post-war period. Moreover, this decision has ensured that future Speakers were not replaced when a change of government occurred and embedded the notion of impartiality because it enabled the Speaker not to be the creature of the front bench of the day.

When Clifton Brown retired at the 1951 General Election, the new government, which saw Winston Churchill’s return as Prime Minister, had to search for a replacement. Harold Macmillan, wrote in his diary:

But what about the Service Ministers? ...And then the Speaker? Shall it be W. S. Morrison or Hopkins Morris – both good men?⁷

In the end, the former wartime Cabinet minister and Conservative MP for Cirencester & Tewkesbury, William Shepherd Morrison, was selected as the candidate to be put forward as Speaker. Lady Dunrossil, Morrison’s daughter-in-law, remembers that

⁴ Laundy, ‘The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century’, p. 139.

⁵ Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Parliamentary Labour Party Minutes, ‘Minutes of the Party Meeting held on Saturday 28 July 1945’.

⁶ Laundy, ‘The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century’, p. 139.

⁷ Harold Macmillan, *Tides of Fortune, 1945-1955*, (London: Macmillan, 1969), diary entry for 28 October 1951, p. 365.

following the Conservative victory in 1951, her father-in-law ‘didn’t know what job he was going to get’ which demonstrates that he had not been approached before the election.⁸ Dr Alasdair Morrison, Speaker Morrison’s son, believed that it suited Churchill to offer his father the Speakership because it ‘made use of his talents [he was an experienced parliamentarian and had been a recorder in Walsall] and kept him personally happy with something to do’.⁹

Laundy argues that ‘the consultative process broke down very badly’ and this is most definitely the case because it resulted in the first contested election for the Speakership since William Gully was opposed in 1895.¹⁰ This transpired because the Labour leadership had agreed Morrison’s nomination but some in the Parliamentary Labour Party believed that it was time that a Labour MP became Speaker. The former Labour Cabinet Minister and MP for Coventry East, Richard Crossman, recorded in his diary what happened at the meeting of the Parliamentary Party on 31 October 1951:

Most of our time was spent arguing whether we should oppose Shakes Morrison’s nomination as Speaker and put up Jim Milner [Labour MP for Leeds South East]. Milner is certainly unpopular in the Party and I doubt whether many people really thought he would make a better Speaker than Morrison. On the other hand Labour has never had a Speaker and we had continued with a Tory Speaker since 1945 [...] On the vote, 108 were for proposing Milner and 86 against, with a large number of abstentions. Then came one of those queer spasms of second thought, when Hartley Shawcross [former Attorney-General and President of the Board of Trade] suggested that Attlee should tell Churchill that we would put Milner forward if Shakes Morrison were the Tory candidate, but that we would not put him forward if Sir Charles MacAndrew [Conservative MP for Bute] were their candidate. This beautiful escape got 115 votes to 106.¹¹

Churchill did not agree to these terms and so the aggrieved Labour backbenchers proposed Major James Milner, who had been Deputy Speaker and Chairman of Ways and Means in the previous Parliament. In the end, Morrison was chosen by 318 votes

⁸ Interview with Mavis, Lady Dunrossil, 19 March 2005.

⁹ Interview with Alasdair Morrison, 13 November 2004.

¹⁰ Philip Laundy, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, (London: Quiller Press, 1984), p. 74.

¹¹ Janet Morgan (ed.), *The Backbench Diaries of Richard Crossman*, (London: Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, 1981), diary entry for 31 October 1951, pp. 28-9.

to 251 but this election highlighted the difficulty of consulting the whole House in the choosing of its Speaker and not just leaving it up to the two front benches to decide.¹²

Controversy returned to the issue of selecting a Speaker when Morrison retired in 1959. Laundry states that ‘it appeared that the Conservatives, who had again been re-elected to office, would have been prepared to concede the speakership to Labour provided they chose the candidate’.¹³ Indeed, Harold Macmillan recorded in his memoirs that:

It was suggested by some of the Press that since there had never been a Speaker from the Labour Party it would be a generous, even chivalrous, act if the Conservatives should waive their claim and elect a member of the Labour Party. I rather liked this idea, and accordingly on 16 October [1959] I sent a note to [Rab] Butler [the Conservative Party Chairman] on whose advice I chiefly relied.¹⁴

The Conservatives, therefore, put forward the name of the former Solicitor-General and Labour MP for Newport, Sir Frank Soskice. Discussions took place between the two parties but, as Macmillan records:

[Hugh] Gaitskell [the Labour leader] would not part with him [Soskice], and then tried to turn this act of generosity into a grievance, accusing us of trying to ‘dictate’ a Labour choice. However, this proved very thin. The Press gave it no support.¹⁵

Finally, the Conservatives proposed one of their own Members, the Solicitor-General and MP for the Cities of London & Westminster, Sir Harry Hylton-Foster. However, during the debate on 20 October 1959, Gaitskell voiced his dissatisfaction with the whole process and went on to say that:

there are some objections in my opinion to a member of the Treasury Bench being selected for the post of Speaker. We were not enthusiastic when Mr Speaker Morrison was chosen, because he had been a Minister, but he was not at that time a Minister, nor had he held Ministerial office – I think I am right in saying – for some years. The right hon. and learned gentleman [Sir Harry Hylton-Foster]

¹² HC Deb 31 October 1951 c20.

¹³ Morgan, *The Backbench Diaries of Richard Crossman*, diary entry for 31 October 1951, pp. 28-9.

¹⁴ Harold Macmillan, *Pointing the Way, 1959-1961*, (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, diary entry for 22 October 1959, p. 21.

comes straight from a distinguished position on the Treasury Bench, and that, I think, is another difficulty.¹⁶

Despite this protest, the Labour Party did not put forward an alternative candidate and so Hylton-Foster was elected unanimously as Speaker. However, the issue of a former minister being elected to the Speakership was to become a recurring theme whenever the matter of electing a Speaker was discussed and formed part of the much wider debate concerning the legislature retaining supremacy over the executive.

Hylton-Foster was re-elected as Speaker following Labour's narrow victory at the 1964 General Election although Laundry makes the point that:

it has been suggested that, had Labour's majority been larger, the continuity convention might have been breached. Lord Pannell, in a letter to the author [Laundry] prior to the election, surmised that this was a possibility.¹⁷

This possibility of removing Hylton-Foster continued even after he had been re-elected. The convention which allows a sitting Speaker to continue in office until he or she chooses to retire was most definitely at risk. The former Conservative MP for Tiverton, Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, felt that Hylton-Foster was a weak Speaker recalling that:

Eventually, I wrote to the Chairman of the 1922 Committee [Sir William Anstruther-Gray], during a Recess (1965?), telling him that I had little but contempt for Speaker Hylton-Foster's manifest cowardice, and that I would oppose his re-election next time round. The Chairman of the 1922 Committee replied in a letter saying that he agreed that Harry H-F must not be re-elected as Speaker, and must be told that his re-election was unacceptable.¹⁸

The death of Hylton-Foster on 2 September 1965 prevented this from happening and brought about the election of the first Speaker from Labour ranks. This episode is an example of what happens when a sitting Speaker dies in office. On this occasion, the death of the Speaker occurred during the summer recess because otherwise the House of Commons would have had to have been adjourned until an election for a new

¹⁶ HC Deb 20 October 1959 c7.

¹⁷ Laundry, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, p. 76.

¹⁸ Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 22 April 2005.

Speaker was arranged.¹⁹ The Commons cannot sit without a Speaker and so the election was the first item of business when the House reconvened on 26 October 1965.

The former veteran Labour MP and Cabinet minister, Tony Benn, recounted in his published diaries a discussion that took place on the evening of 4 September 1965 at a dinner with the then Prime Minister, Harold Wilson:

It was a delightful evening and we had a long time talk about the Speakership. Marcia [Williams, Harold Wilson's Personal Secretary] suggested we make Desmond Donnelly [Labour MP for Pembroke] Speaker and we had an amusing talk about the possibilities. Harold [Wilson] is optimistic that a Tory Back Bencher might be induced to do it.²⁰

Donnelly was a Labour rebel opposed to the renationalisation of steel and it might have suited the Wilson government to have removed this thorn from their side because once in office, a Speaker cannot voice his or her political opinions.

However, the obvious choice for the Speakership was the Chairman of Ways and Means and Deputy Speaker, the Labour MP for Southampton Itchen, Dr Horace King. Wilson recorded in his memoirs that 'the Conservatives immediately called for the election of Dr King, less, we felt, through admiration of his qualities than through voting arithmetic'.²¹ Indeed, Labour had only been returned with an overall majority of four in October 1964 and, as Laundry notes, the election of the first Labour Speaker happened 'ironically at a time when the government with its wafer-thin majority could ill afford to see it depleted even further'.²² Benn recorded in his diaries the discussion that took place at the meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party:

With typical Labour tactlessness Ted Short [the Government Chief Whip] said that the choice of Horace King had been forced on the Party by the Tory insistence on him and the views of 5 per cent of Labour members, who thought he should be

¹⁹ See Erskine May, *Parliamentary Practice*, 23rd Edition, 2004, p. 282.

²⁰ Tony Benn, *Out of the Wilderness: Diaries 1963-67*, (London: Hutchinson 1987), diary entry for 4 September 1965, p. 315.

²¹ Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government, 1964-1970: A Personal Record*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson and Michael Joseph, 1971), p. 135.

²² Laundry, 'The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century', p. 146.

Speaker regardless of the parliamentary consequences to us. This bald statement was greeted with some horror.²³

Despite this warning, the Labour Party did not prevent King's candidature and so his election went through smoothly and unanimously.²⁴ Ironically, the first Labour Speaker was elected at a time when his party would have preferred a Conservative in the Chair.

King's successor, the former Conservative Cabinet minister Selwyn Lloyd, did not enjoy a smooth election when he became Speaker in January 1971. Lloyd's biographer, D. R. Thorpe, states that 'The way to Speaker's House was not to be an easy one' thanks to the fact that the Conservatives had two potential candidates.²⁵ Lloyd had been approached by Sir Vere Harvey, the Chairman of the 1922 Committee and MP for Macclesfield, and asked whether he would like to become Speaker.²⁶ However, Willie Whitelaw, the Leader of the House, approached the former Cabinet minister, John Boyd-Carpenter, and asked him to consider becoming Speaker too. When Boyd-Carpenter questioned whether Lloyd wanted the Speakership, Whitelaw told him that Lloyd was out of the picture because he was going to be made Ambassador to Washington.²⁷ When Lloyd turned down the ambassadorship the Conservative leadership decided it would support whichever of the two candidates commanded the most support within the Labour shadow team.²⁸ Boyd-Carpenter wrote in his memoirs what happened:

Although the Prime Minister had said that this was a House of Commons matter on which he could not take a decision, the decisive factor had been that Mellish, the Opposition Chief Whip had told them that the Shadow Cabinet was 'overwhelmingly for Selwyn'.²⁹

²³ Benn, *Out of the Wilderness: Diaries 1963-67*, diary entry for 26 October 1965, pp 339-340.

²⁴ HC Deb 26 October 1965 cc1-17.

²⁵ D. R. Thorpe, *Selwyn Lloyd*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989), p. 413.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 412.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 413.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

²⁹ John Boyd-Carpenter, *Way of Life: The Memoirs of John Boyd-Carpenter*, (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980), p. 225.

Despite the fact that Roy Jenkins, who was Deputy Leader of the Labour Party at the time, told Boyd-Carpenter that this was not necessarily the case, Whitelaw asked him not to stand in order to prevent a contest. Whitelaw even went as far as to say that he would have to resign if Boyd-Carpenter went for the Speakership and managed to win.³⁰ On 30 December 1970 John Boyd-Carpenter put out a press statement saying that he was not going to put his name forward for the Speakership.³¹ Obviously Boyd-Carpenter thought that he could not prevail against the combined forces of the Government and Opposition front benches. Indeed, the future Speaker, Bernard Weatherill, recalled that:

with a heavy heart I was put in as a junior whip to deliver Selwyn Lloyd as Speaker [...] when I think that left to its own devices or its own choice, John Boyd-Carpenter would have been their first choice.³²

This demonstrates that the government of the day still considered the Speakership to be in the gift of the two front bench teams. Lloyd records in his book, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, that:

Then the storm broke. Back-benchers on both sides felt that they had not been properly consulted; and that a decision by the two front benches in a matter essentially for the whole House was being thrust down their throats. They were determined to assert their rights.³³

At 2.30pm on 12 January 1971 the veteran Conservative MP for Tynemouth, Dame Irene Ward, proposed Lloyd as Speaker, a motion which was seconded by the Labour MP for Leeds West, Charles Pannell.³⁴ Shortly afterwards the objections began with the Liberal MP for North Cornwall, John Pardoe, expressing his dissatisfaction with the way in which consultation had been carried out.³⁵ Pardoe announced that he thought the Commons should question whether a former senior minister ought to become Speaker and said that:

³⁰ Boyd-Carpenter, *Way of Life: The Memoirs of John Boyd-Carpenter*, p. 225.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

³³ Selwyn Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 20.

³⁴ HC Deb 12 January 1971 c1.

³⁵ *Ibid.* cc8-14.

the Speaker ought to be a protector of the rights of back benchers, and can a man who is imbued with the rights of Government ever throw off that mode of thinking entirely?³⁶

Robin Maxwell-Hyslop agreed with Pardoe and nominated the Labour Member for Kettering, Sir Geoffrey de Freitas, to become Speaker. The irony here is that de Freitas had been a junior Air and Home Office minister during the Attlee governments. The argument was, however, more to do with the lack of consultation amongst backbenchers and so Maxwell-Hyslop's nomination was swiftly seconded by the Labour MP for West Fife, Willie Hamilton. Hugh Noyes, the parliamentary correspondent for *The Times*, wrote that this was 'a mini-revolution against the party establishments'.³⁷ This move was without the consent of de Freitas himself, who announced to the House that he would be voting for Lloyd.³⁸ The House divided with the result being 294 for the ayes and 55 against and so Lloyd was elected Speaker.³⁹ Maxwell-Hyslop recalled that:

One of the Clerks present at the Table of the Commons told me that in addition to the (58?) [it was actually 55] who voted in favour of my Motion (including RHS Crossman, a previous Leader of the House), the Clerks reckoned that about 250 Members abstained, which figure, if added to my 58, was in fact more than the votes cast in favour of Selwyn.⁴⁰

There is clearly an issue over whether a former minister should go on to become Speaker and the fact that so many MPs abstained demonstrated this. The former Clerk of the House, William McKay also points out that Selwyn Lloyd was 'not just a minister but one involved in Suez'.⁴¹ Indeed, Lloyd had been Foreign Secretary during the Suez crisis of 1956 and had later become Chancellor of the Exchequer. Selwyn Lloyd had held two of the highest offices in government and so was undoubtedly associated with executive power rather than defending the rights of the legislature.

³⁶ HC Deb 12 January 1971 c12.

³⁷ Hugh Noyes, 'Mr Lloyd new Speaker as revolt fails', *The Times*, 13 January 1971.

³⁸ HC Deb 12 January 1971 c22.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 5 January 2005.

⁴¹ Interview with William McKay, 1 March 2001.

During the debate which finally elected Lloyd to the Speakership, Willie Hamilton made the point that:

When Mr Speaker Morrison was elected in 1951, my party [Labour] objected at that time that it was a serious break with precedent, the precedent being that of electing a Speaker who had not held Ministerial office. Mr Morrison had held six Ministerial offices before he was called to the Speakership. In the previous hundred years, only two Speakers had been Ministers – Mr Speaker Peel in 1884 and Mr Speaker Lowther in 1905. If and when the right hon. and learned Member for Wirral [Selwyn Lloyd] is elected, he will be the third successive Conservative Speaker who has been elected after having held Ministerial office.⁴²

Hamilton went on to argue that Speakers who had previously held ministerial office might have to preside over debates in which their actions when they were a minister were discussed and possibly criticised. Hamilton said that:

The right hon. and learned Member for Wirral [Lloyd] will, no doubt, if he is elected, be sitting in that Chair when we have foreign affairs debates in this House, and, no doubt, some of us on this side will have recourse to reminiscing and, no doubt, will bring up the part he played in 1956.⁴³

This is, of course, a direct reference to the Suez crisis and proves that there was a question over whether a politician who had been so closely involved in such a controversial episode of post-war history should go on to be Speaker.

Lloyd countered the argument against former ministers becoming Speaker when he wrote that:

I believe that it is of benefit to the Speaker to have been a Minister. He knows how Departments work, and, far from yielding to the blandishments of Ministers, he is better able to withstand them.⁴⁴

A former Clerk of the House, Sir Donald Limon, believed that there are ‘some likenesses’ between being a minister and being Speaker and so ministerial office might

⁴² HC Deb 12 January 1971 cc18-19.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, c20.

⁴⁴ Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, pp. 24-25.

be a good training ground.⁴⁵ After all, the Speaker does have to balance being a constituency representative with his or her responsibilities in the House just as a minister has to divide his or her time between constituency and Whitehall.

Despite the arguments against having former ministers as Speaker, George Thomas, the Labour MP for Cardiff West and a former Secretary of State for Wales, was elected unopposed to succeed Lloyd on 3 February 1976. For the second time in little over a decade, a Labour Speaker was elected at the time when a Labour government with a tiny majority could not really afford to lose one of its number.

The system for electing a Speaker was altered in 1972 following a Procedure Committee report, chaired by the Conservative MP Sir Robin Turton, which looked at the method that had been used up until then.⁴⁶ This enquiry had been brought about following criticisms made on the occasion of the election of Speaker on 12 January 1971.⁴⁷ Rather than the Clerk of the House chairing the proceedings, it was decided that either the outgoing Speaker or the Member with the longest unbroken service in the Commons would oversee the Speakership election. William McKay believes that this is a far better system as he highlights that the fact his predecessors could not speak in the Commons chamber meant that ‘you pointed to them’.⁴⁸ However, the method of putting forward a motion, and then an amendment if you oppose a candidate, was not changed in the 1972 reforms. Moreover, Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop wrote:

Of the six recommendations which I made in my letter, and orally, to that Committee, five the Committee adopted in its Report. The sixth (a secret ballot, so that the Speaker elected does not know who voted for, and who against) was adopted by the House much more recently.⁴⁹

Selwyn Lloyd presided over the election of his successor, George Thomas, although from then on the Father of the House, as the longest continually serving Member has

⁴⁵ Telephone conversation with Sir Donald Limon, 17 March 2001.

⁴⁶ See House of Commons Select Committee on Procedure, First Report 1971-72, *Election of a Speaker*, HC 111.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Interview with William McKay, 1 March 2001.

⁴⁹ Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 5 January 2005.

become known, has undertaken the duty. The reason for this move is that if a Speaker retires at the end of a Parliament then he or she is no longer a Member when the new House of Commons meets and so cannot take part. It is also the case that if a Speaker retires and resigns his or her seat during the summer recess, then they are not Members when the Commons reconvenes.

On Thomas's retirement in 1983 there was again a difference of opinion between the front bench and the back bench over who should become the next Speaker. The Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, wanted either the former Foreign Secretary, Francis Pym, or the former Conservative Chief Whip, Sir Humphrey Atkins, to become Speaker.⁵⁰ Douglas Hurd, who was a junior Foreign Office minister at the time, records in his memoirs that:

The Foreign Office gave drinks that evening for Francis Pym, who had been offered merely the Prime Minister's support for the speakership of the Commons, a job which he did not want, which was not in her power to give and which went to Bernard Weatherill.⁵¹

This is an important comment because it shows a shift towards the Speaker becoming the backbenchers' choice rather than being decided by the government and Opposition front bench of the day. Indeed, Bernard Weatherill, the Conservative MP for Croydon North East and Deputy Speaker during George Thomas's time in the Chair, did become Speaker thanks to a bold move from a Conservative backbencher.

The backbencher in question was Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, who remembered the events that took place as follows:

Prior to the Dissolution of the previous Parliament, I had discussed the matter with backbenchers of all (11?) parties, except Sinn Fein, and satisfied myself that Jack Weatherill was the Speaker that they wanted. Subsequent to that, both Jack and I were subjected to intense, and repeated, pressure from both the Conservative

⁵⁰ See Laundy, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, p. 78.

⁵¹ Douglas Hurd, *Memoirs*, (London: Little, Brown, 2003), p. 288.

Whips, and No. 10, to give way in favour of the “official” candidate: but we stood firm.⁵²

Indeed, Weatherill, stated that he was summoned to No. 10 and offered a ministerial job in the Foreign Office by Mrs Thatcher a few days before the new Parliament met following the 1983 General Election. However, Weatherill turned down ministerial office on the basis that there was ‘no precedent for a Chairman of Ways and Means [as he had been in the previous Parliament] ever going back into party politics’.⁵³ He went on to recall that he had ‘literally 36 hours notice’ that he was going to be Speaker because:

It was then the next day that Jim Callaghan [the Father of the House of Commons] came to see me and said that the Labour Party was going to propose me as Speaker and [...] eventually David Steel [Leader of the Liberal Party] and finally younger members of the Tory Party.⁵⁴

Weatherill himself believed that the reason why he enjoyed the support of the Opposition was down to an episode that took place when he was Deputy Chief Whip in 1979. On the evening of 28 March 1979, before the crucial vote of no confidence which brought down the Callaghan government, Weatherill had offered not to vote in order to honour an agreement ‘to pair sick with sick’ due to that fact that Sir Alfred Broughton, the Labour MP for Batley and Morley, was too ill to get to the Commons.⁵⁵ In the end, the Labour Deputy Chief Whip, Walter Harrison, did not put his Conservative opposite number in that position and so the government lost the motion of no confidence by one vote. Weatherill stated that:

I am now told that it was that action of being prepared to honour my word that caused Jim Callaghan and the Labour Party to propose me as Speaker against the will of Mrs Thatcher.⁵⁶

⁵² Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 5 January 2005.

⁵³ Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Betty Boothroyd records in her autobiography how Maxwell-Hyslop ensured that the backbenchers got their man:

He nominated Jack in a recorded-delivery letter to Jim Callaghan, Father of the House, and at the same time told the BBC's *World at One* programme what he had done.⁵⁷

The nomination was now out in the open and the Whips' Office could do nothing about it. Maxwell-Hyslop recounted what happened on 15 July 1983 just before the Speakership election:

20 minutes before we all went into the Chamber to elect a Speaker, the Conservative Chief Whip (or his Deputy, I forget which) came up to me in the Members' lobby and said: "The Prime Minister concedes defeat but, to save face, will you allow Cranley Onslow (Chairman of the 1922 Committee) to take over your nomination of Jack Weatherill?" I replied: "Yes: but I never trust a Whip! In authorising the Father of the House to substitute Cranley's name for mine on the first Resolution put to the House, I shall also instruct him that if Cranley attempts to double-cross me by nominating, instead, No. 10's candidate, he will immediately call me to move an Amendment thereto nominating Jack Weatherill. And, dear boy, you will realise that under the new procedure, MY AMENDMENT WILL BE TAKEN BEFORE THE MAIN QUESTION!"⁵⁸

In the end, it was actually Sir Humphrey Atkins, Mrs Thatcher's preferred candidate, and not Cranley Onslow, who proposed Weatherill as Speaker and this was done in order to show Conservative solidarity.⁵⁹ Weatherill was, therefore, put forward and elected unopposed and so, as the 2000 Procedure Committee report into the election of a Speaker points out, 'even a Prime Minister at the height of her influence within her party, and who had just been returned to power with a majority of 144, was unable to secure the election of her preferred candidate for the Chair'.⁶⁰ Julian Haviland, the Political Editor for *The Times*, commented:

⁵⁷ Betty Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, (London: Century, 2001), p. 124.

⁵⁸ Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 5 January 2005.

⁵⁹ See HC Deb 15 June 1983 cc2-4.

⁶⁰ House of Commons Select Committee on Procedure, Second Report 2000-01, *Election of a Speaker*, Stationery Office, HC 40, p. x.

What seems to have clinched his [Weatherill's] election was the discovery by his fellow MPs that he did not have the Prime Minister's approval. For Opposition MPs that would have been commendation enough, but Conservatives have also been affronted by the idea that Mrs Margaret Thatcher, or anyone in Government, should have wished to dictate the decision of the House.⁶¹

It is the case that the Speakership election of 1983 was the culmination of the gradual move during the post-war period towards the backbenchers finally getting the Speaker of their choice rather than just accepting what the leadership of the two main parties had agreed between them.

The other significance of Weatherill's election was, as Maxwell-Hyslop stated, that it broke 'the power of the Prime Minister to impose "a decayed ex-Minister" on the House of Commons as its Speaker'.⁶² The recurring issue of concern that a Speaker should not have previously been a minister, which first arose in 1951 when 'Shakes' Morrison took the Chair, seems to have been solved. Although Weatherill had been Deputy Chief Whip, he was not associated with high ministerial office in the way that Speakers Morrison, Hylton-Foster, Lloyd and Thomas had been.

Jack Weatherill stood down at the 1992 General Election and so an election for a new Speaker was required as soon as the new Parliament met. On this occasion there was a contest for the post as once again backbenchers were not in favour of the government's candidate, the former Northern Ireland Secretary and Conservative MP for the City of London and Westminster South, Peter Brooke. Indeed, the then Leader of the Labour Party, Neil Kinnock, is said by Betty Boothroyd to have held the view that 'it was Labour's turn to nominate his [Weatherill's] successor'.⁶³ However, unlike the 1983 Speakership election, the government did not withdraw their candidate at the last minute; instead there was an open contest on the floor of the House.

⁶¹ Julian Haviland, 'Weatherill elected without dissent', *The Times*, 16 June 1983.

⁶² Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 5 January 2005.

⁶³ Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 138.

Giles Radice, the former Labour frontbencher and MP for Durham North, recorded in his diary how the Speakership was secured for the Deputy Speaker and Labour Member for West Bromwich West, Betty Boothroyd:

As one of her campaign managers, I spend Sunday ringing round the Tories, including my pair John Biffen [former Leader of the House of Commons]. Betty fortunately agrees to my proposition that John should move her – a critical decision as it turns out.

During the morning of Monday, it becomes clear that a number of Tories are going to vote for Betty. The minority parties, including the Liberals with whom I have been in contact, have been squared. Harold Walker [the Chairman of Ways and Means and Labour MP for Doncaster] has been persuaded not to run. So it looks good, but you never can tell in the Commons.⁶⁴

At 2.51pm on 27 April 1992, the Conservative MP for Romford, Sir Michael Neubert, moved that ‘Mr Peter Brooke do take the Chair of this House as Speaker’.⁶⁵ This motion was seconded by the Conservative Member for Hazel Grove, Sir Thomas Arnold. However, as Radice had arranged, John Biffen, moved an amendment to the motion which deleted Brooke and inserted the name ‘Miss Betty Boothroyd’.⁶⁶ This was seconded by the Labour MP for Crewe and Nantwich, Gwyneth Dunwoody, and so the House divided in order to decide the matter. The result of the vote was 372 to 238 in favour of Boothroyd.⁶⁷ Radice wrote that the ‘key to her victory is that over 70 Tories break ranks and vote for her’.⁶⁸ The fact that the senior Conservative MP John Biffen proposed Boothroyd was crucial here and demonstrated that Members from the government benches were prepared to vote for the candidate of their choice rather than one who was thrust upon them. Biffen himself wrote that Conservative MPs Terence Higgins and Giles Shaw had also indicated that they wanted to contest the Speakership and this meant that the government side was not united and pushing for a single candidate.⁶⁹ The Prime Minister at the time, John Major, believes that Betty

⁶⁴ Giles Radice, *Diaries 1980-2001: From Political Disaster to Election Triumph*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), diary entry for 27 April 1992, p. 272

⁶⁵ HC Deb 27 April 1992 c2.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, c10.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, c16.

⁶⁸ Radice, *Diaries 1980-2001*, diary entry for 27 April 1992, p. 272.

⁶⁹ John Biffen, *Semi-Detached*, (London: Biteback Publishing Ltd, 2013), p. 428.

Boothroyd's election was the case of 'the House of Commons asserting its independence'.⁷⁰ By defying the executive, the legislature not only consolidated on the position gained in 1983 but also elected the first female Speaker and the first not to come from the governing party.

During her speech indicating her willingness to become Speaker, Boothroyd noted that:

I have been a Deputy Speaker, but always at heart I have been a Back Bencher, and, except for a period 16 years ago when I was in the Whips' Office, that has been my position. I have never sought, and I have never expected, to occupy one of the great offices of Government.⁷¹

Again, the Commons had rejected a former minister in favour of a backbencher to become its Speaker. Another first, as Boothroyd herself put it, was that, 'For a Tory Parliament to put a Labour nominee in the chair was as unprecedented as electing a woman'.⁷²

It was the election following Boothroyd's retirement which provoked calls for further reform. The Speakership election held on 23 October 2000 was contested by an unprecedented twelve candidates.⁷³ Radice describes the election in his diaries:

Our procedure is curious and archaic, being based not on an overall ballot, but on a motion for and amendments against. So the contest resembles a medieval jousting tournament in which one champion is pitted in turn against a series of opponents until he or she comes out the victor. As there is a plethora of candidates (unlike last time, when there were two or at the most three serious candidates), it means that there will be many votes.⁷⁴

The election, which was presided over by the Father of the House, Sir Edward Heath, lasted nearly seven hours. In the end, one of Boothroyd's deputies, the Labour MP for

⁷⁰ Conversation with John Major, 31 May 2001.

⁷¹ HC Deb 27 April 1992 c15.

⁷² Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 139.

⁷³ See HC Deb 23 October 2000 cc1-106. The twelve candidates were Alan Beith, Menzies Campbell, Dr David Clark, Sir Patrick Cormack, Gwyneth Dunwoody, Sir Alan Haselhurst, Michael Lord, Michael Martin, John McWilliam, Richard Shepherd, Nicholas Winterton and Sir George Young.

⁷⁴ Radice, *Diaries 1980-2001*, diary entry for 23 October 2000, p. 470.

Glasgow Springburn, Michael Martin, was elected as Speaker. However, Martin failed to get an Opposition Member to second his nomination and, in fact, eight Conservatives voted against him in the final division.⁷⁵ The journalist Peter Riddell wrote in *The Times* that:

Mr Martin's victory was because Labour MPs, who outnumbered Conservatives and Liberal Democrats by two-to-one, asserted their tribal loyalties, and desire to defy the government front bench, in voting against a series of obviously better qualified candidates.⁷⁶

Indeed, the Labour backbenchers voted against the former Conservative Cabinet Minister, Sir George Young, who had been the preferred candidate of the two front benches.⁷⁷ Again, the legislature had asserted its independence from the executive and elected a Speaker of its own choosing who was a backbencher rather than a former minister. Michael Martin said during the debate that:

My apprenticeship has been one of serving the House as a Chairman of Standing Committees, the Administration Committee and the Scottish Grand Committee. I have never sought to be a Whip, a Front-Bench spokesman or a Minister.⁷⁸

The break with the tradition of getting a Speaker the government wanted, which was started by Robin Maxwell-Hyslop in 1971 and finally achieved in 1983, had continued. This change had occurred over three successive Speakership elections and so was now most definitely established.

The circumstances of the October 2000 Speakership contest resulted in calls for reform from both inside and outside the Commons. During the debate, Tony Benn called for a ballot to decide which of the twelve candidates should become Speaker.⁷⁹ The Conservative MP, David Davis and the Labour Member, Paul Marsden, shot straight up

⁷⁵ HC Deb 23 October 2000 c99.

⁷⁶ Peter Riddell, 'House falls into theatre of the absurd', *The Times*, 24 October 2000.

⁷⁷ HC Deb 23 October 2000 c47.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, cc2-3.

to support what Benn had put forward. However, as the former BBC Political Editor, Robin Oakley, describes:

To their shame, they [MPs] decided it wasn't worth the fuss. They let the Father of the House, Sir Edward Heath, who presided over the process, get away with refusing to allow a vote to change the procedure on the grounds that 'such a motion requires notice', and the day was won by the 'we've always done it this way so we'd better do it this way again' school.⁸⁰

The other controversial issue was the fact that Heath had complete power over the order in which the twelve candidates were presented when it came to voting. When questioned by the veteran Labour MP Tam Dalyell on how he had decided upon the order, Heath responded, 'It was done at my discretion'.⁸¹ Dalyell has said that the 'sequence is all-important' because, of course, candidates who might have stood more of a chance if they came later on could be knocked out at an early stage.⁸² Although Heath rejected the proposal, the Procedure Committee, which later looked into reform of the 1972 system, concluded that it 'be replaced by a ballot-based system' going on to 'recommend that the ballot be secret'.⁸³ These recommendations now form part of the Standing Orders of the House of Commons and were agreed on 22 March 2001.⁸⁴

These new rules were first used following Michael Martin's resignation as Speaker in June 2009. Martin announced his resignation on 19 May 2009 stating that he would relinquish the office on 21 June.⁸⁵ The month in between gave MPs who wanted the Speakership time to campaign for the role. Peter Riddell explains that:

After nine years of the Michael Martin era, it was widely accepted at Westminster that the election after he resigned should be more public and open. As Chairman of the Hansard Society, it was my idea to hold a hustings of all the candidates. Initially, some people said, "Well, can you do that?" And I said, "Well, let's do

⁸⁰ Oakley, *Inside Track*, p. 385.

⁸¹ HC Deb 23 October 2000 c5.

⁸² House of Commons Select Committee on Procedure, Second Report 2000-01, *Election of a Speaker*, HC 40, p. 22.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.

⁸⁴ See HC Deb 22 March 2001 cc498-541.

⁸⁵ HC Deb 19 May 2001 c1323.

it.” I happened to meet a couple of the potential candidates [...] and set about organising this with the Hansard staff. Eventually, we had all the candidates.⁸⁶

This was a complete innovation to have ten candidates saying why they should become Speaker in a public forum before the formal election in the House of Commons.⁸⁷ This symbolised just how much the Speakership had been given wider ownership and was no longer confined to the Commons chamber.

Out of the ten contenders, Sir George Young stood once again with the backing of most of the Conservative side. Margaret Beckett, the former Labour Foreign Secretary also threw her hat into the ring and the former Conservative minister, Ann Widdecombe, put herself forward as a temporary Speaker because she had already indicated that she would be standing down at the next general election. However, the House demonstrated that it was still not keen on former Cabinet ministers becoming Speaker because the Conservative MP for Buckingham, John Bercow, soon became the front runner.

Bercow had moved from being on the right of the Conservative Party to someone with more liberal ideals and who was married to a Labour supporting wife. This would have gained him support on the government benches and Ann Widdecombe recorded in her memoirs that she had ‘watched him currying favour with Labour over some years’.⁸⁸ Bercow also admits that he fought hard for the Speakership and has said, ‘We are in a campaign age [...] in the modern world most posts are sought after [...] I had a campaign manager, Martin Salter [Labour MP for Reading West]’.⁸⁹ This demonstrates just how much the Speakership election has changed and become a real contest for the top job.

In the end, the new electoral system, which consists of rounds which knock out candidates who receive the fewest votes or less than 5% of the votes cast, left only John

⁸⁶ Interview with Peter Riddell, 4 October 2010.

⁸⁷ The ten candidates were Margaret Beckett, Sir Alan Beith, John Bercow, Sir Patrick Cormack, Parmjit Dhanda, Sir Alan Haselhurst, Sir Michael Lord, Richard Shepherd, Ann Widdecombe and Sir George Young.

⁸⁸ Ann Widdecombe, *Strictly Ann: The Autobiography*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2013), p. 411.

⁸⁹ Interview with John Bercow, 26 October 2010.

Bercow and Sir George Young in the contest.⁹⁰ The former Labour MP for Sunderland South, Chris Mullin, recorded in his diary that Bercow ‘has virtually no support on his own side, which is precisely why many of our lot are proposing to vote for him’.⁹¹ Labour’s superior numbers gave Bercow 322 votes to Young’s 271 in the final round.⁹² Most of Bercow’s support came from the Labour backbenches with the vast majority of Conservatives having voted for Young. Mullin commented that the ‘Tories have been well and truly shafted and they know it’ with very few of them cheering or applauding when Bercow’s victory was announced.⁹³ Again, Labour had put in their man in a partisan move rather than simply looking to see who would be best for the job.

What this election also showed was that, despite all the outside influences on the Speakership, the choice of who becomes Speaker is still a House of Commons matter. If it had been up to the press and the general public then Ann Widdecombe would most probably have become Speaker thanks to her high profile in the media.⁹⁴ On this occasion, calls from the press did not penetrate the so-called Westminster village and so MPs voted for the candidate who most suited their purposes. The last two Speakership elections have been a case of one side having one over on the other. A quarter of a century before, the backbenchers had seized the power to decide who their Speaker should be but now they had turned it into a tribal struggle which looked to outdo political opponents.

The Speaker seeking re-election in his or her constituency

In order to continue in the Chair for more than one Parliament a Speaker has to be re-elected in his or her constituency. After all, the Speaker is first and foremost a Member of Parliament and is only able to accede to the Chair because he or she has been elected to the House of Commons. The convention by which a sitting Speaker is not opposed

⁹⁰ See *Standing Orders of the House of Commons*, 2010 (New Parliament), p. 4 & HC Deb 22 June 2009 c635.

⁹¹ Chris Mullin, *Decline & Fall: Diaries 2005-2010*, (London: Profile Books, 2010), diary entry for 16 June 2009, p. 346.

⁹² HC Deb 22 June 2009 c635.

⁹³ Mullin, *Decline & Fall*, diary entry for 22 June 2009, p. 349.

⁹⁴ Widdecombe, *Strictly Ann: The Autobiography*, p. 413.

in his or her constituency at a general election was broken in 1935 by the Labour Party's decision to run a candidate against Speaker Edward Fitzroy in his Daventry seat. Since that time, every Speaker has had to face one or more opponents in his constituency when standing as 'Speaker seeking re-election'.

At the 1945 General Election, Clifton Brown faced a Labour opponent in his Hexham constituency because, as Laundry points out, Labour 'regarded itself as a struggling party which could not afford to miss any opportunity of gaining an extra seat'.⁹⁵ Despite Labour's landslide victory, Clifton Brown managed to hold on to Hexham and so the problem of a sitting Speaker being defeated at the polls was avoided. The result was as follows:

Col. D. Clifton Brown	Speaker	16,431
E. Kavanagh	Labour	11,786 ⁹⁶

At the 1950 General Election the Labour Party did not put up a candidate against Clifton Brown although he was opposed by an Independent Liberal who, in the words of Laundry, 'expressed the view that no candidate, not even the Speaker, should be allowed an unopposed return'.⁹⁷ On this occasion, Clifton Brown was returned with a far more comfortable majority with the result being:

Col. D. Clifton Brown	Speaker	24,703
A. Hancock	Ind Liberal	4,154 ⁹⁸

In 1955 Speaker Morrison was opposed in his Cirencester and Tewkesbury seat by a member of the local Labour Party, Douglas C. Cox, who stood as an Independent Socialist candidate. On this occasion, the Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden, wrote to the leaders of the Labour and Liberal parties urging them to write letters in support of

⁹⁵ Laundry, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, p. 69.

⁹⁶ *The Times House of Commons 1945*, (London: The Times Office, 1945), p. 92.

⁹⁷ Laundry, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, p. 70.

⁹⁸ *The Times House of Commons 1950*, (London: The Times Office, 1950), p. 204.

the Speaker. Both Attlee and Clement Davies [the Liberal leader] replied indicating their support for the Speaker's re-election. Eden wrote that anyone challenging a sitting Speaker in their constituency was 'contrary to tradition'.⁹⁹ At this stage, it was only twenty years since the convention to allow a sitting Speaker to be re-elected unopposed was broken although this break with tradition had happened on two subsequent occasions and it meant to continue.

The results in the Cirencester and Tewkesbury constituency at the 1955 General Election were as follows:

W. S. Morrison	Speaker	25,372
Douglas C. Cox	Independent Labour	12,394 ¹⁰⁰

Morrison achieved a substantial majority and so the continuity of the Speakership was once again preserved.

The next time that a Speaker wished to seek re-election to the House was at the 1964 General Election. This time Speaker Hylton-Foster faced both Labour and Liberal opponents in the Cities of London and Westminster. It would seem that if Labour decided to put up a candidate against the Speaker then the Liberals would follow suit. Hylton-Foster's majority fell by nearly 6,000 compared to the result he achieved when he was elected as a Conservative in 1959.¹⁰¹ The results were as follows:

Sir H. Hylton-Foster	Speaker	21,588
R. G. Wallace	Labour	11,309
J. W. Derry	Liberal	4,087 ¹⁰²

⁹⁹ The National Archives: PREM 11/863. 'Possibility of Independent opposition at General Election of Speaker of House of Commons: PM's request for support from Clement Davies MP and Clement Attlee MP 1955'.

¹⁰⁰ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons 1955*, (London: The Times, 1955), p. 150.

¹⁰¹ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons 1964*, (London: The Times, 1964), p. 111.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

In this case, the swing in favour of Labour at the 1964 General Election clearly had an impact on the Speaker's seat because Hylton-Foster had come from the Conservative ranks.

The first Labour Speaker, Dr Horace King, was not opposed by the Conservatives at either the 1966 or 1970 General Elections. The Conservatives therefore honoured the tradition that the Speaker should not be opposed even though both Labour and the Liberals had opposed Speakers drawn from their side. In 1966, King was opposed by an Independent candidate who described himself as a Democratic Non-Party Nationalist. The result in Southampton Itchen was as follows:

Dr H. M. King	Speaker	30,463
K. D. Hunt	Dem Non-Party Nat	5,217 ¹⁰³

In 1970 Dr King faced two opponents neither of whom were drawn from the major parties. At this election, Speaker King's vote dropped perhaps because of the swing to the Conservatives that year and thanks to the fact that two people had opposed him. The result that year was:

Dr H. M. King	Speaker	29,417
E. Bray	National Democrat	9,581
B. Phillips	Independent	4,794 ¹⁰⁴

Selwyn Lloyd was the next Speaker to be opposed by the both the Labour and Liberal parties. In his memoirs, Lloyd states that:

Although most senior members of the Labour and Liberal Parties at Westminster with whom I had discussed the matter told me privately that they thoroughly disapproved of the Speaker being opposed when seeking re-election in his constituency, I knew that they could not overrule their local party organisations.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons 1966*, (London: The Times, 1966), p. 191.

¹⁰⁴ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons 1970*, (London: Times Newspapers Ltd, 1970), p. 201.

¹⁰⁵ Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, p 134.

Lloyd was, therefore, opposed by Labour and Liberal candidates at both general elections held in 1974. The result in the Wirral on 28 February 1974 was:

Selwyn Lloyd	Speaker	38,452
A. J. Whipp	Labour	22,605
M. Gayford	Liberal	14,123 ¹⁰⁶

At the general election held in October of the same year, Lloyd recorded in his memoirs that the Liberal candidate ‘placed much more emphasis on the issue that the electors of Wirral were being disenfranchised by having the Speaker as their Member’.¹⁰⁷ Selwyn Lloyd’s vote dropped at the October 1974 General Election with the result being as follows:

Selwyn Lloyd	Speaker	35,705
P. R. Thomas	Labour	22,217
M. R. D. Gayford	Liberal	12,345 ¹⁰⁸

The tactics employed by the Liberal candidate clearly had no effect on the electorate of the Wirral because his vote decreased by nearly 2,000.

Speaker George Thomas was not opposed by the Conservative or Liberal Parties in 1979 although a Welsh Nationalist and a National Front candidate did stand against him in Cardiff West. The results in this constituency were as follows:

George Thomas	Speaker	27,035
A. Ogwen	Plaid Cymru	3,272
C. Gibbon	National Front	1,287 ¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons 1974*, (London: Times Newspapers Ltd, 1974), p. 258.

¹⁰⁷ Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, p 137.

¹⁰⁸ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons October 1974*, (London: Times Books, 1974), p. 274.

¹⁰⁹ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons May 1979*, (London: Times Books, 1979), p. 75.

Thomas was, therefore, returned with an overwhelming majority. Despite being a Speaker from the Labour Party, the swing to the Conservatives in 1979 did not affect George Thomas because, as his successor in the Chair has pointed out, during the post-war period ‘the Tory Party has given a free run to the sitting Speaker’.¹¹⁰

The next time a sitting Speaker was to face opponents from the major parties was at the 1987 General Election when Speaker Weatherill faced Labour and Social Democrat candidates. However, Weatherill managed to increase his majority in Croydon North East to 12,519 compared to the 11,627 margin he had achieved in 1983 when he had stood as a Conservative. The results were as follows:

Bernard Weatherill	Speaker	24,188
C. Patrick	Labour	11,669
J. D. Goldie	SDP/Alliance	8,128 ¹¹¹

Weatherill argued that ‘it is a myth that the Speaker gets a free ride’ and he recalls that it was not the Labour leadership in the House of Commons that decided to put up a candidate against him but the London Labour Party.¹¹²

This was the last occasion on which a sitting Speaker faced opponents from the main parties. Ever since, he or she has been opposed by candidates from smaller parties or by those who stand as independents. A tradition has, therefore, built up whereby the Speaker is never elected unopposed in his or her constituency.

This tradition continued when Betty Boothroyd faced two opponents in West Bromwich West at the 1997 General Election. One of these candidates stood as an independent

¹¹⁰ Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

¹¹¹ Alan Wood (ed.), *The Times Guide to the House of Commons June 1987*, (London: Times Books Ltd, 1987), p. 88.

¹¹² Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

socialist Labour Change candidate and the other stood as a National Democrat. The results were:

Betty Boothroyd	Speaker	23,969
R. Silvester	Labour Change	8,546
S. Edwards	National Democrat	4,181 ¹¹³

Boothroyd increased her majority by a massive 9,249 votes although she probably benefited from the Labour landslide of that year thanks to the fact that she had been the Labour MP for the area since 1973.

At the general election held on 7 June 2001, Speaker Michael Martin faced four opponents in his Glasgow Springburn constituency, including a Scottish Nationalist. The result in Glasgow Springburn was as follows:

Michael Martin	Speaker	16,053
S. Bain	SNP	4,675
C. Leckie	Scottish Socialists	1,879
D. Houston	Scottish Unionists	1,289
R. Silvester	Independent	208 ¹¹⁴

Whilst Martin was returned with a comfortable majority of 11,378, the Scottish Nationalists managed a swing of 2.91% in their favour.¹¹⁵

Speaker Martin fought the new seat of Glasgow North East at the 2005 General Election. He was again opposed by a candidate from the Scottish Nationalist Party as well as by a host of smaller parties and an independent. Indeed, never before in the post-war period had the Speaker been faced by so many opponents which perhaps

¹¹³ Tim Austin (ed.), *The Times Guide to the House of Commons May 1997*, (London: Times Books, 1997), p. 262.

¹¹⁴ Tim Austin & Tim Hames (eds.), *The Times Guide to the House of Commons June 2001*, (London: Times Books, 2001), p. 160.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

demonstrates discontent with the fact that the Speaker's constituency is removed from normal party politics. On 11 May 2005, when Speaker Martin was re-elected as Speaker by the House, the Leader of the Scottish Nationalists, Alex Salmond, said the following:

On behalf of the Scottish Nationalist party and Plaid Cymru, I warmly congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your second unanimous re-election by the House. I also congratulate you, despite the best efforts of my party, on your thumping majority in Glasgow North East. Your campaigning in a non-political way is perhaps, given your thumping majority, a tactic we should all employ.¹¹⁶

Indeed, Speaker Martin was returned with a convincing 10,134 majority at the 2005 General Election (although the SNP again increased its vote). The result in Glasgow North East was as follows:

Michael Martin	Speaker	15,153
John McLaughlin	SNP	5,019
Doris Kelly	SLP	4,036
Graham Campbell	SSP	1,402
Daniel Houston	SUP	1,266
Scott McLean	BNP	920
Joe Chambers	Independent	622 ¹¹⁷

What is clear from this result is that, in order to preserve the convention whereby a sitting Speaker can remain in office despite a general election taking place, it is beneficial for the holder of the office to represent a 'safe' seat.

However, if a Speaker who represents a more marginal seat were to be selected then this might create difficulties. Indeed, Laundry does admit the following:

¹¹⁶ HC Deb 11 May 2005 cc9-10.

¹¹⁷ Tim Hames & Valerie Passmore (eds.), *The Times Guide to the House of Commons* 2005, (London: Times Books, 2005), p. 162.

The possibility of a Speaker one day losing his seat must therefore remain. Should this happen there might well be demands for a further inquiry into the method whereby the Speaker is returned to Parliament at a general election.¹¹⁸

Moreover, there has been debate over how to solve the potential problem of the Speaker losing his seat and on 24 April 1963 Richard Marsh, the Labour MP for Greenwich, introduced a ten minute rule bill ‘for the creation of a constituency to be known as St Stephen’s and represented by Mr Speaker’.¹¹⁹ This specially created constituency would mean that the Speaker would not have to face the possibility of being defeated at the polls because it would contain no electors. However, along with a very similar motion put forward by the Liberal MP for the Isle of Ely, Clement Freud, on 26 January 1982, it was defeated because the feeling was, as Weatherill put it, that the ‘Speaker should be one of us’.¹²⁰

In his book on the Speakership, Selwyn Lloyd set out a very detailed argument why the Speaker should not be given a special seat:

If this system is altered, a fundamental blow will be struck at the Speakership. If by some resolution of the House the Speaker becomes a notional Member for a fictitious constituency, it would gravely diminish his authority and standing. He would soon have only the status of an official of the House without a corresponding security of tenure.¹²¹

It is most certainly the case that the Speaker would become just an official of the Commons like one of the clerks. The Speaker needs to share the experiences of other Members if he or she is to ensure that the office does not become even more removed than it already is. Lloyd goes on to point out that other MPs are confined by the nature of their offices such as Deputy Speakers, Government Whips and members of the Chairmen’s Panel. He concluded that:

¹¹⁸ Laundry, ‘The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century’, p. 153.

¹¹⁹ See HC Deb 24 April 1963 cc229 - 234.

¹²⁰ Telephone conversation with Lord Weatherill, 16 March 2001.

¹²¹ Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, p. 141.

If the Speaker is to be given a special constituency, what about the Deputy Speaker, and these others? Should they not have special seats? Where would it end?¹²²

For all these reasons the Speaker continues to represent a constituency in the same way as other Members of the House of Commons.

Lloyd raises an important issue when he mentions the position of the Deputy Speakers. Indeed, William McKay, believes that ‘being a Deputy Speaker is not a plus’ when it comes to a general election because the holder of this office is not allowed to raise questions in the House and yet has to fight his or her seat on a party ticket.¹²³ McKay points to the fact that the Conservative MP, Michael Morris, who was Deputy Speaker and Chairman of Ways and Means under Betty Boothroyd, lost his Northampton South seat to Labour at the 1997 General Election. Indeed, Lord Naseby, as Michael Morris is now styled, highlights the fact that a Deputy Speaker ‘can’t go at an election time and campaign until Parliament is prorogued’ thanks to his duties in the House and so is not in an advantageous position.¹²⁴

Another problem surrounding the topic of the Speaker wanting to continue in office beyond a general election is if a boundary review abolishes, or radically alters, the sitting Speaker’s constituency. The former Speaker, Lord Weatherill, believed quite simply that ‘my seat goes and I go too’ adding that ‘to do one Parliament is no dishonour’.¹²⁵ The former Deputy Speaker, Baroness Fookes, disagrees with this point and has stated that:

My view is that one looks at the person concerned not as Speaker but as a Member of Parliament. There is no reason why a sitting MP should not seek to be a candidate in any other seat or part of his or her old seat. I do not see that the Speaker would be in any different position, since he or she is first and foremost a

¹²² Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, p. 141.

¹²³ Interview with William McKay, 1 March 2001.

¹²⁴ Interview with Lord Naseby, 7 September 2004.

¹²⁵ Telephone conversation with Lord Weatherill, 16 March 2001.

Member of Parliament and indeed in our system cannot be Speaker unless a Member of Parliament.¹²⁶

The former Speaker's Secretary, Sir Nicolas Bevan, agrees with Baroness Fookes although added the comment, 'Let us hope it never arises!'.¹²⁷ Perhaps Bevan agrees with Lord Weatherill that, in these circumstances, a Speaker 'would have to put themselves up for auction' in order to secure a new seat?¹²⁸

These circumstances have indeed arisen because the devolved settlement, as set out in the Scotland Act 1998, made reference to the electoral quota for English constituencies now applying in Scotland.¹²⁹ The Boundary Commission, therefore, redrew the political map of Scotland and reduced the number of Scottish constituencies from 72 to 59.¹³⁰ A result of this review was that Speaker Martin's Glasgow Springburn constituency disappeared as the number of Glasgow seats went from ten to seven. Clearly, some internal Labour Party discussions must have taken place in order to allocate Martin the new Glasgow North East constituency because Labour MPs would have had to have made room and given up their seats for him. As it was, Glasgow North East took in all Speaker Martin's old Glasgow Springburn constituency plus three wards from the old Maryhill division of the city and so the move was not as controversial as perhaps it could have been if the seat had been altered dramatically.

Another possible scenario which could affect the continuity tradition that has built up around the office is if a sitting Speaker were prevented from being re-elected to the House of Commons and so could not be re-appointed to the Chair on the first day back after a general election. For example, at the 2005 General Election, the contest in the Staffordshire South constituency had to be delayed because the Liberal Democrat candidate died during the campaign. Sir Patrick Cormack, the sitting Member for that seat, had not been re-elected when the House of Commons reconvened on 11 May

¹²⁶ Letter from Baroness Fookes, 21 March 2001.

¹²⁷ Letter from Sir Nicolas Bevan, 5 March 2001.

¹²⁸ Telephone conversation with Lord Weatherill, 16 March 2001.

¹²⁹ See *Scotland Act 1998*.

¹³⁰ See *Fifth Periodical Review of the Boundary Commission for Scotland*, December 2004.

2005. If such an episode took place in the Speaker's constituency then the continuity tradition could possibly collapse because he or she would not be present on the first day of the new session of Parliament and so could not be re-elected to the Chair. The Commons must have a Speaker in order to conduct its business and so the new House would either have to delay the new sitting or elect a new Speaker regardless of the fact that the old Speaker might well be back in the chamber within a few weeks once the constituency contest is resolved.

Some might say that this point is completely hypothetical and the likelihood of this ever happening is minimal. However, bearing in mind that Sir Patrick Cormack had been a contender for the Speakership in October 2000, it is nevertheless possible. Indeed, when asked about this, the former Clerk of the House, Roger Sands, responded by saying that:

The same thought had occurred to me, and I spent the last few days of the General Election campaign praying for the sustained good health of the candidates in Glasgow North-East [Speaker Martin's seat].¹³¹

There is an example of such an occurrence taking place in the United Kingdom although not in the Westminster Parliament. The incident involved the Speaker of the Northern Ireland House of Commons, Sir Norman Stronge, who had to resign the Speakership on 24 January 1956 because there was a possibility that he would be disqualified as a Stormont MP.¹³² The reason for the potential disqualification was that Stronge's membership of the Central Advisory Council on Disabled Persons, although voluntary and unpaid, could have been deemed to have been an 'office of profit under Crown Law'.¹³³ On 25 January 1956, William Frederick McCoy was elected as the new Speaker to replace Sir Norman Stronge while his position was in question.¹³⁴ However, the passing of the Validation of Election Act at Westminster removed the legal question mark hanging over Stronge and enabled him to take up his seat once again at Stormont.

¹³¹ Letter from Roger Sands, 27 May 2005.

¹³² See Northern Ireland House of Commons, *Official Report*, 24 January 1956, cc3141-3144.

¹³³ See *Ibid.*, c3141.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 25 January 1956, cc3145-3149.

William McCoy swiftly resigned on 24 April 1956 in order to allow Stronge to regain the Speakership.¹³⁵ Stronge was re-elected as Northern Ireland Speaker on 26 April 1956 and in the Stormont Commons chamber he said:

To-day, through the interpretation of an ancient law, I find myself in the unique position of being twice elected to the office of Speaker during the life of one Parliament. I trust that no holder of this honourable office will ever find himself in a like position in the future.¹³⁶

In the end, the continuity of the Northern Ireland Speakership was upheld because Members allowed the old Speaker to return to office once his position was clarified and it was deemed that he was not disqualified from being an MP. This is a good example of what could happen at Westminster and also an interesting precedent which could be used if such an occurrence ever happened to the Speaker of the United Kingdom House of Commons. Roger Sands concurs with this and states that:

No doubt the House would follow broadly the same course as in the Stormont precedent which you [the author] cite. But it would be complicated because it would involve not only setting aside Standing Order Nos. 1 and 1A, but also changing the traditional form of direction, which is given to the House on behalf of Her Majesty when the new elected House first convenes, to proceed forthwith to the election of a Speaker.¹³⁷

Clearly, the events in South Staffordshire made the ‘powers that be’ surrounding the Speakership stop and think about the possibility that it could one day happen in the Speaker’s seat and thus cause an unintentional break with continuity.

One tradition which evolved during the post-war period, but has since been broken, is the convention whereby the Speakership alternates between the two main political parties. Although the first three post-war Speakers were all from the Conservative ranks, the journalist Paul Routledge describes what happened following the election of the first Labour Speaker:

¹³⁵ Northern Ireland House of Commons, *Official Report*, 24 April 1956, cc927-928.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, c930.

¹³⁷ Letter from Roger Sands, 27 May 2005.

This notion dates only from the 1960s, the so-called ABAB pattern, which saw Labour's Horace King in the chair from 1965 to 1971, then the Tory Selwyn Lloyd, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, from 1971 to 1976, giving way to Labour's George Thomas [...] from 1976 to 1983. After Jack Weatherill, a Tory, was in post from 1983, said the Labour Whips, it must be our turn.¹³⁸

So, in 1992, when Weatherill retired, the then Leader of the Labour Party, Neil Kinnock, firmly believed that a Labour MP should be elected Speaker.¹³⁹ This is indeed what transpired when Betty Boothroyd was elected and so the 'ABAB pattern' continued. The convention being established was nevertheless destroyed when Boothroyd was succeeded by a fellow Labour MP, Michael Martin, in 2000. It is clear that the Labour front bench wanted to continue with the idea of the Speakership alternating between the two main parties because they favoured the former Conservative Cabinet minister, Sir George Young, for the job.¹⁴⁰ However, this was not to be and so a recently created tradition was prevented from embedding itself into the unwritten codes of the House.

The post-war period has witnessed a move away from having Speakers who have held ministerial office in favour of backbenchers who have had some experience of the Speakership. Speakers Clifton Brown, King, Thomas, Weatherill, Boothroyd and Martin all served as Deputy Speakers and Speaker Bercow served on the Chairmen's Panel meaning that they all undertook an apprenticeship before they were elected to the Chair. The House now prefers to elect someone who has a proven track record in chairing the proceedings in the Commons chamber which again demonstrates that the backbenchers exercise their right to choose a Speaker rather than have one imposed on them. The Speakership is now a possible career path for a Member of Parliament who does not seek ministerial office but does, however, wish to serve the House of Commons and achieve high status.

¹³⁸ Paul Routledge, *Madam Speaker: The Life of Betty Boothroyd*, (London: Politico's, 2000), p. 215.

¹³⁹ See Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 138.

¹⁴⁰ See Tony Benn, *Free at Last! Diaries 1991-2001*, (London: Hutchinson, 2002), diary entry for 22 October 2000, p. 631.

The election and selection of a Speaker has clearly undergone a process of evolution during the post-war period. At the beginning of the era, the two front benches would agree on a former minister to become Speaker and this would be voted through by the whole House. Quite quickly this process was questioned so that in recent times the Speaker has become the backbenchers' choice and they have chosen someone from their own ranks rather than someone who has held high ministerial office. This has evolved further so that it has become a tribal struggle between backbenchers over which side gets their man (or woman) elected. The convention that a sitting Speaker is unopposed at the polls has been broken by the Labour and Liberal parties on several occasions during the post-war period. Whilst the Conservatives have never opposed a sitting Speaker, a tradition has built up whereby he or she is opposed by the smaller parties or by independent candidates. Even the abolition of a sitting Speaker's constituency thanks to a boundary change has not prevented the occupant of the Chair from continuing on into a new Parliament and so that element of tradition has not been able to slide during the post-war era.

What is clear is that the Speakership is now seen as the pinnacle of the career of a long-serving backbencher who has worked his or her way up the ranks by first becoming a committee chairman or Deputy Speaker. It is no longer a swan song for a distinguished ex-minister as it had been up until the 1970s. Nowadays, the Speakership election is a bit like the Conclave choosing a respected priest rather than a great cardinal to be Pope. This person must also be the preferred candidate of the backbenchers from the majority party who use their numerical superiority to vote in their man. The post-war period has undoubtedly seen the end of the Speakership being in the gift of the Prime Minister and is now an office that is hotly contested and ultimately determined upon by the backbenchers who want their own champion rather than the executive's choice.

CHAPTER TWO

IN AND OUT OF THE CHAIR: THE SPEAKER'S POWERS AND RESPONSIBILITIES INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE COMMONS CHAMBER

You have to gauge the mood of the House, you have to gauge the mood of the country because, you are not a political person as a Speaker but nevertheless you are there, that is what your job is to do, to gauge the mood of everything. The clerks will advise you on the procedures but when they've done that the buck stops with you.

Former Speaker, Baroness Boothroyd, 2005.¹

Basically the job of the Speaker is to keep order, to see that things run smoothly and to ensure that there is fairness on sides which includes minority parties, of course, as well as being fair to the majority and, I suppose, as part of that be independent of the powers that be, in this case the government.

Former Deputy Speaker, Baroness Fookes, 2004.²

The other block of duties which is much newer historically I supposed you'd say, although it's not that new, is to have a central role in the administration of the House.

Former Clerk of the House of Commons, Roger Sands, 2004.³

Once elected to the Speakership, the Speaker-Elect has to go along to the House of Lords and declare that he has been chosen by the Commons as their new Speaker. The Lords Commissioners, who represent the Queen, tell him that Her Majesty gladly approves the choice. From that moment, the Speaker-Elect becomes Mr or Madam Speaker and is invested with all the ancient rights, privileges and powers of the office. This chapter will set out all the Speaker's procedural powers whilst chairing the debates in the Commons chamber and up-date previous research by looking at recent developments and reforms. It will also identify all the administrative and representative

¹ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 24 October 2005.

² Interview with Baroness Fookes, 25 October 2004.

³ Interview with Roger Sands, 29 July 2004.

duties that tend to be forgotten because they are not so much in the public eye and examine how these have increased over the post-war period.

When asked what he thought was the most important element of the Speakership, the former Speaker, Lord Weatherill, answered:

Total impartiality. The Speaker has no political party. On becoming the Speaker he gives up party politics for life. I always make the point in saying that there's absolutely nothing wrong with party politics because that gives us choice but as far as the Speaker's concerned he must always be totally impartial and that continues for the rest of his time.⁴

Moreover, on becoming Speaker all party affiliations must be renounced in order that there is no question of bias. Even on retirement, a Speaker does not return to party politics because he or she immediately stands down as a Member of Parliament and, on receiving the customary peerage, sits as a cross-bencher in the House of Lords. Betty Boothroyd comments on this tradition in her memoirs when she recalls that:

I took my seat in the Lords on 16 January 2001 as a cross-bencher, supported by [the former Labour Cabinet ministers] Barbara Castle and Denis Healey. Barbara suggested I should sit on the Labour benches, but I was not about to break the tradition that ex-Speakers stay above the party fray.⁵

It is this total impartiality and obligation to quit party politics for life which sets the Westminster Speakership apart from presiding officers in other Parliaments. Even the Commonwealth Parliaments which have sought to emulate the United Kingdom Speakership have not managed to achieve this degree of neutrality. The former Speaker of the New Zealand House of Representatives, Jonathan Hunt, wrote that, in his country, the Speaker 'does not cut all links to the party in the House to which the Speaker was affiliated at time of election. The Speaker may attend caucus meetings'.⁶ This is also true in Australia and even in Canada, which is the closest parliamentary system to the Westminster model, the Speaker does not resign from his or her political

⁴ Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

⁵ Betty Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, (London: Century, 2001), p. 316.

⁶ Letter from Jonathan Hunt, 24 June 2004.

party. Even the presiding officers of the devolved parliament and assemblies in the United Kingdom retain membership of their political party. Lord Elis-Thomas, who was the first Presiding Officer of the National Assembly for Wales, stated that he was ‘still a member of the [Plaid Cymru] group but kind of at a distance’.⁷ All this demonstrates that the impartiality of the Westminster Speakership is one that has built up and become imbedded over many years and is not something that other legislatures can copy quickly or easily.

Roger Sands believes that ‘the Speakership is definitely the last job of a political career’ although Speaker Morrison went on to become Governor-General of Australia and Speaker Weatherill became Convenor of the Cross-Bench peers.⁸ These two examples, although important positions, are not overtly political because being a Governor-General is supposed to be above party politics and being Convenor of the Cross-Bench peers is really an administrative rather a political role. The fact that someone who becomes Speaker is prepared to renounce party politics for the rest of their life is a sacrifice that demonstrates a willingness to remain totally impartial.

The overall notion of impartiality is taken very seriously and, in his short book on the Speakership, the former Speaker, Lord Maybray-King, made the point that, once elected to the Chair:

MPs may come to his [the Speaker’s] room for advice on how to carry out in the House matters which interest them, but he must not have any special friends. From time to time he will have to admonish or advise Members and in this he must treat all alike. So he lives a lonely life in a Parliament where all his companions mix freely, enjoying each other’s company in the smoke-rooms, tea-rooms, dining-rooms, bar, library and chess room.⁹

The Speaker should not be seen to be too friendly to any of his or her parliamentary colleagues for fear of appearing to favour anyone. Speaker Michael Martin chose not to

⁷ Interview with Lord Elis-Thomas, 21 September 2004.

⁸ Interview with Roger Sands, 29 July 2004.

⁹ Lord Maybray-King, *The Speaker and Parliament*, (Birmingham: Tom Stacey, 1973), p. 27.

distance himself too much because, when the former Labour Cabinet minister, Tony Benn, retired from the House in 2001, he stated that:

In my opinion, you [Michael Martin] are the first Speaker who has remained a Back Bencher. You have moved the Speaker's Chair on to the Back Benches. You sit in the Tea Room with us. You are wholly impartial, but your roots are in the movement that sent you here.¹⁰

Betty Boothroyd states in her memoirs that her successor's decision to go into the tea rooms is 'breaking with a long-established and wise custom' because a Speaker has to be a neutral judge and cannot be seen to be socialising with certain Members for fear of being criticised for favouritism.¹¹ What is clear is that the impartiality of the Speakership is all important and so a Speaker should not put himself in a position where that impartiality becomes questionable. Being removed from the intrigue of the tea room is one way in which the Speaker can demonstrate that he is not involved in party politics.

The former Speaker's Secretary, Sir Nicolas Bevan, believes that any Speaker who compromised the impartiality of the office would 'be in dead trouble' and would quickly lose the support of the House.¹² Moreover, MPs could, in effect, sack a Speaker who was not deemed to be fair and neutral. Maybray-King set out how a Speaker could be removed from office:

If a Member is dissatisfied with what Mr Speaker has said, he may courteously question the Speaker's ruling, and sometimes, though not often, persuade him to change it. If the Member is still dissatisfied and has had to obey Mr Speaker, he has another remedy. He can put down a motion criticizing Mr Speaker, and if such a motion is debated by the House and carried by a majority, then Mr Speaker, having lost the confidence of the House would have to resign.¹³

¹⁰ HC Deb 22 March 2001 c511.

¹¹ Ibid, c957.

¹¹ Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 159.

¹² Interview with Sir Nicolas Bevan, 8 February 2001.

¹³ Maybray-King, *The Speaker and Parliament*, p. 25.

Michael Martin got into trouble over the question of impartiality when he broke with tradition and made a political point from the Chair on 29 October 2001. At the conclusion of questions to the Home Secretary, David Blunkett, on asylum seeker vouchers Martin said:

The Home Secretary knows of my interest in the matter that the House has been discussing. I welcome vouchers being abolished because, as I know from experience in my constituency, they take away people's dignity.¹⁴

The press were quick to pick up on the point that the Speaker had compromised his neutrality with the political journalist, Melissa Kite, writing in *The Times* that:

Michael Martin, the Speaker of the House of Commons, shattered centuries of parliamentary tradition yesterday when he rose not to call MPs to order but to voice his own political opinions [...] Veteran parliamentarians said it was the only time in living memory, and possibly in the history of Parliament, that the Speaker has expressed an opinion.¹⁵

It is certainly true that there was no other example of a Speaker making a comment on a policy issue during the post-war period. Martin clearly realised that he had made a mistake because the following day he made a statement to the House in which he said:

I wish to assure the House that I am wholly committed to maintaining the long-standing tradition that the Speaker stands aside from politics. The remark I made yesterday stemmed from my personal experience with constituents in my Glasgow, Springburn constituency, particularly in the community of Sighthill. Members may be aware that there was a particularly tragic murder of a young asylum seeker in that area during the summer recess. If, contrary to my intention, my remark was subject to the interpretation that has been placed on it, I seek the indulgence of the House.¹⁶

The Conservative MP for South Staffordshire, Sir Patrick Cormack, immediately rose to thank Martin for his statement and for 'upholding the impartiality of the Chair'.¹⁷

Kite commented that 'Sir Patrick's remarks in effect ended the controversy' and so,

¹⁴ HC Deb 29 October 2001 c647.

¹⁵ Melissa Kite, 'Speaker breaks neutrality rule', *The Times*, 30 October 2001.

¹⁶ HC Deb 30 October 2000 c753.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

with the support of the Opposition, Martin overcame his faux-pas.¹⁸ This episode demonstrates just how much the House of Commons values the Speakership and does not wish to see the office harmed in any way and will rally to its defence even if the occupant of the Chair makes a mistake. Roger Sands, has said that:

he [Speaker Martin] acknowledges that it was an error [...] it was a natural reaction but he's apologised to the House for it and so it's not a precedent.¹⁹

Even though Speakers do sometimes make mistakes, and Members even put down motions against certain rulings, Maybray-King made the point that:

It is noteworthy that whilst such motions have occasionally been debated in the House, not one has been carried in the past 150 years. This is a tribute to the fairness of Speaker after Speaker, and to the tolerance of the House to Mr Speaker, even if he has made an error.²⁰

This fairness is all down to the impartiality of the Speakership and, on this subject, Philip Laundry has written that the Speaker

has a particular duty to protect the rights of minorities, which no Speaker will ever fail to do, but in the exercise of his impartiality neither must he lose sight of the majority nor of any dissident elements or factions submerged beneath the umbrella of the majority party.²¹

Baroness Boothroyd has stated that it is the job of the Speaker to ensure that 'most Members, and that means minority groups as well as minorities within major parties [...] get a fair share of time'.²² Indeed, bearing in mind that so many Members from different parties had voted for her, Boothroyd has said on the question of impartiality, 'How could I let those people down?'.²³ Clearly, ensuring that Members all have a fair

¹⁸ Melissa Kite, 'Speaker denies remark betrayed political bias', *The Times*, 31 October 2001.

¹⁹ Interview with Roger Sands, 29 July 2004.

²⁰ Maybray-King, *The Speaker and Parliament*, p. 25.

²¹ Philip Laundry, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, (London, Quiller Press 1984), p. 65.

²² Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 24 October 2005.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5 April 2001.

chance of participating in a debate also makes sure that the Speaker retains the support of the House and so an even-handed approach is essential.

Selecting Members to speak is probably the most important routine task the Speaker has to undertake in relation to the role in the Commons chamber and is also the greatest test of his or her impartiality. Selwyn Lloyd kept his 'Blue Book' which listed every Member's name and when, and for how long, he or she last spoke.²⁴ In this way Lloyd was able to ensure that each and every MP was given a fair chance of being called to speak.

In a BBC Television documentary broadcast in 1991 called *Mr Speaker, Sir*, Bernard Weatherill, admitted that:

Everything that the Members do here [in the Commons chamber], even when they stand and are not called, gets recorded in my computer.²⁵

Weatherill's computer, therefore, replaced the 'Blue Book' system and enabled the Speaker to have accurate records on who had spoken and for how long so that he could ensure that all Members had an even chance of being allowed to participate in a debate.

A former Deputy Speaker, Baroness Fookes, explained how Betty Boothroyd used her deputies to assist her with deciding on whom to speak:

I would take what was then the Government side and Geoffrey [Lofthouse] would take the Opposition side. We would have the letters or [...] telephone messages that would come through to the Speaker's Office and that would be put together by the Speaker's staff together with a list, not in order, but a list of all those who put their names in by a given time. It was our task to, as I say, prepare a preliminary batting order for the meeting [...] we would then go through the list of people and the Speaker would comment on order, perhaps query it, accept it, and then she [Boothroyd] would then write down the final batting order.²⁶

²⁴ See Selwyn Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 81.

²⁵ University of Kent, Weatherill Papers, WEA/PP V13 Video of 'Mr Speaker, Sir', 28 March 1991.

²⁶ Interview with Baroness Fookes, 25 October 2004.

Fookes set out the rationale behind deciding on who would speak, and in what order, during Speaker Boothroyd's period in the Chair:

We worked to quite a useful system. In looking at names we would look first to see whether there were any Privy Counsellors who usually get to be first on the list [thanks to their seniority]. We would look at anyone who had some special interest or expertise or position in relation to the debate so, for example, if the Chairman of the Select Committee wished to speak or a member of the Select Committee for the relevant subject, let's say it's Foreign Affairs, so the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, we would give those a higher priority. Or, maybe, there's something where there's a special local interest and we would make sure then that if the local MP wished to speak he or she would be fairly high up the list. All other things being equal, we would then look at the number of times someone had spoken and the priority would go to those who had spoken less. There was also a penalty system because the staff would keep a list of those who had spoken for longer than a certain time. It might have been in order but I think it was 20 minutes and 25 and twenty minutes would be one star and 25 minutes would be two stars. They would be given less priority if they had spoken too long in a previous debate.²⁷

Whilst Members will be aware of the pecking order for being called to speak, they will nevertheless try to 'catch the Speaker's eye' and see whether they can get called to participate in a particular debate. Stanley Baldwin, Conservative Prime Minister in the 1920s and 1930s, once called the Speaker's eye, 'The most elusive organ that Nature has ever yet created'.²⁸ The preparation outlined by Fookes perhaps explains why it is difficult for other Members to be called during a debate because the Speaker knows that other MPs have a greater claim to the floor and they so must be given precedence.

Of course, in order to be able to call Members to speak, the Speaker has to undertake the huge task of learning the names of all the more than 600 MPs. The fact that each and every Member is known to the Speaker gives him or her the necessary knowledge to ensure that they are given a fair crack of the whip when it comes to being called to speak in the Commons chamber. One change that has taken place in the post-war period has been pointed out by Lord Weatherill when he said that:

²⁷ Interview with Baroness Fookes, 25 October 2004.

²⁸ Quoted in Graham Cawthorne, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, (London: Cleaver-Hume Press Ltd, 1952), p. 81.

Television has made this difference that Members of Parliament now not only do they wish to be heard but they wish to be seen to be heard so the pressures on the Chair are very considerably greater than they were because they want to get on when the television cameras are actually running.²⁹

This is a very important point and shows that Speakers who have served since the introduction of televised broadcasting of the proceedings of the Commons in 1989 have had a tougher job than their predecessors. Clearly, the demand from MPs to be called is greater for ‘prime time’ debates and so the Speaker has to try to accommodate as many Members as possible whilst maintaining fairness.

The Speaker cannot vote in a division but he or she does cast the deciding vote in the event of a tie which makes the issue of impartiality even more vital. In the 2004 edition of *Erskine May*, the former Clerk of the House, Sir William McKay, states:

In the performance of this duty to give a casting vote, the Speaker is at liberty to vote like any other Member, according to his conscience, without assigning reason; but, in order, to avoid any imputation upon his impartiality, it is usual for him, when practicable, to vote in such a manner as not to make the decision of the House final.³⁰

In his memoirs, Speaker Thomas wrote that, ‘Fortunately a Speaker’s greatest ally is precedent and there is very little that happens which has not happened before at some time in the long history of Parliament’.³¹ The precedents associated with the usage of the casting vote are recorded in *Erskine May*:

- (1) that the Speaker should always vote for further discussion, where this is possible, eg Mr Speaker Addington’s decision of 1796;
- (2) that, where no further discussion is possible, decisions should not be taken except by a majority, eg Mr Speaker Denison’s decisions of 1861 and 1867; and

²⁹ University of Kent, Weatherill Papers, WEA/PP V13 Video of ‘Mr Speaker, Sir’, 28 March 1991.

³⁰ Erskine May, *Parliamentary Practice*, 23rd Edition, 2004, p. 413.

³¹ Thomas, *Mr Speaker: The Memoirs of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 150.

(3) that a casting vote on an amendment to a bill should leave the bill in its existing form.³²

Both Speakers Thomas and Boothroyd were in the Chair at a time when the government of the day did not enjoy a Commons majority which meant that the casting vote had to come into play. On 27 May 1976, a Conservative amendment to the Aircraft and Shipbuilding Industries Bill resulted in a tie of 303 to 303.³³ It was necessary, therefore, for Thomas to use his casting vote and vote with the Noes so that the original bill was left in its existing form.

Betty Boothroyd was forced to use the casting vote on 22 July 1993 when Labour put forward a wrecking amendment restoring the Social Chapter to the Maastricht Treaty. The House divided with a result of 317 to 317 and so Boothroyd announced that:

The numbers being equal, it is my duty to cast my vote. It is not the function of the Chair to create a majority on a policy issue where no majority exists amongst the rest of the House. In accordance with precedent, I therefore cast my vote with the Noes.³⁴

If the need arises the casting vote is, therefore, an important function of the Speaker and one which must be exercised carefully in order not to compromise the impartiality of the office.

Whilst it is true, however, that the Speaker has to interpret the rules, it is also the case that he or she does not create them. Baroness Boothroyd has made the following point:

The Speaker has not the powers that, maybe, a number of members think he has [...] The power lies with you; it lies with the House of Commons; it lies with the members. The Speaker is the servant of the House. The Speaker can do nothing unless you give that Speaker authority.³⁵

³² Erskine May, *Parliamentary Practice*, 24th Edition, p. 420.

³³ Thomas, *Mr Speaker: The Memoirs of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 150.

³⁴ HC Deb 22 July 1993 c606.

³⁵ House of Commons Select Committee on Procedure, Second Report 2000-01, *Election of a Speaker*, HC 40, p. 51.

Boothroyd's comment highlights the fact that it is the House of Commons as a whole that decides upon the Standing Orders and it is then up to the Speaker to uphold them.

As guardian of the rules the Speaker has to take Points of Order each day. This is when a Member asks the Speaker to rule on whether something that has happened in the chamber was within the rules. This can be a real test of the Speaker's knowledge of parliamentary procedure and, although he or she is assisted by the clerks at the Table, the occupant of the Chair has to respond quickly and give a fair ruling. This task is one which the Speaker has to be ready to respond to all the time he is in the Chair and can sometimes mean that he has to set his wits against veteran MPs who know the rules of the House very well indeed.

In his memoirs, Selwyn Lloyd asserts that the Speaker 'has wide powers' when it comes to ensuring that debates are managed properly and do not break down into disorderly slanging matches.³⁶ Standing Order 42 empowers the Speaker to order a Member who persists in irrelevance or tedious repetition to discontinue his speech. Standing Order 43 gives the Speaker the power to order an MP whose conduct is grossly out of order to withdraw from the House for the remainder of the day's sitting or, if deemed necessary, coupled with Standing Order 44, the Speaker can 'name' an unruly Member. This is the most severe sanction the Speaker can exercise and calls on the House as a whole to divide and vote on whether the MP concerned should be suspended for five sitting days if it is a first offence, twenty sitting days for a second offence or a period for Members to determine for repeated incidents.³⁷ If the whole House is behaving in a disorderly fashion then Standing Order 46 enables the Speaker to suspend the sitting.

George Thomas wrote in his memoirs that 'whereas Selwyn Lloyd had boasted that he had not named or suspended anyone throughout his Speakership, that policy was no

³⁶ Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, p. 60.

³⁷ Standing Orders of the House of Commons, 2010 (New Parliament), p. 42.

good for me'.³⁸ Indeed, thanks to the increasingly unruly nature of the Commons, caused by the fact that there was a minority Labour government, Thomas decided that he 'would have to take firm action very soon or the House could easily spin out of control and Parliamentary business become impossible'.³⁹ Almost from the outset Thomas was true to his word because he had to suspend the sitting on 27 May 1976 when the Conservative MP for Henley, Michael Heseltine, seized the Mace following a break down in pairing arrangements.⁴⁰

Speaker Boothroyd also had to exercise her disciplinary authority early on in her period in the Chair. On 2 July 1992, Dennis Skinner, the veteran Labour MP for Bolsover, described the Minister for Agriculture, John Gummer, as 'a little squirt'.⁴¹ Boothroyd required Skinner to withdraw the remark which led to a short exchange about the word 'squirt' not being in *Erskine May*.⁴² Whilst Boothroyd admitted that this remark was not mentioned in *Erskine May* she nevertheless ruled it as unparliamentary and so ordered Skinner to leave the chamber after he had refused to back down.⁴³ This is not only a good example of a Speaker using the disciplinary powers given to him or her but also how he or she can use discretionary authority when it comes to ruling on whether a word or phrase is not in order. The Speaker's powers to maintain order are essential in order to uphold the dignity of Parliament and to ensure that the business of the House is allowed to proceed unhindered.

The Speaker has no power over deciding the business to be debated in the House. An example of this was Tony Blair's early decision to consolidate the twice-weekly fifteen minute Prime Minister's Questions into one thirty minute session on Wednesdays. This decision was announced through a press release rather than on the floor of the House.⁴⁴ In her memoirs Betty Boothroyd states that she 'was neither forewarned nor consulted –

³⁸ Thomas, *Mr Speaker: The Memoirs of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 142.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁴⁰ HC Deb 27 May 1976.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2 July 1992 c956.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, c957.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 14 May 1997 c37.

merely informed' which shows that the Speaker has no role in deciding such matters.⁴⁵

Roger Sands has pointed out what powers the Speaker actually does have when it comes to determining what goes on in the Commons chamber:

The most important ones, I guess, being the selection of amendments and the right to rule on what we now call Urgent Questions, used to be Private Notice Questions, which Members seek to have raised after Question Time. That's a quite significant discretion because it can involve ministers coming to the House to talk about matters which they don't particularly want to talk about at a time when they don't particularly want to talk about them.⁴⁶

The Speaker has the power to grant an emergency debate if a Member so requests. This debate can either be held for three hours from the commencement of public business the following day or, if deemed urgent by the Speaker, from 7pm until 10pm the same day.⁴⁷ This is clearly an important power because it certainly enables the House to debate topics which are of immediate concern to the public. In this sense the Speaker can increase the chances of Parliament being relevant to the British people.

The Speaker also has the power to limit the length of backbench debates down to a minimum of eight minutes. He can also intervene to prevent deliberate time wasting by Members who are either speaking repetitiously or calling for unnecessary votes.⁴⁸ At any time a Member may rise and ask that a debate be finished by moving 'that the question now be put'.⁴⁹ The Speaker has the power whether to accept this motion and allow it to be put. Lord Maybray-King wrote:

In so deciding, he must consider whether the debate has gone on long enough to be fair to those who wish to close it, but also to those who wish it to go on longer. This is sometimes quite a tricky decision for him to make – but the House accepts whatever he decides.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 246.

⁴⁶ Interview with Roger Sands, 29 July 2004.

⁴⁷ Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, p. 83.

⁴⁸ See Robert Rogers & Rhodri Walters, *How Parliament Works*, Fifth Edition, (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2004), p. 45.

⁴⁹ Maybray-King, *The Speaker and Parliament*, p. 22.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Clearly, the Speaker must be careful when exercising this power because he or she does not want to call into question the much valued principle of impartiality and fairness.

The clerks of the House of Commons advise the Speaker over which Standing Orders to use and which precedents apply. In his diary entry for 26 October 1993, Tony Benn made the argument that:

One of the things I must record is that the Speakership is run entirely by the Clerk of the House. The Clerk preserves the precedents, won't allow change, and Speakers aren't interested in procedure or history.⁵¹

The reason why Benn made this point is explained in a much earlier diary entry he wrote when he wanted to remain in the Commons rather than take up his late father's peerage:

I would go to see Sir Edward Fellowes [the Clerk of the House], and I would say, 'Sir Edward, I think I would like to raise this point with the Speaker [Sir Harry Hylton-Foster].' So he would have tea with me and appraise me how to draft the letter. I would then write the letter and send it to the Speaker. The Speaker would then, no doubt, ring up Sir Edward and say, 'I've had a letter from Wedgwood Benn' – it must have been an awful bore to him – 'What shall I say?' And Sir Edward would say, 'Well, Mr Speaker, I think really the position is this.'⁵²

Of course, this might be a reflection on the Speaker of the time rather than of the Speakership in general. Indeed, on this point, Baroness Boothroyd has said that:

The Clerk of the House is asked for advice and the Speaker does exactly what she wants to do if you've got a Speaker who's got spirit and determination [...] I always asked for advice like you ask your solicitor for advice, but you don't always follow what your solicitor wants to do.⁵³

⁵¹ Tony Benn, *Free at Last! Diaries 1991-2001*, (London: Hutchinson, 2002), diary entry for 26 October 1993, p. 209.

⁵² Tony Benn, *Years of Hope: Diaries, Letters and Papers 1940-1962*, (Hutchinson: London, 1994), p. 375.

⁵³ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 24 October 2005.

It would seem that whether or not a Speaker relies heavily on the advice of the clerks is down to the character of the individual concerned. Boothroyd has recalled times when she definitely did not take the advice of the Clerk of the House, especially when determining whether to allow a Private Notice Question, and explains why:

I remembered once, many times, going against the advice of the Clerk of the House but I remember one Clerk saying to my secretary afterwards, “You know, she was right.” Because they wouldn’t advise on policy, they would just advise on structures and on Standing Orders. Of course, that is their job but you, the Speaker, have to determine whether an issue is of such urgency or importance on the discussion outside what the nation might think about it and you decide eventually and very often I went against the will of the Clerk of the House [...] but I do recall on one occasion particularly when, it was Clifford Boulton who said to my secretary, “You know she was right to accept that PNQ”.⁵⁴

This goes back to the quote at the beginning of this chapter from Baroness Boothroyd about having to gauge the mood of the House and of the country because a Speaker must take on board public feeling not just advice from officials.⁵⁵

Boothroyd’s senior Deputy Speaker, the former Conservative MP for Northampton South, Michael Morris, also disagrees with the argument that the Clerk of the House runs the Speakership. Lord Naseby, as Michael Morris is now styled, remembers a particular occasion when he did not take the advice of the Clerk when Dennis Skinner insisted on taking formal votes rather than nodding orders through late one evening:

I gently nudged the Clerk and said to him there is a standing order that allows one to do standing and sitting [to vote], please find it. He found it, and then suggested that I did not use it as it had not been used for the best part of twenty plus years and, further more, the Speaker had gone to bed. So, I decided to use it, it was used, and we finished off the remaining votes and the rebellion collapsed.⁵⁶

Having been an MP for twenty years at that point, Morris had a keen knowledge of the rules of the House and so was able to use his own judgement to resolve the problem.

⁵⁴ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 24 October 2005.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Interview with Lord Naseby, 7 September 2004.

This does illustrate the point that those who occupy the Chair do not necessarily bow to the advice of the clerks.

The Speaker now has to rule on whether matters relating to Scotland, and to a lesser extent Wales and Northern Ireland, should be discussed by the House of Commons since the creation of the devolved legislatures. Baroness Boothroyd remembers that:

I had to rule on it because it was such a new procedure and Members were still raising questions about Scottish affairs and making points in general debate on issues that were not the responsibility of the Westminster Parliament. My rulings did have an impact for a while, but I could not allow matters to be raised or discussed in debate which was outside our area of responsibility.⁵⁷

This is relatively new although Speakers did have to give similar rulings during the era of the Stormont Parliament in Northern Ireland up until 1972.⁵⁸ The former veteran Conservative MP, Sir Teddy Taylor has put a different slant on the issue:

most of the cutting down is done by the clerks. They tell you what you can ask about and what you can't ask about and, to that extent, the questions are usually in order before you start. If someone in a supplementary stretches it a bit then the Speaker could, if he wanted to, curb them but you'll find he [Speaker Martin] doesn't really because he feels if they've got an opinion to express then good luck to them and what ministers often do is say, well, this is actually a matter for the Scottish Executive so I'd say, if anything, it's ministers who do it rather than the Speaker.⁵⁹

The Speaker is also guardian of Members' privileges 'to freedom of speech in debate, to freedom from arrest, and free access to Her Majesty whenever the occasion shall require'.⁶⁰ While these privileges are ancient, the Speaker has had to assume the guardianship role in order to reassert the authority of the House. On 5 April 2000 Speaker Boothroyd reprimanded the Blair government for announcing a sports policy change through the media rather than at the despatch box on the floor of the House.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Notes from Baroness Boothroyd, 6 December 2005.

⁵⁸ See Speaker Whitley's ruling: HC Deb 3 May 1923 cc1623-5.

⁵⁹ Interview with Sir Teddy Taylor, 26 October 2004.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Laundy, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, p. 63.

⁶¹ HC Deb 5 April 2000 c975.

However, this was only a request as the Speaker has no power to demand that a government announce new initiatives in the Commons chamber. Despite Boothroyd's statement being to no avail it does show that the Speaker is a key figure in fighting for the rights of the legislature in what Peter [now Lord] Hennessy has called 'the executive's Constitution'.⁶² Indeed, the Speaker has the duty of being the voice of the House and so must make sure that that voice is heard if the Commons is not being respected in the way that it should. Rogers and Walters have made the argument that:

if Parliament is to be the focus of national attention, then, whether the news is momentous or not, the principle that the nation's representatives in Parliament are told first is an important one; and the Speaker must be its main advocate.⁶³

This is a new role that has come about thanks to the development of round the clock broadcast media during the second half of the post-war period. Governments want to get their message across but it is up to the Speaker to try to ensure that the House of Commons is not left out.

Selwyn Lloyd wrote in his memoirs that, 'Perhaps the most important of the discretions entrusted to the Speaker is the power to select the amendments to be discussed'.⁶⁴ This is indeed an important task because it is crucial in enabling the Opposition to bring the government to account and in ensuring debate. Rogers and Walters highlight the importance of selecting amendments:

This can be of great significance. For example, when in February 2003 options on the future composition of the House of Lords were put before the Commons by the government, the choices were in the form of seven free-standing motions, on each of which the House would taken a decision (in fact everyone was defeated). There was no option that would have allowed a decision on whether there should be a House of Lords at all. However, a Labour back-bencher put down identical amendments to each of the options, declining approval as 'it does not accord with the principle of a unicameral parliament'. The Speaker selected the amendment (in other words, allowed it to be debated and voted upon) and it was defeated by

⁶² Peter Hennessy, *The Hidden Wiring: Unearthing the British Constitution*, (London: Indigo, 1996), p. 142.

⁶³ Rogers & Walters, *How Parliament Works*, Fifth Edition, p. 48.

⁶⁴ Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, p. 94.

390 votes to 172. But it was only because of the Speaker's decision that a substantial minority in favour of abolition were able to record their view.⁶⁵

This demonstrates how the Speaker attempts to ensure that views from across the House are heard. Selecting amendments is all part of the judicial nature of the office of Speaker because he must decide which one warrants debate. Not only does the Speaker have the power to rule on the admissibility of bills, motions and amendments as well as determine whether an emergency adjournment motion meets the necessary criteria but he or she must also interpret the *sub judice* convention. *Erskine May* states that 'matters awaiting the adjudication of a court of law should not be brought forward in debate'.⁶⁶ Speakers must not allow MPs to discuss anything, no matter how topical, which could prejudice the outcome of a court case.

Another of the Speaker's duties is to declare a seat vacant in the event of a Member dying, being diagnosed as mentally insane or having been convicted of a criminal offence. Under the terms of the Lunacy (Vacating of Seats) Act 1886, the Speaker has the power to authorise medical examinations to determine whether a Member is suffering from mental illness. If this Member is found to be in the same state of health after a six month gap then the Speaker is obliged to declare the seat vacant thus making a by-election necessary.⁶⁷ Speaker Boothroyd declared a seat vacant following the conviction of Fiona Jones, the Labour MP for Newark, for fraud over election expenses. However, the conviction was quashed by the Court of Appeal and so Mrs Jones was allowed to resume her seat.⁶⁸ In these instances the Speaker does perform an important task in ensuring that constituencies are represented adequately.

The Speaker is also responsible for deciding which political party forms the official Opposition. This is another important function although it has not been exercised during the postwar period. The last time it came into play was in 1940, following the formation of the coalition government led by Winston Churchill. Speaker Fitzroy

⁶⁵ Rogers & Walters, *How Parliament Works*, Fifth Edition, p. 45.

⁶⁶ *Erskine May, Parliamentary Practice*, 24th Edition, p. 441.

⁶⁷ See Parliamentary Archives: SO/58 Lunacy (Vacating of Seats) Act 1886, 1918-1958.

⁶⁸ See HC Deb 29 April 1999 c476.

rejected the tiny Independent Labour Party's claim to official opposition status.⁶⁹ However, following the collapse of the Conservative Party at the 1997 General Election, several Liberal Democrat MPs occupied the Opposition front bench. Speaker Boothroyd records in her memoirs that:

They were reminded that their place as a minority party was below the gangway that runs further along the Opposition benches. Only the official Opposition, that is the minority party with the largest number of MPs – the Conservatives – had the right to sit above the gangway and speak from the dispatch box.⁷⁰

The Speaker, therefore, had to enforce the rule and make the point that the Conservatives were the recognised Official Opposition. What is clear is that with coalition governments and a much larger third party then this power could have to come into play.

The Speaker must also decide whether a Bill should be forced into law against the wishes of the House of Lords under the terms of the Parliament Acts. *Erskine May* describes the procedure:

a bill which is passed by the House of Commons in two successive sessions (whether of the same Parliament or not), and which, having sent up to the House of Lords at least one month before the end of the session, is rejected by the House of Lords in each of those sessions, shall, on its rejection for the second time by the House of Lords, unless the House of Commons directs to the contrary, be presented to Her Majesty and become an Act of Parliament on the Royal Assent being signified to it.⁷¹

Speaker Martin used this power twice during his time in the Chair. The first time was just a month after his election when he used the procedure to force into law the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 2000 which lowered the age of homosexual consent to sixteen. The second occasion was over the banning of fox hunting in November 2004 when Martin certified the Hunting Bill after being rejected by peers in successive parliamentary sessions. Laundry states that the Speaker's 'certificate is conclusive and

⁶⁹ See HC Deb 29 April 1999 c476.

⁷⁰ Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 262.

⁷¹ Erskine May, *Parliamentary Practice*, 24th Edition, p. 649.

may not be questioned in a court of law'.⁷² All money bills must be determined by the Speaker and, again, this adjudication means that the House of Lords' powers of delay are severely restricted, in this case by only a month. This is clearly an important power although the Speaker is directed by the terms of the Parliament Acts and so what has to be done is pretty straightforward.

Another of the Speaker's powers is the fact that he or she can recall the House of Commons during recess if there is an urgent matter to debate.⁷³ Under Speaker Martin the Commons was recalled on three separate occasions: following the attacks in the USA on September 11th 2001, on 3 April 2002 following the death of the Queen Mother and again on 24 September 2002 to debate possible military action against Iraq. The Speaker can also give permission to hold a debate on a Saturday and this was granted by George Thomas at the time of the Falklands War in April 1982.

The Speaker also has a role to play at the time of the death of the monarch which is both in the Chair of the House and behind the scenes. When King George VI died on 6 February 1952, Speaker Morrison attended a meeting of the Cabinet that morning at 11.30am. At this meeting the following was agreed:

The Cabinet agreed that the meeting of the Privy Council to proclaim the Accession of the new Sovereign should be held at 5pm that day. When the House of Commons met at 2.30pm they would be informed of the Demise of the Crown. The sitting would then be suspended until the Accession Council had been held. Thereafter, the House would meet again for the sole purpose of enabling the Speaker to take the oath of allegiance and to swear in such other Members as were present.⁷⁴

Morrison was clearly there to explain the parliamentary procedures that would have to take place because it is unprecedented for a Speaker to attend a Cabinet meeting. The most important duty for the Speaker at this time is to take the oath of allegiance to the

⁷² Laundy, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, p. 97.

⁷³ Erskine May, *Parliamentary Practice*, 23rd Edition, pp. 277-8.

⁷⁴ National Archives: CAB 128/24, C. C. (52) 11th Conclusions, 6 February 1952.

new monarch. The former Clerk of the House, Roger Sands, has set out the format that would take place:

Over the following days the Speaker presides and passes on to the House messages of condolence received. The Leader [of the House] announces future business, Members take the oath of allegiance to the new Sovereign, arrangements for the Lying-in-State are announced to the House and the House is asked to agree a motion for the House to attend the Lying-in-State. The modern precedent (1936 and 1952) is that normal business is suspended until after the State Funeral.⁷⁵

The Speaker has to be fully aware of all these duties and Speaker Boothroyd recalls that ‘certainly we had documents that came before me on what the role of the Speaker was’.⁷⁶ Moreover, the Speaker could well have to recall the House under Standing Order No. 13 if Parliament was in recess and he or she so is central to all the formalities that go on when a monarch dies.⁷⁷

Although the Speaker is famous for his or her function in the Chair, he or she also has to perform duties and attend meetings behind the scenes that are out of the public eye. Indeed, in order to ensure the smooth conduct of business in the chamber, the Speaker meets with the Leader of the House, the Government Chief Whip and the Opposition Chief Whip on a regular basis. Boothroyd recalls that:

I met them all on a weekly basis. The Chief Whips of the respective parties would come and have a talk; they confided in me and told me of their problems. I would sympathise and offer some solution. The meeting with the Leader of the House was most important and something I always looked forward to. He would let me know the Government’s forthcoming business, and the mid to long term business plans. It was important to keep in regular touch and good relations were formed. Not only was it good for a Speaker to listen, but in turn I could let them know my thoughts, and particularly let the Whips know my thoughts, and particularly let the Whips know of some of their Members who might be difficult to deal with and to remind them that I needed their help in disciplining and educating individual Members to ensure improved conduct.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ ‘Duties of the Speaker on the death of a Sovereign’, note produced by Roger Sands for the author, 4 November 2005.

⁷⁶ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 24 October 2005.

⁷⁷ See ‘Duties of the Speaker on the death of a Sovereign’.

⁷⁸ Notes from Baroness Boothroyd, 6 December 2005.

These meetings, which are referred to as ‘behind the Speaker’s Chair’, are crucial to the smooth running of the House of Commons and ensure that the Speaker is fully up to speed with what is going on.

The Speaker also has informal pastoral responsibilities and looks after Members of Parliament not only in their public duties but also with personal troubles. Lord Weatherill has pointed out the following:

there must always be somebody in a position of authority to whom people can come and open their hearts and people used to come to me and open their hearts.⁷⁹

Indeed, in his television documentary on the life of Betty Boothroyd, Michael Cockerell claims that ‘Madam Speaker liked to keep a motherly eye on her MP charges’.⁸⁰ This demonstrates what a special role the Speaker has and what a close relationship the Chair has with colleagues.

The Speaker is also responsible for overseeing the administration of the House of Commons and is Chairman of the House of Commons Commission which employs all the staff. The Commission was established under the *House of Commons (Administration) Act 1978* which replaced the House of Commons Services Committee set up in 1965. Roger Sands has explained how these administrative duties have increased since the time Laundry was writing:

It was recognised first of all in the House of Commons Administration Act 1978, but it had pre-existed that and it’s become, just as the role as the Clerk of the House has become much more significant in those directions, so the role of the Speaker has since, well I’ve dated it from 1992 roughly, when the House of Commons took over managerial and financial responsibility for a whole number of basic services which previously had been provided for us by government

⁷⁹ Notes from Baroness Boothroyd, 6 December 2005.

⁸⁰ *Call Me Madam: A Profile of Betty Boothroyd* by Michael Cockerell, first broadcast on BBC2, 16 December 2000.

agencies, principal among them being the building, management of the building and the building's budget.⁸¹

Although the Speaker had administrative responsibilities before the 1978 Act and the further reforms in 1992, it is clear that this role has increased in its scope in more recent times and is one that has developed over the post-war period. Moreover, Michael Ryle, who was Clerk of Committees in the late 1980s, has stated that:

The present Commission did not exist before 1978. Speakers before then had no significant role or responsibility for staff employment.⁸²

The Speaker's power to appoint staff in the House of Commons has, therefore, increased substantially in the post-war period demonstrating that the role is by no means confined to presiding over the chamber. Roger Sands, when commenting on the amount of administrative work a Speaker now has to do, has said that:

possibly the number of meetings that the House of Commission which he [the Speaker] chairs has not increased but the weight of the business has increased because of the growth in the House's budget and the matters which the Commission, therefore, has to deal with.⁸³

The Speakership has become a huge managerial job behind the scenes as well as at the same time continuing to fulfil all the duties on stage in the Commons chamber.

A very new administrative task undertaken by the Speaker came into force during the Blair government. The Clerk of the House, Sir Robert Rogers, has explained that:

Something the Speaker does himself, which he's never had to do before is signing off certificates under Section 34 and Section 36 of the *Freedom of Information Act* [2000] and satisfying himself that he's signing them off properly. Now, of course, that is something that only Speaker Martin ever had to do. None of their predecessors has had to do it.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Interview with Roger Sands, 29 July 2004.

⁸² Michael Ryle, in 'The Role of the Speaker of the House of Commons', seminar held 25 February 2002, (Institute for Contemporary British History, 2005, <http://www.icbh.ac.uk/icbh/witness/speaker>), p. 72.

⁸³ Interview with Roger Sands, 29 July 2004.

⁸⁴ Interview with Robert Rogers, 16 December 2010.

Under the Act, the Speaker is allowed to sign a certificate exempting private information about the House or about Members which, if released, would either breach parliamentary privilege or prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs.⁸⁵ This new power was used by Martin in his attempts to shield MPs from the expenses scandal towards the end of the Speakership. In the end, when it was exposed how he had used this power to try to protect MPs, this contributed to his eventual resignation. Whilst a Speaker has a duty to try to help the MPs who elected him, he now had a much wider duty to the British public in upholding good standards in the House.

Prior to this, Speaker Boothroyd campaigned to raise the standard of debate and conduct in the House and records in her memoirs that:

My call for urgent action in 1996 had prompted an inquiry into the conduct of twenty-five Members that was analogous in its scope to a statutory tribunal of inquiry. Most members were exonerated, but five were found to have fallen below the standards of the House. The inquiry was wholly unlike anything the House had envisaged when it appointed Sir Gordon Downey its first Commissioner for Standards but I had no other choice if the crisis of public confidence was to be contained.⁸⁶

This demonstrates just how influential the Speaker can be and shows that a call for action from the Chair can indeed make things happen. It is the House of Commons Commission, chaired by the Speaker, which employs the Parliamentary Commissioner and since the creation of this post there have been high profile investigations into the business activities of the former Paymaster-General, Geoffrey Robinson and into a loan he gave to the former Cabinet minister Peter Mandelson that was not declared in the register of interests. In this sense, Members of Parliament now have a ‘watch-dog’ who is completely independent of anyone else in the House of Commons. The creation of this office has meant that the Speaker does not have to get involved with investigating allegations against Members and so can be totally removed from the process and, therefore, remain completely impartial. The downside of this was exposed during the

⁸⁵ See Sections 34 and Sections 36, *Freedom of Information Act 2000*.

⁸⁶ Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 277.

expenses scandal of 2009 when the public, the media and even MPs still expected the Speaker to step in and take personal action.

The Speaker is also responsible for the security of the House of Commons. The Conservative front bench spokesman on Northern Ireland, Airey Neave, was killed in the Commons car park by a bomb planted by Irish Republican terrorists on 30 March 1979 and since that time the Speaker has overseen security. Roger Sands has pointed out that:

although he [the Speaker] will involve the Commission, and certainly if security works are envisaged which are going to impose a significant charge on the annual budget for which the Commission is responsible, nonetheless, for smaller scale measures the buck does stop with him. Things like, you know, the pass system and access arrangements and so on.⁸⁷

Speaker Martin was faced with responding to two very serious breaches of security during 2004. The first incident involved purple powder being thrown down from the gallery onto the government front bench and the second witnessed fox hunting supporters storming the chamber. Under pressure from senior ministers, the Speaker appointed Peter Mason, a top-ranking MI5 officer, to take over as security co-ordinator, to oversee the work previously undertaken by the Serjeant at Arms.⁸⁸

The Speaker also acts as an ambassador for the House of Commons and either hosts or attends international events. Indeed, the Speaker attends the Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers of Commonwealth Parliaments which has met periodically since 1969. In this forum Speakers from the various Lower and Upper Houses of Parliament within the Commonwealth can exchange views on how to approach different issues of mutual interest. Baroness Boothroyd has recalled the following:

⁸⁷ Interview with Roger Sands, 29 July 2004.

⁸⁸ See David Cracknell & David Leppard, 'MI5 agent will build Fortress Westminster', *The Times*, 19 December 2004. The Serjeant at Arms is an office dating back to 1415. The holder is responsible for carrying the Mace in the Speaker's procession and he or she is in charge of the security of the House of Commons.

I received a huge number of invitations from overseas Parliaments and spent a good deal of the recesses, summer, Easter and Christmas, travelling abroad to meet these requests [...] I addressed the Russian Duma, the Ukraine and Slovak Parliaments and many others as well as speaking to various Constitutional and Foreign Affairs Committees in the various countries visited. I also put in a regular attendance at the Commonwealth Speakers' Conference, European Speakers Conference, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union Conference at the United Nations. There was a large agenda outside Westminster to be tackled. It was exhausting, not least for my staff, but I liked meeting people and representing the Commons in this way.⁸⁹

Since Boothroyd's time there has also been the introduction of the G8 Speakers' Conference which has met every year since 2002 and was attended by Michael Martin during his period in the Chair.

In addition to representing the Commons abroad, the Speaker also has to entertain foreign dignitaries in the grace and favour residence of Speaker's House. Selwyn Lloyd wrote in his memoirs that:

From time to time I was also asked to entertain a visiting Head of State who particularly wished to come to the House of Commons. The Queen of the Netherlands, the King of Afghanistan and the President of the West German Federal Republic were among those who visited Speaker's House.⁹⁰

The very fact that the Speaker entertains foreign royalty and world leaders demonstrates the prestige and dignity that is associated with the office. Baroness Boothroyd believes that the Speaker should be seen on the international stage because:

Many Parliaments are anxious to hear about the way we manage our affairs at Westminster. Westminster may not find the respect I believe it should have in many parts of this country, but it is held in the highest regard by overseas legislatures, many of whom are keen to examine our procedures and our ways and means of doing things.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Notes from Baroness Boothroyd, 6 December 2005.

⁹⁰ Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, p. 126.

⁹¹ Notes from Baroness Boothroyd, 6 December 2005.

The Speaker is also used by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to improve relations with other countries by means of parliamentary diplomacy. Lord Weatherill explained his experience of this:

And the first month that I was Speaker Geoffrey [Howe, the Foreign Secretary] came to see me and asked if I would go to Romania. I asked, 'What for?' And he said Ceausescu [the Romanian leader] was breaking away from the Soviet Union and they couldn't get a line on him, 'Couldn't you go and see the Speaker, and take our man with you, and ask to see the President and get some line on it'. And, thereafter, there was not a recess when I wasn't asked to go somewhere [...] Really not the job of the Speaker, but merely I think a 'visiting card' to get ambassadors in. I think that was probably new in my time.⁹²

This demonstrates that the respect that the office of Speaker commands around the world can be used to the British government's advantage when it comes to diplomatic relations and uncovering information about foreign countries. This is a newer development for the office of Speaker which has evolved in the last two decades. Lord Weatherill is right when he says that this is not the job of the Speaker because he or she is not a diplomat or a representative of the government but of Parliament. The former Clerk of the House, Sir Donald Limon, confirmed that Betty Boothroyd conducted similar diplomatic missions when she was Speaker and so this role has continued.⁹³ The Speaker is, therefore, a very useful tool when it comes to strengthening diplomatic relations with another country because he or she can make visits and be granted audiences thanks to the dignity of the office.

The Speaker also represents Parliament at national services, commemorations and state occasions. For example, the Speaker is always present at the Remembrance Sunday service at the Cenotaph in Whitehall. Indeed, the Speaker is seventh [sixth if you discount the defunct role of Lord High Treasurer] in the official order of precedence after the Royal Family and ahead of all peers except those who hold offices which outrank his own.⁹⁴ The fact that the Speakership is considered to be a high office, and

⁹² Lord Weatherill in 'The Role of the Speaker of the House of Commons', p. 77.

⁹³ Sir Donald Limon in *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Laundry, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, p 67.

that the incumbent is present at all state ceremonies, demonstrates that the Speaker plays a national role and represents Parliament on these occasions.

One ceremony that the Speaker does, of course, partake in every day the House is sitting is the Speaker's Procession. The Speaker leaves his residence preceded by the Bar Doorkeeper, the Serjeant at Arms carrying the Mace and followed by the Trainbearer, Chaplain and Secretary. The formal procession goes via the Library Corridor, the Lower Waiting Hall, Central and Members' Lobbies to the Commons chamber before every sitting. This route was adopted during the Second World War when MPs had to use the House of Lords chamber because the Commons had been destroyed by enemy bombing. It has been retained in preference to the shorter pre-war route because it allows visitors in the Central Lobby to witness the ceremony.⁹⁵ This procession is the event around which the Speaker's day revolves. The Speaker has to be present for this set ceremony and so the rest of the day has to be worked out on that basis.

One change that took place during George Thomas's period in office was the increase in the number of parties hosted by the Speaker in Speaker's House. In his memoirs Thomas records that, 'In all my time in Parliament, Speaker's House had remained something of a mystery even to members, very few of whom had a chance to see it properly'.⁹⁶ Thomas was determined to change that and so Speaker's House has become a neutral meeting ground for politicians to meet, relax and chat informally away from the Commons chamber. Even before Thomas's time, Selwyn Lloyd wrote in his book on the Speakership that he would regularly invite seven MPs to have lunch with him and believed that these occasions 'were extremely valuable to me for keeping in touch with the feelings of back-benchers, and for getting to know younger Members and their first impression of the House'.⁹⁷ However, this was not good enough for Lloyd's successor who wrote:

⁹⁵ See *The Speaker*, Factsheet M2, Members Series, House of Commons Information Office, Revised September 2003.

⁹⁶ Thomas, *Mr Speaker: The Memoirs of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 161.

⁹⁷ Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, p. 125.

I passionately believe that the House of Commons belongs to the people, and that therefore everything connected with the Speaker, the official embodiment of the House, also belongs to them. I was determined that Speaker's House and its magnificent dining-room would not be used just for formal official occasions. It was also my home and I entertained my friends there too. So a great cross-section from the Archbishop of Canterbury to Menachem Begin, from ex-President Nixon to Chairman Hua of China, from Penelope Keith to Sheik Yamani, from policemen to union leaders, sat at that table.⁹⁸

Cockerell mentions in his television documentary that 'Anyone who was anyone in politics would come to Betty Boothroyd's parties'.⁹⁹ Indeed, Boothroyd records in her memoirs that:

Speakers have held formal dinners and levees for centuries, and guests were expected to attend in court dress. The dinners continued (without court dress) and I added buffet suppers and musical evenings to the social diary, as well as carol concerts and scores of engagements to which MPs and their partners were invited, along with other guests. I discovered that many long-serving Commons staff – such as cleaners, canteen and post-office workers and police officers – had never seen inside the house and did my best to remedy that.¹⁰⁰

So, it seems that the Speaker now holds far more informal gatherings as well as the State dinners. This is yet another duty that the Speaker has to perform but the fact that he or she enables opposing politicians to meet socially on a non-confrontational basis is all part of the behind the scenes work which allows the House of Commons to function.

Other duties that the Speaker performs include being the ex-officio chairman of the four Boundary Commissions for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland although this is only symbolic and not an active role. It is also the case that the post-war period witnessed the referral of questions concerning electoral reform to a conference of Members of Parliament chaired by the Speaker. Speaker King presided over an electoral reform conference which recommended lowering the voting age to 20 in 1968. Speaker Lloyd chaired a conference between 1973 and 1974 which proposed that the

⁹⁸ Thomas, *Mr Speaker: The Memoirs of Viscount Tonypanady*, p. 162.

⁹⁹ *Call Me Madam*, BBC Television.

¹⁰⁰ Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 165.

minimum age for a parliamentary candidate should be lowered from 21 to 18 and Speaker Thomas presided over a conference which looked at the number of parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland.¹⁰¹ In his last year in office, Michael Martin chaired a Speaker's Conference to examine the under-representation of women and ethnic minorities in the House of Commons and this report was concluded by his successor in 2010.¹⁰² Whilst these electoral conferences do not happen all the time, they nevertheless are an extra responsibility that the Speaker has to undertake when the need arises.

The Speaker has an enormous workload and really the public face of the Speakership, that is the chairing of Commons proceedings, is only a small part of what has to be done. The job of the Speaker is like an iceberg; the bit that everyone sees is the small part above sea-level with the much bigger bit under the water being the huge amount of behind the scenes work that is undertaken. Baroness Boothroyd has described a typical day when she was Speaker:

I started work around half past seven in the morning with radio news, the newspapers and the daily Order Paper (that day's agenda). I needed to familiarise myself with all Parliamentary Questions of that day and to consider who might stand to be called for a supplementary Question, for example, Chairmen of Select Committees related to the subject matter. I also considered Questions that would not be reached that related to an earlier Question. I took the view that if a Member took the initiative to table a Question that was far down on the Order Paper and related to an earlier one, he/she had some right to be called for a supplementary. It was very detailed work, but I regarded it as essential.¹⁰³

This demonstrates just how seriously Boothroyd took her work and is a good illustration of the background work that a Speaker has to do in order to ensure fairness. It also shows that the Speaker can be very hands-on and takes decisions without necessarily taking advice from officials. Boothroyd continues:

¹⁰¹ Laundy, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, pp. 98-9.

¹⁰² See HC Deb 22 July 2008 c659.

¹⁰³ Notes from Baroness Boothroyd, 6 December 2005.

At 9.30 my secretary and I would go through it all again. Then other staff would join us to go through correspondence, letter signing, faxes, lists for social gatherings, diary engagements and detailed, long-term planning for overseas visits and weekend engagements. There were security meetings and heads of various departments to see, but 12 noon was the crucial meeting of the day which no one was allowed to miss, with the 3 Clerks at the Table, Serjeant-at-Arms, my three deputies and secretary. I conducted a “wash-up” session of the previous day, an examination of the current day’s dossier and attempted to anticipate the hazards and pitfalls of that day and suggest how we might best deal with them. At twenty minutes to 1 o’clock a slot was kept available for visiting VIPs, ambassadors, High Commissioners who wished to pay a courtesy call or to say farewell. The House started at 2.30pm and I would remain in the Chair for a couple of hours, or, as a matter of courtesy, until a Secretary of State had completed a Ministerial Statement and questions. From around 5 o’clock I would see Whips or the Leader of the House, or anyone who wished to see me as my door was always open to Members. And then of course at about 7 o’clock the receptions and dinners would commence in the Speaker’s State Rooms.¹⁰⁴

This shows what a busy schedule the Speaker has and demonstrates that the job entails far more than the chairing of the House of Commons. Indeed, the Speaker is usually only in the Chair for about three hours a day and yet the rest of the time is packed with meetings and with preparing for that day’s business.

The post-war period has witnessed the continuation of the much valued impartiality of the Speakership with the office enjoying wide-ranging powers to regulate the debates in the House of Commons. Since the Second World War, Speakers have had to maintain order at times when the House was very unruly, particularly during Parliaments when the government of the day only had a small majority. What has changed is the amount of background and administrative work that a Speaker has to undertake. The Speaker not only has to be a skilled presiding officer and guardian of the rules, he or she now has to be the chairman of the board, a keen entertainer and an international statesman. The fact that visiting foreign dignitaries like to pay a visit to Speaker’s House also shows the grandeur of the office and the fact that it is respected abroad. The Speaker is no longer confined to the corridors of Westminster as he or she must now represent the House of Commons at international events which is a role that has developed and

¹⁰⁴ Notes from Baroness Boothroyd, 6 December 2005.

increased in the post-war era. The Speaker's role has grown in relation to the overall development of Parliament and the office has had to adapt to these changes. Much is expected of the person who holds the office of Speaker because he or she must now be the embodiment of the House and convey its traditions to all those who wish to learn through its example.

CHAPTER THREE

THE EARLY POSTWAR SPEAKERS: THE SPEAKERSHIPS OF COLONEL DOUGLAS CLIFTON BROWN (1943-1951) AND WILLIAM SHEPHERD MORRISON (1951-1959)

By common consent, the manner in which Clifton Brown steered the House of Commons through the difficult period of post-war transition was both efficient and admirable.

Philip Laundy, 1964.¹

I must say that although he [Clifton Brown] was not a person to laugh much, he was very polite, listened carefully, didn't commit himself much, but he was a good Speaker.

Lord Renton, Member of Parliament for Huntingdonshire 1945-1979, 2006.²

I think he [W. S. Morrison] was very well suited to being Speaker [...] he was by nature not a strongly partisan person. He very rarely quoted the Bible [...] and the one quotation which has stuck very firmly in my mind, which I've heard him use more than once, comes from the Book of Proverbs which is, 'A soft answer turneth away wrath' and that catches something very characteristic of him because he didn't like rows.

Dr Alasdair Morrison, son of W. S. Morrison, 2004.³

I think the feeling was that he [W. S. Morrison] was an inspirational choice really in many ways because he had a great deal of respect in the House, a lovely sense of humour and he wasn't regarded by lots of people as a typical Tory if you like.

Mavis, Lady Dunrossil, daughter-in-law of W. S. Morrison, 2005.⁴

The first of the post-war Speakers, Colonel Douglas Clifton Brown, was actually elected during the Second World War in 1943 following the death of Speaker Fitzroy. To this military gentleman fell the task of presiding over a post-war House of Commons that was dominated by the Labour Party for the first time. On Clifton Brown's

¹ Philip Laundy, *The Office of Speaker*, (London: Cassell, 1964), p. 341.

² Interview with Lord Renton, 1 March 2006.

³ Interview with Alasdair Morrison, 13 November 2004.

⁴ Interview with Mavis, Lady Dunrossil, 19 March 2005.

retirement in 1951, the Scottish barrister and former Cabinet minister, William Shepherd Morrison, was elected to take his place. This chapter will fill a void in parliamentary literature by looking at the two men who took the Chair in the early days of the post-war era and will examine their background and the manner in which they executed their duties as Speaker of the House of Commons.

Douglas Clifton Brown was born on 16 August 1879 and was educated at Eton College and then went on to Trinity College, Cambridge. He was commissioned in the Lancashire Royal Garrison Artillery in 1900 and transferred to the 1st Dragoon Guards in 1902 in which he later obtained his captaincy. In 1910 Clifton Brown joined the special reserve of his regiment and during the First World War he served in France and Belgium. In 1919 he was promoted to Major and from 1925 to 1929 he was the lieutenant-colonel commanding The Northumberland Hussars Yeomanry and was awarded the brevet of Colonel.⁵

Despite his continuing military career, Clifton Brown was first elected to Parliament for Hexham in 1918 although he lost the seat at the 1923 General Election. Clifton Brown swiftly regained Hexham in 1924 and soon became a member of the Panel of Chairmen of Committees appointed by the Speaker. In 1938 he became Chairman of Ways and Means and Deputy Speaker which made him the natural choice to succeed Speaker Fitzroy when he died in office in 1943. Indeed, Sir Cuthbert Headlam, who was Conservative MP for Barnard Castle in the 1920s and 1930s and then for Newcastle North from 1940 until 1951, recorded in his diary entry for Wednesday 3 March 1943:

Attended the 1922 Committee later in the afternoon – the succession to the Speakership was discussed – except for Ned Grigg [MP for Altrincham] and a few others, almost everyone was in favour of having Douglas Clifton Brown as Speaker.⁶

⁵ See Obituary of Viscount Ruffside, *The Times*, 6 May 1958.

⁶ Stuart Ball (ed.), *Parliament and Politics in the age of Churchill and Attlee: The Headlam Diaries 1935-1951*, (Cambridge: Royal Historical Society, 1999), diary entry for 3 March 1943, p. 358.

This is backed up by Harold Macmillan who, when writing down some thoughts on the Speakership of Clifton Brown, recorded in his diary entry for 12-17 March 1951 that:

He [Clifton Brown] was made Speaker during the war, against the wishes both of Churchill and Eden, by the pressure of the Tory Party. Churchill, who then rode magnificently in the saddle of the state but uneasily in that of the party, gave in.⁷

The reason that Clifton Brown did not have the backing of the Prime Minister was because, according to William Shepherd Morrison's widow, that the job had been offered to her husband on the basis that some MPs were anxious that the elevation of the Chairman of Ways and Means to the Speakership should not become a precedent.⁸ Morrison declined Churchill's offer and so delayed becoming Speaker for another eight years. Clifton Brown was, therefore, elected on Tuesday 9 March 1943 thanks to the fact that Morrison did not take up the post and because he enjoyed the support of the Conservative Parliamentary Party. Towards the end of the Second World War, Clifton Brown was the first Speaker to travel abroad and make diplomatic tours on behalf of the House of Commons. In August 1944, he travelled over to Normandy and he recorded:

It was a proud moment for me to feel, when I landed back in Heston, that the Speaker of the House of Commons had been in direct contact with our fighting forces and those of our Allies.⁹

However, this chapter will look at when he was re-elected to the Speakership following the 1945 General Election and his execution of the office of Speaker during the first two post-war Parliaments.

Clifton Brown's obituary in *The Times* went as far as to say that he would 'probably be remembered as the most unconventional of Speakers'.¹⁰ The reason for this is that he

⁷ Peter Catterall (ed.), *The Macmillan Diaries: The Cabinet Years, 1950-1957*, (London: Macmillan, 2003), dairy entry for 12-17 March 1951, p. 57.

⁸ See Philip Laundry, 'The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century' in S. A. Walkland, *The House of Commons in the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 141.

⁹ *My Birthday Trip of 1944*, Private Papers of Viscount Ruffside (held by Anthony Clifton Brown).

¹⁰ Obituary of Viscount Ruffside, *The Times*, 6 May 1958.

was less austere than his immediate predecessors. A profile of Speaker Clifton Brown published in 1945 gives a good example of this:

His stately progress through the Lobbies with his train-bearer, Mr W. J. Pusey, preceding him, calling for bared heads and a clear passage, has about it a friendliness that no predecessor has been able to contrive. The first time he passed by, after his election to office, Mr Speaker solemnly paused in his stride, bowed gracefully to a row of astonished MPs who were bowing to *him*, said with a twinkle, "Thank you very much!" and passed on.¹¹

Moreover, Clifton Brown, having been allowed to stay in office by the Attlee government, was the first Speaker to preside over a House of Commons which was dominated by the Labour Party. In order to maintain the support of the whole House, the Conservative Clifton Brown had to ensure that the Labour government was allowed to get its business through whilst at the same time maintaining strict impartiality.

However, the former Cabinet minister and Conservative MP for Kingston-upon-Thames between 1945 and 1972, John Boyd-Carpenter, recorded in his memoirs that when he entered the Commons 'the Speaker at that time [Clifton Brown] was the weakest in my time in Parliament'.¹² Indeed, Boyd-Carpenter was very critical of Clifton Brown's Speakership and wrote:

He [Clifton Brown] made the mistake of letting Members argue with him, and he generally lost the argument. He was inclined to be petulant, and lacked dignity of either appearance, voice or manner. Sometimes when summoned to give a ruling during late sittings he arrived looking dishevelled and obviously having been in bed.¹³

This obviously seemed unprofessional to Boyd-Carpenter. A Speaker is on constant watch when the House is sitting and must be on hand to come to the chamber very quickly if he is needed to make a ruling or to tackle unruly behaviour from MPs.

¹¹ 'Profile – Mr Speaker', *The Observer*, 18 March 1945.

¹² John Boyd-Carpenter, *Way of Life: The Memoirs of John Boyd-Carpenter*, (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980), p. 77.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 78.

Boyd-Carpenter recalls in his memoirs one evening when Speaker Clifton Brown was recalled to close a debate:

On one of these occasions he sought to put without debate a motion which under the rules was debatable. I rose and asked him direct whether he was ruling that I could not speak on it. 'Very well,' he said, 'if you want to kill your Speaker'.¹⁴

The burden placed on the Speaker in terms of the hours he had to spend presiding over the House was much greater then because the third Deputy Speaker position was not created until 1971.¹⁵ Clifton Brown's remark shows that this amount of workload had most definitely taken its toll. Moreover, Harold Macmillan wrote in his diary that Clifton Brown 'has always regarded a late sitting as a sort of personal affront'.¹⁶

However, Lord Renton, who was Conservative MP for Huntingdonshire between 1945 and 1979, recalled discussing Clifton Brown's Speakership with his friend John Boyd-Carpenter:

I remember he and I disagreeing about Clifton Brown. I quite agree Clifton Brown was not a very strong Speaker but there was no real need for a strong Speaker. The great thing was the Speaker should deal with outstandingly bad behaviour and there wasn't much.¹⁷

On one occasion Speaker Clifton Brown did have to reprimand Winston Churchill who was Leader of the Opposition at the time.¹⁸ It happened on 4 March 1947 when the backbench Conservative MP for Bucklow, William Shepherd, and Winston Churchill both rose simultaneously to ask a supplementary question of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Dalton, following on from an answer given to Shepherd's main question. Clifton Brown remarked that 'The Front Bench must not gatecrash on a backbencher' but when Churchill objected the Speaker ruled that:

¹⁴ Boyd-Carpenter, *Way of Life: The Memoirs of John Boyd-Carpenter*, p. 78.

¹⁵ See Selwyn Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 111.

¹⁶ Catterall, *The Macmillan Diaries: The Cabinet Years, 1950-1957*, diary entry for 12-17 March 1951, p. 57.

¹⁷ Interview with Lord Renton, 1 March 2006.

¹⁸ See Laundry, *The Office of Speaker*, pp 341-342.

It is always my custom that when an hon. Member asks a Question he is entitled to the first supplementary, and if a Member of the Front bench wants to get up, surely he can look round to see if the hon. Member who put the Question has risen. Personally, I do not see, if the right hon. Gentleman does not look round, what the difference is between that and gatecrashing.¹⁹

Whilst Clifton Brown did not back down, he made the point that if Churchill took offence at the term ‘gatecrashing’ then he was sorry.²⁰ Clearly, Shepherd allowed his leader to continue because Churchill put his supplementary question to Dalton. Nevertheless, this episode demonstrates that Speaker Clifton Brown was not afraid to rebuke even the most senior of parliamentarians if he thought that they were not respecting the etiquette of the House. In his obituary in *The Times*, the remark was made that:

He [Clifton Brown] always remembered that it was the special duty of the Chair to see that minorities were not brow-beaten and got a hearing in debate.²¹

Clifton Brown’s travels to see British and Allied forces at the front at the close of the Second World War started a whole new role for the Speakership which saw the office grow beyond the confines of the Houses of Parliament. In late November 1947, Clifton Brown went to Paris to be awarded the Grand Croix de la Legion d’Honneur, the highest decoration in France. In an article he wrote for the local newspaper in Hexham, Clifton Brown recorded:

This was the first time in history that the Speaker of the House of Commons has been invited to visit officially a foreign country, and I know of no case where, as chief representative of Parliament, a Speaker has received such a high honour.²²

This was undoubtedly because he had made those personal visits to the theatres of war and had taken the trouble to talk to servicemen and civilians in France. As Speaker, he was the figure head of the British Parliament and so now acted as its ambassador

¹⁹ HC Deb 4 March 1947 cc239-240.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Obituary of Viscount Ruffside, *The Times*, 6 May 1958.

²² Douglas Clifton Brown, ‘The Speaker Describes a Trip to France’, *Hexham Courant*, 6 December 1947.

abroad. The Second World War, and the more hands-on and adventurous nature of Clifton Brown, changed the office of Speaker from a purely official Westminster based role into one which added overseas travel and representing Parliament abroad to its job description.

The highlight of Clifton Brown's Speakership was the opening of the new House of Commons chamber, which replaced the one destroyed by bombing during the Second World War, on 26 October 1950. Sir Ralph Verney, who was Speaker's Secretary at the time, recorded some of the events of that day:

It was a truly dramatic moment when we entered the new Chamber for the first time, in dead silence, in this packed House. Then followed the Prime Minister [Clement Attlee], moving his Motion of Welcome to all our visiting Speakers and Representatives from the Dominions and Colonies of the British Empire. This was seconded by Winston Churchill and supported by Clement Davies, the leader of the Liberal Party, and by Lord Winterton, the Father of the House.²³

It fell to Clifton Brown to preside over this truly historic moment and to lead the grand procession of Commonwealth Speakers into Westminster Hall where King George VI addressed the assembled gathering from the two Houses of Parliament. This ceremony was one of those where the Speaker was centre stage, entertaining dignitaries from across the world and wearing all the formal regalia. The dignity and importance of the office of Speaker would have been evident on that day and Colonel Clifton Brown was fortunate enough to be the incumbent.

Towards the end of Clifton Brown's period in the Chair, Macmillan wrote down some comments on his Speakership which support the views of John Boyd-Carpenter:

Mr Speaker is clearly breaking up [...] Now Mr Speaker has begun to lose control of the House. His rulings are attacked and argued about and he allows general

²³ Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop (ed.), *Secretary to the Speaker: Ralph Verney's Correspondence*, House of Commons Library Document No. 22, (London: The Stationery Office 1999), p. 196.

talk about them to go on, sometimes for half an hour at a time. Late at night, he alternates between weak appeals, and weaker threats.²⁴

Whilst Macmillan felt that the Speaker was losing control of the House, Laundy, when looking back at Clifton Brown's tenure in the Chair, does not indicate that this was so and has written that:

Clifton Brown ruled with tact and patience rather than through force of personality. He coupled firmness with flexibility, and if the rod of iron was seldom evident in his equipment, his authoritative command of procedure and the universal respect in which he was held rendered it scarcely necessary.²⁵

However, the problems that Macmillan records in his account are also referred to by Laundy which shows that Clifton Brown's last year in the Chair was particularly difficult:

Perhaps his [Clifton Brown's] most trying period of office was during the short-lived Parliament of 1950-1 when the Labour Party struggled to carry on the Government with a precarious majority of six. The keen political rivalry between the evenly balanced parties led to long and arduous sittings and frequent procedural disputes, occasioned by the natural desire of each party to score off the other, in which the Speaker was constantly being called upon to arbitrate.²⁶

Unlike Macmillan, Laundy does not believe that Clifton Brown lost command of the House and indeed he wrote that, 'The conscientious manner in which he [Clifton Brown] ensured fair play, often in circumstances which would have frayed the most placid temper, was a triumph of endurance'.²⁷ Moreover, one of Clifton Brown's successors in the Chair, Dr Horace King, who was the newly elected Labour MP for Southampton Test in 1950, wrote how

²⁴ Catterall, *The Macmillan Diaries: The Cabinet Years, 1950-1957*, diary entry for 12-17 March 1951, pp. 57-8.

²⁵ Laundy, *The Office of Speaker*, p. 342.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

a new Member, seeking to be called, waved his papers at the Chair. He was sent for by Speaker Clifton Brown who said to him that he must not do that, and, that because he had done so he would be moved down the list a number of places.²⁸

This episode demonstrates that Clifton Brown was not prepared to allow standards to slip during the 1950-1951 Parliament. He did not allow this incident to pass unnoticed and he even punished the MP concerned in order to ensure that such discourtesy to the Chair did not happen again.

Clearly, periods in which a government only enjoys a very slender majority are far more difficult for a Speaker because the tensions are greater and Opposition Members want to do their utmost to outdo the other side. It is perhaps the case that Macmillan and Boyd-Carpenter did not think of Clifton Brown as being particularly effective in the Chair because he ensured fair play and did not allow Conservative MPs to always get their own way. On the other hand, Lord Renton was not critical of Clifton Brown's period in the Chair. What is most probably the case is that Clifton Brown's last year as Speaker was a difficult one and it would have taken its toll as he himself admitted. Indeed, it was written in *The Times* that:

Clifton Brown was plagued during his later years in the Chair, with many complaints of breach of privilege and he had difficult decisions to take, often with very little time to consider them. He did his best in trying circumstances, but the heavy burden affected his health for a time.²⁹

There was clearly great pressure on the Speaker during this period and, as always, it is crucial that the incumbent maintains the notion of impartiality and does not take decisions that risk this in any way.

Speaker Clifton Brown's obituary sums up his achievements whilst in the Chair as follows:

²⁸ Parliamentary Archives, HC/LB/1/131 (Part 1 of 2), *Journal as Speaker*, an unpublished first person account of his tenure by Lord Maybray-King, c. 1970, p. 300.

²⁹ Obituary of Viscount Ruffside, *The Times*, 6 May 1958.

he was able to realize his three ambitions – to lead the House of Commons into St Margaret’s Church for the thanksgiving service at the end of hostilities, to sit in the Speaker’s Chair when it was re-erected in the new House of Commons, and to turn on the switch which controls the lantern on the top of Big Ben when peace came.³⁰

Two of these ambitions came early on in his Speakership but Clifton Brown had to wait a bit longer until he could preside in the new chamber. As a result of his bad health, Clifton Brown would have liked to have retired at the 1950 General Election but he felt compelled to stay on in the knowledge that it was going to be a tight contest.³¹ Whilst this demonstrates great commitment which, as already indicated, was to result in a negative effect on his health, this postponement of Clifton Brown’s retirement did allow him to fulfil that last ambition of sitting in the new Commons chamber.

Clifton Brown retired at the 1951 General Election and was later elevated to the peerage as the Viscount Ruffside of Hexham. When the new Parliament met on 31 October, the House of Commons had to elect itself a new Speaker. Mavis, Lady Dunrossil, daughter-in-law of Clifton Brown’s successor, William Shepherd Morrison, recalls that:

He [Morrison] was invited obviously, he didn’t know what job he was going to get when they [the Conservatives] got back in again and I remember the excitement when he was invited up. I’m not sure whether he was offered something else or not but, anyway, they were thrilled to accept the Speakership so that was great.³²

This remark demonstrates just how much the Speakership was still in the gift of the Prime Minister in 1951. It seems that the Speakership was treated very much like a Prime Ministerial appointment and one was summoned to No. 10 in the same way as if you were going to become a minister and join the government. Lady Dunrossil’s use of the word ‘they’ also shows that Morrison and his wife Allison were very much a team when it came to his political career.

³⁰ Obituary of Viscount Ruffside, *The Times*, 6 May 1958.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Interview with Mavis, Lady Dunrossil, 19 March 2005.

Once Speaker Morrison was elected to the Chair on 31 October 1951, following the first contested Speakership election for 56 years, his son, Alasdair Morrison, remembered:

There was a bit of a change of the guard when my father became Speaker because Clifton Brown, who'd been before him, was a fairly solid country landowner, used to a fairly solid kind of existence, and he had a butler called Dover. Dover got the surprise of his life sharply because on the first morning within a couple of hours more or less of the announcement being made that he [Morrison] was going to be Speaker, or his taking up office, he got four calls from the four of us sons all asking to speak to our parents and reverse the charges please which showed things weren't going to be quite the same in future.³³

William Shepherd Morrison, known as 'Shakes' because he liked to recite Shakespeare, was born on 8 October 1893 in Torinturk, Argyll and Bute.³⁴ Alasdair Morrison, described his father's early life and how it affected his later career:

He was one of these people who had taken a terrific beating in World War One. He had been at Edinburgh University [reading law] for two years already when it broke out and, as a side interest, he had been doing what's called the 'Battery', which was the gunner section of the officer training corps there. So, in fact, he received his commission on October 14th, I think it was, 1914 and he was in France very soon after serving most of the time as a forward artillery officer. He had what I call 'a good war', he was mentioned in dispatches, got a Military Cross, a wound and so on, a minor wound, and came out alive at the beginning of 1919. He would never talk about it at all afterwards, absolutely not at all, but I think it left a great impression on him that war was to be avoided at all costs.³⁵

Morrison completed his law degree and was called to the bar in 1923. He stood as the Unionist candidate for the Western Isles at both the 1923 and 1924 General Elections but was unsuccessful. He finally entered Parliament in 1929 as Conservative MP for Cirencester and Tewkesbury and soon rose the ranks becoming Financial Secretary to the Treasury in 1935. Alasdair Morrison believed that his father was side-lined when Churchill became Prime Minister in 1940 because

³³ Interview with Alasdair Morrison, 13 November 2004.

³⁴ See 'Portrait Gallery: The Speaker', *The Sunday Times*, 12 October 1952.

³⁵ Interview with Alasdair Morrison, 13 November 2004.

I think it's fair to say that he [W. S. Morrison] was also a fairly loyal Chamberlain supporter largely because he thought that Chamberlain was right to do everything he possibly could to avoid a recurrence of war and partly temperament because he was of a conciliatory disposition.³⁶

Nevertheless, Morrison was included in the ministerial team, becoming Postmaster General on the creation of the war-time coalition and in 1943 he became the first ever Minister for Town and Country Planning. Morrison continued as a front bench spokesman with the Town and Country Planning portfolio whilst the Conservatives were in Opposition between 1945 and 1951. His ministerial background was to prove controversial when he was put forward for the Speakership in 1951 and was the main reason why the election was contested. Despite this contest, on 31 October 1951, Morrison became the 149th Speaker of the House of Commons and the first Scot to be chosen since 1835 when James Abercromby, later Lord Dumfermline, was elected to the office.³⁷

Morrison had to prove his worth when he first became Speaker because of the nature by which he arrived at the office. He did not enjoy the support of the Labour benches and so he had to demonstrate the impartiality and fairness that are necessary in a good Speaker. The Parliamentary Labour Party minutes of April and May 1952, just six months after Morrison's election to the Chair, record much criticism of his Speakership.³⁸ On 24 April 1952 the minutes record that:

Mr Harry Hynd [Labour MP for Accrington] referred to a Motion which had been tabled by Mr Sidney Silverman [Labour MP for Nelson and Colne] and three other Labour Members complaining about the conduct of the Chair.³⁹

At the next meeting on 29 April, it was also recorded that 'Mr R. Paget [Labour MP for Northampton] referred briefly to complaints against actions by the Chair on a number of recent occasions, and suggested that some action ought to be taken with regard to

³⁶ Interview with Alasdair Morrison, 13 November 2004.

³⁷ Obituary of Lord Dunrossil, *The Times*, 3 February 1961.

³⁸ See Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Parliamentary Labour Party Minutes, minutes of the meetings held on 24 April 1952, 29 April 1952 & 6 May 1952.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 'Minutes of the Party Meeting held on Thursday 24 April 1952'.

this'.⁴⁰ There was clearly growing criticism of Morrison's Speakership from Labour backbenchers although the meeting agreed to refer this matter to the Parliamentary Committee. On 6 May 1952, Silverman's motion was again discussed but 'the Parliamentary Committee felt that the right thing was that this Motion should be taken off the Order Paper'.⁴¹ When pressed on this 'the Chairman [Clement Attlee] stated that the Party would not support it as there was no adequate ground for censuring the Speaker'.⁴² Whilst a small band of Labour backbenchers were probably still annoyed at the way in which Morrison had been installed, it is evident that the leadership of the Party had accepted his election as Speaker and were not prepared to attack the Chair at this early stage. The unfortunate business of the contested election had to be put behind them and the House of Commons' traditionally fierce protection of the office of Speaker had to be maintained.

Either Attlee's ruling quelled any further criticism or Morrison upped his game because, a few months later, a feature in *The Sunday Times* gave the following comment on his style in the Chair:

It might have seemed, then, that he lacked that touch of asperity so characteristic of our past Speakers. Nor has he developed it in the Chair, yet without it he commands the House. It might have seemed, too, almost cruelty to condemn so friendly a man to a life aloof and a little lonely.⁴³

On the last point, Lady Dunrossil, who lived at Speaker's House with her husband, Morrison's eldest son John, and young family, remembers that:

The Speaker's life is much more isolated. I mean, he couldn't, as he had all his life as a Member of Parliament, stroll into the smoking room or the library or just chat and relax and I think that was quite hard so he very much appreciated the contacts that came to him.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Parliamentary Labour Party Minutes, 'Minutes of the Party Meeting held on Tuesday 29 April 1952'.

⁴¹ Ibid., 'Minutes of the Party Meeting held on Tuesday 6 May 1952'.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Portrait Gallery, 'The Speaker, *The Sunday Times*, 12 October 1952.

⁴⁴ Interview with Mavis, Lady Dunrossil, 19 March 2005.

Speaker Morrison presided over the Commons at the time of the Suez crisis towards the end of 1956. Indeed, Morrison had a ring-side seat when the events at the Suez Canal unfolded and his son remembered that:

They [Morrison and his wife Allison] were actually at Downing Street when the news came through that the Suez balloon had gone up [...] what happened during dinner was that a message was brought in to say the balloon had gone up and things had started moving and so the matter was discussed over dinner briefly and dinner came to an end slightly earlier than expected.⁴⁵

Morrison was, therefore, fortunate to learn straight away that an issue had arisen which would provoke lots of debate in the House of Commons. He rose to the occasion and proved that he could indeed command the House as *The Sunday Times* article stated. Indeed, Laundry has written that Speaker Morrison

re-established, in the opinion of Lord Tranmire [the former Conservative MP, Sir Robin Turton], the discipline which had been slackened in the time of Clifton Brown.⁴⁶

This remark demonstrates the contrast between the styles of Clifton Brown and Morrison. Moreover, Speaker Morrison was not afraid of using his powers to maintain order in the House. In the parliamentary report in *The Times* on 2 November 1956 it records that:

Such was the state of uproar in the Commons to-day [1 November], before the debate on the Opposition censure motion had begun, that the Speaker took the most unusual course of suspending the sitting for half an hour.⁴⁷

The unruly behaviour was started before the censure motion debate following a statement by Antony Head, the new Minister of Defence, that the RAF had bombed Egyptian targets and sunk a frigate. The Leader of the Opposition, Hugh Gaitskell, rose and asked the Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden, whether Britain had declared war on Egypt. Eden stated that Britain was not at war but in ‘a state of armed conflict’ with

⁴⁵ Telephone conversation with Alasdair Morrison, 18 April 2006.

⁴⁶ Laundry, ‘The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century’, p. 188.

⁴⁷ *The Times*, 2 November 1956.

Egypt and went on to say that he would deal with the matter in more detail during the main debate. *The Times* describes what happened:

It was then that there developed what the Speaker evidently interpreted as a defiance of the authority of the Chair. He asked whether it would be possible for all these matters to be raised during the debate. (“No” interrupted Opposition voices). The motion, he said, was in the widest possible terms and all these matters could be raised. Again there was an Opposition chorus of “No, no,” in which Mr Bevan joined vehemently.⁴⁸

Speaker Morrison attempted to read out the motion but was constantly interrupted by cries from the Opposition benches. His warning that he would suspend the sitting if this behaviour continued was not heeded and so he had no choice but to carry out his threat. During that period Alasdair Morrison was staying with his parents at Speaker’s House while he was convalescing from jaundice and he recalled:

I remember one particular moment involving my father because it got very lively; I was up there one afternoon [...] and I came down the passage and, to my surprise, I saw my father sitting in his usual chair, in his knee breeches with a pint of beer beside him doing *The Times* crossword in the middle of the afternoon and I said, big surprise, “What are you doing here?” He said, “Oh, they’re making too much noise, I’ve shut them down for half an hour.” But he was completely relaxed about it and, apparently, I think it was Aneurin Bevan making a lot of noise and he came up and said afterwards, he spoke to him afterwards, was very conciliatory, and said, “That’s quite all right I’m sorry I made a bit of a noise and you were quite right to shut us down.” But I think it takes quite a lot of fuss in the House of Commons for that to happen. When he [Speaker Morrison] went back and they started up again of course they were much better behaved.⁴⁹

Clearly, Speaker Morrison was not afraid to take on an unruly House of Commons and suspend the sitting when order had broken down. Indeed, it was the first time since 1924 that a Speaker had suspended a sitting and so Morrison proved his mettle and showed that he would use all the powers at his disposal to maintain order.

⁴⁸ *The Times*, 2 November 1956.

⁴⁹ Interview with Alasdair Morrison, 13 November 2004.

Lord Renton stated that ‘As far as I remember ‘Shakes’ Morrison handled the Suez debate in 1956 very well [...] I’ve never heard of any criticism of ‘Shakes’ Morrison on that’.⁵⁰ Sir Richard Body, who was Conservative MP for Billericay in 1956, recalls that:

The Suez debates required very skilful handling and the temperature in the House was very high and several times he [Speaker Morrison] had to just adjourn and walk out. But he was very good. He had the gift of being able to allow the House just to raise its temperature to a certain height and then stop it. He had a great sense of humour but was very much liked by everyone and that made a lot of difference.⁵¹

Sir David Price, who was Conservative MP for Eastleigh between 1955 and 1992, concurred with Body and remembered that:

The House was very rowdy and potentially disruptive. The Speaker handled everybody with firmness but fairly. Emotions ran high, but he was able to keep control throughout a pretty tempestuous debate through his own personality.⁵²

Sir Robin Chichester-Clark, who was Ulster Unionist MP for Londonderry between 1955 and 1974, remembers just how heated the Suez debates were and has said that:

They were very alarming [...] I could never have believed that since the 18th Century that politics could have been quite so rugged. It was only in the latter days where I felt that he [Speaker Morrison] was very rattled and it showed. You couldn’t blame anyone for losing their nerve because people were looking for a way to get in and they weren’t sparing anybody, there was no quarter given and they wouldn’t have given any quarter to the Speaker either. He was given a very, very rough time. I thought at one time I saw him close to tears.⁵³

However, Lady Dunrossil has stated that her father-in-law was ‘at the height of his powers’ by that stage and so it is clear that, having had five years experience in the Chair, Morrison was able to control a very heated House of Commons and ensure that

⁵⁰ Interview with Lord Renton, 1 March 2006.

⁵¹ Telephone conversation with Sir Richard Body, 22 February 2007.

⁵² Letter from Sir David Price, 3 June 2008.

⁵³ Interview with Sir Robin Chichester-Clark, 13 February 2007.

proceedings did not break down.⁵⁴ Sir David Price, whose turn it was to do *The Week in Westminster* on BBC radio during the time of the Suez debates, remembered that he made Speaker Morrison his ‘hero of the week’ because he was so impressed at how he had managed the House.⁵⁵

Speaker Morrison’s style of presiding over the House was emulated by Ivan Neill, who was the last Speaker of the Stormont House of Commons. Neill wrote in his memoirs:

When in London on business if I had time available I sat in on the proceedings of the House of Commons to listen to debates. I was impressed by the firm and fair handling of debates by the speaker, W. S. Morrison, and now in the Speaker’s Chair I made his style the model for my handling of our House of Commons.⁵⁶

Parliamentarians considered Morrison to be highly skilled at regulating the debates in the Commons chamber, so much so that a Speaker from another legislature wanted to copy his style.

The political journalist, Anthony Howard, when looking back, has made the point that, ‘if ever there was a person absolutely cut out for television, it was probably Speaker Morrison. He had a wonderful voice; he had a wonderful head of hair’.⁵⁷

Unfortunately, Morrison’s Speakership came thirty years before the televising of the House of Commons but Howard’s comment does indicate that ‘Shakes’ was clearly a skilled performer whose voice and appearance made him very much suited to the part.

Morrison’s obituary made reference to his qualities and physical attributes when it said that:

Physically he looked the part to perfection with his towering figure and finely modelled countenance so fitly framed in the wig [...] Morrison’s voice never lost

⁵⁴ Interview with Mavis, Lady Dunrossil, 19 March 2005.

⁵⁵ Letter from Sir David Price, 3 June 2008.

⁵⁶ Ivan Neill, *Church and State*, (Renewal Publications, 1995), p. 64.

⁵⁷ Anthony Howard, in ‘The Role of the Speaker in the House of Commons’, seminar held 25 February 2002 (Institute for Contemporary British History, 2005, <http://www.icbh.ac.uk/icbh/witness/speaker>), p. 52.

its native tones. It was a magnificent organ and he managed it superbly. The rolling “r’s” of his “Order. Order,” could bring the House to its senses in a second.⁵⁸

Alasdair Morrison commented that his father’s qualities made him more successful in the Speakership than when he was a government minister. Dr Morrison said that, ‘It was better for him to give up the idea of being a partisan minister because he was not by nature a particularly partisan person’.⁵⁹ Clearly, the fact that Morrison was not strongly party political meant that he could easily uphold the notion of impartiality which is so vital to the Speakership. His physical attributes and his skills enabled him to make a success of the Speakership because he was able to maintain order when, particularly during the Suez debates, others might have failed.

Despite his skilful handling of the Suez debates, Speaker Morrison was criticised less than a year later for a ruling he gave and was subject to a motion of censure put forward by the Labour MP for Bristol South East, Tony Benn.⁶⁰ On 22 July 1957, during a statement by the Foreign Secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, on disturbances in Central Oman, Benn had asked the Speaker to move the Adjournment of the House under Standing Order No. 9 so that Members could discuss ‘The decision of Her Majesty’s Government to offer British military assistance to the Sultan of Muscat and Oman’.⁶¹ Morrison refused saying that, ‘I think that this submission must fail on the ground of urgency. We have just heard that, at the moment, there are no British troops in Muscat’.⁶² However, Morrison allowed Benn to come back and argue why he thought the matter was urgent. George Wigg, the Labour MP for Dudley and Reginald Paget, Labour MP for Northampton, joined in and supported Benn. Morrison did not back down and suggested to Opposition MPs that they used one of the Supply Days that week to discuss the issue.⁶³ Benn was still not happy and so he moved his motion of

⁵⁸ Obituary of Lord Dunrossil, *The Times*, 3 February 1961.

⁵⁹ Interview with Alasdair Morrison, 13 November 2004.

⁶⁰ See HC Deb 29 July 1957 cc878-909.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 22 July 1957 c35.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, c37.

censure against the Speaker on the afternoon of 29 July.⁶⁴ After much debate, when it was made quite clear that Members were not criticising ‘Shakes’ personally, Benn decided to withdraw his motion having succeeded in having his grievance aired.⁶⁵ What was clear about the debate was that it was not a personal attack on Speaker Morrison himself and the fact that the motion was withdrawn shows that there was no desire to even attempt to remove him from office.

Morrison’s Speakership happened to coincide with the death of George VI and the accession of Elizabeth II and so, as Speaker, he represented the House of Commons at both the King’s State Funeral on 16 February 1952 and the Queen’s Coronation on 2 June 1953. As set out previously, Speaker Morrison played a key role at the time of the King’s death and attended a Cabinet meeting to ensure that ministers were clear as to the parliamentary protocol on the occasion of the demise of a monarch.⁶⁶

Morrison was not keen on hosting or attending banquets and drinks parties which is seen as part of the Speaker’s job. Indeed, Philip Laundy has written that:

Speaker Morrison maintained ‘it is the entertainment that kills’ rather than the work in the Chair. He made it a rule to decline any external commitment he was not obliged to fulfil in his capacity as Speaker, and normally refused invitations unless they came from Buckingham Palace.⁶⁷

This shows that a Speaker’s duties are not just confined to the chamber of the House of Commons. Whilst ‘Shakes’ was not keen to attend engagements in his role as Speaker, he nevertheless hosted many events at Speaker’s House and represented the House of Commons at various functions. Brigadier Sir Francis Reid, who was Speaker’s Secretary during Morrison’s period in the Chair, recorded in his diary the many events which the Speaker had to attend. For example, on 31 March 1955, Speaker Morrison hosted a dinner at Speaker’s House for the Lebanon Delegation and on 12 July 1956,

⁶⁴ HC Deb 27 July 1957 cc878-909.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, c909.

⁶⁶ National Archives, Public Record Office. CAB 128/24, C. C. (52) 11TH Conclusions, 6 February 1952.

⁶⁷ Laundy, ‘The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century’, p. 186.

Speaker and Mrs Morrison attended a dinner at Lambeth Palace.⁶⁸ Reid's diaries also show that, whilst Morrison refused various engagements in his role as Speaker, he nevertheless continued to attend functions in his constituency in Gloucestershire. Reid recorded such events as Morrison attending the AGM of the Cirencester Archaeology and History Society and when he opened the Cirencester Horticultural Society Show.⁶⁹ Clearly, Morrison always made time for his constituency duties despite being extremely busy exercising the functions of Speaker.

In terms of the way in which Morrison conducted himself as Speaker, and particularly the manner in which he presided over the Commons chamber, his son made the following comment:

He thought that very often rows achieved very little and that there had to be some better way round it. Now, this, I think, doesn't necessarily make for a good departmental minister in a strongly confrontational two party system because you can't really be friends with the Opposition while you're doing that sort of thing [...] I think probably, I've no doubt at all, that my father was a very good Speaker and he was temperamentally, and by experience, very well suited to it because at the same time as being conciliatory and not liking rows, he was a stickler for protocol. He could be relied upon to play the rules of the game, as far as the Speaker was concerned, very strictly on all occasions, without fear or favour as you might say, certainly without any partisanship.⁷⁰

Indeed, Speaker Morrison recorded in a make shift diary (a few loose leaf pages of foolscap covering the end of 1952) that he kept on 13 November 1952, 'In the morning read up some precedents'.⁷¹ This shows that he liked to have the facts at his finger tips and wanted to be prepared whilst in the Chair. The fact that he spent time reading over the various precedents of the Commons demonstrates that he wanted to know the rules of the House so that he could always ensure that they were adhered to. Laundry has, however, criticised both Morrison and his predecessor when he wrote that, 'Both

⁶⁸ National Army Museum, Accession 9103-119, Papers of Brigadier Sir Francis Reid, 323, diary entry for 31 March 1955 & 325, diary entry for 12 July 1956.

⁶⁹ Ibid., diary entries for 24 May 1956 & 6 September 1956.

⁷⁰ Interview with Alasdair Morrison, 13 November 2004.

⁷¹ Gloucestershire Archives, Alasdair Morrison, political and family papers.

Clifton Brown and Morrison had a tendency to explain their rulings which occasionally led to difficulties'.⁷²

Alasdair Morrison has tried to set out why his father felt it necessary to explain his rulings to the House:

I think that goes back to his lawyer's background in the sense that he was at one stage a Recorder of Walsall in the mid 1930s, and just as he made a good Speaker, I think he would have made a cracking good judge [...] and so it came as natural not to do things by impulse. It was entirely characteristic of him that in making a decision he would weigh very carefully and articulate to himself very carefully why he was making a decision in the way he would. So, having worked that out for himself, he almost felt a bounden duty to explain why he had done it to somebody else [...] my father thought that it was a good thing that Parliament had a right to know why the decision was being made because all the time you are making a decision of that kind, you are setting a precedent for the next time and he was acting almost like a judge in this kind of way.⁷³

Morrison's legal background obviously shaped the way in which he conducted himself as arbitrator of the rules and it stood him in good stead for the role he undertook.

W. S. Morrison remained Speaker for two full Parliaments and his daughter-in-law has commented upon the end of his period in the Chair:

Later on it became much more of a struggle for him because of course, with the guns in the First World War, and he became increasingly deaf. I do know that it was a wonderful gift from an American ambassador who gave him a little watch, as far as I remember, with a microphone in it so that it was much less evident. Obviously, there are microphones in the back of the Chair but it meant that when he was at a social gathering [...] he could just hold his hand up [...] nearer the person quite naturally. Being a big man it was quite easy to do that and he was absolutely thrilled with that.⁷⁴

⁷² Letter from Philip Laundy, 15 July 2004.

⁷³ Interview with Alasdair Morrison, 13 November 2004.

⁷⁴ Interview with Mavis, Lady Dunrossil, 19 March 2005.

Whilst the microphones in the back of the Chair would have helped, it would have nevertheless been very difficult for the Speaker to hear what was going on during a debate. Coupled with the deafness, Morrison's obituary in *The Times* commented that:

During his term of office the House – and the Speaker, who is never off duty – endured a record number of all-night sittings for one session, and the strain began to tell on him.⁷⁵

Speaker Morrison decided to retire at the 1959 General Election having had a medical examination from which he was advised that it would be unwise to continue for another Parliament.⁷⁶ Morrison wrote down the reason why he decided to give up the Speakership:

Slight deafness, greatly increased strain of being Speaker. Feared service of House might suffer if I carried on.⁷⁷

Indeed, Michael Ryle, who was a junior clerk in the House of Commons during the time of Speaker Morrison, mentioned one episode relating to the deafness:

a man called George Brown [former Labour Foreign Secretary], whom many of you will remember, a somewhat rambunctious and powerful character with a loud voice, said something which the Speaker didn't think was quite what he should say and he called him to order. George Brown immediately challenged the Speaker and said, 'I want to have a ruling on this, a proper ruling', and the Speaker leant forward and spoke to the Clerk. Now it happened that the Speaker was getting very deaf and the Clerk spoke very loudly, so the House could hear what advice he gave. Whereupon George Brown said, 'Mr Speaker, it is your advice I want, not the advice of that *fellow* there'. The point of the joke of course was Sir Edward Fellowes was then the Clerk.⁷⁸

The frustration of not being able to hear Members, or indeed advisors who sat immediately in front of him, must have been a clear indicator that it was time to retire.

⁷⁵ Obituary of Lord Dunrossil, *The Times*, 3 February 1961.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Gloucestershire Archives, Alasdair Morrison, political and family papers.

⁷⁸ Michael Ryle, in 'The Role of the Speaker in the House of Commons', p. 35.

Morrison announced to the House on 19 February 1959 that he would not be contesting his Cirencester and Tewkesbury seat at the next election which signalled the end of his time as Speaker.⁷⁹ Morrison stated that:

I have decided, with regret, that I should not offer myself as a candidate at the next General Election. I have recently undergone a very thorough medical examination, and my advisers, in whom I have full confidence, tell me that I would be unwise to undertake the work of another Parliament. From what they say, however, I appear to be as sound in wind and limb as a man of my age has any right to expect. I am very thankful to recall that I have not hitherto missed a day in your service through illness since I was first elected Speaker.⁸⁰

The fact that Morrison had never missed a day in the eight years he served as Speaker shows his commitment to the office. On that occasion, Morrison admitted to the House that his deafness was the reason for quitting the Speakership:

The infirmity of which I am personally conscious is a slight difficulty in hearing. I am aware that a certain degree of judicious deafness is not an unmixed evil in the occupant of this Chair, but I could wish that mine were sometimes more selective and less fortuitous. It adds somewhat, as hon. Members will appreciate, to the strain of performing my duties to the House.⁸¹

Immediately following the general election held on 8 October 1959, Morrison was invited by the Australian government to become Governor-General.⁸² Indeed, in an aide-memoir written to himself, Morrison records that the High Commissioner for Australia approached him on 27 October, nearly three weeks after ceasing to be a Member of Parliament and Speaker of the House of Commons.⁸³ Morrison had no idea that he was going to be offered this role and wrote:

I had planned a very different life for myself in 1960; Had accepted many engagements for 1960, e.g. Presidency of Three Counties Agricultural Show, several school Speech Days, Openings, etc.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ HC Deb 19 February 1959 cc549-550.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Gloucestershire Archives, Alasdair Morrison, political and family papers.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Alasdair Morrison outlined the background behind the Australian government inviting his father to be their country's governor-general:

It is true, and this is part of the explanation for the arrival of the invitation, that he had known Mr Menzies, who was then Prime Minister in Australia, for a long time and they were great friends. The reason for this was that they both had a strong Scottish background of which both were well aware, both were very interested in poetry, both were lawyers by background and training and they had in many respects a similar kind of temperament and respect for each other. I can see why from Menzies' point of view Dad looked like a very good candidate because, on the one hand it maintained the United Kingdom connection which Menzies was always keen on as far as Australia was concerned, on the other hand he wasn't going to get yet another 'pom' because Dad was not your typical English colonial governor by any manner of means and he didn't sound like one, he sounded like a Highland Scot. Menzies, of course, knew that Dad would do it very well because it's like being Speaker. You are supposed to act in an impartial way in the same manner and he knew that Dad could be trusted to do that and to do it very well which of course he did.⁸⁵

Lady Dunrossil has pointed out that her father-in-law accepting the Governor-Generalship of Australia 'was controversial here [in the UK] as distinct from controversial there'.⁸⁶ Moreover, on the second reading of Mr Speaker Morrison's Retirement Bill, Labour MPs expressed their opposition to a former Speaker taking up another position by voting against.⁸⁷ On this, Lady Dunrossil has recalled that:

I think he was wounded, well, she [Allison] was certainly, by the kind of reaction and I think those who were close to him probably knew that financially he wasn't all that well off.⁸⁸

In his aide-memoir, Morrison does take into account his financial position when considering whether he should take up the Governor-Generalship. He wrote down the fact that his youngest son was still at university and he had the upkeep of the house in

⁸⁵ Interview with Alasdair Morrison, 13 November 2004.

⁸⁶ Interview with Mavis, Lady Dunrossil, 19 March 2005.

⁸⁷ See Philip Laundy, 'The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century' in S. A. Walkland (ed.), *The House of Commons in the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1979), p. 195.

⁸⁸ Interview with Mavis, Lady Dunrossil, 19 March 2005.

Gloucestershire and the flat in the Temple.⁸⁹ He asked himself, ‘Could I afford it?’ and then concludes, ‘Yes, with £2,000 per annum from House of Commons and provision for my widow and old age’.⁹⁰ It is clear that Morrison thought quite hard before taking up office in Australia and considered his own personal arrangements as well as any political or constitutional consequences.

It was, of course, and still is, highly unusual for a former Speaker to take on another appointment because anyone who accedes to the Chair agrees to give up politics for life. The only other Speaker in the twentieth century to take up an appointment after retiring was Whitley when he became Chairman of the Governors of the BBC in 1930.⁹¹ Morrison was elevated to the peerage as the Viscount Dunrossil of Vallaquie and it would have been the norm for him to see out his days on the cross-benches of the House of Lords. However, Morrison dealt with this point in the aide-memoir that he wrote as one of his reasons for accepting the appointment:

Very great honour. Might help, and certainly not harm growth of Parliamentary Government in Commonwealth, that a great self-governing country should ask to submit to Her Majesty the name of the ex-Speaker of the House of Commons as their Governor-General.⁹²

Next to this, in the margin, Morrison wrote in his own hand, ‘Remain out of party politics’ which refers to the fact that the position of Governor-General is very much akin to that of Speaker because both offices require the holder to be non-partisan.⁹³ As the representative of the Queen, the Governor-General is above party politics in the same way as the Speaker of the House of Commons and so Morrison’s decision to accept the role in Australia did not see fit to break with the established convention that still continues to this day.

⁸⁹ Gloucestershire Archives, Alasdair Morrison, political and family papers.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Laundry, ‘The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century’, p. 196.

⁹² Gloucestershire Archives, Alasdair Morrison, political and family papers.

⁹³ Ibid.

Lord Dunrossil, as he had become, took up the post of Governor-General of Australia on 2 February 1960 only to die suddenly one year later on 3 February 1961. Whilst Morrison wrote in late 1959 that he was ‘Sound in wind and limb’, clearly the strain of being Speaker and the fact that he had given up that office on medical advice meant that taking on another high-ranking appointment was his undoing.⁹⁴ Moreover, Sir Robin Chichester-Clark, believes that the strain of ‘Suez could be said probably to have damaged him very seriously’.⁹⁵ Morrison was buried with full honours at a state funeral in Canberra on 7 February 1961.

Two very different characters occupied the Chair in the years immediately following the Second World War. A wealthy English middle-class country land owner was succeeded by a less affluent Scottish barrister who had frequented the corridors of power in Whitehall for most of his parliamentary career. Clearly, Clifton Brown had a less than easy Speakership with some of his colleagues going as far as to say that he was weak and indecisive. However, he did succeed in ensuring that the new Labour intake, who were hungry for reform, carried out their programme whilst adhering to parliamentary protocols. What he did do was to broaden the horizons of the Speakership by making overseas trips and adding an ambassadorial role to the office. Morrison was a much more dominant figure who enjoyed a far greater command of the House than his predecessor. This is just as well because he found himself in the Chair at the time of the Suez crisis when parliamentary niceties broke down on the floor of the House and slanging matches ensued. Morrison’s force of character won the day although he did have to suspend a sitting. Clifton Brown’s Speakership has received mixed reviews whereas Morrison is almost universally acclaimed as having been a very able and respected Speaker of the House of Commons. Fortunately, both Speakers came at the right time because Clifton Brown was successful in guiding the new post-war House of Commons but would have probably found it difficult to control the Suez debates. Morrison excelled in the role as Speaker and should be remembered for using

⁹⁴ Gloucestershire Archives, Alasdair Morrison, political and family papers.

⁹⁵ Interview with Sir Robin Chichester-Clark, 13 February 2007.

his talents to tame a most unruly House of Commons and safeguard the continuance of reasoned debating.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE QUIET SPEAKERS: THE SPEAKERSHIPS OF SIR HARRY HYLTON-FOSTER (1959-1965) AND DR HORACE KING (1965-1971)

Sir Harry Hylton-Foster QC MP, my first Speaker, was a poor Speaker, frightened of the “bully-boys” [...] who could do more or less anything, however “out of Order”, that they wanted: and he would then try to reassert his authority by jumping on “little people”.

Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, former Conservative MP for Tiverton, 2005.¹

If he [Speaker Hylton-Foster] called you to speak, he made you feel very comfortable and he made you feel that you were the one person in the House who actually mattered.

Sir Robin Chichester-Clark, former Ulster Unionist MP for Londonderry, 2007.²

He [Speaker King] was always very personable and all that to me [...] but I didn't find him particularly helpful.

Stanley Newens, former Labour MP for Epping and then Harlow, 2007.³

Like a good Headmaster, I think he [Speaker King] knew to let the naughty boys have a little bit of rope but not too much.

Sir Richard Body, former Conservative MP for Boston and Skegness, 2007.⁴

Following Harold Macmillan's general election victory in 1959, the Conservative Solicitor-General, Sir Harry Hylton-Foster, was elected to the Chair. Having been a front bencher, Hylton-Foster faced the same criticism as his predecessor, W. S. Morrison, concerning whether or not a former minister should be elected Speaker. Hylton-Foster's sudden death in September 1965 brought about the election of the first Speaker drawn from the ranks of the Labour Party, Dr Horace King. Speaker King

¹ Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop 22 April 2005.

² Interview with Sir Robin Chichester-Clark, 13 February 2007.

³ Interview with Stan Newens, 9 July 2007.

⁴ Telephone conversation with Sir Richard Body, 22 February 2007.

presided over the House during the period of the first two Wilson governments although he swiftly gave up the Chair a few months after the Conservatives' return to power in 1970. This chapter will fill yet another gap in parliamentary literature because the Speakership in the 1960s has received very little academic attention.

Sir Harry Hylton-Foster was born in Ewell, Surrey on 10 April 1905 and was educated at Eton before reading law at Magdalen College, Oxford. He was called to the bar in 1928 and served as legal secretary to Viscount Finlay at the Permanent Court of International Justice. On 22 December 1931, Hylton-Foster married Audrey Pellew Clifton Brown, the daughter of the future Speaker, Colonel Douglas Clifton Brown. During the Second World War Hylton-Foster served in the Royal Air Force and acted as Deputy Judge Advocate in North Africa. He stood as the Conservative candidate for the Yorkshire seat of Shipley at the 1945 General Election but, having failed to win Shipley, Hylton-Foster contested York at the 1950 General Election and won by 77 votes.⁵ In 1954, Hylton-Foster became Solicitor-General in Churchill's government and was knighted. The following year, he managed to retain his marginal seat at the 1955 General Election but after that he decided to swap to a safer division. Hylton-Foster was fortunate enough to be selected to fight the Conservative stronghold of the Cities of London and Westminster at the 1959 General Election and won by 17,188 votes.⁶

Sir Harry Hylton-Foster was a reluctant Speaker because, as a lawyer, it is said that he would have much rather have risen to the highest office of the legal profession and become Lord Chancellor.⁷ Moreover, Sir Robin Chichester-Clark, who was Ulster Unionist MP for Londonderry between 1955 and 1974, believes that Hylton-Foster was 'probably the best lawyer that was in the House of Commons at the time'.⁸ However, Macmillan insisted that Hylton-Foster became Speaker and so he gave up any chance of

⁵ *The Times House of Commons 1950*, (London: The Times Office, 1950), p. 161.

⁶ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons 1959*, (London: The Times Office, 1959), p. 27.

⁷ See Philip Laundy, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, (London: Quiller Press, 1984), p. 83.

⁸ Interview with Sir Robin Chichester-Clark, 13 February 2007.

sitting on the Woolsack.⁹ Hylton-Foster's period in the Chair started off badly and was one which was highly criticised. As seen previously, the Leader of the Opposition, Hugh Gaitskell, was not happy with the choice of Hylton-Foster for Speaker on the grounds that the holder of this high office should not be someone who had been a minister immediately before being elected to the Chair.¹⁰ Whilst the Labour Party did not put up an alternative candidate, the fact that Hylton-Foster's election as Speaker was not given universal approval was not a good start to his period in office. Despite the controversy, Sir Harry Hylton-Foster became the 150th Speaker of the House of Commons on 20 October 1959.

Lord Hooson, who was Liberal MP for Montgomeryshire between 1962 and 1979, described Sir Harry Hylton-Foster as being 'a very nice chap and as blameless as a blancmange' and he, therefore, did not set the world on fire during his period in the Chair.¹¹ Sir Teddy Taylor, who was elected as Conservative MP for Glasgow Cathcart in 1964, recalls that Hylton-Foster 'didn't give the impression of great power'.¹² His biggest critic must be the former Conservative MP for Tiverton, Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop who thought that Hylton-Foster was very weak in the Chair and would not rebuke more confident Members.¹³ Maxwell-Hyslop wrote:

Harry Hylton-Foster's greatest weakness was lack of moral courage: there were Members of whom he was afraid, who could break the Rules of Order with impunity: they included Gerald Nabarro [Conservative MP for Kidderminster], Sydney Silverman [Labour MP for Nelson & Colne], Leslie Hale [Labour MP for Oldham West], and about six others. That completely undermined his authority, and thereby, too, made it consequently very difficult for the Deputy Speakers to try to enforce what their Speaker was afraid himself to do.¹⁴

This appears to be true and was all the more apparent during Hylton-Foster's last year as Speaker when Harold Wilson's Labour government only had a majority of four.

⁹ See Philip Laundy, 'The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century' in S. A. Walkland (ed.), *The House of Commons in the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 144.

¹⁰ See HC Deb 20 October 1959 c7.

¹¹ Interview with Lord Hooson, 25 April 2007.

¹² Interview with Sir Teddy Taylor, 26 October 2004.

¹³ Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 22 April 2005.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15 November 2005.

When commenting on the motion of censure debate on 2 August 1965, Wilson remarks in his record of his first premiership that, ‘In a winding up speech in a previous debate there had been no fewer than nineteen points of order, which had proved almost impossible for the Speaker to control’.¹⁵ Lord Morris of Aberavon, who as John Morris was a Labour MP between 1959 and 2001, has recalled that:

Nabarro, Silverman and Hale were indeed very obstreperous as were some others, like Willie Ross [Labour MP for Kilmarnock and Secretary of State for Scotland 1964-70] and other Scottish members. I do not think that his [Hylton-Foster’s] authority was undermined, although the repetitious nature of the point of order could become quite tedious.¹⁶

However, Silverman did put down a motion of censure against the Speaker on 16 February 1961, following his refusal to grant him a question to the Home Secretary.¹⁷ Silverman had wanted to ask whether a miscarriage of justice had occurred in the case of George Riley, who had been hanged for murder. Silverman debated at some length quoting from *Erskine May* and really mounted a challenge to the Speaker’s authority but in the end the motion was defeated by 253 votes to 60.¹⁸ Whilst Morris is more generous than Maxwell-Hyslop, it is clear that Hylton-Foster allowed too many Points of Order and actually allowed his authority to be challenged. The Speaker is there to maintain order and to enforce the rules that the House has set down and so can not afford to allow his judgements to be called into question. Hylton-Foster must have seemed very weak if he was constantly having to defend the decisions that the House had entrusted in him to make.

In terms of Hylton-Foster’s Deputy Speakers, it is probably more the case that they caused him trouble rather the other way around. His chief deputy, the Chairman of Ways and Means and Conservative MP for Dorking, Sir Gordon Touche, was involved in two separate incidents in 1961 which caused the Labour benches to criticise him for

¹⁵ Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1970: A Personal Record*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson and Michael Joseph, 1971), p. 128.

¹⁶ Letter from Lord Morris of Aberavon, 22 March 2007.

¹⁷ See HC Deb 16 February 1961 cc1773-1842.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, c1838.

allegedly acting in a biased manner. On 8 February 1961, whilst the House was in Committee, Touche, the Chairman, was seen having a private conversation with Martin Redmayne, the Government Chief Whip.¹⁹ The Labour Opposition put down a motion of censure because they believed that Touche's discussion with Redmayne led to him accepting a premature motion of closure which Hugh Gaitskell maintained prevented backbenchers from taking part in the debate.²⁰ During the censure debate, John Diamond, Labour MP for Gloucester, said when referring to Touche that 'the Government have made a mistake in appointing a man whose abilities are not appropriate to the dimensions of this task'.²¹ Touche managed to survive the motion of censure by 302 votes to 211 but nine months later he got himself in trouble again when he mistakenly announced an Opposition victory in a division and, after numerous Points of Order, had to adjourn the House because of grave disorder.²² Despite all this, Speaker Hylton-Foster backed his deputy but in the end Sir Gordon Touche decided to resign from the post. These events demonstrate that Hylton-Foster was loyal to his team and was prepared to support them even if they had made some real errors when chairing the House.

One reason why Hylton-Foster backed his deputies was because he leant so heavily on them. One of Touche's successors, the Labour MP for Southampton Itchen and future Speaker, Dr Horace King, wrote in his unpublished memoirs that:

Sir Samuel Storey [Conservative MP for Stretford and Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means] and I were Mr Speaker's slaves. We were always in the chamber long ahead of the time that we were due to relieve him.²³

Hylton-Foster had been a reluctant Speaker and perhaps, thanks to the criticism he received, he was more than happy to let his deputies do as much of the work in the Chair as possible.

¹⁹ HC Deb 16 February 1961 cc1025-1074.

²⁰ Ibid., c1026.

²¹ Ibid., c1061.

²² Ibid., 6 December 1961 cc1455-1500.

²³ Parliamentary Archives, HC/LB/1/131 (Part 1 of 2), *Journal as Speaker*, an unpublished first person account of his tenure by Lord Maybray-King, c. 1970, p. 259.

According to Laundry, it was Hylton-Foster who instituted the Speaker's right to think over a ruling for 24 hours before passing judgement.²⁴ This practice can be traced back to a sessional order regarding complaints of privilege on 8 February 1960. Speaker Hylton-Foster interpreted the order as allowing him to postpone his ruling for 24 hours to consider whether or not a complaint of privilege should take precedence over other business. Since then, the Speaker has been allowed to give himself 24 hours to seek advice and consider what his ruling should be.

A major episode of Hylton-Foster's Speakership was the Labour MP Tony Benn's peerage battle. On the death of Viscount Stansgate on 17 November 1960, Tony Benn automatically succeeded to his late father's peerage. However, Benn did not wish to leave the House of Commons and so started a campaign to enable people to renounce hereditary titles. As soon as his father had died Tony Benn recalled that:

On the Monday I made an appointment to see the Speaker, and when I went to see him he said, rather facetiously, 'I've made an order, my Lord, that you are to be kept out of the Chamber', which I thought was a bit offensive. Anyway, he was perfectly friendly, but said that he had decided that I was to be kept out. I asked 'Why?' and he said, 'Because it is now settled, since the Selborne case, that when a man inherits a peerage then he is kept out. Then I asked, 'How do you know that I've inherited?' He said, 'I've got your letter, saying that your father has died, and as far as I'm concerned that is *prima facie* evidence that you've succeeded'.²⁵

Benn went on to say that 'the Speaker assumed that this was just a little protest and a struggle before I was carried away'.²⁶ Hylton-Foster could not have been more wrong but nevertheless he was upholding the rules of the House as he had been elected to do. Benn proceeded to mount the campaign to renounce his peerage and remain a Member of Parliament.

²⁴ Laundry, 'The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century', p. 194.

²⁵ Tony Benn, *Years of Hope: Diaries, Papers and Letters 1940-1962*, (London, Hutchinson 1994), p. 359, extracts from interviews with David Butler.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

When Benn won the subsequent by-election in his Bristol South East seat, Hylton-Foster ruled him to be a ‘stranger’ when he was presented at the Bar of the House and so would not let him take up his seat.²⁷ Benn went to see the Speaker and told him that he had just been elected by a large majority and so would take his seat by force if he had to. According to Benn, the ‘Speaker was shaken by this’ but went on to exclude him from all the amenities of the House which were usually extended to peers who had previously been MPs.²⁸ Hylton-Foster gave the excuse that this was because Benn had not yet taken up his peerage which, although, technically true, seems to have been taking the letter of the law too far considering that the people of Bristol had just endorsed him.

On 31 May 1962, the Speaker did relent and gave permission for Benn to use the Commons library for his research. In the end, Benn won his fight and the Peerage Act passed on 31 July 1963 changed the law to allow peers to renounce their titles thus enabling them to be Members of Parliament. Following a further by-election in Bristol South East, Hylton-Foster finally allowed Tony Benn to retake his seat on 24 October 1963. The Speaker was absolutely right to uphold the rules of Parliament and prevent Benn from taking his seat when the law still considered him to be a peer. Speakers are elected to see that the rules are adhered to and Hylton-Foster would not have been within his rights to do anything else. However, Hylton-Foster could have been a bit kinder, seen which way the wind was blowing and allowed Benn to use some of the Commons’ facilities bearing in mind that he had won a by-election and had a mandate from Bristol. Fortunately, this difficult period in Hylton-Foster’s Speakership was resolved with the changing of the law which enabled Tony Benn to go on being an MP, with a short gap between 1983 and 1984, until 2001.

When considering Hylton-Foster’s Speakership, Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop argued that:

²⁷ Benn, *Years of Hope: Diaries, Papers and Letters 1940-1962*, p. 389.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Speaker Hylton-Foster QC's lasting contribution to constitutional law was his definition of the nature of a Hybrid Bill and his (to my mind, equally important) statement on Onus of Proof when hybridity is alleged, both of which were delivered seriatim in his Ruling.²⁹

Maxwell-Hyslop points out that 'the Clerks did not like his Ruling on Onus of Proof, and sought to suppress it, by omitting it from *Erskine May*'.³⁰ Onus of Proof is the interpretation of what is a Hybrid Bill. Indeed, *Erskine May* still uses Hylton-Foster's ruling on a Hybrid Bill (a cross between a Public and a Private Bill). A Public Bill is a bill that, if passed, will have general effect in some or all of the constituent parts of the United Kingdom whereas a Private Bill will have only local or personal, rather than general effect.³¹ Most bills are public bills because they affect most parts of the UK but some bills can give particular rights to individuals such as a local authority and so are deemed to be private.³² To this day, *Erskine May* uses Hylton-Foster's judgement and defines a Hybrid Bill as:

a public bill which affects a particular private interest in a manner different from the private interest of other persons or bodies of the same category or class.³³

A good example of a Hybrid Bill was the Aircraft and Ship Building Industries Bill of 1976, which sought to nationalise the two industries. It was discovered that this bill did not apply to one of the shipbuilding companies which otherwise fulfilled the bill's criteria for nationalisation. Thanks to the fact that this company was being treated differently from all the others, the bill was ruled to be hybrid by Speaker Thomas.³⁴ Whilst Speaker Hylton-Foster might not have very good at maintaining discipline and chairing debates, his legal background stood him in excellent stead when it came to ruling on matters such as defining hybridity.

²⁹ Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 15 November 2005.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Robert Rogers & Rhodri Morgan, *How Parliament Works*, 6th Edition, (London: Pearson Longman, 2006), pp. 460-461.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 190-191.

³³ Erskine May, *Parliamentary Practice*, 24th Edition, p. 652.

³⁴ Rogers & Morgan, *How Parliament Works*, 6th Edition, p. 252.

Criticism of Hylton-Foster's Speakership came to a head in July 1965 when Conservative Members were annoyed at him for not granting the former Chancellor of the Exchequer and Conservative MP for Barnet, Reginald Maulding, a Private Notice Question about the work of a Foreign Office adviser.³⁵ On a Point of Order, another former Cabinet minister, the Conservative MP for Enfield West, Iain Macleod, asked the Speaker:

If Questions on this are disallowed, may we have an assurance that you do not regard it as part of the function of the Chair to protect the Government from proper questioning by the House of Commons?³⁶

This was an outright attack on the impartiality of the Speaker and showed just how angry the Conservative benches had become. Macleod swiftly withdrew what he said following protests from other Members because otherwise it could have resulted in a motion of no confidence in the Chair.³⁷ Dr Horace King, who was Hylton-Foster's deputy and Chairman of Ways and Means at the time, wrote, 'I can remember how hurt Speaker Hylton-Foster was over this exchange'.³⁸ Such an attack from colleagues with whom he had served in the previous government must have taken its toll. From then on certain elements of the Conservative Party sought to remove Hylton-Foster from the Chair and were not prepared to support his re-election next time round.³⁹

Sir Harry Hylton-Foster died suddenly at the age of 60 when he collapsed whilst walking along Duke Street in Westminster on 2 September 1965. Despite a policeman attempting to give the Speaker the 'kiss of life', Hylton-Foster was dead on arrival at St George's Hospital at Hyde Park Corner.⁴⁰ He was the second Speaker to die in office during the twentieth century. His wife, Audrey, was given the customary peerage awarded to retiring Speakers and became the long-serving convener of the cross-bench peers. Hylton-Foster's untimely death prevented him from facing the possible indignity

³⁵ HC Deb 9 July 1965 c1990.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., c1992.

³⁸ Parliamentary Archives, HC/LB/1/131 (Part 1 of 2), *Journal as Speaker*, p. 246.

³⁹ Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 22 April 2005.

⁴⁰ 'The Speaker Dies in London Street', *The Times*, 3 September 1965.

of being removed from office because, only a few weeks before, the Chairman of the 1922 Committee and Conservative MP for Berwick and East Lothian, Sir William Anstruther-Gray indicated that his re-election to the Chair was unacceptable.⁴¹

Dr Horace King was elected Speaker on 26 October 1965 when Parliament met again following the summer recess. King was born on 25 May 1901 in Grangetown near Middlesbrough and was educated at Stockton Secondary School before attending King's College, London. He graduated with first class honours in English in 1922 and completed his PhD on the Folios of Shakespeare in 1940. Horace King became head of the English department at Taunton's School in Southampton and became headmaster of Regent's Park Secondary School in the same city in 1947.⁴²

King stood as the Labour candidate in the Conservative stronghold of New Forest and Christchurch at the 1945 General Election but, despite Attlee's landslide victory, was unsuccessful. The following year, King was elected to Hampshire County Council on which he served until 1965. In 1950, he was elected to Parliament as MP for Southampton Test with a majority of 1,389.⁴³ King held the seat at the 1951 General Election but decided to swap to the safer Southampton Itchen division in 1955. Within four years of becoming a Member of Parliament he had been appointed to the Speaker's Panel of Chairmen of Committees which enabled him to eventually become Chairman of Ways and Means and Deputy Speaker in November 1964. King found his new responsibilities extremely tiring thanks to the fact that Speaker Hylton-Foster put a lot of the work chairing debates onto his deputies. This meant that King was in the Chair late into the night and, in his unpublished biography, it recalls when

once during the small hours of the morning Dr King was waiting on the embankment for one of the infrequent night buses to take him to his lodgings in Kennington, when a reporter saw him there and wrote about it. As a result, the

⁴¹ Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 22 April 2005.

⁴² See Obituary of Lord Maybray-King, *The Times*, 4 September 1986.

⁴³ *The Times House of Commons 1950*, (London: The Times Office, 1950), p. 146.

Chairman of Ways and Means, for the first time in history, was allowed by the Treasury to use a Government car if the House rose after midnight.⁴⁴

However, this innovation was not enough to prevent King from suffering thanks to all the hours he was putting in and he recorded:

The strain of the Deputy-Speakership had led to my physical collapse when attending the NUT [National Union of Teachers] Conference at Easter – but I had shaken that off before Parliament resumed.⁴⁵

Despite finding the workload of the deputy role difficult, Dr King became the first Labour Speaker on 9 September 1965 following the shock death of Hylton-Foster. Perhaps he should have declined the Speakership on the basis that he could not physically cope with the lesser deputy job and because he was being parachuted into the role at a time when his party could ill afford to lose one of its tiny Commons majority. However, King accepted the office and the 151st Speaker proved to be very popular in the Chair and was instrumental in ensuring that more questions were answered at the despatch box. Laundry has written that:

Speaker King himself explained that as a result of the recommendations of the Select Committee on Procedure he cut down the number and the length of supplementary questions and aimed at getting through a basic 45 main questions each day.⁴⁶

King managed to do this by having an indicator which was placed on the Table of the House which showed a minus sign if question time was dragging and a red minus sign if they were not getting through nearly enough questions. If they were getting through a good number of questions then the indicator would show a plus sign.⁴⁷ This system was employed throughout King's time in the Chair. Speaker King also initiated the practice of requesting MPs to make any Points of Order at the end of Question Time so

⁴⁴ Parliamentary Archives, HC/LB/1/131 (Part 2 of 2), *A Boy Called Horace*, an unpublished biography of Mr Speaker Horace King by Minni Horton, c.1980, p. 85.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, (Part 1 of 2), *Journal as Speaker*, p. 385.

⁴⁶ Laundry, 'The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century', p. 160.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

that the limited time available was not unduly curtailed.⁴⁸ King immediately embarked on this course of action on being elected to the Chair because in November 1965 Tony Benn commented in his diaries that, ‘Speaker King is getting through questions at a spanking pace and it does mean that Members have a chance of getting their questions answered’.⁴⁹ However, this system was criticised by the Labour Cabinet Minister and MP for Coventry East, Richard Crossman. In his diaries, Crossman recorded that:

Although I was first in Questions I didn’t leave much time for preparation. A few months ago I wouldn’t have dreamt of taking the risk, but under Horace King Question Time is having the sting taken out of it. He tries to get some fifty or sixty Questions answered each day and to prevent supplementaries going on for too long. This increases the enormous advantage which the Minister always enjoys at Question Time.⁵⁰

So, whilst Speaker King was trying his best to ensure that backbenchers were allowed to ask as many questions as possible, the fact that they were not allowed to ask supplementaries meant that in many cases ministers were let off the hook. In his attempt to assist backbenchers, King managed to undermine their effectiveness because ministers did not have to answer difficult supplementaries. Horace King clearly meant well but Crossman demonstrates that rather than standing up for the rights of backbenchers, the Speaker actually reduced their power to bring the government to account on the floor of the House.

One important procedural reform which enhanced the power of the Speaker is described by King in his unpublished memoirs:

In my early days in the Chair there were certain procedural restrictions which barred some PNQs [Private Notice Questions]. These were later abolished by the House.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Laundy, ‘The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century’, p. 161.

⁴⁹ Tony Benn, *Out of the Wilderness: Diaries 1963-67*, (London: Hutchinson, 1967), diary entry for 4 November 1965, p. 346.

⁵⁰ Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister, Volume One: Minister of Housing 1964-66*, (London: Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, 1975), diary entry for 16 November 1965, p. 381.

⁵¹ Parliamentary Archives, HC/LB/1/131 (Part 1 of 2), *Journal as Speaker*, p. 270.

The Speaker's ability to grant Private Notice Questions (now called Urgent Questions) is an important power because it requires ministers to come to the House to answer a question on an urgent matter of public interest. The 1964 edition of the parliamentary rule book, *Erskine May*, states that:

A question cannot be asked by private notice in order to anticipate a question of which notice has been given. The latter must be first withdrawn; withdrawal becomes effective on publication of an Order paper no longer containing the question.⁵²

The Select Committee on Procedure examined this rule during the 1966-1967 session and concluded that 'the decision on the appropriateness of a private notice question is best left to Mr Speaker'.⁵³ On 6 June 1967, Speaker King gave the following statement to the House:

On occasions, that rule [on PNQs] has been considered unduly restrictive by my predecessors and by the House, particularly when Private Notice Questions of some importance have been blocked by a Question for Written Answer. Recently, the Select Committee on Procedure recommended in its Fifth Report of this Session that in future, when considering Private Notice Questions, I should be entitled to disregard any Question for Written Answer and should take account only of Questions which are liable to be answered orally within a reasonable period of time, having regard to the urgency of the subject matter. From such soundings as I have taken, I understand that it would meet with the general approval of the House if I were to adopt that recommendation and, therefore, I propose to adopt it today.⁵⁴

This was an important ruling which extended the power and authority of the Speakership. The Speaker now had far greater discretion over the granting of PNQs which would enhance his role of helping backbenchers and minorities to hold the government of the day to account. King seized on the Procedure Committee's recommendation and wasted little time in implementing it although the fact that he took soundings shows that the Speaker is very much the servant of the House and can only make changes with its support.

⁵² Erskine May, *Parliamentary Practice*, 17th Edition, 1964, p. 358.

⁵³ Procedure Committee, *Questions*, April 1967, HC 410, p. vii.

⁵⁴ HC Deb 6 June 1967 cc812-813.

It is clear that Dr King did not like the isolation of Speaker's House and missed mingling with colleagues in the bars and tea rooms of the Commons. He wrote in his unpublished memoir that, 'Perhaps the most accurate description of the Speakership is its utter remoteness'.⁵⁵ As a result of this, King did propose to take his meals occasionally in the Members' Dining Room at the table reserved for the Clerks but in the end he was persuaded not to do this by a delegation of senior MPs.⁵⁶ The impartiality of the Speakership is closely guarded and Members will not let anything call it in to question. Speaker King would, however, hold a weekly luncheon in his apartments to which he invited about seven Members from all parties. During these gatherings he would encourage MPs 'to talk about anything except politics'.⁵⁷ The ninth Duke of Buccleuch, who as Lord Dalkeith was Conservative MP for Edinburgh North between 1960 and 1973, recalled that:

Horace King always seemed very fair, stood for no nonsense and became quite a friend, staying with us in Scotland on one occasion at the same time as the Lebanese Ambassador who was at that time the doyen of the Diplomatic Corps.⁵⁸

Whilst coming from a Labour background, it would appear that Speaker King had no qualms about mingling in aristocratic circles and socialising with the grandest of MPs. The office of Speaker can quickly propel someone from the humblest of origins into the highest echelons of society demonstrating the importance of the role.

King came to the Chair determined that he would never have to use the ultimate sanction available to him, naming a Member. However, on 23 May 1968 he was forced to name Dame Irene Ward, the Conservative MP for Tynemouth, because she persisted in obstructing the tellers while they were reporting the result of a division concerning the allocation of time to the Finance Bill.⁵⁹ Whilst King sympathised with Ward's point that she wanted Members to be given the right to debate the Bill for longer, he

⁵⁵ Parliamentary Archives, HC/LB/1/131 (Part 1 of 2), *Journal as Speaker*, p. 604.

⁵⁶ Laundry, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, p. 83.

⁵⁷ Laundry, 'The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century', p. 187.

⁵⁸ Letter from The Duke of Buccleuch, 19 March 2007.

⁵⁹ HC Deb 23 May 1968 cc893-5.

nevertheless was obliged to uphold the rules of the House. Whilst reluctant, King demonstrated that he was not afraid to use the full disciplinary powers of the Speakership if he needed to.

Despite being the first Labour Speaker, it seems that King did not openly favour his old comrades on the Labour benches. Stan Newens, who was Labour MP for Epping from 1964 to 1970, remembers that he ‘didn’t find him [King] particularly helpful’ when it came to being called to speak on issues such as the Vietnam War.⁶⁰ The fact that Newens did not believe King to have been too co-operative with the Labour benches shows that the first Speaker from that side did not jeopardise the all-important impartiality that is the keystone of the office. However, there were criticisms from the Conservative side that Speaker King did not give the Opposition a fair crack of the whip when it came to debating time. On 17 February 1969, William Whitelaw, the Conservative MP for Penrith and Opposition Chief Whip, wrote to Dr King complaining that Conservative Members had been given less time than Liberal MPs during a debate.⁶¹ The fact that both Labour and Conservative MPs had cause to grumble about King’s calling of speakers undoubtedly means that he was very fair overall when it came to conducting debates.

The mid-1960s witnessed a big change in the way the House of Commons was administered which affected the workload of the Speaker. In his unpublished memoir, King wrote:

The greatest reform at that time was the setting up of what was called the Services Committee. Control of the House of Commons part of the Palace of Westminster had been vested in April [1965] in Mr Speaker. The new Committee was set up to act as his advisers, and to create sub-committees to deal with various aspects of administration – catering, administration, Library and accommodation.⁶²

⁶⁰ Interview with Stan Newens, 9 July 2007.

⁶¹ Letter from William Whitelaw to Speaker King, dated 17 February 1969, The Maybray-King papers, Southampton City Council Archives.

⁶² Parliamentary Archives, HC/LB/1/131 (Part 1 of 2), *Journal as Speaker*, p. 276.

Although this change took place in Speaker Hylton-Foster's time, his untimely demise only a few months later meant that it fell upon King to be the first holder of the office to take on this additional responsibility. King's successor in the Chair, Selwyn Lloyd described how the House had been administered prior to this reform:

Before that, supreme control was vested in the Lord Great Chamberlain. When the House of Commons was sitting, control was delegated on his behalf to the Serjeant at Arms acting on behalf of Mr Speaker. At week-ends and during recess control reverted to the Lord Great Chamberlain. This was resented by some Members, and so the Palace was 'nationalized'.⁶³

Whilst the vast bulk of the work was done by the clerks and other members of the parliamentary staff, this change nevertheless meant extra meetings for the Speaker. He was no longer purely responsible for what went on in the chamber, he now had the additional responsibility of managing the running of the whole building. This reform brought a whole new dimension to the office of Speaker and was one which would cause the downfall of a Speaker thirty-five years later.

Horace King travelled to many other countries during his time as Speaker visiting other Parliaments and representing the House of Commons at conferences. In his papers housed at the Southampton City Archives, he notes that he visited Athens at the invitation of Mr Paspriou, the President of the Greek Parliament.⁶⁴ King also visited Iran for the 75th annual conference of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and went to West Germany as the guest of Dr Gerstenmayer, the President of the Bundestag.⁶⁵ King certainly undertook far more engagements abroad than any of his predecessors and enlarged the ambassadorial role for the Speakership which has continued to develop. Whilst Clifton Brown started this trend with his trips to war-torn Europe, Speaker King undoubtedly re-enforced this and established an additional function for the Speakership which meant travelling to international conferences, informing foreign parliamentarians about his office and representing the House of Commons.

⁶³ Selwyn Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 118.

⁶⁴ See Box 6 of The Maybray-King Papers, Southampton City Archives.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

During his period in the Chair, King had to preside over an electoral reform conference. The conference worked through three sessions of Parliament and issued its final report on 9 February 1968. Its most significant recommendation was the lowering of the voting age to 20 but, in the end, the voting age was in fact reduced to 18 by the Representation of the People Act 1969.⁶⁶ However, King's electoral conference paved the way for this move to happen and so its work was not in vain.

On 31 May 1966, during his period as Speaker, Dr King's wife, Florence, died suddenly from a heart attack. King had been visiting the United States at the invitation of the Speaker of the House of Representatives, John McCormack and so was given the news by British Embassy staff. Mrs King had been a politician in her own right having been a Labour councillor and then alderman on Southampton City Council for 36 years. She did not give up her political activism whilst her husband was Speaker and so it could be said that Speaker's House was not as impartial as it should have been. Lord Hooson recalls that 'Horace King was famous because he always used to march in front of his wife. She came up behind him'.⁶⁷ It is unclear whether this was true of his first wife, Alderman Mrs Florence King, or whether he did not class his second wife, his secretary Una Porter, who he married in 1967, as his equal. However, Baroness Fookes, who entered Parliament in 1970 as MP for Merton and Morden, recalls that:

He was the [Speaker] who greeted me as a new MP with the shaking of the hands. My chief memory of that was that he hung on to my hand for a very long time. He was known as being partial to the ladies.⁶⁸

Indeed, Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop recalled that King 'was notorious for goosing the women who had the misfortune to sit next to him at official lunches and dinners'.⁶⁹

The fact that King was married four times in all also proves Lady Fookes's point.

⁶⁶ See HC Deb 24 July 1968 cc576-582.

⁶⁷ Interview with Lord Hooson, 25 April 2007.

⁶⁸ Interview with Baroness Fookes, 25 October 2004.

⁶⁹ Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 22 April 2005.

The one thing that really marred Horace King's Speakership was that, despite the fact he was a Methodist, towards the end of his tenure he became too fond of alcohol. Lord Weatherill said that 'Dear old Horace was under the misapprehension that sherry was a non-alcoholic drink'.⁷⁰ Sir Richard Body recalls that King 'gave the impression sometimes at 10 o'clock at night he'd drunk rather more than he should have done'.⁷¹ Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop remembered going to Speaker's House and seeing how much Horace King would drink:

He didn't say "What would you like?" He said, "I expect you drink the same as I do", hence my amazement. He poured about four fingers of brandy into a lager glass and then filled it up with the best part of half a pint of sherry!⁷²

Sir Robin Chichester-Clark remembers one episode when Speaker King was drunk on a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association visit to Northern Ireland:

Someone gave a dinner [...] it got going and he [Horace King] tickled the ivories quite a bit and knocked back quite a few. At the end, he was left by himself, for some reason, to walk back to the hotel. When he got back to the hotel, it was all barred down for the night, it was 2 o'clock in the morning, so he batters at the door and eventually the porter appears saying, "What the hell do you want?" sort of thing. Horace says, "Will you please let me in?" "Well who are you, sir?" "I'm the Speaker of the House of Commons, London." "Well, if you're the Speaker of the House of Commons, I must be William of Orange!"⁷³

Fortunately, the porter let Horace King in and the fact that the Speaker told people this story shows that he was a good sport and did not mind a joke. However, Lord Weatherill remembered what effect King's drinking had on him whilst presiding over the Commons chamber:

He was unwise enough to say, "I will always be present for the adjournment." Now, that didn't always take place at 10 o'clock. I mean it could be 12 o'clock, half past one, sometimes two o'clock. Poor old boy used to sit upstairs putting

⁷⁰ Lord Weatherill, in 'The Role of the Speaker of the House of Commons', seminar held 25 February 2002 (Institute for Contemporary British History, 2005, <http://www.icbh.ac.uk/icbh/witness/speaker>), p. 32.

⁷¹ Interview with Sir Richard Body, 22 February 2007.

⁷² Telephone conversation with Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 4 June 2007.

⁷³ Interview with Sir Robin Chichester-Clark, 13 February 2007.

back the sweet sherry and was not absolutely sober when he got to the Chair. Walter Harrison and I looked after him [...] we helped the old boy out. But one day, he was in his cups [...] and faced a very difficult Point of Order and found himself saying [in a slurred way], “Before I rule on this matter, I would like to consult the Table of clerks.” The next day, having consulted the Table, he ruled very wisely but, by that time, the boys and girls had had him and so, whenever he got up and hesitated for a moment, a buzz started round, “Have a word with the Table, Mr Speaker”, “Why don’t you talk to the Table, Mr Speaker, sir?” and he had to go.⁷⁴

Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop recalled a time when Horace King was so drunk that he could not climb the few steps to get to the Speaker’s Chair:

Horace came in at twenty-five past nine and he had two goes at getting up into his Chair [...] and the second time he fell to the right across the Clerks’ Table with his wig 45° to the left and Bob Mellish [Government Chief Whip and Labour MP for Bermondsey] [...] called out, “You’re a disgrace, Horace, and I’ll have you out of that Chair within three months.” Horace turned round so abruptly that his wig was then 45° out the other way and he gave a brilliant repost, “How can you get me out of the Chair, Bob, when I can’t get myself in to it?”⁷⁵

Speaker King announced his retirement on 10 December 1970 just six months after the general election which saw Edward Heath and the Conservatives win power.⁷⁶ He could have retired at the general election and allowed a new House of Commons to select its Speaker in the same way as after the 1951 and 1959 elections. King did say in his resignation speech that:

Some 18 months ago I indicated to the then Leader of the House [Labour MP for Workington, Fred Peart] and the then Chief Opposition Whip [Conservative MP for Penrith and the Border, William Whitelaw] that if I were re-elected to a new Parliament I would hope to remain in the Chair for only a short time in order to see the new Parliament in. When the House did me the honour of re-electing me as Speaker, I again indicated through the usual channels that I would seek to retire some time during the first year of this Parliament. In October I reaffirmed that it was my intention to retire during the Christmas recess.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

⁷⁵ Telephone conversation with Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 4 June 2007.

⁷⁶ See HC Deb 10 December 1970 cc669-76.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, c669.

One incident which must have contributed to his decision to go so soon after the election happened in July 1970 when a disgruntled Belfast man launched an attack on the Commons chamber during a statement on the Common Market.⁷⁸ King described what happened:

Whilst the Minister, Tony Barber [Conservative MP for Altrincham and Sale] was making his statement, a man stood up in the Strangers' Gallery and threw two objects on to the Floor of the House, close to the Front Benches. Members with military experience immediately scattered or ducked. I sat tight, imagining it to be some minor nuisance. But the draught carried the fumes to the Chair and I was almost overcome [...] I heard, faintly, somebody moving that the sitting be suspended – murmured myself “Sitting suspended”, but by then was unable to move. I learnt later that the Deputy Speaker and the Clerk of the House dragged me out of the Chair.⁷⁹

For someone who suffered badly from the strains of the workload of the Speakership such an attack would have affected King badly. Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop said that in the end Speaker King ‘was “persuaded” to retire’ because of his sometimes drunken state.⁸⁰ Stan Newens confirms this ‘was really why he was pushed out’ and that this was orchestrated by the Labour Chief Whip, Bob Mellish.⁸¹ Sir Robin Chichester-Clark believes that Speaker King’s wife put pressure on her husband to give up the role because of the womanising, the drinking and the pressure of the job.⁸² Philip Laundry states that ‘King himself described the strains of the Speakership as ‘unimaginable’ and said that he had made a point of retiring before his strength failed’.⁸³ If this is the case, then King’s assertion that he had planned to go was a face saving exercise because, clearly, the stresses of the office caused the excessive drinking which eventually led to him having to retire slightly earlier than expected from the Speakership. King himself wrote:

⁷⁸ HC Deb 23 July 1970 cc784-799.

⁷⁹ Parliamentary Archives, HC/LB/1/131 (Part 1 of 2), *Journal as Speaker*, p. 556.

⁸⁰ Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 22 April 2005.

⁸¹ Interview with Stan Newens, 9 July 2007.

⁸² Interview with Sir Robin Chichester-Clark, 13 February 2007.

⁸³ Laundry, ‘The Speaker and his Office in the Twentieth Century’, p. 186.

I had been a happy Chairman of Ways and Means. The burden I assumed on becoming Speaker took away some of that happiness.⁸⁴

The sudden death of Speaker Hylton-Foster had propelled King into the Chair having only had less than a year's experience as deputy. He had not expected to become Speaker at that time and so was totally unprepared to take up the role. The fact that he had found the Deputy Speaker role a strain should have forewarned him that the full Speakership was going to be difficult. The fact that he was unhappy in the role, had lost his wife and found the job exhausting meant that it was to his credit that he lasted more than five years in office.

On being replaced as Speaker in January 1971, Horace King was given a life peerage, taking the style Lord Maybray-King which incorporated his middle name, the maiden name of his mother. He was the first Speaker not to be given the customary hereditary viscounty because Harold Wilson had stopped the practice and tradition of creating hereditary peers and the new Prime Minister, Edward Heath, did not see fit to re-introduce it. Only Mrs Thatcher created further hereditary peers when Harold Macmillan was granted an earldom and Willie Whitelaw and George Thomas were given viscountcies. Whilst in the House of Lords, King served as a Deputy Speaker although his obituary in *The Times* notes that it was 'a position whose duties he tended to find onerous as the years went by and he found it increasingly difficult to attend the House'.⁸⁵ King married twice more before passing away on 3 September 1986.

Whilst the 1960s might well have been an era of reform and cultural change in Britain, this mood did not reach the Speaker's Chair. The Speakerships of Sir Harry Hylton-Foster and Horace King were uninspiring because the individuals who occupied the Chair were not of the same ilk as their immediate predecessor, W. S. Morrison. There was no equivalent of the Suez debates which had to be controlled and there were no moves to change the office of Speaker in any way. The two holders of the Speakership in this period were quite weak in different ways: Sir Harry Hylton-Foster was possibly

⁸⁴ Parliamentary Archives, HC/LB/1/131 (Part 1 of 2), *Journal as Speaker*, p. 309.

⁸⁵ See Obituary of Lord Maybray-King, *The Times*, 4 September 1986.

too nice and had never wanted to be Speaker whilst Dr Horace King could have been an effective Speaker had it not been for the dependence on alcohol to cope with the strains of the job. Hylton-Foster's legal background put him in good stead for making procedural rulings and the fact that Horace King had been Deputy Speaker meant that he had had some training for the job. However, these strengths were not enough to make their time as Speaker stand out. Both men were fair and reasonably well liked by their colleagues but they were not particularly political heavy weights. Perhaps that is why MPs opted for the very experienced and senior parliamentarian, Selwyn Lloyd, to succeed to the office in 1971.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SPEAKERSHIP IN A TOUGH CLIMATE: THE SPEAKERSHIPS OF SELWYN LLOYD (1971-1976) AND GEORGE THOMAS (1976-1983)

Selwyn Lloyd, I think, was one of the best Speakers because, as a former Cabinet Minister, he had the determination and the vigour to stand up to government in a polite way and he did this in a very effective way.

Sir Teddy Taylor, former Conservative MP for Glasgow Cathcart and then Southend East, 2004.¹

He [George Thomas] had his favourites. He was particularly friendly with Mrs Thatcher, the Prime Minister. Margaret Thatcher actually said to me, "I've nothing against you but you won't look after us like George did." And I said, "I hope not. That was noticed." Dear George and dear Margaret were very thick.

Former Speaker, Lord Weatherill, 2005.²

George Thomas, who was much more of a character in the land than I think other Speakers had been, I think impacted more on the public mind than other Speakers because he was something of a character and also because it coincided with the Royal Wedding [of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer] in which he participated.

Lord Steel of Aikwood, former Leader of the Liberal Party, 2005.³

The economic and industrial unrest of the 1970s arguably engendered the toughest political climate in post-war British history. The indecisive outcomes of the two general elections held in 1974 meant that the occupant of the Chair had to maintain order in an evenly divided House of Commons in which every vote was on a knife edge. Both Speakers Selwyn Lloyd and George Thomas came to the post with a vast experience of government having both been Cabinet Ministers although Lloyd had served at a much higher level and had a somewhat more chequered career than his successor. How these men coped with the challenges they faced, the way in which they were viewed by their parliamentary colleagues and what changes and reforms they instituted will form the basis of this chapter.

¹ Interview with Sir Teddy Taylor, 26 October 2004.

² Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

³ Interview with Lord Steel, 15 March 2005.

John Selwyn Lloyd was born on 28 July 1904 in West Kirby on the Wirral Peninsula. His father, John Wesley Lloyd, was a local doctor and devout Methodist and Selwyn (as he was known) was brought up in a very middle class family. Lloyd was educated at Fettes College and then went on to gain a Classics scholarship to Magdalene College, Cambridge where he also read law. At Cambridge he joined the Liberal Club and went on to become President of the Cambridge Union. Following university he became a lawyer at Gray's Inn but was adopted at the age of 22 as the Liberal candidate for Macclesfield which he contested at the 1929 General Election. It was a difficult seat for the Liberals and, despite doubling the number of votes for the Party, he came third behind the Conservatives and Labour.⁴

Lloyd quickly fell out with the Liberals over the question of free trade and when it was known that he would not be standing again for them in Macclesfield, he was approached by the Clitheroe Conservative Association. However, Lloyd declined because he wanted to concentrate on his legal career and had become interested in local rather than national politics. He was elected as an independent councillor on Hoyle Urban District Council in 1932 and served there until 1945. During the Second World War he reached the rank of Brigadier, served as Deputy Chief of Staff of the British Second Army and was present on D Day. In October 1944, a letter from Albert Buckley of the Wirral Conservative Association notified Lloyd that the sitting MP, Alan Graham, was not standing again and urged him to put his name forward. Having abandoned the Liberals, Lloyd applied and was unanimously selected as the Conservative candidate in January 1945. Despite the Labour landslide at the 1945 General Election, Lloyd was elected with a healthy majority of 16,625 although this was a greatly reduced margin from the 25,816 majority secured by the Unionist candidate, Captain Graham, in 1935.⁵

When the Conservatives returned to power in 1951, Selwyn Lloyd served under Anthony Eden as a Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. In the same year, at the age of

⁴ See D. R. Thorpe, *Selwyn Lloyd*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989), p. 48.

⁵ *The Times House of Commons 1945*, (London: The Times Office, 1945), p. 75 & *The Times House of Commons 1935*, (London: The Times Office, 1935), p. 88.

47, he married Elizabeth [known as Bae] Marshall. Together, they had a daughter, Joanna, but the marriage was not to last and Lloyd filed for divorce in early 1957. In 1954 he became Minister of Supply and went on to become Minister of Defence in 1955. Later that year Lloyd was made Foreign Secretary and so in ten years, he had managed to climb the ranks to become one of the most senior ministers in the Cabinet. Lloyd was Foreign Secretary during the Suez crisis of the autumn of 1956 and despite this leading to Eden's resignation, Lloyd remained Foreign Secretary in Harold Macmillan's government and later became Chancellor of the Exchequer in the reshuffle of 1960. Lloyd was the biggest casualty and motivator behind Macmillan's 'Night of the Long Knives' in July 1962 when he sacked seven ministers in an attempt to reinvent his government following the disastrous Orpington by-election. However, Lloyd was not on the back benches for very long because he returned to the Cabinet as Leader of the House of Commons when Sir Alec Douglas-Home became Prime Minister in October 1963. When the Conservatives lost power in 1964, Lloyd continued as Shadow Leader of the House and then took on Commonwealth Relations when Edward Heath became Party Leader in July 1965. However, following the 1966 General Election, Heath reshuffled his Shadow Cabinet giving the following reason in his memoirs:

It was important to have experienced spokesmen, but we needed an injection of new blood. I was keen to reduce numbers [...] The major changes involved Selwyn Lloyd, Reginald Manningham-Buller (latterly Lord Dilhorne), Duncan Sandys, John Boyd-Carpenter and Ernest Marples. The first two stood down voluntarily, having served the party well for more than two decades.⁶

Lloyd probably thought that his days at the forefront of national politics were over and so opted to concentrate his efforts on helping to restore the Conservative Party's organisation on the ground ready for the next general election. He did, however, remain a member of the House of Commons Services Committee, the body which advised the Speaker on his administrative responsibilities, and, in 1970, he became its chairman. Lloyd admitted that, 'This experience was of great help to me when I became Speaker.'⁷ Indeed, his Godson, Jonathan Aitken, who became the Conservative MP for Thanet East

⁶ Edward Heath, *The Course of My Life: My Autobiography*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), p. 282.

⁷ Selwyn Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 118.

in February 1974, believes that Lloyd's membership of this committee was part of a strategy and admitted:

I was very much aware, probably almost ahead of anybody else because, as his Private Secretary, he confided in me, that he had his eye on becoming Speaker really as early as 1963 or something like that. He made himself, which didn't take much effort because he was that anyway, a good House of Commons man as opposed to a good ministerial man. He served on various key committees [such as the Services Committee] [...] he angled himself to become Speaker and of course he did.⁸

Despite having his sights firmly set on the Speakership, Lloyd had to overcome the fact that he had been at the top table of government and for this reason his candidacy was questioned. Lloyd's involvement as Foreign Secretary in the collusion that took place between Britain and Israel during the disastrous Suez crisis, which was exposed by Anthony Nutting in 1967, was another factor which went against him.⁹ Members were expected to support a man who had been part of a conspiracy, in which the Prime Minister misled the House of Commons, and allow him to chair their proceedings and ensure impartiality. Nevertheless, despite the attempt by Robin Maxwell-Hyslop to cause a contested election, Lloyd was elected as the 152nd Speaker on 12 January 1971. Clearly, even by 1971, the Prime Minister could still determine who the Speaker would be even if his choice was highly questionable and not universally supported.

Lloyd's greatest challenge was to overcome the issue that he would be too much in favour of the government because, having served as an extremely senior Cabinet minister, he was considered to be too close to the executive. Lloyd was also elected shortly after a new Conservative government had come to power and so fears from Opposition Members that he would favour his old colleagues in Heath's administration were understandable. The fact that Lord Weatherill commented that, on Lloyd's election to the Chair, 'It is said that he didn't have to pretend to be a Conservative anymore' thanks to his Liberal background, perhaps stood him in good stead for

⁸ Interview with Jonathan Aitken, 29 November 2010.

⁹ See Anthony Nutting, *No End of a Lesson: The Story of Suez*, (London: Constable, 1967).

ensuring that he was not biased towards the government side.¹⁰ Lord Parkinson, who was Conservative MP for Enfield West at the time, recalls that Lloyd

had this problem as Speaker of proving to the House that once he was Speaker he was unbiased, he was neutral and that's quite difficult when you've been a member of the Cabinet, Foreign Secretary, Chancellor of the Exchequer. So he was quite guarded in his dealings with the Conservatives and the Labour Party watched him like hawks to see if he favoured us.¹¹

Lord Hooson, who was Liberal MP for Montgomeryshire, remembered that 'Selwyn was terribly anxious to please and he didn't want to battle with the Beast of Bolsover [Labour MP and firebrand, Dennis Skinner]'.¹² Despite being a new MP, Skinner was not afraid to cause trouble in the chamber and on 20 January 1972, following unemployment rising to more than 1 million, he stood directly in front of Prime Minister Edward Heath and shook his fist in his face. Lloyd had to suspend the sitting for 15 minutes to restore order.¹³ Skinner himself does not agree with Hooson and the fact that Lloyd did suspend the sitting shows that he would take the necessary action.¹⁴ However, the Speaker chose to suspend the whole House rather than 'name' Skinner and have him suspended individually which shows that Hooson's point is most certainly the case. The former Conservative MP for Huntingdonshire, Lord Renton, argued that Lloyd 'was one of those people who tried to avoid any kind of party attitude. He didn't hold people down as much as he might have done'.¹⁵

Baroness Boothroyd, who was first elected to the House of Commons in 1973 during Lloyd's time in the Chair, however, remembers that:

Selwyn Lloyd was very stern. He used to terrify me actually. I remember once speaking in a full House late at night. I was right at the end of the list obviously.

¹⁰ Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

¹¹ Interview with Lord Parkinson, 17 January 2009.

¹² Interview with Lord Hooson, 25 April 2007.

¹³ See John Campbell, *Edward Heath: A Biography*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), p. 407. This incident is not recorded in Hansard although the Speaker's decision to suspend the sitting is noted in the House of Commons Journal on Thursday 20 January 1972.

¹⁴ Telephone conversation with Dennis Skinner, 15 September 2008.

¹⁵ Interview with Lord Renton, 1 March 2006.

We were waiting for the division and he used to tap his [papers] like this, come on hurry it up. I never knew Selwyn Lloyd but I found him intimidating.¹⁶

This might well have been the case for newer Members who were not as confident as the more well established MPs although Dennis Skinner was in the new intake and clearly Lord Hooson did not think that Lloyd had the same effect on him.

According to Maxwell-Hyslop, Lloyd had an ‘unfortunate habit of taking several right-wing Conservative MPs off on holiday, which gave the impression at least of impaired impartiality.’¹⁷ Lloyd’s successor in the Chair, George Thomas, commented on this in his memoirs and recorded that:

when Selwyn Lloyd had been to Spain for a holiday, he had taken among others the Tory MP Jonathan Aitken with him. Selwyn never made any bones about having the company of the Tories.¹⁸

Aitken argues that, ‘I had grown up with Selwyn Lloyd long before he became Speaker [...] we had a close Godfather – Godson relationship’.¹⁹ In fact, their relationship was so close that, when Lloyd first became Speaker, he acted as a character witness at the Old Bailey for Aitken, who was acquitted for breaching the Official Secrets Act 1911. Aitken had photocopied a government document on British arm sales to Nigeria and passed it to *The Sunday Telegraph*.²⁰ The fact that Lloyd and Aitken were like family was excusable but the Speaker also took on holiday Harold Macmillan’s son-in-law, the far more senior Foreign Office Minister and Conservative MP for Brighton Pavilion, Julian Amery.²¹

¹⁶ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 24 October 2005.

¹⁷ Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 15 November 2005.

¹⁸ George Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonyandy*, (London: Century Publishing, 1985), p. 156.

¹⁹ Interview with Jonathan Aitken, 29 November 2010.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 5 February 2009.

As seen previously, impartiality is key to the Speakership and anything that jeopardises this would bring the whole office crashing down. Lord Parkinson supports Lloyd's decision to take political friends on holiday saying:

Such friends as Selwyn had were all Conservatives. He couldn't stop his friendships and retreat into an ivory tower and bear in mind he was divorced at the time. One of the things that hit me when we went there that night we took him home was that he was really a very lonely man.²²

However, the Commons does expect the Speaker to give up his or her political friends and retreat into the ivory tower that is Speaker's House. That might seem unfair and unkind but that is what the Speakership entails if the holder of the office is to be deemed impartial. Holidaying with colleagues from one side of the political divide leaves the occupant of the Chair open to criticism.

Even other fellow Conservatives believed that Lloyd did not give everyone a fair crack of the whip with Sir Richard Body, the former Conservative MP for Holland and Boston, arguing that:

Selwyn Lloyd was not liked. He was not a fair Speaker. I don't think he selected the speakers for debate very fairly. I think most Speakers have tried to make sure that minorities are heard. I don't think he made any effort.²³

Despite this criticism from his own ranks, Lord Elis-Thomas, who was Plaid Cymru MP for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, recalls that Lloyd 'issued that famous statement at the beginning, "We are all minorities now", of the short Parliament of 1974'.²⁴

Clearly, Selwyn Lloyd enjoys mixed reviews concerning his impartiality when it came to selecting speakers and some of his critics came from his own Conservative side.

Lord Weatherill, who was a senior whip at the time, recalled that:

²² Interview with Lord Parkinson, 17 January 2009.

²³ Telephone conversation with Sir Richard Body, 22 February 2007.

²⁴ Interview with Lord Elis-Thomas, 21 September 2004.

He [Lloyd] was a former Chancellor of the Exchequer, former Foreign Secretary, didn't know anybody in the House of Commons. They had to give him another Deputy because he didn't know who to call.²⁵

The fact that Lloyd was a very lonely man could be because he was shy and felt awkward among colleagues and so he failed to get to know other MPs well. Lord Naseby, who as Michael Morris was Conservative MP for Northampton South, agrees with Weatherill and remembers that:

Selwyn never learnt any of the names of the new Members in 1974. In fact, Geoffrey Pattie [Conservative MP for Chertsey and Walton] and I went to see him. We complained because we used to stand up regularly and were never called. We learnt somewhere or another that he hadn't really learnt the names of any of us. So, he said that he'd noticed we'd been getting up but we'd have to bide our time.²⁶

For a Speaker to ensure fairness it is absolutely essential that he or she learns the names of each and every one of the 650 odd MPs. This is not an easy job but a Speaker must be seen to be giving everyone an equal chance and should not preclude someone from speaking just because he does not know their name! This is a weakness that none of the other post-war Speakers have been criticised for and supports the argument that a Speaker should have served an apprenticeship as a Deputy Speaker because at least this role enables someone to learn all the names and gain greater knowledge of procedure.

Members of the Labour Parliamentary Party tested Lloyd's mettle on 25 January 1971, only a few days after he was elected to the Chair. The incident arose when a group of thirty or so Labour MPs demonstrated in front of the Table of the House against the guillotining of the Industrial Relations Bill. Lloyd had no choice but to suspend the sitting and Tony Benn, then Labour MP for Bristol South East, wrote in his diary that:

After the first suspension we had all agreed to talk to the demonstrators in the Tea Room, but they were determined to go on and when the Tory Chief Whip, Francis Pym, got up and moved that the question be put, and it was put, and there was a

²⁵ Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

²⁶ Interview with Lord Naseby, 7 September 2004.

vote and the Speaker declined to hear points of order. So that brought it to an end.²⁷

Fortunately, Pym came to the Speaker's aid because otherwise this would have been even more difficult for Lloyd to have managed and could have been an early embarrassment resulting in irrevocable damage. Lloyd did not have the benefit of having already had experience in the Chair and so he certainly enjoyed a baptism of fire into the role.

Lloyd himself wrote in some 'Impressions of the 1971/72 session' that 'Northern Ireland was a constant irritant' and indeed it was an incident early on in his Speakership concerning an Ulster MP which caused him great criticism.²⁸ The incident, which took place on 31 January 1972, involved Bernadette Devlin, the Independent Unity MP for Mid Ulster. Tony Benn described what happened in his diary entry:

There was a statement on the Bogside massacre ['Bloody Sunday' in Londonderry] yesterday in which thirteen Catholics were killed by troops following the illegal march which had been undertaken by the Civil Rights people against a ban [...] Bernadette Devlin was not called by the Speaker so she had to speak on points of order. At one point, she stamped down the gangway and went over and attacked [Reginald] Maudling [the Home Secretary] physically, an extraordinary sight. She smacked him and pulled his hair. People took her away and she was fighting with them.²⁹

Devlin, who had been present at the shootings in Londonderry, had already accused Maudling of being a liar and a 'murdering hypocrite' but had not been disciplined by Lloyd for using this unparliamentary language.³⁰ However, Benn wrote that the 'Speaker, very wisely, didn't do anything about it' probably because any action from the Chair could have made matters worse.³¹ However, not all Members shared Benn's view and Lloyd's biographer, D. R. Thorpe states that, 'All Speakers have their bad

²⁷ Tony Benn, *Office Without Power: Diaries 1968-72*, (London: Hutchinson, 1988), diary entry for 25 January 1971, p. 327.

²⁸ Selwyn Lloyd papers, Churchill Archives Centre, SELO 5/103, 'Notepad with SL's Impressions of the 1971/72 session', 11 November 1972.

²⁹ Benn, *Office Without Power: Diaries 1968-72*, diary entry for 31 January 1972, p. 401.

³⁰ See HC Deb 31 January 1972 c33 & c41.

³¹ Benn, *Office Without Power: Diaries 1968-72*, diary entry for 31 January 1972, p. 401.

moments. 31 January 1972 was Selwyn's'.³² The event clearly affected Lloyd because he dedicated two pages in his book on the Speakership to the episode and he wrote that:

For this I was much criticized. The Leader of the House [Willie Whitelaw] and the Government Chief Whip [Francis Pym] came to warn me of deep feeling on the Government side. I was told that it was by no means confined to Government supporters. The authority of the Chair and my personal position was in jeopardy.³³

Lloyd, realising the precarious position he was in, decided that he had no choice but to make a statement to the House which he did the next day:

I have considered what happened yesterday. When strong feelings exist or are aroused, there are times when the Chair can appropriately be deaf or indeed blind. In my view, I went to the absolute limits of tolerance, perhaps beyond them. What I now want to make clear is that if an hon. Member uses unparliamentary language or acts in an unparliamentary manner and when ordered to, refuses to withdraw or desist, I will not hesitate to act in accordance with the Standing Orders.

The reputation of the House and the position of the Chair are now at risk. That is something which I, so long as I am Speaker, cannot tolerate.³⁴

Some Members were still upset and Lloyd notes that there was an attempt at tabling a motion of criticism but this only attracted the signatures of Sir Gerald Nabarro [Conservative MP for Worcestershire South], Anthony Fell [Conservative MP for Yarmouth] and Ivor Stanbrook [Conservative MP for Orpington].³⁵ Interestingly, this indication of no confidence came from colleagues on his own side which showed that the Conservatives were not all prepared to rally to save a criticised Speaker who had come from their own ranks. Lloyd concluded by writing:

I realized at the time that my action or lack of it would be criticized. But, in the prevailing atmosphere, no appeals from the Chair for withdrawal or apology would have had any effect. It would have ended in Miss Devlin being named and

³² D. R. Thorpe, *Selwyn Lloyd*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989), p. 422.

³³ Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, p. 70.

³⁴ HC Deb 1 February 1972, c239.

³⁵ See Selwyn Lloyd papers, Churchill Archives Centre, SELO 5/103, 'Notepad with SL's Impressions of the 1971/72 session', 11 November 1972.

perhaps removed by force. She would at once have become a martyr. There might have been further riots in Northern Ireland, and the loss of more innocent lives.³⁶

This could have been true but what no one has commented on is the fact that Lloyd himself could well have brought on her physical attack on the Home Secretary by consistently failing to call Devlin to speak in the main debate. At the time, there were only twelve MPs representing Northern Ireland in the Commons and, as this debate was about an incident in the Province, Devlin would have expected to have been called. The fact that the Speaker did not call her could well have frustrated her even more and made her angrier than she was already. The Speaker has a duty to ensure that minority and specialist views are heard and, as an Ulster MP and a member of a minority party, she should have been called. Indeed, only two Northern Ireland representatives, Robin Chichester-Clark [Unionist MP for Londonderry] and Gerry Fitt [Republican Labour MP for Belfast West] were actually called to speak during the debate. Devlin's colleague, Frank McManus [Unity MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone], complained, in a Point of Order, that, despite being present at the march, she was not being called to speak.³⁷ Lloyd did not heed this comment and Devlin even protested to the chamber saying that, 'I have a right, as the only representative in this House who was an eye witness, to ask a question'.³⁸

This was absolutely true and perhaps, if Devlin had not finished off the sentence with 'of that murdering hypocrite' then Lloyd would have been compelled to have allowed her to put a question.³⁹ Lloyd's caution and reluctance to call someone who he knew would cause trouble could have actually made matters worse. In his private notes on the period, Lloyd wrote, 'Bernadette Devlin had her outburst. I was much criticised for ignoring it, but judging by her behaviour since, I was right (touch wood)'.⁴⁰

³⁶ Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, p. 71.

³⁷ See HC Deb 31 January 1972 c40.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, c41.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ See Selwyn Lloyd papers, Churchill Archives Centre, SELO 5/103, 'Notepad with SL's Impressions of the 1971/72 session', 11 November 1972.

Lord Parkinson, who was present during the debate, agreed with Lloyd's handling of the matter commenting:

Poor old Selwyn. What do you do when you have this extraordinary little Irish woman - brilliant, brilliant orator? It had all happened in a jiff and it was a very difficult one for him to handle but people felt he should have been firmer. But in a funny way she was wanting to be martyred. She wanted this to be world-wide publicity and the more he imposed the penalty on her, the bigger the penalty the bigger the story. So, I think in a lot of ways, I was never a critic of his about that because I always felt he showed rather a grown up attitude in not getting her more publicity than she'd already got.⁴¹

Lloyd's inaction over Devlin's performance could well have forced his resignation which in turn would have caused great damage to the office. Fortunately for Lloyd, he survived because many Members, like Parkinson, could see that any discipline from the Chair could have made matters worse and too few MPs were prepared to put their head up above the parapet and remove the Speaker. Once again, the Commons tolerated perceived weakness from the Chair in order to preserve the dignity of the office rather than protect the holder of it.

Speaker Lloyd took the unusual step of departing from a ruling made by his immediate predecessor. This arose from what became the Lord Lambton case which occurred at the end of Speaker King's period in the Chair. Lambton, the Conservative Member for Berwick upon Tweed, disclaimed the earldom of Durham which he inherited from his father on 23 February 1970 so that he could remain an MP. However, he requested the right to be able to continue to use his courtesy title of Lord Lambton. King sought the advice of the Garter King of Arms who came back saying that when a peer renounces a title, he also renounces all titles and rights associated with that peerage and so the Speaker rejected Lambton's request. According to Philip Laundy, Lambton was warned by the Speaker and the Clerk of the House that he risked disqualification if he continued to style himself as a lord and used it on his nomination papers.⁴²

⁴¹ Interview with Lord Parkinson, 17 January 2009.

⁴² Philip Laundy, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, (London: Quiller Press Ltd, 1984), p. 86.

Lambton was, however, re-elected to Parliament at the 1970 General Election using the words ‘commonly called Lord Lambton’. As soon as Lloyd was elected Speaker, Lambton renewed his request and this is where the volte-face from the Chair arose. Lloyd, having made his own enquiries, announced on 7 February 1972 that: ‘In my view the practice of the House is that hon. Members should be called and described as they wish, and as they are known in their constituencies. I have therefore decided to accede to this request’.⁴³ This showed that Speakers can easily overturn rulings made by their immediate predecessor only months before. The Labour MP Charles Pannell immediately tabled a motion seeking to reverse Lloyd’s new ruling. On 9 March, the question was referred to the Committee of Privileges which later backed the stance Lloyd had taken on the matter.⁴⁴ In this sense, a Speaker is virtually all powerful because he or she can make a new ruling which can countermand anything that has gone before. The only way in which a Speaker can be reined in is if MPs put down a motion to overturn a ruling. The Lambton case, whilst in the grand scheme of things is very trivial, shows quite clearly that a new Speaker can reverse any decisions made by his predecessors so long as the Commons does not summon up the courage to restrain him.

D. R. Thorpe believes there were two important reforms introduced during Lloyd’s period in the Chair: one was his usage of the ‘Blue Book’ and the other was the introduction of a third Deputy Speaker.⁴⁵ When Lloyd was elected Speaker he soon realised the difficulty of ensuring fairness when calling MPs to speak in the chamber. He wrote that he

discovered that the system was for a list to be prepared of those who had written in, asking to be called, with a figure after each name showing how often that Member had spoken during the session. That gave me no idea of the topics on which the Member had spoken, nor did I know the dates and lengths of previous speeches. If a Member came to the Chair and asked to be called or rose without notice, I had no quick way of looking up the record.⁴⁶

⁴³ See HC Deb 7 February 1972, cc975-978.

⁴⁴ See Third Report from the Committee of Privileges, HC 324, 1971-72, paragraph 11. p. vii.

⁴⁵ See Thorpe, *Selwyn Lloyd*, pp. 419-420.

⁴⁶ Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, p. 81.

Lloyd therefore introduced the Blue Book which allowed him to keep track of which Members had spoken and for how long. Lloyd described how he compiled the Blue Book:

Every Member's name was in it. I kept it up to date myself, entering the date, subject and length of each back-bench speech. I did not record the speeches made on the daily adjournment motion, or those made during Committee or Report Stages. Friday was a day on which as a rule few Members tried to speak. I recorded a speech made on a Friday with an F after it, to show that it probably should not be counted against its maker. Before each big debate I would make a list of those who wanted to speak, and fill in their records from the Blue Book, so that I and the Deputies would know the form.⁴⁷

This was an amazing amount of additional work for the Speaker to take on although it did show just how much Lloyd was determined to be fair.

The introduction of the third Deputy Speaker was a major reform for the overall execution of the office. During the post-war period, the House of Commons had seen fit to appoint additional Deputy Chairmen of Ways and Means on three occasions (Sir Robert Young [Labour MP for Newton] in 1948, Sir William Anstruther-Gray [Conservative MP for Berwick and East Lothian] in 1957 and Sir Harry Legge-Bourke [Conservative MP for the Isle of Ely] in 1964) and they assisted in chairing proceedings in the chamber.⁴⁸ However, during Lloyd's time this ad hoc arrangement was formalised with the office of the third deputy. On 13 February 1972, Lloyd expanded on notes that he had recorded which gave his impressions of the Speakership three months after he had taken office:

Sleep

This was a real problem, as the Committee Stage of the Industrial Relations Bill was going through [...] With only 2 Deputies it was not possible for me to be off completely any night.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, p. 81.

⁴⁸ *Deputy Speakers of the House from the start of the 1945/46 Parliamentary session to the present*, (House of Commons Library, 2006).

⁴⁹ Selwyn Lloyd papers, Churchill Archives Centre, SELO 3/67A, 'SL's notes (possibly for his autobiography) on the Speakership, mistakes, people etc.', 13 February 1972.

Lloyd wrote this after the appointment of the third Deputy in 1971 but it gives a flavour as to why he wanted an extra pair of hands. Lloyd had seen that the Speakership had killed off Sir Harry Hylton-Foster and had driven Horace King to drink and ill health and so, at the age of 67, he did not want to follow suit. On 22 November 1971, Lance Mallalieu, the Labour MP for Brigg, was appointed as Deputy Speaker and Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means. This gave Lloyd the additional body he needed to ensure that he did not have to chair debates after 10pm and so conserving his energies for the more important periods of the day during parliamentary questions.⁵⁰ But Lloyd kept close control of his deputies and did not allow them any discretion when it came to choosing who to call. This was pointed out by his senior deputy and successor, George Thomas, who commented:

Selwyn used to keep a pretty tight rein on his deputies [...] Selwyn made his promises [on who he was going to call to speak in debate] and it was up to us to keep them.⁵¹

The creation of the third deputy also meant that there were amendments to the Standing Orders in order to allow the Deputy Speakers to be able to ‘name’ unruly Members and to be able to accept the closure of debates.⁵² This meant that the Speaker did not have to return to the Chair at the end of the day’s sitting nor if an incident occurred where a Member needed to be disciplined. The creation of the third deputy, plus the additional powers conferred on the Deputy Speakers, must have eased the burden on Lloyd. However, during the short, hung Parliament of March to October 1974, no third Deputy Speaker was appointed because of the closeness of the arithmetic in the House of Commons. This was probably the time when Lloyd could have really done with the extra deputy and shows that, in these instances, the office of Speaker can be completely beholden to the will of the two front benches.

⁵⁰ See Thorpe, *Selwyn Lloyd*, p. 419.

⁵¹ Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 131.

⁵² See HC Deb, Changes to Standing Orders on 8 March & 16 November 1971.

On 2 August 1972, Lloyd announced that the Prime Minister [Edward Heath] had asked him to preside over a Speaker's Conference on Electoral Reform and that he had agreed so to do.⁵³ Lloyd described that:

The Conference over which I presided had twenty-nine other members. We met or tried to meet once a week. The average attendance was about half. A move to allow the Deputy Speaker to stand in for me from time to time was narrowly defeated.⁵⁴

Lloyd had already succeeded in being granted a third Deputy Speaker to help him manage the chamber and it seems he was also willing to delegate the chairmanship of a Speaker's Conference to one of his lieutenants. Whilst Lloyd undoubtedly enjoyed the grandeur of the office of Speaker, it would appear that he was not happy with all the work that it entailed and would do his best to reduce his responsibilities.

Lloyd believed that the only real achievement that the Conference managed was the change to election expenses. With the February 1974 General Election imminent, the rules governing candidates' election expenses had to be altered because inflation had meant that the current regulations would prevent even a modest campaign being conducted. Fortunately, Lloyd managed to get the Conference to agree and so the Heath government accepted its recommendations to increase the amount candidates could spend and this was included in the Representation of the People Act 1974.⁵⁵

During his period as Speaker, Lloyd definitely became an elder statesman and confidant of senior Conservative politicians. When the February 1974 General Election did not produce a clear outcome, Heath tried to put together a coalition government with the Liberals. D. R. Thorpe explains:

The catalyst for such a government during the financial crisis of 1931 had been King George V, but it was tacitly accepted that the Queen could not be expected in 1974 to take such an active part as her grandfather, though ultimately the

⁵³ HC Deb 2 August 1972, c560.

⁵⁴ Lloyd, *Mr Speaker, Sir*, p. 116.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Monarchy might well be the stabilising force [...] some felt that the Speaker might have a significant role to play in any constitutional crisis that might arise in the course of the year.⁵⁶

Lloyd felt that the Speaker engaging in any kind of horse-trading could seriously compromise his impartiality although his office and experience did make him an obvious choice for the role. In the end, the October 1974 General Election quickly resolved the problem although the episode did show that the Speaker could well be called upon to sort out a constitutional crisis.

On 16 December 1974, Willie Whitelaw went to Speaker's House to discuss the current political position. Whitelaw told Lloyd that the only two people he could consult were the former Prime Minister, Sir Alec Douglas-Home and himself because clearly there was now a big question mark over Heath's leadership of the Conservative Party following his two defeats at the polls that year.⁵⁷ It therefore came as no surprise to him that there was a leadership contest and Margaret Thatcher became leader. Despite the fact that Lloyd was Speaker and therefore removed from party politics, this did not stop old colleagues from asking for advice. It is very doubtful however that leading Labour politicians would have approached Lloyd on similar grounds and shows that Speakers never really discard their roots no matter how hard they try.

On 3 November 1975 Lloyd issued a statement saying that he did not intend to seek re-election at the next general election and later that month he wrote to the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, indicating that he would be retiring in the very near future.⁵⁸ Lloyd was clearly of the view that he should go mid Parliament so that MPs could choose someone who they had all seen in action. Waiting until an election would mean that new MPs would be part of the selection but would not have worked with any of the potential candidates. Jonathan Aitken also believes that his Godfather 'had an intimation or two of bad health' and that he 'was suddenly realising that he wasn't as fast on his feet'.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Thorpe, *Selwyn Lloyd*, p. 427.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 428.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 429.

⁵⁹ Interview with Jonathan Aitken, 29 November 2010.

Lloyd retired on 3 February 1976 after being Speaker for six years and having achieved one last hurrah in his political life. He took the unusual step of staying on as an MP so that he could conduct the election of his successor and declared:

To mark the fact that I am an ordinary Member I have decided, as is my right, to stay on as a Member of this House. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am grateful for that response. I have also noticed the uneasiness on the surfaces of the usual channels at the prospect of having yet another floating voter. Although I shall stay on, it will be only for a few days. This time next week, or thereabouts, I hope to be unprofitably employed either in the Chiltern Hundreds of Stoke, Desborough and Burnham or perhaps in the Manor of Northstead.⁶⁰

Although within the rules, this decision was unprecedented in the post-war period because sitting Speakers normally resign from both the Chair and as an MP at the same time. Even though Lloyd only stayed on as an MP for a few days, it does show that a retired Speaker does not have to automatically resign his seat and could return to the backbenches if he so wanted. Lloyd's action could well be used as a precedent for the future if a former Speaker did not want to give up his or her job as an MP and indeed this was mooted at the time of Michael Martin's departure from the Chair.⁶¹

Whilst Lloyd had never become Prime Minister, he managed to finish his political career with the highest of parliamentary offices. He was most definitely the 'come back kid' who showed that politicians can survive career setbacks and rise like the phoenix from the ashes if opportunities present themselves. Having retired from the Speakership and from the Commons, Lloyd was elevated to the House of Lords although the policy of only giving a life peerage and not the usual viscounty was continued. Having changed his name by deed poll so that he could incorporate both his names in his title, he became Lord Selwyn-Lloyd of the Wirral. However, Lloyd's period in the House of Lords was short-lived. He soon became ill and underwent surgery in London for a brain tumour that was discovered to be incurable. Lloyd died on 17 May 1978 thus ending a most remarkable political career that saw high ministerial office culminating in presiding over a Parliament in which he had served for so long.

⁶⁰ HC Deb 3 February 1976 cc1140-1.

⁶¹ George Foulkes, 'Michael was a reformer cut down by jittery MPs', *The Independent*, 20 May 2009.

Lloyd's successor, George Thomas, had served as his senior Deputy Speaker and Chairman of Ways and Means and so was the natural choice to take over in the Chair. Thomas had been born on 29 January 1909 in Port Talbot, Wales and was the son of a Welsh speaking miner and the daughter of a founder of the English Methodist Church in Wales. During the First World War, Thomas's father, Zachariah, went off to fight and later his mother had to go to court with her marriage certificate to prove that she was Zachariah's wife and not the woman in Kent to whom he was paying his soldier's allowance. Thomas's father never returned to South Wales and died of Tuberculosis in 1925.⁶²

Unlike, his brothers and sisters, Thomas was allowed to continue with his schooling rather than become a miner or go into domestic service. He passed the scholarship examination and went on to what became the Tonypany Grammar School. On leaving school, he became a pupil teacher firstly in Wales and then in Essex. Thomas completed his teacher training in Southampton and then taught in London and Cardiff. During the Second World War, Thomas volunteered for the armed forces but was found to be medically unfit for duty (although he was never told why) and so became a member of the reservist police force in South Glamorgan instead.⁶³

In 1944, Elizabeth Andrews, who was the women's organiser of the Welsh Labour Party and a friend of Thomas's mother, suggested that he put his name forward as a parliamentary candidate.⁶⁴ Thomas was initially selected to contest the dual member seat of Blackburn with Barbara Castle but was worried that he would not be able to spend enough time there as it was so far away from South Wales. The Cardiff selections came up and, whilst he lost out by one vote to future Prime Minister, James Callaghan, in Cardiff South, he was later selected for the Cardiff Central seat.

⁶² See Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonypany*.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁶⁴ See E. H. Robertson, *George: A Biography of Viscount Tonypany*, (London: Marshall Pickering, 1992), p. 74.

Thomas was elected as MP for Cardiff Central at the 1945 General Election with a majority of 4,524.⁶⁵ This seat was, however, abolished during the first Attlee Government and so Thomas was selected for the newly created Cardiff West constituency which he won at the 1950 General Election and then continued to represent until he retired from the House of Commons in 1983.

Early in 1951, just before the general election, Sir Charles MacAndrew, the Chairman of Ways and Means and Deputy Speaker, invited Thomas to join the Panel of Chairmen who preside over the standing committees which examine bills. As Thomas was the only Welsh MP on the Speaker's Panel of Chairmen, he was virtually automatically appointed as the first chairman of the Welsh Grand Committee. This work undoubtedly gave Thomas the experience he needed to later go on to be Deputy Speaker and then Speaker and so his future was mapped out at an early stage of his parliamentary career.

When it seemed that Labour would regain power in 1964, the Party's Chief Whip, Bert Bowden, called Thomas into his office at the House of Commons and told him that if they won the general election then he would be made Chairman of Ways and Means. Thomas was delighted at this prospect but Bowden added the caveat saying that, 'Of course, if we have a majority of only about half a dozen, we will have to give the job to a Tory, for we will need the vote'.⁶⁶ Labour were returned with a majority of just four and so the new Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, appointed Thomas as a junior Home Office minister believing that the Conservatives wanted the incumbent Chairman of Ways and Means, Sir William Anstruther-Gray to remain in post. Within a week of becoming a Home Office minister, Thomas learned that Anstruther-Gray no longer wanted to remain Deputy Speaker. Wilson quite graciously gave Thomas the option of swapping and becoming Deputy Speaker as originally intended but he chose to pursue a ministerial career and remain in the Home Office. In the end, Dr Horace King was Labour's choice as Deputy Speaker and Chairman of Ways and Means and, as we have

⁶⁵ See *The Times House of Commons 1945*, p. 105.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonypanody*, p. 88.

seen, later became the first Speaker from the Labour benches. On his decision to pursue a ministerial career, Thomas wrote:

If it were not for the genuine misunderstanding about Anstruther-Gray, I would have missed six years' ministerial experience, but I might well have become Speaker ten years before I did.⁶⁷

Becoming Speaker much earlier would have meant that Thomas would have probably retired from the House of Commons a decade earlier than he actually did and he would not have been able to give the service to his native Wales that this postponement permitted.

Following the 1966 General Election there was the usual ministerial reshuffle and Thomas became Minister of State at the Welsh Office. The major event for Thomas in this period was the Aberfan mining disaster on 21 October 1966 when a coal tip slid down the mountain and buried the primary school below. Of the 144 people killed, 116 were primary school aged children. Thomas was at the scene within an hour of being telephoned and he visited all the families affected by the tragedy. Later he was criticised for allowing part of the disaster fund to be used to pay for the removal of the coal tip.⁶⁸

In June 1967, Thomas left the Welsh Office to become a minister in the Commonwealth Office which meant that he spent most of his time touring the newly independent African countries. This appointment was short-lived because in April 1968, Harold Wilson invited George Thomas to join the Cabinet as Secretary of State for Wales. The highlight of being Secretary of State was that he was responsible for the Investiture of Prince Charles as Prince of Wales which took place in Caernarvon on 1 July 1969. All this experience surely made him a better Speaker when he eventually gained the office than he would have been had he been elected to the Chair a decade earlier.

⁶⁷ Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 90.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-102.

When Labour lost power in 1970, Thomas continued on the front bench as Shadow Welsh Secretary and when they finally regained power in 1974 he expected to get his old job back. Thomas was shocked when, having been invited to Downing Street to see the Prime Minister, Wilson offered him Deputy Speaker and Chairman of Ways and Means rather than a return to the Cabinet.⁶⁹ Thomas's anti-devolution beliefs meant that he was the only former Cabinet minister still sitting in the Commons not to be reappointed to Harold Wilson's Cabinet and he had to make-do with the vague promise that Selwyn Lloyd was getting old and that he would soon become Speaker. At this stage, however, the Prime Minister of the day still did exercise a lot of influence when it came to selecting who would become Speaker and it was only later that backbenchers asserted their right to choose their own candidate. The fact that Thomas did eventually become Speaker, as Wilson virtually promised he would, demonstrates this. Even in the 1970s, the election of the Speaker was still determined by an agreement of the two front benches. It was only in the 1980s that true universal suffrage was extended to all MPs so that they could have a Speaker of their own choosing.

Thomas was Deputy Speaker and Chairman of Ways and Means for just under two years and during that time he took the office very seriously indeed. One of Thomas's biographers, Ramon Hunston, believes that:

When George first became Deputy Speaker, he found it difficult to get used to. For twenty-nine years George Thomas had been a loyal Labour party MP [...] Now, as Deputy Speaker, he was suddenly thrust outside the party political battlefield, and was no longer making Party speeches.⁷⁰

Thomas had, after all, been a Cabinet minister and a very vocal campaigner, but, despite this, he wrote in his memoirs:

I resolved from the first day in my new role that party politics were ended so far as I was concerned. From then on I gave my wholehearted loyalty to the House of

⁶⁹ See Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 127.

⁷⁰ Ramon Hunston, *Order! Order! A biography of The Rt. Hon. George Thomas*, (London: Marshalls, 1981), p. 122.

Commons and not to the Labour Party. It was not for me to allow the Labour Government to use me as a parliamentary pawn.⁷¹

This impartiality which Thomas imposed on himself undoubtedly stood him in good stead when Speaker Lloyd did eventually retire in February 1976. Had Thomas made glaring mistakes and openly shown favouritism to his colleagues in the government then it is quite possible that the backbenchers could have asserted their right to choose their own Speaker seven years earlier. In the end, George Thomas was the obvious choice to succeed Lloyd and what it did do was establish the pattern that anyone who is chosen as Speaker should have had experience chairing the House beforehand.

George Thomas was elected the 153rd Speaker on 3 February 1976. Bernard Donoghue, who was Senior Policy adviser to Harold Wilson, recorded in his diary entry for that day:

Thomas is a charming, typically effusive Welshman, who has longed for this job and loves Harold [Wilson] for getting it for him. The only sad aspect is that his mother is not alive. He is a bachelor and was a complete mother's boy, worshipping 'Mam' as everybody in South Wales called her. When she died the light went out of his life.⁷²

Thomas soon realised that it was a huge leap from being Deputy Speaker to actual Speaker as he recorded in his memoirs:

I thought that I knew the House of Commons thoroughly when I became Speaker, but in my first few months in the Chair I learned otherwise. There was a side of the Commons that had remained hidden to me throughout my thirty-one years there. It was as dark as the other side of the moon, and it was unattractive. At first I was merely shocked by the things I was learning, but in a short while, shock turned to anger.⁷³

The dark side was the pressure that was put on the Speaker by the more forthright MPs who had no qualms about undermining the Speakership to get their own way. One

⁷¹ Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 130.

⁷² Bernard Donoghue, *Downing Street Diary: With Harold Wilson in No. 10*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), diary entry for 3 February 1976, p. 654.

⁷³ Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 139.

episode when this was apparent was when Speaker Thomas took the view that supplementary questions after a ministerial statement were going on too long and Members who had no knowledge of the topic in hand were asking questions for the sake of it. He therefore resolved to take no more than three questions on each side of the House giving the reason as follows:

That would avoid the terrible tension that built up with people waiting to be called and the awful rows that would follow if they were not. Selwyn Lloyd had them and I was determined that I would not.⁷⁴

Indeed, Lord Hooson recalled that ‘He [George Thomas] would say to me before he became Speaker, “If I were Speaker I’d put that so-and-so [Dennis Skinner] down”’.⁷⁵ Clearly, Thomas, as senior Deputy Speaker, knew the problems that Lloyd had encountered and wanted to attempt to overcome them by employing this method of working. However, Thomas wrote that ‘the bully-boys were trying it on’ and continued that ‘many members were genuinely appalled that people were trying to force me into calling them and there was general approval when I told the House that such action was counter-productive’.⁷⁶ Thomas had to stamp his authority on the House at the outset demonstrating that he intended to be completely impartial and could not be bullied into favouring those who shouted the loudest. Hooson remembers how Speaker Thomas managed this:

I remember one marvellous day when I was with George in his office in the House of Commons and the Beast of Bolsover [Dennis Skinner] came in and said, “George, he said, “You didn’t call me today!” And George, wagging his finger, “I didn’t see you”, he said. “Oh you did!” “Have you come to interview George Thomas, the Member of Parliament, or Mr Speaker?” “Oh, does it make a difference?” “Yes, it does”, he said. That was a typical George way of dealing with it and he said, “If you are speaking to Mr Speaker, I did not see you today and I only call speakers that I see and I look around and I often must fail to see many and obviously I failed to see you.” The Beast of Bolsover is a hell of a nice chap but he nearly burst a blood vessel.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 140.

⁷⁵ Interview with Lord Hooson, 25 April 2007.

⁷⁶ Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 140.

⁷⁷ Interview with Lord Hooson, 25 April 2007.

George Thomas was also under pressure from the Government and Opposition whips when it came to making rulings. He wrote that:

Key people from the Opposition and the Government would come to sound out what my rulings were likely to be on certain issues and it was not unusual for me to be told that a poor view would be taken if I decided to rule in a particular way. I soon became convinced that both sides were engaged in an effort to gain the ascendancy over me. Polite but barely hidden menaces would be forthcoming in the privacy of a chat in my rooms.⁷⁸

When Thomas's memoirs were published, this was the first time that any Speaker had indicated publicly that there was a power struggle between the Chair and the whips of the major parties. It is not however surprising that the party managers would want to be able to control the Speaker so that they could enjoy an easier ride in the chamber.

Despite this pressure, Thomas was having none of it and he went on to write how he dealt with the matter:

My response was not what was expected for I turned sharply and pointed to my door: "See that door. I do not mind walking out through that door tomorrow, but I will go with my head high. I am not going to be pushed around. And as a backbencher I would tell the House why I had resigned." I was immediately assured in the most fulsome terms that the last thing anybody wished to do was to try to push me around.⁷⁹

Whether Thomas would have resigned the Speakership only a short time after having acceded to the office is unclear but what he did have to do was to show his strength of character and prove that he was his own man and not the creature of the whips.

Like his predecessor, Thomas had to deal with a House of Commons that was evenly divided and on 6 April 1976, when the Labour MP for Rotherham, Brian O'Malley, died, the government lost its overall majority. This meant that the House was even more prone to becoming extremely unruly. Thomas wrote that:

⁷⁸ Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonyandy*, p. 143.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

Sustained barracking is a very ugly development, which I felt was organised, and it made me realise that whereas Selwyn Lloyd had boasted that he had not named or suspended anyone throughout his Speakership, that policy was no good for me.⁸⁰

It was not long before he had to contend with a disorderly House which forced him to suspend the sitting.

The Aircraft and Shipbuilding Industries Bill had been reintroduced while Selwyn Lloyd was still Speaker and was in committee stage by the time George Thomas was elected to the Chair. The Conservatives opposed this bill and Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, who had become an authority on Commons procedure, set about proving that the bill was hybrid because some shipbuilders had been excluded from the legislation.⁸¹

Thomas wrote in his memoirs that:

The rules of procedure meant that if it were hybrid, that is to say if it did not deal fairly and equally with every shipyard concerned, then the bill could not proceed. Maxwell-Hyslop asked me to give a considered ruling within the next few days and I undertook to do so.⁸²

However, Thomas admitted that his ‘advisers wobbled and changed the advice they gave’ showing that the buck does stop with the Speaker because, in the end, he has to put his head above the parapet and make the crucial ruling.⁸³ The former Deputy Prime Minister and Conservative MP for Henley, Michael Heseltine, recalls:

The clerks, in advising him [the Speaker] had not given him the full quotation in the precedent they had put before him, a ruling by Mr Speaker Hylton-Foster in 1962. Again Robin [Maxwell-Hyslop] was up to speed. He had – almost unbelievably – remembered the full ruling, which laid down that, if any doubt existed about hybridity, the matter would have to be referred to examiners. He copied the text and had it laid under the egg-cup of George Thomas’ breakfast tray with a note that read: ‘Dear Mr Speaker. *Quod erat demonstrandum*. I claim game, set and match.’ Two months before he died in 1997, George confirmed to

⁸⁰ Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonyandy*, p. 142.

⁸¹ See Michael Heseltine, *Life in the Jungle: My Autobiography*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000), pp 169-170.

⁸² Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonyandy*, p. 147.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 148.

Robin what the chief clerk, Richard Barlas, had earlier reported, that this was the clinching moment.⁸⁴

So, Thomas ruled that the bill was hybrid. Maxwell-Hyslop believed that this was an important moment, not only when considering George Thomas's Speakership but also in defining the independence of the Chair. Maxwell-Hyslop recalled:

When he [Speaker Thomas] had ruled in my favour, in 1976, that the Aircraft & Shipbuilding Industries Bill was "prima facie hybrid", I moved down the Opposition benches to thank him (on his left side, of course). I was just beaten to it by the Leader of the House, Michael Foot, whom I heard say angrily: "I never thought that you would do to an old colleague what you have done to me!"

George Thomas looked at him glacially, and said, "Michael: Mr Speaker has NO OLD COLLEAGUES!", and turned away dismissively, to me, on his other side. I then thanked him warmly for his decision.⁸⁵

Maxwell-Hyslop believed that this was 'as historic a statement of the independence of the Chair, as Speaker Lenthall's famous response to King Charles I'.⁸⁶ Whilst, this is not necessarily the case because Lenthall's 'May it please your Majesty, I have neither eyes to see, nor tongue to speak, save as this House is pleased to direct me' has gone down in history as the Speaker stating that he was a servant of the House and not of the monarch, Thomas's comment demonstrates that the modern Speakership is not controlled by the government of the day.

Despite Thomas's ruling, Michael Foot announced a procedural motion designed to overrule it. The motion proposed that 'any Standing Orders relating to Private Business, and consideration of the application of any such Standing Orders, are dispensed with'.⁸⁷ Thomas was annoyed at the action taken by the government and later wrote:

⁸⁴ Heseltine, *Life in the Jungle: My Autobiography*, p. 170.

⁸⁵ Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 12 November 2008.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ See Heseltine, *Life in the Jungle: My Autobiography*, pp. 170-171.

Even now I feel upset that my ruling was simply ignored. Looking back I know I would not have tolerated it in my later years. For any government to overrule the Speaker, as the Callaghan Government did, is really so offensive that the Speaker ought to resign once the motion is carried.⁸⁸

Foot's motion certainly demonstrated that the government of the day can ride roughshod over the Speakership if it so chooses. Despite all the prestige and trappings of the office of Speaker, in the end it can be overruled by a simple majority in the Commons.

On the first vote, which was the Conservative amendment seeking to overturn Foot's motion, there was a tie of 303 to 303. In such circumstances the Speaker has to exercise the casting vote. The future Labour Leader and MP for Bedwellty, Neil Kinnock, shouted, "Vote Labour, George", however the Speaker announced:

I am following the precedent laid down by Mr Speaker Denison, which has been followed to this time. He said that the question upon which he was called to give his casting vote was one of great importance, and if affirmed by a majority of the House, it would have much force. It should, however, be affirmed by a majority of the House, and not merely by the casting vote of its presiding officer. For these reasons, my vote has to go with the Noes and I declare the Noes have it.⁸⁹

The Conservative amendment was therefore lost and the House had to move on to the Government's motion to approve the bill. According to precedent, if there was another tied vote then the Speaker would vote against and the bill would fall. However, when it came to the vote, the Government managed to win by one vote (304 to 303) to everyone's surprise. However, their victory was because Labour had broken their pairing agreement with the Conservatives and allowed Tom Pendry, the Labour MP for Stalybridge and Hyde, to cast his vote. Heseltine recounts what happened next:

I watched from my position behind the Opposition dispatch box. I was acutely aware of the utter helplessness of the parliamentary Opposition, faced with a constitutional abuse of this sort. In the end, the House of Commons can only work because people stick to the rules. The Speaker is their custodian. If the

⁸⁸ Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonypanady*, p. 149.

⁸⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 151.

government legislates to overrule the Speaker and does so by breaking its word, then there is no knowing where that process will end. The symbol of the authority of the Commons is the mace and it was the authority of the Commons that had been abused. I picked it up with both hands and offered it to the jeering, ranting rows of Labour MPs.⁹⁰

At that point, Thomas had no choice but to suspend the sitting of the House for twenty minutes because of gross disorder. A note came up to the Speaker's apartments from Margaret Thatcher, who was then Leader of the Opposition, saying that Heseltine would apologise immediately to the House.⁹¹ However, Thomas was not prepared to resolve the matter that night and recorded how he dealt with a potentially explosive episode when he returned to the chamber:

I did not sit down. I just stood in my place which, according to the custom of the House, made it impossible for anybody else to do or say anything. I simply said that I was suspending the sitting until the following morning because of the scenes of grave disorder. Before they realised what was happening, I had left the chair. There was a great roar of laughter because members had expected more of the earlier antics. I felt that that night I had established that I could deal with a crisis.⁹²

Thomas's biographer, E. H. Robertson, commented that his 'skills at maintaining order in the classroom when he was a teacher came in useful!'.⁹³ It would appear that a Speaker who had formerly been a school teacher (such as George Thomas and Horace King), were good at keeping order in the chamber because maintaining discipline in a classroom is not dissimilar to maintaining discipline in the Commons chamber. The future Speaker and then Labour MP for West Bromwich, Betty Boothroyd, recalls how Thomas considered ways of maintaining order in the House:

He [Thomas] used to say, "I think of little lines sometimes that I can use when there is a bad atmosphere. Just a line to make people laugh and to reduce the tension".⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 151.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 152-3.

⁹³ Robertson, *George: A Biography of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 241.

⁹⁴ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 24 October 2005.

Like his predecessor, he also ensured that he was fair when it came to calling Members to participate in a debate. Whilst he did not have Speaker Lloyd's Blue Book, he did keep records of who had spoken in order to guarantee that everyone was given a fair chance. In his memoirs, Thomas records the following episode:

I remember the Labour MP for Walsall North, David Winnick, once getting up on a point of order to protest that he had not been called and wanted to know the basis on which I called members to ask questions of the Prime Minister. This was a very impertinent question and I told him that I did not have to give reasons as to how I chose the people I called, but I was able to add, "Everyone who has been called this afternoon has not been called more than once before. The honourable member himself has been called four times. I keep a register." There was a great laugh.⁹⁵

Clearly, Thomas was good at maintaining order in the Commons chamber thanks to his good humour and his experience in the classroom. This skill was crucial in the late 1970s when the Commons could have easily had more unruly episodes and more occasions when debates could have been suspended.

When Mrs Thatcher tabled a motion of no confidence in the government in March 1979, George Thomas knew that the voting would be tight. He recorded in his memoirs that:

As always before a crucial debate, particularly when a tie is a real possibility, both the Opposition and the Government wanted to know how I would use my casting vote. I was able to tell them once again that I would rely on Speaker Denison's ruling, which in this case, would mean that I would vote with the Government.⁹⁶

As it was, the vote on 28 March 1979 resulted in the Opposition winning by 311 to 310 and the Callaghan government resigning. Speaker Thomas was not required to use his casting vote. Had the Labour Party managed to find one more vote then Thomas would have had to have saved the government.

⁹⁵ Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 142.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

Despite his good command of the House, George Thomas has been accused of bias and it would appear that this fell in two halves and depended very much on who was Prime Minister of the day. During the period 1976-1979, Thomas was accused of being too friendly towards the Labour side and then, as seen at the beginning of this chapter, during 1979-1983, it was argued that he was too close to Mrs Thatcher. Baroness Fookes, who was Conservative MP for Plymouth Drake at that time, has said that, 'There was a view, which I don't share, but there was a view of him that he enjoyed being popular'.⁹⁷ Thomas very much wanted to be liked and sometimes this could be used against him. At the beginning of his Speakership, Thomas records that the Conservative Chief Whip, Humphrey Atkins, came to see him and 'then went on to say that several of his senior colleagues had told him that they thought I was too friendly with Cledwyn Hughes [former Labour Cabinet Minister and MP for Anglesey] and the Prime Minister'.⁹⁸ When Thomas challenged Atkins of accusing him of bias, the Conservative whip soon backed down which shows that, at that time, MPs did not want to openly criticise the Speaker in case it harmed the overall office.

It must be extremely difficult for a Speaker to relinquish all contact with long-standing political friends and, after all, George Thomas and Jim Callaghan had both served together as Cardiff MPs for more than thirty years. Despite this friendship, relations between the two men were often cold. The Prime Minister's adviser, Bernard Donoghue, recorded in his diary one instance when:

after Questions Speaker George Thomas agreed to allow an emergency debate on British Leyland tomorrow. Jim was furious, stormed back to his room and wrote a letter of protest to the Speaker.⁹⁹

If Thomas had been overtly favourable to his old Labour friends then he would not have granted emergency debates which were difficult for the government.

⁹⁷ Interview with Baroness Fookes, 25 October 2005.

⁹⁸ Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 157.

⁹⁹ Bernard Donoghue, *Downing Street Diary: With James Callaghan in No. 10*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), diary entry for 1 March 1977, p. 155.

However, it is the period of Mrs Thatcher's premiership that George Thomas is seen to have favoured the governing party as Lord Weatherill's comment at the beginning of the chapter depicts. Lord Elis-Thomas, who was a Plaid Cymru MP from 1974 to 1992, has said that:

I wouldn't like to point out the specific instances that he was, as it were, out and out biased towards the government because he would never get away with that as a Speaker because the officials would never allow that to happen but I did have a feeling that he had a care for the Prime Minister then that was beyond the call of duty.¹⁰⁰

Certainly, there is correspondence between George Thomas and Margaret Thatcher which displays the Speaker's admiration for and friendliness towards her. On 18 December 1980, Thomas wrote to the Prime Minister indicating that he was considering retiring as Speaker in February or March the next year.¹⁰¹ He ended this letter with:

I content myself for the present with saying that I shall always be grateful to you for your friendship.

Every blessing to you in your heroic efforts to put our country back on its feet. You deserve to succeed & I hope and pray that you will.¹⁰²

Whilst this was a very private note, it nevertheless shows just how friendly George Thomas was with the Prime Minister and how his personal political sympathies had shifted. Lord Parkinson puts the closeness between Thatcher and Thomas down to their shared Christian values:

They were both Methodists and she was quite a staunch Methodist, she was brought up as a Methodist and George was too. They had quite a lot in common in a way and she liked him.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Lord Elis-Thomas, 21 September 2004.

¹⁰¹ See The Viscount Tonyandy papers, National Library of Wales, File 553, Letter from Mr Speaker to the Prime Minister, 18th December 1980.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Interview with Lord Parkinson, 17 January 2009.

Mrs Thatcher herself confirms that their shared values were the reason why they got on so well and enjoyed mutual respect and admiration:

My respect for George Thomas, already great, was to grow over the years. He was a deeply committed Christian with a shining integrity that gave him as Speaker a special kind of authority.¹⁰⁴

Thomas's Christianity coupled with his traditionalism and patriotism aligned him with many of Mrs Thatcher's views. They were so friendly that he used to buy birthday and Christmas presents for Mark and Carol Thatcher.¹⁰⁵ Clearly, Thomas had a strong personal regard for Mrs Thatcher and probably felt that he had to show that, despite coming from a Labour background, he was not against the Conservatives. Nevertheless, Thomas went over the top and this is why fellow parliamentarians and commentators have noted a warmth to the Prime Minister that could be considered as an impairment to the impartiality that the Speaker is supposed to exude.

The one area where it can most definitely be argued that Thomas was biased towards Mrs Thatcher's government was his decision to drastically reduce the number of Private Notice Questions that he allowed. However, whilst he allowed forty-five PNQs to be asked during the first year of the Thatcher government, this was quickly reduced to just eight in 1980/81, nine in 1981/2 and a mere seven in 1982/3.¹⁰⁶ This is compared to the twenty-one he allowed in 1977/8 and the twenty-nine in 1978/9 during the final years of the Labour government.¹⁰⁷ These statistics certainly point to Speaker Thomas being guilty of giving Mrs Thatcher and her ministers an easier time than their Labour predecessors. In this Thomas was quite different from Speaker Lloyd who averaged about sixty PNQs per year and who was quite keen to be seen as a servant of the House rather than of his old friends in government. Interestingly enough, the journalist Edward Pearce later wrote that 'nobody complained' that Thomas allowed very few PNQs and this is really the only evidence that demonstrates favour being shown to the

¹⁰⁴ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, (London: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 34.

¹⁰⁵ See The Viscount Tonyandy papers, National Library of Wales.

¹⁰⁶ See Robert Blackburn & Andrew Kennon with Sir Michael Wheeler-Booth, *Griffith & Ryle on Parliament: Functions, Practice and Procedure*, (London: Sweet & Maxwell 2003), 9-041, p. 503.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

Conservative government.¹⁰⁸ Once again, MPs chose not to take on the authority of the Speaker for fear of bringing the office into disrepute. The lack of PNQs was clearly not considered important enough for Members to question the impartiality of the Speaker. However, the fact that Thomas decided this shows that he was prepared to take risks with the office in order to satisfy his own prejudices.

One of the reasons why Thomas decided not to retire from the Speakership in early 1981, as he had indicated in his letter to Margaret Thatcher, was because he was invited to read the lesson at the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer on 29 July 1981. In the letter from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, it set out the reasons why the Prince of Wales wanted Speaker Thomas to play a role in the Royal Wedding which he recorded in his memoirs:

The Archbishop went on to point out that I was a Methodist, therefore, could represent the Free Churches in St Paul's; I was the Speaker, therefore could represent Parliament; I was also Welsh, and after all, it was the wedding of the Prince of Wales.¹⁰⁹

And so, Thomas read Corinthians 19 to the 750 million people across the world who were either watching the Royal Wedding on television or listening to it on the radio.¹¹⁰ Never before had a Speaker of the House of Commons received such global recognition. Thomas's participation in the proceedings of the Royal Wedding served to build on the fame that he had personally risen to which had started when the sound broadcasting of the Commons began early on in his Speakership. Thomas himself wrote that:

Nothing did more to open up the proceedings in Parliament and coincidentally focus attention on the role of the Speaker than the broadcasting of Parliament, which began on 3 April 1978.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ See Edward Pearce, 'Straight-talker Speaker finds knives are out', *The Sunday Times*, 1 May 1988.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonyandy*, p. 12.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

Thomas's successor, Lord Weatherill, has commented that 'It's a great advantage to have an accent' and indeed it was this that helped George to become a household name.¹¹² Thomas explained how his 'Order, order' became famous:

On the morning on which broadcasting was to start on a permanent basis, the BBC told me they were a little bit worried about the microphone by the Chair because my voice did not carry, so they very politely asked if I would speak loudly and throw my voice out for the first Order, Order of the day. I agreed at once, not realising what they were up to because that Order, Order – which even now seems to greet me wherever I go, even on buses – was the recording they used throughout my Speakership.¹¹³

Thomas's 'Order! Order!' became the opening to the BBC's *Today in Parliament* programme and so was heard by everyone tuning in. In the same way that Speaker Morrison's Scottish accent has received recognition, Thomas's Welsh one resonated with his audience. Unlike Morrison, Speaker Thomas was heard by millions who were listening to the programme on their radios. George Thomas became the most well-known person to hold the rank of Speaker up until that point thanks to sound broadcasting and because of the part he played in the Royal Wedding. These two factors meant that the ordinary man or woman on the street now knew who the Speaker was whereas previously such knowledge would have been the preserve of an elite interested in politics.

The broadcasting of the proceedings of the House of Commons had another impact for the Speaker and changed the way that the occupant of the Chair had to handle the chamber. Thomas recorded that:

After a week, I found that the character of the House had changed. Members who had been silent ever since I had been elected Speaker suddenly came to life. It was as though the dead had been restored to life and had found a new aggressiveness. It became clear at once that both sides of the House were determined to use broadcasting to party advantage and the party political

¹¹² Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

¹¹³ Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonypany*, p. 184.

differences were much sharper and more angrily expressed than they had been before broadcasting.¹¹⁴

Thomas had to adapt to these new circumstances and ensure that he maintained control over Members who were determined to participate in debates so that their constituents could hear them on the radio.

Towards the end of Thomas's Speakership he was called upon to preside over a House of Commons when the country was in a state of armed conflict. The invasion of the Falkland Islands on 2 April 1982 led to the unusual step of recalling Parliament for a Saturday debate. Thomas recalled that, 'From the moment I entered the Chamber it was obvious that the debate was going to be one of the most dramatic in recent times'.¹¹⁵ However, it did not turn out to be anything like the Suez debates of 1956, the last time that there had to be a special Saturday sitting. Unlike Speaker Morrison, George Thomas did not have to put up with exceptionally unruly behaviour and was not forced to suspend proceedings. Fortunately, this was because there was no great division between the parties unlike in 1956. Thomas's admiration and affection for Mrs Thatcher is once again highlighted in the way that he summed up the actions of the government during the Falklands War:

The Prime Minister showed remarkable courage and determination throughout the whole of the tragedy, and she knew tragedy was inevitable once the islands had been invaded by Argentina. But by her action she saved the good name of Britain.¹¹⁶

Whilst Thomas did have to suspend Andrew Faulds, the Labour MP for Warley East, for questioning the Chair and unruly behaviour, he nevertheless ensured a broad cross-section of opinion was heard in the Commons chamber. His clear personal bias towards Margaret Thatcher was not allowed to manifest itself when he was in the Chair.

¹¹⁴ Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonypandy*, p. 185.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 210-211.

Like his predecessor, George Thomas had to chair a Speaker's Conference on Electoral Reform. This time it was to consider and make recommendations on the number of parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland and it sat between July 1977 and February 1978.¹¹⁷ The Prime Minister, James Callaghan, had asked the Speaker to preside over this committee and Tony Benn explained in his diaries that the motivation behind this was to 'give more seats to the Unionists just to buy a bit of extra support for the Labour Government'.¹¹⁸ This demonstrates how the Prime Minister can manipulate the Speakership to fulfil his own political ends because by setting up this conference, Callaghan was attempting to persuade the Ulster Unionists to prop up his minority government. As a result of this Speaker's Conference, the number of parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland increased from twelve to seventeen although this was too late to come into force for the 1979 General Election.

George Thomas certainly opened up Speaker's House and he loved to entertain fellow MPs, members of the Royal family and local and foreign dignitaries. A year after Thomas became Speaker he took the unprecedented step of inviting the Queen to dinner. Richard Barlas, the Clerk of the House at the time, wrote to the Speaker saying:

It was an honour to dine with Her Majesty [...] I have since spoken to some of my fellow guests who were full of admiration for the success of the dinner and in particular for the part which you played in it yourself. Their only surprise was that none of your predecessors had thought of such an occasion.¹¹⁹

Thomas was clearly a pro when it came to promoting the office of Speaker and indeed himself. None of his predecessors in the Chair had invited the Queen to dine in the Speaker's apartments and by doing so he added even greater prestige to the office.

Whilst George Thomas is almost universally credited with being an excellent Speaker, his biggest critic was his deputy and successor in the Chair, Jack Weatherill who said:

¹¹⁷ See Isobel White, *Speaker's Conferences*, House of Commons Library paper, 9 July 2008.

¹¹⁸ Tony Benn, *Conflicts of Interest: Diaries 1977-80*, (London: Hutchinson 1990), diary entry for Wednesday 17 January 1979, p. 439.

¹¹⁹ The Viscount Tonyandy papers, National Library of Wales, File 550, Letter from the Clerk of the House to Mr Speaker, 5 April 1977.

I never got on very well with him. I was his deputy for three or four years and after I'd been there about six months he invited my wife to a state dinner in the state apartments and round about six o'clock his trainbearer rang up and cancelled it. Next day, my wife was a bit put out by this, she'd never been to dinner in the Speaker's House, I said to George Thomas, "You know, forgive me for saying so Mr Speaker, but my wife was really rather upset that you withdrew your invitation at the last minute." He said, "These are my parties. I decide who comes. It's not a matter for you who comes." And I said, "I know that." But he was not very nice to my wife. In fact, the reverse. He used to shake hands with her at arm's length and all that.¹²⁰

Whilst he adored Mrs Thatcher probably in the same matriarchal way that he adored his Mam, such comments and instances serve to put flesh on the bones of the accusation from the veteran Labour MP, Leo Abse, that George Thomas was a closet homosexual who was scared his secret would come out. Abse maintained that he had had to lend Thomas money to pay off blackmailers.¹²¹ The former BBC Political Editor, Robin Oakley, also comments that 'a 'revelation' about a life-long bachelor who talked endlessly about his 'Mam' and who took regular holidays in north Africa came as no surprise to any in the Westminster community'.¹²² Whatever the case, Thomas's coldness to Mrs Weatherill caused the following confrontation between the Speaker and his deputy:

One day, about a month or so after this, I formed up and said, "Mr Speaker, I've come to tell you that I'm not at all happy in this job as your deputy and I'm going to offer my resignation. "Oh Jack, you can't say that," he said. "Why not?" "What will they say about me?"¹²³

This probably sums up Thomas's egocentric nature which is also demonstrated by the fact that he kept many hundreds of letters from the general public, and in particular from school children, telling him just how brilliant he was as Speaker.¹²⁴ Thomas was clearly an extremely insecure man who was terribly anxious to please and wanted

¹²⁰ Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

¹²¹ See Leo Abse, *Tony Blair: The Man Behind the Smile*, (London: Robson Books, 2001), pp. 47-59.

¹²² Robin Oakley, *Inside Track*, (London: Bantam Press, 2001), p. 63.

¹²³ Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

¹²⁴ See The Viscount Tonypany papers, National Library of Wales.

people to lavish praise on him. This is why he was so close to Mrs Thatcher and why he held such grand dinner parties. Lord Parkinson remarks:

You know, if you're a single person, his mother died, he was very close to his mother, then adulation and public approval is really the substitute for family warmth.¹²⁵

This completely sums up how George Thomas tackled the Speakership. He enhanced the role in order to fill the void in his life that was the lack of a family around him. With the Speakership often being called the 'loneliest job in Westminster', Thomas had to ensure that his schedule was completely filled with parties and dinners so that he would not be alone. He 'adopted' Mark and Carol Thatcher because he had no children of his own to buy presents for and he loved receiving cards from school children.

One observation made by Philip Laundy is that George Thomas was 'beloved by the members but not at all popular with the staff for whom he did not have a very high regard'.¹²⁶ Thomas himself wrote in his memoirs that:

In the early days I found that I had to insist quite firmly that the clerks were indeed the advisers of the Speaker not his masters. Sometimes I would discover that the clerks had given some advice to a member agreeing to a motion or giving guidance to Party Leaders on what decisions I would be likely to reach without consulting me.¹²⁷

An experienced parliamentarian like George Thomas wanted to make his own decisions and, in many ways, this showed that he wanted to maintain the independence of the Speakership. The way in which he took this course of action did not endear him to the clerks. The current Clerk of the House, Sir Robert Rogers, who was a junior clerk during George Thomas's time, remembers 'words like lies and duplicity being used by many of my senior colleagues... I think that he [George Thomas] was a little low on

¹²⁵ Interview with Lord Parkinson, 17 January 2009.

¹²⁶ Letter from Philip Laundy, 15 July 2004.

¹²⁷ Thomas, *Mr Speaker, the memoirs of Viscount Tonyandy*, p. 217.

moral courage'.¹²⁸ This goes back to George Thomas wanting to be popular amongst MPs. His desire to please meant that he was not always prepared to take the advice of the clerks because that might mean taking a difficult decision that might be unpopular. George Thomas also allowed the trappings of the important office of Speaker go to his head so that he thought that he was above taking advice from officials.

Thomas decided to retire when the 1983 General Election was called which happened to be two years later than he had indicated when he wrote to the Prime Minister in late 1980. Mrs Thatcher took the unusual step of reviving hereditary peerages and George Thomas was created the 1st Viscount Tonypandy which perhaps proves that there was an unduly strong relationship between him and the Prime Minister. However, the former Conservative MP Lord Naseby believes that, 'the reason he [Thomas] was given a hereditary title was more to do with the fact that Willie [Whitelaw] was given one, to maintain balance'.¹²⁹ Like his predecessors, Lord Tonypandy took his seat on the cross-benches of the House of Lords in order to maintain the fact that once elected to the Chair all association with party politics had ended. In 1985, Thomas published his memoirs which were immediately criticised for their indiscretion. An editorial in *The Times* argued that, 'Lord Tonypandy has [...] now written his memoirs and it cannot be said that in so doing he has been as well governed by wisdom as he was when he was Speaker'.¹³⁰ The following day, a letter from James Callaghan was published which ended by saying:

When the House of Commons honoured Mr Speaker's retirement nearly two years ago I then spoke as "one old friend to another". That was my genuine feeling and until Lord Tonypandy's memoirs appeared last week I had every reason to believe that the feeling was mutual. I am deeply sorry to find it is not.¹³¹

Clearly, Callaghan got over this feeling of betrayal because when Thomas was ill and dying he would visit him frequently. What this does show however is that commentators believed that the Speaker, even when retired, should not betray

¹²⁸ E-mail from Sir Robert Rogers, 27 March 2014.

¹²⁹ Interview with Lord Naseby, 7 September 2004.

¹³⁰ 'Order! Order!', *The Times*, 26 February 1985.

¹³¹ 'Mr Speaker's Memoirs', Letter from James Callaghan to the Editor, *The Times*, 27 February 1985.

confidences or relay what has gone on behind the scenes in case it brought about harm to the dignity of the office. Indeed, *The Times* editorial argued that the ‘office is something of a mystery, and such it should remain’.¹³² Clearly, its author would not have approved of this thesis which seeks to unravel that mystery.

Thomas’s retirement after the Speakership had another controversial episode when, at the very end of his life in 1997, he took the unprecedented step of re-entering party politics when he endorsed Sir James Goldsmith’s Referendum Party and voiced opposition to the European Union. Former Speakers are not supposed to take sides because, once having accepted the office, convention has dictated that they never return to party political squabbles even when retired. Thomas could well have ended this convention had he lived but he died on 22 September 1997 and so, having never had children, his hereditary title became extinct.

This period witnessed two quite different personalities occupying the Speakership. Both came to the role with experience of having been Cabinet ministers but they executed the office of Speaker differently according to their own characters. Lloyd was probably more interested in ensuring the smooth and effective running of the Speakership whereas Thomas was more interested in promoting the office and making it into an even grander role. Both men had to manage an evenly divided House of Commons although this proved even more problematic for George Thomas because he had to preside over a prolonged period of minority government. Both Lloyd and Thomas served as Speaker during periods when the government of the day was not made up from the party from which they came and this meant that they had to go out of their way to prove that they were not biased towards old colleagues. Thomas has been accused of out and out favouritism towards Mrs Thatcher but at the same time he has been praised for ensuring the continuation of complete impartiality. He was most definitely overly friendly with Mrs Thatcher and the fact that he reduced the number of Private Notice Questions undoubtedly shows that he helped the Conservative side. This was different to Speaker Lloyd who allowed lots of PNQs in an attempt to prove to

¹³² ‘Order! Order!’, *The Times*, 26 February 1985.

backbenchers and the Opposition that he was not the government's placeman. However, both Speakers ensured that they kept meticulous records on who had spoken in debates so that they could be as fair as possible when deciding on whom to call to speak in the chamber.

What does set the two men apart is that fact that Thomas was allowed to become a much more famous personality because he happened to be Speaker at the time when the broadcasting of Parliament commenced. Thomas rose to the occasion and this enabled him to expand the prestige of the Speakership by bringing it to a wider audience than the normal confines of Westminster. One common factor between the two Speakers is that it probably suited both of them to renounce their memberships of the political parties from which they had originated. It has been said that Lloyd no longer had to pretend to be a Conservative thanks to his Liberal background and it is evident that Thomas would have found it increasingly difficult to support a Labour Party that was pro-devolution and pro-European. What is clear is that the 1970s were a particularly tough political climate in terms of the indecisive outcomes of the 1974 General Elections and the period of minority government from 1976 to 1979. Selwyn Lloyd and George Thomas held it together thanks to their vast knowledge of parliament and government and they were both successful Speakers. Thomas was also excellent at using his quick wittedness to defuse tension in the House although his way of conducting the role was not at all popular with the clerks because he thought that he knew best. Those less experienced than Lloyd and Thomas could well have allowed greater unruliness in the House. This they did not do and that is how their periods in the Chair should be remembered.

CHAPTER SIX

THE MODERN SPEAKERSHIP: THE SPEAKERSHIPS OF BERNARD (JACK) WEATHERILL (1983-1992) AND BETTY BOOTHROYD (1992-2000)

There was nothing haughty or disdainful about Jack Weatherill but genuine modesty and a belief in political service.

Professor the Lord Alton of Liverpool, former Liberal Chief Whip, 2009.¹

Jack's great strength [...] was that everybody knew that Margaret Thatcher didn't want him.

Lord Parkinson, former Conservative Cabinet Minister, 2009.²

She [Betty Boothroyd] was the absolutely superb public face of Westminster. She had enormous presence and charm and she kept order better than any Speaker I've known.

Tam Dalyell, former Labour MP for West Lothian and then Linlithgow, 2009.³

Betty Boothroyd had an extremely difficult time during the very heated debates on the Maastricht Treaty but I have no complaint about the way in which she handled them. In difficult decisions she took the advice of the Clerks, reflected upon it and made her own judgement.

Former Prime Minister, Sir John Major, 2009.⁴

The close of the twentieth century witnessed a great change for the Speakership in that for the first time the backbenchers exerted their right to elect a Speaker of their own choosing. Both Speakers Weatherill and Boothroyd were most definitely the choice of the backbenchers and were not the favoured candidates of the Prime Minister of the day. The televising of the proceedings of the House of Commons, which was introduced in 1989, meant that both Weatherill and Boothroyd gained household recognition which, apart from George Thomas, none of their predecessors had ever enjoyed. This chapter will examine how the last Speaker to wear the traditional full-bottomed wig and the first

¹ E-mail from Professor Lord Alton of Liverpool, 31 March 2009.

² Interview with Lord Parkinson, 19 January 2009.

³ Telephone conversation with Tam Dalyell, 14 March 2009.

⁴ Letter from Sir John Major, 10 February 2009.

woman Speaker conducted themselves in the Chair, the way they carried out the role and how they were viewed by their parliamentary colleagues.

Bruce Bernard Weatherill was born on 25 November 1920 in Guildford, Surrey. He was a twin and he and his sister were always known as Jack and Jill. His father, Bernard Weatherill, was a tailor by trade and was a Fabian Socialist who had once led a tailors' strike. Weatherill sent his son to Malvern College but did not allow him to go to university because he wanted him to become an apprentice tailor and go into the family business.⁵

On 3 September 1939, Weatherill enlisted in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry but was then 'sent home to grow up'.⁶ In 1940 he was commissioned into the 4/7th Dragoon Guards but he soon transferred to the Indian Army because he felt that he was the only officer without a title.⁷ Weatherill's days in India left a lasting impression on him because he became a vegetarian after seeing the Bengal famine in 1942 and he also learnt to speak Urdu. It was also during his time that he saw a grave of an East India Company Administrator which read: 'He was trusted absolutely'. This was the memorial that Weatherill himself wanted.⁸

After the Second World War, Weatherill returned to the family business and also became an enthusiastic Young Conservative later becoming Chairman of Guildford Conservative Association, Vice Chairman of South East Area Conservatives and a member of the executive committee of the National Union.⁹ In an interview with the BBC just before he died, Weatherill described how he became a parliamentary candidate and then an MP:

It never occurred to me that I would be elected. I think they had some difficulty in finding a candidate in [North] East Croydon. We've got that strong link with the

⁵ Obituary of Lord Weatherill, *The Times*, 8 May 2007.

⁶ Obituary of Lord Weatherill, *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 May 2007.

⁷ Obituary of Lord Weatherill, *The Times*, 8 May 2007.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons 1964*, (London: The Times Office, 1964), p. 58.

Indian sub-continent. I spoke, in those days, quite good Hindustani because I'd been in an Indian cavalry regiment. I was persuaded by Quintin Hogg [future Lord Chancellor, Lord Hailsham] to go down and stand as a candidate who more or less said to me, "Don't get too excited about it, you haven't a hope in hell." But we clambered in with a tiny majority.¹⁰

His majority was in fact 3,831 which was not that tiny considering the Conservatives lost the 1964 General Election.¹¹ Croydon North East was traditionally a Conservative seat and so Weatherill should have been more confident about his chances. However, he was still so shocked at becoming an MP that he was really apprehensive about taking on this role at first. He recalled that:

When I was elected in 1964, I spent the whole of the first day [in Parliament] locked up in the loo and around about 7 o'clock I was hoping to escape to see if I could find a canteen and get something to eat and slink off home. I heard two of my customers, one saying to the other, "I don't know what this place is coming to Tom, they've got our tailor in here now".¹²

Despite having a successful business, he was not from the landed gentry like a large section of the Parliamentary Party and Lord Parkinson remarks that:

Jack had a slight problem with his background which he had no need to have but he did have [...] The Conservative Party he joined was not a particularly democratic party [...] office was essentially the province of the privileged and, going in when Jack did, that was very much the prevailing attitude [...] That would have given him a slight touch of paranoia about his background and the Party's attitude to him.¹³

The appointment of Sir Alec Douglas-Home as Party Leader and Prime Minister in October 1963 was the last time that the Conservative Party allowed their leader to emerge after consultation with the grandees. The election of Edward Heath as Leader of the Conservatives on 28 July 1965 was not only a move away from the privileged few choosing the leader but also a move towards allowing aspirational people who had risen from more humble beginnings to lead the Party. Under Heath's leadership,

¹⁰ *Bernard and Betty Speak Out*, Part 1, BBC Radio 4, first broadcast on 13 May 2007.

¹¹ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons 1964*, (London: The Times Office, 1964), p. 58.

¹² *Bernard and Betty Speak Out*, Part 1.

¹³ Interview with Lord Parkinson, 19 January 2009.

Weatherill became an Opposition Whip in 1967 and became a Government Whip when the Conservatives were returned to power in 1970.

In 1973, Weatherill became Deputy Chief Whip, a position he continued to hold when the Conservatives lost power in 1974. Weatherill retained this post when Margaret Thatcher became Party Leader in 1975 and recalled:

When I was a Deputy Chief Whip I took in the bad news and she [Mrs Thatcher] had an absolutely super secretary, Caroline Stephens, and I used to take in the bad news and when I came out she already had the hot, sweet tea for me.¹⁴

As seen in an earlier chapter, Weatherill conducted himself as a whip in a gentlemanly manner because he was prepared to honour the agreement that the two major parties would pair sick with sick on the night of the no confidence motion on 28 March 1979 which forced James Callaghan to call a general election. Had Walter Harrison [Labour MP for Wakefield], the Government Deputy Chief Whip, not declined Weatherill's offer to abstain then the vote would have been a tie and Speaker Thomas would have saved the Callaghan administration in accordance with precedent. The fact that Weatherill was already seen as the bringer of bad news meant that his offer to pair on that crucial vote would not have gone down well with Mrs Thatcher. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why Weatherill was not offered a post in the new Conservative government formed following the 1979 General Election. Lord Parkinson also argues that:

Jack was a thoroughly nice man and didn't have an enemy in the place but, unfortunately, he didn't have a very important friend which was Humphrey Atkins [the Conservative Chief Whip and Weatherill's boss] [...] I don't think that Jack would have made the Cabinet, not with Margaret as leader because, thanks to Humphrey's non effort, she never fully appreciated Jack's contribution.¹⁵

By tradition, whips do not take part in debates in the chamber and so are not allowed to shine in front of their colleagues. Junior whips therefore rely on the Chief Whip to

¹⁴ *Bernard and Betty Speak Out*, Part 1.

¹⁵ Interview with Lord Parkinson, 19 January 2009.

forward their career by reporting on how well they were getting on to the leadership. Lord Parkinson believes that Atkins did not give favourable reports about Weatherill to Mrs Thatcher and so this is why he was not included in her government.¹⁶ The whole weekend after the election went by and Weatherill did not receive a telephone call inviting him to continue as a whip or become a minister. Instead, as somewhat of an afterthought, he was offered the Deputy Speakership as Chairman of Ways of Means because the previous incumbent, Oscar Murton, the Conservative MP for Poole, had retired from Parliament.

Weatherill served as George Thomas's deputy for four years and during this time he did not get on with the Speaker. Despite this dislike, and a threat of resignation, Weatherill stuck it out and proved himself to be a competent Deputy Speaker who gained the respect of the House. In his memoirs, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Foreign Secretary and Deputy Prime Minister, Geoffrey Howe, recalls Weatherill's kindness when he was still Chairman of Ways and Means:

My Budget speech [on 15 March 1983] itself got off to an inauspicious start: 'The longest Budget speech that I have been able to trace was given by Mr Gladstone on 18 April 1953.' The House broke into confused sub-uproar, until the Deputy Speaker, Jack (Bernard) Weatherill, gave me a chance to correct my mistake – by placing Gladstone back in his proper century.¹⁷

Such an episode must surely have stood him in good stead with his colleagues when it came to choosing Speaker Thomas's replacement in 1983.

Jack Weatherill was the first Speaker to be elected by the backbenchers rather than being the choice of the Prime Minister and front benchers of the day. A coup from the backbenches, led by the Conservative MP for Tiverton, Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, meant that Mrs Thatcher was not able to offer up the role as a consolation prize to one of the ministers she wanted to retire.¹⁸ Indeed, the irony is that Mrs Thatcher had wanted

¹⁶ Interview with Lord Parkinson, 19 January 2009.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty*, (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 281.

¹⁸ See Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 124.

Humphrey Atkins to be Speaker, the very man who Parkinson believes prevented Weatherill from gaining ministerial office. Maxwell-Hyslop argued that:

What Margaret Thatcher, and her government, wanted was NOT an independent Speaker but a Speaker beholden to her for his appointment, whose disposition would, therefore, be favourable to the government which had secured his appointment.¹⁹

This meant that throughout his period as Speaker, Weatherill had to be wary of some members of the government because he knew that the Prime Minister did not really want him to be there. Weatherill recalled that:

I think without a doubt they were trying to get me out because, after I'd been Speaker for about six weeks, quite late one night, Mr Dobson, who was the accountant in the House of Commons, infiltrated himself quite late at night roundabout six o'clock. He said, "A word, sir?" So, I said, "Come in Mr Dobson. What do you want?" He said, "I don't know whether you're interested, sir, in any way but the Speaker gets a full pension whenever he retires. If you retire tomorrow you'll get a full pension." I said, "But Mr Dobson, I've only just started!" He said, "I know. I just thought you'd like to know, sir." So, I have a sort of idea that they might have put up Mr Dobson to tempt me.²⁰

Weatherill described the tactics used to undermine him as 'Black Glove', which means that a perpetrator of negative campaigning would not leave a trace as to their identity like a burglar wearing gloves in order not to leave finger prints, and is a term he would have learnt from his time in the Whips' Office. Weatherill described how it manifested itself during his period in the Chair:

Black glove is a political phrase not known to too many people [...] rather nasty things are said and written about you and the great art is finding whose fingers are in it. Well, I did discover this. Margaret Thatcher had her spin doctors too notably in the person of Bernard Ingham [Number 10 Press Secretary] and some pretty unflattering articles appeared [...] and I must say that George Thomas wasn't all that helpful because he was up there in the House of Lords and he was frequently criticising what I'd done which is a disgraceful thing to do really.²¹

¹⁹ Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 10 August 2009.

²⁰ Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

²¹ Ibid.

Weatherill was determined to ensure that backbenchers had their say and were allowed to scrutinise the government. According to the journalist Edward Pearce, Weatherill believed that Private Notice Questions, which were in the gift of the Speaker and required ministers to come to the House to answer questions, were the way in which the power of the backbencher could be strengthened.²² Weatherill wanted to increase the number of PNQs granted, which had diminished under his predecessor, and return them to the levels allowed by Selwyn Lloyd, who had averaged about sixty per session.²³ In his first session as Speaker, Weatherill allowed forty-eight PNQs which was double the number granted by Thomas for the previous three years.²⁴ Weatherill went on to grant twenty-six PNQs in the 1984-85 session and then forty-three in the 1985-86 session which meant that ministers had to come to the House and defend their actions.²⁵

Clearly, such a stance, whilst being popular with the Opposition and with backbenchers, was not greeted with the same enthusiasm by the government. Lord Howe recalls that Mrs Thatcher ‘was irritated with Weatherill for appearing to be hostile’.²⁶ Edward Pearce described how this eventually came to a head in 1988:

We should adjust ourselves to a new kind of bloodsport. It is called Jack bashing. It will be practised by journalists close to the government and by official spokesmen giving off-the-record briefings. It will be directed against the Speaker of the House of Commons, Bernard Weatherill, who is better known to his friends as Jack.²⁷

However, Andrew Alexander, an independent-minded journalist, wrote an article in the *Daily Mail* entitled ‘Sorry, there’s a fault in the Speaker’, in which he said that ‘Weatherill, though a very nice chap – and perhaps why people are so reluctant to admit that there is a problem – is not up to the job’.²⁸ The article goes on to accuse Weatherill of allowing unruly behaviour in the House and criticises him for not disciplining the

²² Telephone conversation with Edward Pearce, 22 October 2009.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See J. A. G. Griffith & Michael Ryle, *Parliament: Functions, Practice and Procedures*, (London: Sweet & Maxwell, 1989), p. 262.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Interview with Lord Howe, 8 July 2009.

²⁷ Edward Pearce, ‘Straight-talker Speaker finds knives are out’, *The Sunday Times*, 1 May 1988.

²⁸ Andrew Alexander, ‘Sorry, there’s a fault in the Speaker’, *Daily Mail*, 23 April 1988.

Labour MP for Edinburgh Leith, Ron Brown, when he argued with him on 19 April 1988.²⁹ Alexander compared Weatherill with his predecessor and argued:

In some ways the House was spoilt by George [Thomas]. He was super – witty – and calming when passions were getting out of hand, firm and determined when sheer bad behaviour threatened [...] Instead of that we had the absurd spectacle of a Whip doing the Speaker's job.³⁰

Donald Macintyre wrote an article in *The Sunday Telegraph* which described a private meeting between the Speaker and Norman Tebbit, the former Cabinet minister and Conservative MP for Chingford. Tebbit had gone to Weatherill to complain about the fact that he had granted the Opposition a one-day emergency debate on a matter which was causing the government some problems (social security reform). Macintyre claimed that:

The Speaker inferred, whether rightly or wrongly, that Mr Tebbit was threatening that if he continued to make life uneasy for the Government he would find it increasingly difficult to hang on to his job.³¹

Macintyre reported that Weatherill 'ended the meeting [...] by bluntly asking Mr Tebbit to leave' after a 'particularly bruising exchange'.³² Weatherill's archives, however, contain an exchange of letters between himself and Tebbit in which Tebbit describes what was written in *The Sunday Telegraph* as 'a travesty of the truth'.³³ According to the letters, the information was gleaned from a reporter overhearing a remark made by Weatherill at a private gathering.³⁴ However, the article itself perhaps explains from where the story originated:

Mr Tebbit's visit to the Speaker was the most dramatic example of a grumbling campaign among a certain section of Tory MPs against the Speaker, a campaign

²⁹ Andrew Alexander, 'Sorry, there's a fault in the Speaker', *Daily Mail*, 23 April 1988.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Donald Macintyre, 'Why Tories can't get Speaker out', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 22 May 1988.

³² Ibid.

³³ University of Kent, Weatherill Papers, WEA/PP S18, Letter from Norman Tebbit to the Speaker, 16 June 1988.

³⁴ Ibid., Draft letter from Mr Speaker to Mr Worsthorne.

that appears to have the Speaker's resignation as its long-term objective, and behind which some MPs detect the hand of elements in the Government itself.³⁵

Campaigns to remove a sitting Speaker are not unique to Michael Martin although unlike in that case, the moves to get rid of Weatherill were unsuccessful. Weatherill explained how he managed to survive:

One day Jonathan Aitken [Conservative MP for Thanet South] came to me and said, "You realise Mr Speaker this is a put up job and they're trying to make you resign [...] You've got to go and see the editors." I said, "I don't know any editors." And he said, "Well, we do!" And the result of that was that I began seeing the editors in the evening time. They used to come and talk to me and leading articles began to appear in the newspapers, particularly the heavy newspapers, saying how important it was to have a Speaker who would stand up to a powerful Prime Minister.³⁶

Aitken remembers advising the Speaker that he 'could see a journalist or two completely off the record' and he set about arranging the interviews.³⁷ As a result of this, Edward Pearce recalls that Weatherill 'rung me up wanting friends in the press and I set about being that'.³⁸ Another ally was Matthew Parris, the former Conservative MP who had resigned his seat in 1986 to become a full-time journalist and presenter of the weekly political television programme, *Weekend World*. Parris remembers how he helped the Speaker:

I knew that Jack was really hurting and I said to him, "Why don't you be our guest on *Weekend World*?" No Speaker had ever done such a thing [...] and Jack thought long and hard about it and he came on the programme and then I've no doubt, in fact Jack told me privately, that he was really trying to save himself and his Speakership from what was beginning to look like a media conspiracy inspired by his enemies mostly in government and I think he succeeded.³⁹

³⁵ Macintyre, 'Why Tories can't get Speaker out', 22 May 1988.

³⁶ Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

³⁷ Interview with Jonathan Aitken, 29 November 2010.

³⁸ Telephone conversation with Edward Pearce, 22 October 2009.

³⁹ Interview with Matthew Parris, 5 October 2010.

In the interview, Weatherill declared that, ‘What may have been alleged is not going to put me off in any way from doing what I believe to be my undoubted duty’.⁴⁰ As a result of this action, Weatherill recalled that:

After about three weeks or so of this, a very, very powerful emissary came from Number 10 late one night and said to me, “Mr Speaker, the Prime Minister asks if we may have a truce?”⁴¹

The television interview was clearly a clever move by Weatherill and his supporters because positive newspaper articles which reinforced the message that the Speaker should not be bullied by an over-powerful executive followed. The negative press died away and so the truce must have been honoured. What did follow was speculation about who would succeed Weatherill and this was undoubtedly a hint from his critics that they still wanted him to retire.⁴²

Weatherill also had his critics on the Labour benches. At the Parliamentary Labour Party meeting on 30 November 1988, it was recorded that:

Dennis Skinner [Labour MP for Bolsover] and Bob Hughes [Labour MP for Aberdeen North] urged the Chair [Stanley Orme, the Labour MP for Salford East] to make representations to the Speaker on the organised disruption perpetrated by Tory backbenchers during the speech of Gordon Brown [Labour MP for Dunfermline East] the Shadow Chief Secretary, whose integrity had been impugned by an allegation that he had sought to alter the Hansard report of his speech. James Lamond [Labour MP for Oldham Central and Royton] said that the Speaker had been quite wrong not to defend Gordon Brown and to permit the disruption.⁴³

This discussion allowed other gripes to be aired with it being recorded that ‘The Speaker was also criticised by Ann Clwyd [Labour MP for Cynon Valley] and Joan Walley [Labour MP for Stoke-on-Trent North] for the unfair hearing which Labour

⁴⁰ *Weekend World*, London Weekend Television, first broadcast on 8 May 1988.

⁴¹ Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

⁴² See Heather Kirby, ‘Madam of an orderly House?’, *The Times*, 9 July 1990.

⁴³ Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Parliamentary Labour Party Minutes, ‘Minutes of the Party Meeting held on Wednesday 30 November 1988’.

women Members were receiving in the Chamber'.⁴⁴ At the subsequent meeting on 7 December 1988, it was noted that:

The Chair reported on his highly successful meeting with the Speaker on the issues highlighted by the Party meeting the previous week which had resulted in the Speaker making a statement to the House and the integrity of the Shadow Chief Secretary upheld.⁴⁵

Weatherill could not afford to upset the Labour Party and fight a war on two fronts if he were to survive in the job and so he had to offer them an olive branch in the form of a statement to the House.

It was not only the two major parties which had had cause to criticise Weatherill because, at the beginning of his Speakership, he had faced a backlash from the Liberal Party. The creation of the Social Democratic Party in 1981 meant that there was a competition between SDP and Liberal MPs over who got the traditional amount of debating time allocated to the third party. On 27 October 1983, Weatherill announced that:

I am sure that the House would consider it extremely unfair if in every debate, and given that we have 650 Honorable Members, the chair had to call a Member of the Social Democratic Party and one for the Liberal Party.⁴⁶

This ruling sparked criticism from Russell Johnston, the Liberal MP for Inverness, Nairn and Lochaber, who wrote an article in *The Times* in which he argued that Liberal MPs were not being given enough time to speak during debates.⁴⁷ The Liberal Party had had its nose put out of joint by the creation of the SDP because it was having to share its debating time with them. The fact that the SDP had two Privy Councillors [Roy Jenkins and David Owen] compared to the solitary David Steel for the Liberals

⁴⁴ Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Parliamentary Labour Party Minutes, 'Minutes of the Party Meeting held on Wednesday 30 November 1988'.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 'Minutes of the Party Meeting held on Wednesday 7 December 1988'.

⁴⁶ Russell Johnston, 'Unfair, Mr Speaker, unfair', *The Times*, 10 November 1983.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

meant that the SDP were more likely to be called to speak despite having eleven fewer MPs. David [now Lord] Steel, who was Liberal leader at the time, recalls that:

He [Weatherill] wasn't as kind to the Liberal minority as he should have been given the strength that we had and he wasn't as good as George Thomas had been in that regard so he wasn't as mindful of minorities. I think his old days of the two party system was still very much engrained.⁴⁸

Steel is referring to Weatherill's previous role as Deputy Chief Whip and believes that this experience made him wedded to the two party system. However, Weatherill himself remarked:

Well, he [Steel] would [say that] wouldn't he? That's not true. My predecessors never saw the Liberal whips. I made a point of seeing the Liberal whips.⁴⁹

David [now Lord] Alton, who was Liberal MP for Liverpool Mossley Hill and Liberal Chief Whip between 1985 and 1987, disagrees with his former party leader and recalls how he used to meet with the Speaker:

Each week we had a private meeting to discuss the management of business and to iron out any difficulties. Having been a Whip himself he fully understood the realities of political life and I not only found him to be immensely fair but on a personal level he gave me a great deal of encouragement and helpful advice [...] He believed passionately in the rights of back benchers and he was also insistent that opposition voices should be heard. This won him no credit with Mrs Thatcher – but from my vantage point he had an undistinguished admirer.⁵⁰

Being a whip had meant that he had enjoyed a much closer association with the House of Commons than he might otherwise had had if he had become a departmental minister and this probably made him the skilled operator he undoubtedly became at overcoming all the various threats to his Speakership. When countering the criticism of him from elements of the Liberal Party, Weatherill argued:

⁴⁸ Interview with Lord Steel, 15 March 2005.

⁴⁹ Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

⁵⁰ E-mail from Professor the Lord Alton of Liverpool, 31 March 2009.

It was well known that I was the choice of the backbenchers and that I gave them all a fair run but, of course, the bigger, the more Members of Parliament there are, the greater their chance of catching the Speaker's eye.⁵¹

This is a view supported by many politicians who served with him. Dafydd [now Lord] Elis-Thomas, who was Plaid Cymru MP for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, believes that 'What I found about him [Weatherill] was that he always ensured that minority parties were properly listened to'.⁵² This is contrary to the view put forward by Steel and demonstrates that it is not a universal one amongst the other smaller political parties. Of course, 'minorities' does not just mean the smaller parties because it also relates to special interest groups and differing opinions within political parties. The former long-serving and often rebellious Labour MP, Tam Dalyell, argues that:

I think Jack Weatherill was one of the great Speakers of the House of Commons [...] He always had time for the awkward squad of which he called me the troop sergeant and, as such, I realised he was being entirely fair. He believed that the dissenters should give their opinion.⁵³

In many cases, the minorities within the two main parties were more numerous than the combined forces of the SDP and Liberals and so evidently Weatherill thought it fair to go on parliamentary strength rather than votes cast at the ballot box when calling Members to speak.

Weatherill worked with his team of Deputy Speakers in order to ensure that Members got a fair chance of putting down questions and raising matters affecting their constituencies. He said that:

The truth is [...] that if I had studied the Labour Party for a thousand years I wouldn't have known as much about it as Betty [Boothroyd] and Harold Walker [his two Labour deputies] and I relied very heavily on them and Paul Dean [Deputy Speaker and Conservative MP for Woodspring] [...] the list of those who were to speak was arranged by us all together, it wasn't just me, because they

⁵¹ Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

⁵² Interview with Lord Elis-Thomas, 21 September 2004.

⁵³ Telephone conversation with Tam Dalyell, 14 March 2009.

knew much more about the opposition than I did. So I think the Deputies are the great unsung heroes.⁵⁴

Weatherill had no qualms about taking on the Thatcher government if it meant preserving the rights of the House of Commons. In mid-1987, the Thatcher government was adamant that MPs could not debate the efforts of ministers to prevent the publication of *Spycatcher*, the memoirs of the former MI5 officer Peter Wright, under the *sub judice* rule. Weatherill ruled against *sub judice* on the basis that the matter was being determined by the Australian courts rather than in the UK.⁵⁵ Weatherill recalled that:

She [Margaret Thatcher] sent Michael Havers, the Attorney General, to the High Court to get an injunction [...] Michael Havers came to see me and said he'd got this injunction from the High Court and he'd assume that I'd be upholding it in Parliament and I said, "Well, I'm not going to be able to do that." He said, "What do you mean? I've got this injunction." I said, "When did you last read Article 9 of the Bill of Rights?" He said, "What's that say?" I said, "You're supposed to know Michael. It says, 'No court in the land can overrule the high court of Parliament'." I said, "I don't intend to be the first Speaker since 1688 curtailing speech in Parliament".⁵⁶

However, Weatherill was not as strong on the *Spycatcher* issue as his obituaries and his recollection would make out because he did not allow a full debate on the topic when it was put to him by two Labour MPs. On 27 April 1987, Tony Benn [Labour MP for Chesterfield] asked Weatherill for *Spycatcher* to be the topic of an urgent debate and on 13 July 1987 John Morris, the Labour MP for Aberavon, made the same request. On both occasions Weatherill declined and on the second occasion he ruled:

As the House knows, I have consistently ruled that there can be no question of proceedings in the Australian courts being treated as falling within the ambit of the *sub judice* rule of this House. The same would apply to any proceedings in the United States courts, although I have no knowledge of any such proceedings. With regard to the publication of Mr. Wright's book in this country, I have to rule

⁵⁴ Lord Weatherill, in 'The Role of the Speaker in the House of Commons', seminar held 25 February 2002, (Institute for Contemporary British History, 2005, <http://www.icbh.ac.uk/icbh/witness/speaker>), p. 60.

⁵⁵ See HC Deb 27 April 1987 c48.

⁵⁶ *Bernard and Betty Speak Out*, Part 2, BBC Radio 4, first broadcast on 20 May 2007.

that that subject cannot be raised in the House at this juncture. There are four relevant groups of cases pending in the United Kingdom courts, and all are inter-related.⁵⁷

The legal wranglings had clearly moved on between the April and the July and the fact that there were now cases being heard in British courts meant that Weatherill had no choice but to declare the matter *sub judice* when John Morris asked for an emergency debate. However, this was not the case when Tony Benn made the same request three months earlier when Weatherill made it clear that there was nothing preventing MPs from debating the topic. Despite this fact, the Speaker still ruled that *Spycatcher* did not merit an emergency debate and so even though he ruled that it was permissible to talk about the topic, he did not grant MPs the occasion when they could make use of his ruling. On this matter, Weatherill clearly struck a balance. He ruled that the topic could be discussed, which infuriated the government, but he did not go the extra step of allowing a full blown debate on the subject because that would have been going too far. A Speaker has to be fair but he or she must also be aware of the politics which keep him or her in the Chair. Any Speaker who makes a complete enemy of the government side would not last very long and so he or she has to be very mindful of this *Realpolitik*. Weatherill clearly played the system well, probably thanks to his days as a whip, and so while he was prepared to challenge the government when he felt they were trying to prevent debate in the House, he knew that he could not go overboard for fear of losing the complete confidence of that side of the chamber. *Spycatcher* is a really good example of just how limited the Speaker's powers can be in reality because unless the Speaker is prepared to be forced out of office or resign over a matter then he or she has to know when to stop pushing the government. Weatherill made his point but was clearly not prepared to go any further.

Only a few months earlier, in January 1987, Weatherill had had another security issue to deal with in the form of controversy surrounding the BBC documentary on the Zircon spy satellite. The government had demanded that the programme, which was part of the *Secret Society* series, not be shown on the grounds of national security and the BBC

⁵⁷ HC Deb 13 July 1987 cc706-707.

complied. When Duncan Campbell, the journalist who had put together the documentary published its contents in an article in the *New Statesman* instead, the police raided the BBC offices in Glasgow in order to ascertain from where his information came.⁵⁸ When Robin Cook, the Labour MP for Livingston, managed to get hold of a video of the shelved documentary and wanted to show the film within the confines of the House of Commons, the government applied to the High Court for an injunction. Although this injunction was dismissed on the basis of parliamentary privilege, Weatherill decided to ban the showing of the film in the House of Commons. This was because he had received a personal briefing on Privy Council terms from the Attorney-General [they were both Privy Councillors and so able to discuss sensitive matters in confidence] dealing with the implications for national security.⁵⁹ Tony Benn recorded in his diary:

Jim [Callaghan] got up on a point of order and said he was anxious about the Speaker's ruling on the showing of the Zircon film. So I supported him and Michael Foot, Jim and I all came in on points of order, and it was clear the Speaker was as uneasy as the rest of us, so I hastily drafted an amendment that the matter be referred to the Committee of Privileges.⁶⁰

Members were clearly concerned that their rights were being restricted by having this information banned and so a debate ensued.⁶¹ Weatherill sympathised with this view and Benn went on to recall that:

To my surprise and delight, the Speaker nodded to me and moved on my behalf the manuscript amendment – over and above ten amendments on the order paper – and it was passed unanimously.⁶²

Whilst Weatherill had obviously felt compelled to ban the showing of the film in the first instance, once he had the support of the Opposition and a growing number of

⁵⁸ See Nigel Lawson, *The View for No. 11: Memoirs of a Tory Radical*, (London: Bantam Press, 1992), p. 314.

⁵⁹ See A. W. Bradley, 'Parliamentary Privilege, Zircon and National Security', *Public Law*. (Winter 1987), p. 489.

⁶⁰ Tony Benn, *The End of an Era: Diaries 1980-1990*, (London: Hutchinson, 1992), diary entry for 27 January 1987, p. 490.

⁶¹ See HC Deb 27 January 1987 cc207-275

⁶² Benn, *The End of an Era: Diaries 1980-1990*, p. 491.

backbenchers, he knew that he had to use his powers to defend the rights of MPs.

Afterwards, Weatherill wrote to Tony Benn saying:

I am keeping a list of those who in my time as Speaker have, by powerful argument, changed the course of a debate. Your admirable speech yesterday will always be an example to be quoted.⁶³

Despite yet again annoying the government, who had after all applied for the High Court injunction, Weatherill gauged the mood of the House and knew that he had little choice but to back peddle from his previous ruling and allow it to be considered by the Committee of Privileges. Any other course would have led to fierce arguments on the floor of the House and criticism of his decision from all sides of the chamber. As also seen with the *Spycatcher* affair, Weatherill was determined to protect the rights of MPs and the constitutional lawyer, A. W. Bradley claims that:

Maybe we owe it to the fortunate chance that Mr Weatherill had only 10 days before the events in January addressed the Commonwealth Speakers' Conference in Kuala Lumpur on article 9 of the Bill of Rights that the action he took on 22 January took the form it did.⁶⁴

Whilst Weatherill was determined to defend parliamentary privilege, this was because he wanted to uphold the rights of backbenchers and of minority groupings. He freely admitted:

I was a backbench Speaker [...] I gave the backbenchers precedence. Margaret Thatcher and certainly probably David Steel and others took the view that perhaps I was over-generous to the backbenchers but they were my constituency, they put me here.⁶⁵

As he lacked the support of Mrs Thatcher, he could hardly upset those who had put him in the Speaker's Chair if he had wanted to continue holding the office. In the end, the Committee of Privileges upheld his original ruling to ban the showing of the film

⁶³ University of Kent, Weatherill Papers, WEA/PP H102, Letter from Speaker Weatherill to Tony Benn, 28 January 1987.

⁶⁴ Bradley, 'Parliamentary Privilege, Zircon and National Security', p. 494.

⁶⁵ Interview with Lord Weatherill, 3 June 2005.

decreeing that it did not infringe on the privileges of MPs.⁶⁶ However, the Speaker is the servant of the House and by allowing disgruntled Members to refer the decision, Weatherill was able to deflect any criticism and still make a show of defending their rights. Weatherill was clearly excellent at seeing a chance to get out of a difficult situation and seizing on it.

Throughout his time as Speaker, Weatherill was determined to guarantee the supremacy of Parliament and he did not want anything to detract from it as the great forum of the nation. At the very end of his Speakership, during Prime Minister's Questions on 12 March 1992, the Leader of the Opposition, Neil Kinnock, challenged the Prime Minister, John Major, to take part in a televised 'presidential' debate in the forthcoming general election. However, whilst restoring order, Weatherill threw in the comment, 'This is the public debate'.⁶⁷ It was his last Prime Minister's Questions as Speaker and so he was probably not concerned about breaking with tradition and making his view known on the subject. What is clear is that Weatherill did not want televised debates to replace or become more important than the debates which take place in the House of Commons and he took the opportunity of making this view known. It took another eighteen years before such debates would take place during a general election campaign.

As well as the role chairing the debates, Tam Dalyell remembers that 'One of the functions of the Speaker is receiving guests from all over the world. Jack Weatherill was superb at this'.⁶⁸ In his obituary in *The Independent*, Dalyell explores this further:

With his knowledge of Asian languages and Indian Army experience, Weatherill was a huge success with visitors from the Subcontinent. My abiding memory, however, is the way he greeted my guests Kayapan Ruini and Megaron (who had a ring attached to his lip), chiefs of the Amazonian tribes.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ See *First Report from the Committee of Privileges*, House of Commons (1986-87) 365, paragraph 17.

⁶⁷ HC Deb 12 March 1992 c968.

⁶⁸ Telephone conversation with Tam Dalyell, 14 March 2009.

⁶⁹ Obituary of Lord Weatherill, *The Independent*, 8 May 2007.

As seen in the chapter on the Speaker's role, Weatherill was also used in an ambassadorial capacity.⁷⁰ The former Labour Cabinet minister, founding member of the Social Democratic Party and now Liberal Democrat peer, Shirley Williams, recalls the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev's, visit to London in 1989:

He [Gorbachev] had been invited by Bernard Weatherill, the Speaker of the House of Commons, rather than by the government, so he was not on a formal state visit. Meetings with him had been arranged with the Party Leaders.⁷¹

The Speakership had undoubtedly become a diplomatic tool with which informal and less threatening meetings could be arranged with foreign leaders. Weatherill's style, however, contrasted quite starkly with that of his predecessor in this respect because Speaker Thomas had revelled in receiving the great and the good from across the world. The fact that, on his mother's advice, he always carried with him his tailor's thimble 'to keep me humble' demonstrates that he was determined to keep his feet well and truly on the ground despite having risen to high office.

Of course, Weatherill was the first Speaker to chair televised House of Commons debates and television enabled viewers to gain a greater understanding of his role. Weatherill had always been in favour of Commons proceedings being televised because he believed that radio broadcasting alone, which only really covered rowdy Question Times, distorted the work of the House.⁷² In the end, Weatherill was not successful in his wish to see the televising of the Commons until towards the end of his Speakership on 18 October 1989. Whilst his predecessor had been a household name thanks to being broadcast over the radio, television made the Speaker of the House of Commons a much more recognisable figure in British politics. Weatherill himself commented that:

When I paid an official visit to America, you know that Question Time is broadcast regularly in America, when I paid an official visit the headlines in the *Washington Post* said, 'If the Speaker of the House of Commons was to walk

⁷⁰ See Lord Weatherill, in 'The Role of the Speaker in the House of Commons', p. 77.

⁷¹ Shirley Williams, *Climbing the Bookshelves*, (London: Virago, 2009), p. 341.

⁷² Obituary of Lord Weatherill, *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 May 2007.

down Broadway today wearing his regalia he would be instantly recognised. If he'd done that a year ago we would have probably arrested him'.⁷³

While Weatherill became nowhere near as famous as his predecessor, he did make the role of Speaker even more understood and recognisable thanks to television. Weatherill argued that:

I took my role as being [...] not a star role. I took the view that the Speaker was the conductor of the national orchestra: that the stars were on the floor.⁷⁴

This demonstrated the sort of unassuming man Jack Weatherill was because he did not seek fame for himself. However, for the first time the wider public could actually watch the Speaker in action rather than having to imagine what was going on while listening on the radio and Weatherill helped to shape the way people viewed the office.

Weatherill has been described by many as a truly 'House of Commons man' and this is thanks in part to his parliamentary career as a whip, Deputy Speaker and then Speaker which focussed on the internal matters of the Commons rather than what was going on in the country. He retired as Speaker at the 1992 General Election and was awarded the customary peerage. Weatherill took full part in the work of the House of Lords and in 1993 he was elected alternate Convenor of the cross-bench peers (a position whose duty it is to keep the non-aligned peers up to date with the business of the House) and following the death of Baroness Hylton-Foster in 1995, he became Convenor. When Tony Blair's Labour government proposed abolishing the right of hereditary peers to vote in the House of Lords, Weatherill was instrumental in helping Lord Cranborne, the Conservative Leader in the Lords, secure an agreement to retain 92 of them in the House of Lords Act 1999. Like his predecessor, Weatherill was a euro-sceptic and in 2006 he became patron of the 'Better Off Out' campaign which calls on Britain to leave the European Union. Unlike Thomas, he decided against writing his own memoirs saying, 'I'm not going to: too many confidences'.⁷⁵ Having been diagnosed with

⁷³ *Bernard and Betty Speak Out*, Part 2.

⁷⁴ Lord Weatherill, in 'The Role of the Speaker in the House of Commons', p. 59.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

prostate cancer, Lord Weatherill died after a short illness at a hospice near his home in Surrey on 6 May 2007.

Weatherill's successor was one of his deputies, Betty Boothroyd, who was elected on 27 April 1992, the first day of the new Parliament following John Major's surprise general election victory. Boothroyd was not only the first female Speaker, she was also the first to be chosen from the Opposition benches. Like her predecessor, she was also the backbenchers' choice.

Boothroyd was born into a working class Labour background in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire on 8 October 1929. Her father, Archibald Boothroyd was 43 and her mother, Mary, was 27 and they were both members of the local Textile Workers' Union and the Labour Party. Boothroyd herself commented:

I felt I came out of the womb into the Labour Movement. Throughout my life it's been like coal dust, I can't scrub it out from under my finger nails. I came into a family that was Labour inclined. I was brought up in that atmosphere where our house would be, even when I was a tiny tot, the committee room on local election polling day.⁷⁶

Boothroyd was their only child and, because her father had thought that he would never have children, she was idolised. Her father was often out of work and it fell on her mother to support the family and, because of this hardship, they both pushed Betty to do well at school. They were both delighted when their daughter won a scholarship to the Dewsbury Technical College because they thought it would mean that she would not follow them into the mill.

When she was eight years old, Boothroyd was enrolled in the Vivienne School of Dancing in Dewsbury which was run by Vivien Meakin. As well as learning to dance, Boothroyd took part in shows and pantomimes. The actress Dame Thora Hird, believed that this background helped Boothroyd enormously in her future role as Speaker:

⁷⁶ *Call Me Madam: A Profile of Betty Boothroyd* by Michael Cockerell, BBC Television, first broadcast on BBC 2, 16 December 2000.

She's a theatrical so there must be a touch of it goes into her work which means she will present something verbally just that little bit better than some of your MPs.⁷⁷

It is this stage background which led Boothroyd to leave Dewsbury just after the Second World War and go to London to become a Tiller Girl, the famous line of high kicking chorus dancers. Boothroyd herself admits that 'It was an adventure that was blown out of all proportion by the press in later years'.⁷⁸ Indeed, both Michael Cockerell in his television documentary and Paul Routledge in his biography both question whether Boothroyd was in fact ever a Tiller Girl on the West End Stage.⁷⁹ Boothroyd herself admits that she 'never made it to the Tiller line at London's Victoria Palace or their second line at Blackpool's Winter Gardens'.⁸⁰ She was packed off to appear at a pantomime in Luton and used a foot infection as an excuse to return to Dewsbury and so, as Boothroyd puts it in her autobiography, her 'Tiller days ended in disappointment'.⁸¹ This connection with the Tiller Girls, whether it be exaggerated or not, nevertheless helped Betty Boothroyd in later years with her political career. It gave her that something special which others did not have and made her far more interesting to the media which helped to give her a much bigger profile than she otherwise might have enjoyed.

Archibald Boothroyd died shortly after her return to Dewsbury in May 1948 and this meant that mother and daughter built up an even closer bond. Boothroyd set about becoming active in the local Labour Party and joined the League of Labour Youth. Her involvement steadily increased so that she acted as an assistant agent in the 1950 General Election and unsuccessfully stood for Dewsbury Town Council in 1952.⁸² Following the local elections she quit her job with the British Road Services in Batley in order to work full-time for the Labour Party at Transport House in London. It was

⁷⁷ *Call Me Madam*, BBC Television.

⁷⁸ Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 21.

⁷⁹ See *Call Me Madam*, BBC Television and Paul Routledge, *Madam Speaker: The Life of Betty Boothroyd*, (London: Politico's Publishing, 2000), pp. 57-71.

⁸⁰ Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 25.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 29-31.

not long before Boothroyd managed to find work in the House of Commons when Barbara Castle, the future Cabinet minister and Labour MP for Blackburn, and Geoffrey de Freitas, the Labour MP for Lincoln, agreed to share her as their secretary. Castle was surprised when Boothroyd set about becoming an MP because she felt that ‘she was more a backroom girl’.⁸³ However, Boothroyd felt that, ‘I wouldn’t mind doing this job. I could do it as well as anyone else could’ and so she managed to get herself selected as the Labour candidate in the Leicester South East by-election of November 1957.⁸⁴ The Conservatives had, however, enjoyed a majority of 11,541 at the 1955 General Election and so it was no surprise when Boothroyd did not gain the seat.⁸⁵ At the 1959 General Electoral she contested the more marginal Peterborough constituency but the Conservatives managed to increase their majority by over a thousand votes.⁸⁶

Having lost two parliamentary elections, Boothroyd decided to travel to the United States in 1960 to help out on John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign. Despite working on the Democratic campaign, Boothroyd ended up working for a Republican Congressman from Massachusetts, Silvio O. Conte, a man who was admired by the new President Kennedy and who had friends on both sides of the political divide. With all this experience behind her, Boothroyd returned to England in time for Christmas 1961 with renewed vigour to achieve her goal of becoming a Member of Parliament.

Geoffrey de Freitas had become High Commissioner to Ghana so Boothroyd could not return to her old job at the House of Commons. However, she was fortunate enough to secure employment with the newly created Labour Life Peer, the farmer, Harry Walston. When she failed to be selected as a candidate for the 1964 General Election, Boothroyd continued to work for Lord Walston who became a junior Foreign Office minister in Harold Wilson’s government. In 1965, Boothroyd was elected as a councillor in the London Borough of Hammersmith although she only served one term as her sights were still firmly set on Westminster. Again, Boothroyd was unsuccessful

⁸³ *Call Me Madam*, BBC Television.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons 1955*, (London: The Times Office, 1955), p. 91.

⁸⁶ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons 1959*, (London: The Times Office, 1959), p. 154.

at securing a candidacy when she was beaten by David Owen [future Labour Foreign Secretary and Leader of the Social Democrats] at the Plymouth Sutton selection meeting. In 1968, the veteran Labour MP, Sydney Silverman, died and so a vacancy existed in his marginal Nelson and Colne seat. Boothroyd managed to win the nomination to fight the by-election but the unpopularity of Wilson's government meant that she lost by 3,522 votes to the future Conservative Cabinet minister, David Waddington.⁸⁷ The Nelson and Colne Labour Party decided not to re-select Boothroyd for the general election although she managed to secure the candidacy in the nearby Rossendale seat. However, she fared no better there and lost this marginal Labour constituency to the Conservatives in 1970.⁸⁸

Boothroyd was finally elected to the House of Commons at the West Bromwich by-election on 24 May 1973. Her constituency was redrawn under the boundary review and so Boothroyd was selected for the new seat of West Bromwich West for the February 1974 General Election in which she won by a massive 13,431.⁸⁹ She increased her majority in the October to 14,799 and was appointed as an Assistant Government Whip in Wilson's administration becoming the first female Labour whip appointed while the Party was in government.⁹⁰ Having had experience in the whips' office meant that Boothroyd's preparation for the Speakership was very similar to her predecessor's. This similarity was to continue as she continued her parliamentary career.

Between 1975 and 1977, Boothroyd was one of the MPs who also became Members of the European Parliament before direct elections were introduced. She chose to remain at Westminster and when Labour lost power in 1979, Boothroyd joined the Speaker's Panel of Chairmen and chaired standing committees to examine legislation. This experience was good training for the Speakership because these committees are mini versions of the House of Commons. Coupled with the fact that she had served on the

⁸⁷ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons 1970*, (London: Times Newspapers Ltd, 1970), p. 166.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁸⁹ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons 1974*, (London: Times Newspapers Ltd, 1974), p. 254.

⁹⁰ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons October 1974*, (London: Times Books, 1974), p. 269.

House of Commons Commission, the body which oversees the administration of the House, since 1983, this background made Boothroyd an obvious choice to fill one of the vacant Deputy Speaker positions following the 1987 General Election. On 7 July 1987, Boothroyd took her place as Second Deputy Chairman of Ways of Means, the most junior of the three Deputy Speakers.⁹¹ She was only the second woman in history to hold the post of a Deputy Speaker, the first being Betty Harvie Anderson, the Conservative MP for Renfrewshire East. Anderson only held the post between 1970 and 1973 and felt compelled to stand down when her local Conservative Association kept complaining that she was neglecting her constituency.⁹²

Boothroyd immediately resigned from Labour's National Executive Committee, on which she had been a member since 1981 and where she had spent a long time battling the hard left of the party, because she recalls that Weatherill 'made my appointment conditional on my quitting frontline party politics'.⁹³ This shows that, despite the fact that the Speaker has no formal power over the selection of his or her deputies (in those days the Party managers chose and then the House ratified the appointments), the occupant of the Chair nevertheless had a say over who is put forward to join the team before the introduction of Deputy Speaker elections in 2010.

Despite having had a female Deputy Speaker in the 1970s, it was still a bit of a novelty because Boothroyd recalls:

The Member who was talking at the time, who was making a speech at the time, looked up in astonishment and he said, "What do we call you?" And I stood up and I said, "Call me Madam! They did! It stuck because although there had been a female Deputy Speaker before me, in Hansard it had always been recorded as 'Mr Deputy Speaker' and I wasn't going to have that. For about a week it was printed that I was Mr Deputy Speaker and, anyway, I took them on and I felt that I should assert my gender and I did."⁹⁴

⁹¹ *Deputy Speakers of the House from the start of the 1945/46 Parliamentary session to the present*, (House of Commons Library, 2006).

⁹² Interview with Baroness Fookes, 25 October 2005.

⁹³ Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 121.

⁹⁴ *Bernard and Betty Speak Out*, Part 1.

Boothroyd worked long hours but loved her new role and threw herself into it:

Some days I sat in the chair from 4.30 to 6pm and from 8.30 to 9.30pm. When the House sat late or into the early hours of the morning, I did 4.30-6.30pm, 8.00-9.30pm and 4.30-7.00am. The tiny bedroom in my office was a lifesaver. During all-night sittings I lay on my bed with my eyes closed and relied on Don Lord, the Speaker's Trainbearer, to call me. He had to stay on duty to remove the Mace at the end of the sitting and place it in the safe. Whatever the hour when we finished, I attended the Speaker's noon conference, but it was an undeniable ordeal.⁹⁵

As the most junior of the Speakership team, Boothroyd clearly got the worst deal when it came to the allocation of who chaired which debates. However, it was undoubtedly this hard work and dedication to duty which made her a contender for the Speakership itself and so she was quickly tipped for the top job.⁹⁶ Boothroyd knew she was in with a good chance and so, after a few years as Deputy Speaker, she was confident enough to commission the designer Hardy Amies to create a navy gown with Tudor roses embroidered on the sleeves for her to wear in the chamber.⁹⁷ In her memoirs, Boothroyd comments, 'If Members thought I would look even better in the Speaker's robes, I was already prepared'.⁹⁸ That was clearly her agenda.

When Jack Weatherill announced his intention not to stand at the 1992 General Election and, therefore, to retire as Speaker, Neil Kinnock, the Leader of the Labour Party, was determined to ensure that Boothroyd would get the job. Even though Labour did not win the election, they were convinced that it was their turn to have the Speakership and at the meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party on the morning of the vote, the suggestion that they should all support Betty Boothroyd 'was greeted with enthusiastic acclaim'.⁹⁹ So, with the support of Conservatives such as the former Cabinet minister and MP for Shropshire North, John Biffen, Boothroyd was elected as the first female

⁹⁵ Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 135.

⁹⁶ See Routledge, *Madam Speaker*, p. 212.

⁹⁷ See Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, pp. 136-7.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁹⁹ Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Parliamentary Labour Party Minutes, 'Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party held on Monday 27 April 1992'.

Speaker, and the first Speaker elected from the Opposition benches, on 27 April 1992.¹⁰⁰

Unlike her two immediate predecessors, Boothroyd had been chosen by a contested election for the office. The fact that the names of those who voted are recorded in Hansard could give rise to claims that the Speaker would favour those who voted for her. However, in order to ensure total impartiality Boothroyd maintains that:

I never looked at that division list, that is the list to see who voted for me and who voted against. I never looked at that for well over a year so it didn't colour my thinking at all.¹⁰¹

Boothroyd's first major decision was to dispense with the traditional wig that had been the trademark of the uniform associated with the office of Speaker. In her memoirs, she recalls:

Before I decided not to wear the Speaker's traditional full-bottomed wig, I took Clifford's [Clifford Boulton, the Clerk of the House] advice and sought the agreement of both front benches. 'Never forget that you are a servant of the House,' he advised. I would have been uneasy in a full-bottomed wig. Besides I had sufficient thatch of my own.¹⁰²

The fact that Boothroyd was a woman undoubtedly allowed her to get away with dispensing with the wig because, unlike most of her male predecessors, she had a fine head of hair of her own. Her decision not to wear the wig, however, has meant that her successors have followed suit and it would appear that the most famous part of the Speaker's uniform has now been consigned to the history books.

Boothroyd showed straightaway that she was not afraid of disciplining unruly Members. On 2 July 1992, Dennis Skinner [Labour MP for Bolsover], described the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, John Gummer, as a 'little squirt'.¹⁰³ Boothroyd

¹⁰⁰ See HC Deb 27 April 1992 cc2-26.

¹⁰¹ *Bernard and Betty Speak Out*, Part 1.

¹⁰² Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 163.

¹⁰³ HC Deb 2 July 1992 c956.

required Skinner to withdraw his remark but he refused stating that the term was not listed in *Erskine May*. However, the Speaker ruled that the term was unparliamentary and so when Skinner refused to withdraw the remark once again she ordered him to leave the chamber.¹⁰⁴ Boothroyd had taken on the ‘Beast of Bolsover’, the man who had scared Selwyn Lloyd, and won.

Boothroyd’s confident start was not enough to prevent a group of Scottish Labour MPs from disrupting a health debate in December 1992. The group rushed forward and stood in front of the Mace whilst Boothroyd’s most senior deputy, the Conservative MP for Northampton South, Michael Morris, was in the Chair.¹⁰⁵ Morris had no choice but to suspend the sitting and he recalls that:

I absolutely made the right decision to suspend. My error was not suspending for long enough because 5 minutes doesn’t give any time to cool down. So, we had a debriefing afterwards, Betty, I and the other two [Deputy Speakers] and we agreed that the norm would be half an hour unless we felt that shorter would be better. From then onwards the sort of norm became half an hour. That would enable both sets of Chief Whips to get hold of their troops.¹⁰⁶

This came about because even when Boothroyd came into the chamber and took charge, the Scottish Labour MPs would not come to order. However, Madam Speaker demonstrated that she was not going to tolerate such bad behaviour because, when she returned to the chamber after having suspended the House for a second time, she adjourned the House for the Christmas break.¹⁰⁷ Boothroyd showed that she was not going to allow such blatant acts of defiance in the chamber.

Boothroyd overruled her deputy, Michael Morris, in April 1993 when he decided not to allow a vote on the Social Chapter during the debates on the Maastricht Treaty.

Boothroyd records in her memoirs that:

¹⁰⁴ HC Deb 2 July 1992 c957.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 17 December 1992 c585.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Lord Naseby, 7 September 2004.

¹⁰⁷ HC Deb 17 December 1992 c588.

His [Morris's] ruling against a vote, however, was too much for Tony Benn [former Cabinet minister and Labour MP for Chesterfield], who tabled a motion regretting it and inviting Morris to reconsider. It was the first time the chair had been criticised in this way for twenty years.¹⁰⁸

Boothroyd was lobbied heavily from both sides of the chamber and she took advice from the Clerk of the House, Clifford Boulton. She wrote:

The historical reason for my exclusion from the animated social scene on the terrace below my sitting room was never clearer than it was during the Maastricht crisis.¹⁰⁹

Madam Speaker had to distance herself from Members in order to remain neutral and aloof whilst she took this important decision because she could not allow colleagues to have reason for accusing her of favouritism towards her old Labour comrades. However, in the end she gave them what they wanted and reversed Morris's decision by allowing a vote. She believed that what she had done was right because she 'felt it in the mood of the House and the country'.¹¹⁰ When reflecting on Boothroyd's decision, Morris has said, 'You have to accept it. She's the Speaker. But I did feel aggrieved, yes, but she was wrong. I personally think she knew in her heart she was wrong'.¹¹¹ Boothroyd clearly felt that Benn's challenge to the authority of the Chair could have had greater repercussions and so she gave in to the pressure to hold a vote. This episode demonstrates that the Speaker is indeed the servant of the House because in the end she had to do its bidding. The combined strength of all the opposition parties and the Conservative rebels meant that a vote could have been forced through against the wishes of the Chair. This would have totally undermined the Speakership and so the decision Boothroyd took shows that she was not prepared to risk that.

Boothroyd's honeymoon period finally came to an end just over a year after her election as Speaker in June 1993 when the Conservative MP for Hampshire East, Michael Mates resigned as Minister of State for Northern Ireland. Mates had resigned from the

¹⁰⁸ Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 181.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

¹¹¹ Interview with Lord Naseby, 7 September 2004.

government owing to his involvement with the financier Asil Nadir who was facing thirteen charges of fraud and false accounting involving £30 million. By tradition, outgoing ministers are allowed to make an uninterrupted statement to the Commons covering the reasons causing their resignation. However, Boothroyd, who had been assured by Mates on the telephone that he would not discuss the trial, felt it necessary to take the unusual step of halting the outgoing minister's speech because she felt he was moving into *sub judice*.¹¹² Despite several warnings from the Chair, Mates continued with his statement until at one point Boothroyd went as far to say, 'I am now requiring the hon. Gentleman to resume his seat'.¹¹³ This serious sanction from the Speaker should have been the end of it but the argument between Mates and the Speaker continued and in the end he was allowed to finish his statement to the House. Boothroyd recalls that:

It was a full House and they were all baying to hear what he [Mates] had to say and I think that was the most difficult time I really had as Speaker keeping that in order.¹¹⁴

The problem was that Boothroyd failed to maintain order because she allowed herself to enter into an exchange with a Member which enabled him to defy her. The writer and broadcaster, Gyles Brandreth, who was Conservative MP for Chester, wrote in his diary:

The clerk kept swivelling round in his seat urging the Speaker to get Mates to stop. She tried and tried and tried again. She must have interrupted him eight, nine times. She was angry, she was flustered, she was confused. I don't think he was listening to what she had to say. She was just determined to stop him. But he wouldn't be stopped. On he went. It was agony.¹¹⁵

The Mates affair undoubtedly undermined Boothroyd's authority as Speaker and she thought that she 'would never recover from it'.¹¹⁶ In her memoirs she wrote, 'I was not

¹¹² Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 186.

¹¹³ HC Deb 29 June 1993 c830.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 24 October 2005.

¹¹⁵ Gyles Brandreth, *Breaking the Code: Westminster Diaries May 1990-May 1997*, (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1999), p. 189.

¹¹⁶ *Call Me Madam*, BBC Television.

wrong in trying to prevent Mates from breaching an important rule; my error was in fluffing it'.¹¹⁷ Whilst Boothroyd had been temporarily damaged, the Commons were not going to ditch their Speaker so soon after her election and she soon recovered. What this episode demonstrated was that a Speaker should never engage in a debate with a Member if he or she does not want to appear weak or indecisive. Boothroyd would learn from this early mistake and ensure that she never got drawn into such a row again.

A month later, on 22 July 1993, Boothroyd was forced to use the Speaker's casting vote when Labour put forward a wrecking amendment restoring the Social Chapter to the Maastricht Treaty. Boothroyd stated in a lecture she gave in November 1997 that 'Every day I had in my pocket a piece of paper setting out the way in which I would use that vote and an explanation to give the House for it'.¹¹⁸ She therefore followed the rules observed by her predecessors and so, with the result being 317 to 317, she voted with the Noes because it was not her place to create a majority when one did not exist.¹¹⁹

Boothroyd writes, 'We learned later that my vote was unnecessary, because the tellers had undercounted the Government's vote by one'.¹²⁰ However, she had demonstrated that she was completely fair and was not about to break with the long-established conventions of the Speakership and this is why John Major has no complaints with the way she handled the debates.¹²¹ Major had only secured a twenty-one seat majority at the 1992 General Election and this quickly whittled away to nothing following disastrous by-election defeats, defections and nine Euro-sceptic Conservative rebels defying the whip. All this meant that Boothroyd always had to be prepared to use the Speaker's casting vote.

¹¹⁷ Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 188.

¹¹⁸ Open University Archives, Betty Boothroyd Collection, BB/1/1/6, Lecture to the Thirty Club, 11 November 1997.

¹¹⁹ HC Deb 22 July 1993 c606.

¹²⁰ Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 189.

¹²¹ Letter from Sir John Major, 10 February 2009.

Any damage inflicted on Boothroyd by the Mates affair and the difficult time she had had with the Maastricht Treaty was soon overcome by her show of authority in the Commons chamber on 29 November 1993.¹²² On that occasion she was obliged to order Dr Ian Paisley, the veteran Democratic Unionist MP for North Antrim, to leave the chamber after he accused the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Sir Patrick Mayhew, of using ‘falsehoods’.¹²³ Boothroyd recalls what happened afterwards:

About a couple of weeks later, one of the badge messengers came to me in the Chair, I was in the Chair at midnight, and he said, “Mr Paisley would like to see you.” I was a bit scared. I said, “I’m leaving the Chair. Ask him to come into my downstairs study.” Of course, he was a big man in those days [...] and I sat there at the end of my desk with all the chandeliers on and the Pugin sliver gleaming to give me a bit of confidence because all sensible people had gone to bed of course. And Ian Paisley came round the door and he said, “I want to thank you. I want to thank you for the gracious way you threw me out the other day.” He said, “I got front page of the *Belfast Times* [sic] and you got page 3!” I said, “Come and sit down.” First and last time I’ve been a Page 3 Girl. All ended happily ever after.¹²⁴

Speaker Boothroyd was not frightened to take on even the most fiercest and powerful parliamentarians. She had demonstrated this over a year earlier with Dennis Skinner and now she had proved once again that she was in command of the chamber. As one of her deputies, Lord Lofthouse [former Labour MP for Pontefract], put it, ‘She was the boss. Make no mistake about that’.¹²⁵

Boothroyd even had to take on the Prime Minister on 14 April 1994 when John Major claimed that Margaret Beckett, the Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, had ‘peddled an untruth’ when she asked him a question about elderly people being denied the right to hospital treatment on the grounds of their age.¹²⁶ Members immediately cried ‘Withdraw’ because, as with Ian Paisley, MPs cannot call each other liars, and this prompted Boothroyd to stop proceedings and say:

¹²² See HC Deb 29 November 1993 cc789-793.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ *Bernard and Betty Speak Out*, Part 2.

¹²⁵ Telephone conversation with Lord Lofthouse, 26 October 2009.

¹²⁶ HC Deb 14 April 1994 c415.

Order. I am sure that the Prime Minister will reflect and I hope that he will withdraw his remark.¹²⁷

Madam Speaker demonstrated that she was not afraid to pull up the Prime Minister if she felt he was out of order. Major did not withdraw what he said, instead he altered his phrasing by saying, 'Despite the fact that what the right hon. Lady says is inaccurate'.¹²⁸ MPs were not satisfied with this and so Boothroyd had to step in again:

Order. I do wish that the House would listen to the comments that are being made and not make such a row. I have asked the Prime Minister politely to reflect and I hope that he will withdraw what he said.¹²⁹

Major had no intention of withdrawing an accusation he believed to be correct and so he carried on. At that point Boothroyd gave up trying which was a clear demonstration of the weakness of the Chair to reprimand the Prime Minister. Madam Speaker could have insisted and attempted to use her disciplinary powers but there was no way she would have won a vote which sought to suspend the Prime Minister from the House. In the end, Boothroyd justified her actions later that day when Nick Brown, the Labour MP for Newcastle upon Tyne East, made a Point of Order:

Of course, I heard clearly the Prime Minister's remarks which, I have to say, I felt were unparliamentary. However, it is for me to decide whether the rephrasing that he offered was acceptable and I deemed that it was acceptable.¹³⁰

Madam Speaker managed to cover herself and explain away Major's defiance of her authority. Her options were limited; she could have stopped Prime Minister's Question Time and caused a massive row. Boothroyd chose, however, not to fight a battle she could not win but at the same time she made her feelings clear. This episode is nevertheless a good example of the impotency of the Chair when it comes to reprimanding the Prime Minister or a very senior government minister.

¹²⁷ HC Deb 14 April 1994 c415.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., c432.

During her time as Speaker during the Major government, Boothroyd enjoyed excellent relations with the then Leader of the House, the Conservative MP for Braintree, Tony Newton. However, the same cannot be said for the Government Chief Whip at the time, the Conservative MP for Mid Norfolk, Richard Ryder. Boothroyd explains that friction between herself and Ryder started over the way she concluded Prime Minister's Question Time:

I never got on with Richard Ryder. I used to say, "Time's up!"[...] my secretary Sir Peter Kitcatt, then, when it got to sort of one minute before 3.30, he would say, "Minute to go." Then he'd say, "Time's up", and he would just whisper to me so I would say, "Time's up", and we would move on. Richard Ryder came to see me, after a while, and he was very concerned because he believed that I was saying "Time's up!" to John Major, who was Prime Minister, who's back was to the wall then, his majorities, sleaze, losing by-elections and all that. Nothing was further from the truth. It was "Time's up", we move on.¹³¹

Ryder himself refutes this allegation and believes that his relationship with Boothroyd was 'courteous and businesslike' going on to state that, 'As for her 'Time's up' phrase – it never, ever bothered me. Nor do I ever recall expressing a view on it then or later'.¹³² Boothroyd maintains, however, that she never got on with Ryder believing that this was because he 'was an establishment Tory [...] and having a woman and having Labour with a Tory government was something that someone like Ryder could not accept somehow'.¹³³ As Chief Whip he had tried and failed to deliver the former Conservative Northern Ireland Secretary, Peter Brooke, as Speaker and so he probably resented Boothroyd for getting so many of his troops to vote for her.

Boothroyd's Speakership also coincided with the 'Cash-for-Questions' saga which saw two government ministers, Neil Hamilton [Conservative MP for Tatton] and Tim Smith [Conservative MP for Beaconsfield] eventually found guilty of accepting money from the owner of Harrods, Mohamed Al-Fayed, for putting down parliamentary questions. This episode of what also became known as 'Tory sleaze' brought about the creation of

¹³¹ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 24 October 2005.

¹³² Letter from Lord Ryder, 19 May 2010.

¹³³ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 24 October 2005.

the independent Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards whose job it was to investigate and report to a Committee of the House which then determined the outcome. This new post came under the remit of the House of Commons Commission chaired by the Speaker because Boothroyd was adamant that ‘Members who fall short of our standards must be judged by Parliament’.¹³⁴ Unlike her predecessors, Boothroyd had a much larger job to do in ensuring that the misdemeanours of a few Members did not discredit the whole House.

Boothroyd was safely re-elected in West Bromwich West at the 1997 General Election and was quickly re-appointed as Speaker in the new Labour dominated House of Commons. One of the first things that the new Prime Minister, Tony Blair, did was to change Prime Minister’s Questions from two 15 minute sessions to one 30 minute session each week. Boothroyd recalls that she ‘was neither forewarned nor consulted about this – merely informed’.¹³⁵ Although she goes on to say she ‘understood the thinking behind it and did not object’ this was nevertheless an act of gross discourtesy to the Chair because it had large scale repercussions to the parliamentary week.¹³⁶ It also showed just how powerless even a well-respected and popular Speaker can be in the face of a mighty executive.

When John Major, who was now the Leader of the Opposition, came to see the Speaker, she made it clear that, as the Opposition leader had had three questions for each of the fifteen minute sessions, he would now have six questions at each of the longer thirty minute sessions.¹³⁷ Although Boothroyd had been totally ignored, she did manage to make a point which demonstrated that the Chair was not going to completely kowtow to the new government.

The fact that the Labour Party had a massive Commons majority of 179 also presented other challenges to Boothroyd’s Speakership. Boothroyd states:

¹³⁴ Open University Archives, Betty Boothroyd Collection, BB/1/1/6, Lecture to the Thirty Club, 11 November 1997.

¹³⁵ Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 246.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

In 1997, at the change of government, there were problems then because, with only one very minor exception, none of the Labour ministers had held ministerial office before and, therefore, it was understandable that when they were enunciating policy and making policy decisions they would come to the BBC or the media and that really was not allowed by me at all. Parliament is the great forum of debate for this country and they must come to Parliament first.¹³⁸

Madam Speaker's frustration over this matter came to a head on 5 April 2000, when the Minister for Sport and Labour MP for Vauxhall, Kate Hoey, announced a new sports strategy on the radio. In response to a Point of Order from the Conservative MP for East Surrey, Peter Ainsworth, Boothroyd remarked:

It seems to me that there is a situation developing in some departments in which the interest of Parliament is regarded as secondary to media presentation, or is overlooked altogether. I hope that Ministers will set in hand a review of procedures right across Whitehall to ensure that the events that took place this morning are never allowed to happen again.¹³⁹

However, despite this clear condemnation from the Chair, one of her critics as Speaker is Tam Dalyell who, even though his praise for Boothroyd is quoted at the beginning of this chapter, believes that:

What I think she ought to have done was to be far, far tougher on the government making statements outside the House of Commons. I mean she would wring her hands and say it was awful. She could have done far more about it.¹⁴⁰

Boothroyd defends herself by saying that, 'I've let it be known to individual ministers. I've certainly let it be known to the Prime Minister' about being annoyed at the government's failure to report important policies to Parliament before announcing them on the media.¹⁴¹ She has also said that, 'Eventually, I called in the Cabinet Secretary and had a word with him about it. That improved matters.'¹⁴²

¹³⁸ *Bernard and Betty Speak Out*, Part 2.

¹³⁹ HC Deb 5 April 2000 c976.

¹⁴⁰ Telephone conversation with Tam Dalyell, 14 March 2009.

¹⁴¹ *Call Me Madam*, BBC Television.

¹⁴² *Straight Talk with Andrew Neil*, BBC Television, first broadcast on BBC News 24, 10 June 2006.

Although Boothroyd enjoyed fame and popularity as Speaker, she is most certainly not without her critics. Dalyell argues that:

If you asked me, now this is a very small minority opinion, “Do you think she was a good Speaker?” then the answer is, “No.” [...] She was very reluctant, in a way that Jack Weatherill had not been, to give Private Notice Questions when I thought that the situation absolutely called for PNQs. She tended to be a bit weak in the face of government.¹⁴³

The statistics certainly bear out this argument because in many of the parliamentary sessions while Boothroyd was Speaker the number of PNQs allowed runs into only single figures.¹⁴⁴ However, in the sessions following general elections, she allowed twenty-six [1992-1993] and twenty-nine [1997-1998] although this was still below the sort of numbers granted by Weatherill.¹⁴⁵ In response to this criticism, Boothroyd argues that:

I think I was tough actually [...] but Tam [Dalyell] always wanted his own way and Tam came up with all sorts of ideas about Private Notice Questions so he thought he should always get them. They didn't always fit into the category.¹⁴⁶

One noteworthy PNQ granted by Boothroyd was in July 1997 when she allowed Peter Lilley, the then Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer and Conservative MP for Hitchin and Harpenden, to delay the new Labour government's first budget by fifteen minutes and ask about an alleged leak into what the Chancellor was about to announce.¹⁴⁷

Boothroyd argues that:

The Opposition believed there'd been a leak on the budget and it was right that I held it up in order to have an exchange across the floor of the House as to whether there had been a leak or not.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ Telephone conversation with Tam Dalyell, 14 March 2009.

¹⁴⁴ Robert Blackburn & Andrew Kennon with Sir Michael Wheeler-Booth, *Griffin & Ryle on Parliament: Functions, Practice and Procedures*, (London, Sweet & Maxwell 2003), p. 530.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 14 September 2010.

¹⁴⁷ HC Deb 2 July 1997 c297.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 24 October 2005.

Despite the Labour government's huge majority, Boothroyd had put down a marker clearly demonstrating the authority of the Chair and how it could be used to ensure that the Opposition, however weak and small, could still have a say and put down questions.

Tam Dalyell is not Boothroyd's only critic. Sir Teddy Taylor, who was a Conservative MP for forty years, believes that:

I think you'll find a lot of people will say she was a wonderful Speaker. I must say I can't agree with that [...] She's the only Speaker [...] whom I've gained the impression from her [...] the only one who appeared to have her personal opinions influencing the selection of speakers.¹⁴⁹

In his diary entry for 21 March 1994, Giles Radice, the former Labour MP for Durham North and friend of Boothroyd, records:

At 6.15, I go to drinks with the Speaker, tête-à-tête in her lovely drawing room overlooking the Thames. Apparently, she has had a bust-up with John Smith [the Leader of the Labour Party], arising out of the Tories trying to embarrass John at question time about council troubles in the Monklands constituency [John Smith represented Monklands East]. Betty wants me to be an unofficial PPS [Parliamentary Private Secretary]. I say that I am too old to be a PPS, but I will be her friend and adviser. We down two strong G&Ts to seal our alliance.¹⁵⁰

The Speaker is, of course, not supposed to have any political friends and his or her advisers should be drawn from the House of Commons staff and not from the ranks of his or her former political party. Boothroyd recalls that:

The real story (so far as I was concerned) had nothing to do with Monklands. John Smith was leader of the Opposition. During Questions or in debate he was being severely criticized (perhaps about Monklands) by government benches. John's PPS [Parliamentary Private Secretary] was Hilary Armstrong [Labour MP for Durham North West] but Hilary was [...] shouting and bawling and barracking as she was attempting to protect John. I reprimanded Hilary across the floor of the House, much to her embarrassment and John's also. Indeed she left the chamber

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Sir Teddy Taylor, 26 October 2004.

¹⁵⁰ Giles Radice, *Diaries 1980-2001: From Political Disaster to Election Triumph*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), diary entry for 21 March 1994, pp. 315-6.

shedding tears. John came to see me in my private apartments to tear a strip off me for the manner in which I had dealt with Hilary. Tough! So this is why I must have spoken to Giles [Radice] about keeping an eye open about my popularity, or lack of it in the House.¹⁵¹

Radice's next diary entry demonstrates just how close he was to the Speaker and how keen she was to rebuild some support with the Labour side:

Betty Boothroyd rings me at 8.15am, suggesting that, as there is an opportunity for a Labour MP, I ask the PM a supplementary question [on the European Union].¹⁵²

This does, to a certain extent support what Sir Teddy Taylor has argued because Boothroyd was clearly giving one of her old friends the opportunity to put down a question and therefore giving him preference over other Members. Radice himself believes that the reason she asked him to put down the question was not because she was favouring the Labour Party but because 'She was pro-European. That was her bias'.¹⁵³ Boothroyd herself believes that it was her duty as Speaker to ensure that both sides of any argument were discussed on the floor of the House:

They [John Major's Government] were not very good Europeans at all and I think there had to be a balance there [...] and the voice of those who felt about the European Union had to be heard and it wasn't being heard because the party in power was not very sympathetic to the European Union.¹⁵⁴

Part of the Speaker's role is undoubtedly to make sure that minority opinion is heard but this does prove Teddy Taylor's point that Boothroyd did not bury her views or her old allegiances when she became Speaker. What this certainly shows is that Boothroyd cemented the alliance she had forged with Radice the evening before.

When John Major's government refused to allow the Opposition a preview of the Scott Report, which under the direction of Lord Justice Scott, had investigated the alleged arms sales to Iraq during the 1980s, in February 1996, Alastair Campbell [Labour

¹⁵¹ E-mail for Baroness Boothroyd, 12 October 2010.

¹⁵² Radice, *Diaries 1980-2001*, diary entry for 22 March 1994, p. 316.

¹⁵³ Interview with Lord Radice, 8 June 2010.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 14 September 2010.

Director of Communications] recorded in his diary that ‘Boothroyd came out on the side of the Scott report being given to the Opposition before the statement on it in the House’.¹⁵⁵ Whilst admitting that she could not force the government to release the report early, Boothroyd nevertheless stated to the House that:

In my experience the questioning on any statement is much better focused when some steps have been taken to enable Opposition spokesmen and minority-party spokesmen to have access some time in advance to the text of complicated reports, provided steps are taken to maintain confidentiality.¹⁵⁶

The reaction to this, as Boothroyd wrote in her memoirs was that the ‘Government’s embarrassment led my being accused, in the usual unattributable way, of being unfair’.¹⁵⁷ Whilst to some on the government benches this could have been seen as Boothroyd helping her old Labour comrades, it is most probably the case that she saw herself as fulfilling the Speaker’s duty of allowing MPs to effectively scrutinise and challenge the executive. Speakers can always be accused of bias when a decision does not go the way of one side of the House but on this occasion Boothroyd was merely sticking up for the rights of the Commons.

In his television documentary on the life of Betty Boothroyd, Michael Cockerell argues that:

Although reform can only come from MPs themselves, Betty Boothroyd’s critics felt that she personally represented a major obstacle to modernisation. They argued that she supported unsocial working hours because she was so wedded to Westminster.¹⁵⁸

Boothroyd has said that, ‘One mustn’t run away with the idea that it is the Speaker who brings in reform. That is not the case. The Speaker is first and foremost the servant of the House’.¹⁵⁹ However, in response to calls from the so-called ‘Blair Babes’, the influx

¹⁵⁵ Alastair Campbell, *The Alastair Campbell Diaries Volume 1: Prelude to Power 1994-1997*, (London: Hutchinson, 2010), diary entry for 7 February 1996, p. 372.

¹⁵⁶ HC Deb 7 February 1996 c331.

¹⁵⁷ Boothroyd, *The Autobiography*, p. 230.

¹⁵⁸ *Call Me Madam*, BBC Television.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

of women Labour MPs elected in 1997, to make Parliament more female friendly, she has also stated quite clearly that, ‘I wouldn’t dream of having babies in committees or in the chamber. It was either babies or me!’.¹⁶⁰ Just because the House of Commons had its first female Speaker, it did not mean that ‘women’s lib’ would take hold in Westminster. Peter Bradley, the former Labour MP for The Wrekin, believes that:

I don’t think Betty really was always terribly sympathetic to women Members of Parliament, particularly the younger ones, and I know several who were almost reduced to tears and certainly felt utterly humiliated when they were trying to get a question out or to make a speech and weren’t given the protection and sometimes felt the impatience of Betty in the Chair.¹⁶¹

When Boothroyd entered Parliament in 1973, there were only 26 other female MPs and so she had to have the strength and conviction to make her way in what was a totally male-dominated arena. In 1997, a record 119 female MPs were elected and according to one, the former Labour MP for Bethnal Green and Bow, Oona King,

There is also that syndrome of, you know, I had to walk six miles through the snow to work when I was a lad, sort of thing, or I was a lass as it may be with Betty and the fact that people have had to do that in the past does not mean that that is a sound basis for a future democracy to build itself on.¹⁶²

However, Boothroyd was determined to defend the traditions of the Parliament she loved. She was not prepared, in her view, to see its powers and rights diminished in any way by reforms such as shorter working hours because, as she herself has put it:

It took me so long to get into the House of Commons, so many years, so many campaigns and once I got there I was so dedicated and committed and, if you like, married to the House that it just absorbed me. It took over my life.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 24 October 2005.

¹⁶¹ *Call Me Madam*, BBC Television.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

This certainly explains why she never married and it also explains why achieving the highest office the House of Commons can bestow on one of its Members was so fitting for Boothroyd.

Despite some of the internal criticism at Westminster, Boothroyd nevertheless became the most well-known and most popular Speaker in history. Cockerell believes that, ‘She helped to make Parliament sexy. She always had a keen eye for publicity and would always make her entrance like the star of a big production number’.¹⁶⁴ Whilst being one of her critics, Tam Dalyell argues that, ‘as a public persona she did Westminster a huge amount of good’.¹⁶⁵ The dignity and strength with which she executed her duties as Speaker undoubtedly commanded respect. Indeed, the way in which she carried off big state occasions such as the visit of South African President Nelson Mandela in 1996 and the fact that she undertook more foreign visits to other Parliaments than any of her predecessors meant, as Cockerell puts it, she became ‘a political superstar’.¹⁶⁶ Radio had made Speaker Thomas a household name but the medium of television had made Betty Boothroyd just as famous a political figure as any senior government minister. The result of Boothroyd’s personal fame would be that in future the role of the Speaker would come under the spotlight far more than it had ever done before.

Even though Boothroyd was undoubtedly the star on the Westminster stage, Sir Alan Haselhurst [Conservative MP for Saffron Walden], who became Deputy Speaker and Chairman of Ways and Means in 1997, believes that she ‘was a very collegiate speaker’.¹⁶⁷ Haselhurst has described how:

After the formal meeting, the Speaker’s conference, which takes place each day, where the clerks are present, the three senior clerks, the Speaker’s Secretary, the Sergeant-at-Arms, we would retire upstairs to the private study where she

¹⁶⁴ *Call Me Madam*, BBC Television.

¹⁶⁵ Telephone conversation with Tam Dalyell, 14 March 2009.

¹⁶⁶ *Call Me Madam*, BBC Television.

¹⁶⁷ Sam Macrory, ‘People Profile: Sir Alan Haselhurst. Speaking Up’, *The House Magazine*, 12 July 2010, p. 21.

[Boothroyd] would then tells us what she wished us to know, ask us about things perhaps as well.¹⁶⁸

Janet Fookes [Conservative MP for Plymouth Drake], who was a Deputy Speaker to Boothroyd during the 1992-1997 session, agrees with Haselhurst saying that:

She [Boothroyd] was very keen we should work as a team and she believed in taking us into her confidence as it were about problems that were facing the Speaker and the way we set about dealing with anything.¹⁶⁹

Boothroyd herself claims that ‘I always backed my deputies. Whatever they did, I backed them [...] as far as I was concerned they were the team and they were right.’¹⁷⁰

Geoffrey Lofthouse [Labour MP for Pontefract and Castleford], another one of Boothroyd’s deputies, agrees saying that, ‘On every occasion she would support you openly’, although she would tell you off in private if she felt you had made a mistake.¹⁷¹

Sir Alan Haselhurst also remembers how Boothroyd wanted to look after her deputies when it came to the increased workload created by the introduction of debates in Westminster Hall in late 1999. Haselhurst recalls:

I said to Betty that we would do an hour, the Deputy Speakers would do an hour [presiding over Westminster Hall] and that we would then use members of the [Chairmen’s] Panel for the rest of it and she said, “As much as that, love?” And I said, “Well...” She said, “I’d only do half an hour if I were you.” And so we did half an hour and we expected someone to relieve us.¹⁷²

Boothroyd undoubtedly included her deputies in the day to day decision-making and engendered a strong sense of team work thanks to the support and respect she gave to those who assisted her in chairing the Commons. Despite her great public standing and importance, Boothroyd clearly never got too high and mighty whereby she would not take the help and advice of colleagues in her team.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Sir Alan Haselhurst, 29 July 2010.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Baroness Fookes, 25 October 2004.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 24 October 2005.

¹⁷¹ Telephone conversation with Lord Lofthouse, 26 October 2009.

¹⁷² Interview with Sir Alan Haselhurst, 29 July 2010.

Boothroyd announced her retirement as Speaker on 12 July 2000 choosing to stand down during the course of a Parliament rather than at the end of one.¹⁷³ Boothroyd gave her justification for this decision:

As recommended by the Procedure Committee in 1972, I believe that there is clear advantage in a new Speaker being elected during the course of a Parliament. In particular, it ensures that all Members are familiar with the qualities of potential successors. My decision will give my successor a run-in before the general election.¹⁷⁴

The reaction from MPs was a sorrowful ‘Oh’ and then spontaneous applause demonstrating just how popular she was with her colleagues.¹⁷⁵ Cockerell observed that, ‘The first Madam Speaker was that rare phenomenon in public life: a star who left the stage with the audience wanting more’.¹⁷⁶ Boothroyd retired at a time of her own choosing when she was at the height of her popularity. She did not have to suffer the indignity of being pushed out because she had gone on for too long and become tired. In this way, Boothroyd undoubtedly secured her reputation as being one of the great Speakers of the House of Commons. Lord Lofthouse states that, ‘I felt sorry for some of the incoming Speakers who had to follow on from such a formidable lady’.¹⁷⁷

Like her predecessors, Boothroyd became a Life Peer and became the Baroness Boothroyd of Sandwell, the borough in which her West Bromwich constituency was situated. Unlike Weatherill, she chose to publish her memoirs shortly after her retirement although they did not provoke the sort of backlash that George Thomas’s had received because she did not give away behind the scenes confidences in the same way that he had. She has also commented on the Speakership since her retirement unlike her predecessor. Following the resignation of Michael Martin in May 2009, Boothroyd sent out a press release stating:

¹⁷³ HC Deb 12 July 2000 c869.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Call Me Madam*, BBC Television.

¹⁷⁷ Telephone conversation with Lord Lofthouse, 26 October 2009.

Speaker Martin has taken the initial brunt of the criticism levelled against the Commons for its failure to observe the high standards of ethical conduct expected of it. His apology on behalf of all Members for the scandals that have been uncovered merit our thanks.¹⁷⁸

Privately, she had been appalled at how Martin had managed to bring the office of Speaker into such disrepute although she stopped short of making this known publicly.¹⁷⁹ The importance and majesty her time as Speaker had brought to the office had been rocked to its very foundations by Boothroyd's successor in the Chair. However, if she had not made the Speakership such a prominent role then perhaps the public would not have put such expectations on the office to sort out Parliament's problems. Boothroyd has also criticised Martin's successor, John Bercow, for dispensing with the Speaker's ceremonial dress in favour of a simple black academic gown telling him that he was 'letting the side down a little bit'.¹⁸⁰ In the interview with the journalist and broadcaster, Andrew Neil, she made it clear that she had invited herself round to Speaker's House to tell Bercow how she expected him to carry out his duties.¹⁸¹ Indeed, Boothroyd has said that:

I went to see him [John Bercow] quite seriously on a number of issues. You see, I think it is a matter of courtesy that the Speaker is always in the Chair when a Cabinet minister is making a statement. That had been dropped.¹⁸²

Boothroyd set extremely high standards as Speaker and she is clearly still determined to defend the office she did so much to promote.

The office of Speaker at the very end of the twentieth century was most definitely strengthened by Jack Weatherill and Betty Boothroyd. Both Speakers battled with governments which enjoyed massive majorities in order to ensure that backbenchers were able to have their say, although Weatherill faced far more criticism from all sides

¹⁷⁸ Andrew Pearce, 'Ministers cared only for perks of power, says Boothroyd', *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 May 2009.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ *Straight Talk*, BBC News Channel, first broadcast, 16 January 2010.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 14 September 2010.

of the House than his successor ever did. Weatherill was probably more successful at standing his ground against the Thatcher government with his greater use of Private Notice Questions and the fact that there were plots to remove him showed that he must have been doing something right. Boothroyd was not afraid of announcing in the chamber that she thought that Parliament was being undermined and she would chastise ministers if necessary. However, for some, this was all show and it had little effect. Boothroyd did not use the Speaker's weapon of Private Notice Questions to anywhere near the same extent as her predecessor. However, what she did do was to raise the profile of the Speakership even further and, thanks to her own personality and *modus operandi*, she became a world-wide celebrity. Weatherill made the office more recognisable because he was the first Speaker to be in the Chair whilst the Commons was televised. However, because of the Speaker's wig and uniform, Weatherill made the office rather than the holder better-known. By dispensing with the wig, Boothroyd made the holder of the office more famous because she emerged from behind the shield of the regalia. She became a star through the force of her own personality rather than because she held an office which came with an historic costume. Both Speakers Weatherill and Boothroyd fought hard to maintain the supremacy of the institution of Parliament and they made their views known when they felt this was being undermined. They were both outstanding ambassadors to Parliament and were models of what good MPs should be. Weatherill and Boothroyd's periods in the Chair were the glory days of the Speakership when it reached even greater pre-eminence. However, the strong image and reputation they had built up would be damaged by the end of the first decade of the new Millennium.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A SHOP STEWARD IN THE CHAIR: THE SPEAKERSHIP OF MICHAEL MARTIN (2000-2009)

Anyone will have a hard job after Betty Boothroyd, who has been a real star.

Former Labour MP and Front Bench Spokesman, Lord Radice, 2000.¹

his [Michael Martin's] place in parliamentary history is now guaranteed [...] - as the first Speaker to be driven from office in 300 years.

Political commentator and journalist, Andrew Pierce, 2009.²

One of his [Michael Martin's] great achievements was his work with young people from poor backgrounds, showing them what can be achieved.

Lord Foulkes, former Labour MP for Carrick, Cumnock & Doon Valley, 2009.³

He lost his temper easily, sucked up to the Labour side [and] threw bates with Tories.

Parliamentary sketch writer, Quentin Letts, 2010.⁴

Michael Martin was the first Catholic to become Speaker since Sir Thomas More was elected to the Chair prior to the Reformation in 1523. He was also the first Speaker to represent a Scottish constituency for over 150 years and had risen the ranks from the most humblest of origins. This background, coupled with the work done by his predecessors to improve the status of the office in the public eye could have made Martin one of the most renowned Speakers of all time. It will, however, undoubtedly be the controversy which surrounded his period in office and his ultimate downfall for which he is remembered. From the very outset of his Speakership, commentators believed that Martin was doomed to failure because he was not up to the job when compared to his illustrious predecessor. Martin did, however, suffer from perceived

¹ Giles Radice, *Diaries 1980-2001: From Political Disaster to Election Triumph*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), diary entry for 23 October 2000, p. 470.

² Andrew Pierce, 'Unforgettable, for all the wrong reasons', *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 May 2009.

³ George Foulkes, 'Michael was a reformer cut down by jittery MPs', *The Independent*, 20 May 2009.

⁴ E-mail from Quentin Letts, 31 August 2010.

snobbery thanks to his Glaswegian working class roots. This chapter will look at his period in office and assess whether this was, in fact, true and it will also analyse what impact he had on the Speakership and see what damage, if any, his resignation brought to the institution.

Michael Martin was born in Glasgow in 1945, the son of a merchant seaman and a cleaner, and lived in a tenement in the Anderston part of the city with four brothers and a sister. As a Catholic, Martin attended the St Patrick's Boys' School in Anderston but, having moved up to Springburn, left on his fifteenth birthday in order to take up employment as an apprentice sheet metal worker with a local engineering company. He soon became involved in the trade union movement and was a shop steward for the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers, later becoming a full-time officer of the National Union of Public Employees in the late 1970s.

Martin's trade union affiliations propelled him into politics and he joined the Labour Party at the age of twenty-one. In 1973, he was elected as a Labour councillor to the Glasgow Corporation which later became Glasgow District Council. Vince Cable [Liberal Democrat MP for Twickenham and Secretary of State for Business], was also a Labour councillor in Glasgow in the 1970s and he recalls that Martin 'was quiet and uncontroversial, and he stuck very closely to the line of his union and of his mentor, the MP for Springburn, Dick Buchanan'.⁵ It was, therefore, no surprise that when Buchanan decided to retire as MP for Glasgow Springburn, Martin was selected to take his place. Despite the Conservative victory at the 1979 General Election, Labour did reasonably well in Scotland and particularly in Glasgow, where they managed to gain Glasgow Cathcart from the Conservatives and increase their share of the vote across the city.⁶ Martin himself was elected with a majority of 12,771 and secured a massive 67.8% share of the votes cast in Springburn.⁷

⁵ Vince Cable, *Free Radical: A Memoir*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2009), p. 316.

⁶ See *The Times Guide to the House of Commons May 1979*, (London: Times Books, 1979), pp. 114-118.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 118.

In his first term as an MP, Martin chaired the Parliamentary Labour Party's Industry and Economic Group sub-committee and he also served as Parliamentary Private Secretary to Denis Healey, who was at that time Deputy Leader of the Labour Party. Even though the Conservatives won a landslide victory in 1983, Labour remained the dominant force in Scottish politics with Martin holding Glasgow Springburn with an increased majority of 17,599.⁸

In the 1983-1987 Parliament, Martin's experience as a worker in Glasgow was again put to good use and he was appointed to serve on the Trade and Industry Select Committee. He was committed to ensuring that workers' rights were preserved and that young people received the training they needed to become skilled workers.⁹ Martin was by now becoming a well-established local MP in Glasgow who fought hard for his working-class constituents and so when the election came he was returned with a 22,063 majority.¹⁰ Martin had managed to turn what was already a reasonably safe seat for Labour into an impregnable bastion.

It was the 1987-1992 Parliament which first gave Michael Martin his first taste of chairing committees of MPs when he became a member of the Speaker's Panel of Chairmen. In that role he became Chairman of the Scottish Grand Committee and gained experience of what it was like to preside over a large group of MPs. Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop [former Conservative MP for Tiverton], who had served with Martin on the Trade and Industry Select Committee, wrote that 'he was never a "Labour Whips' tool": he was always his own man' and clearly this independence had made him acceptable for chairing such a large parliamentary body.¹¹

During the 1992-1997 Parliament, Martin gained further experience when he became Chairman of the Commons Administrative Committee. Geoffrey Lofthouse, who was Labour MP for Pontefract and a Deputy Speaker, decided to retire at the 1997 General

⁸ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons June 1983*, (London: Times Books, 1983), p. 121.

⁹ See Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Minutes of the Parliamentary Labour Party, 'Minutes of the Party Meeting held on Wednesday 18 March 1987'.

¹⁰ *The Times Guide to the House of Commons June 1987*, (London: Times Books, 1987), p. 122.

¹¹ Letter from Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, 7 May 2009.

Election which meant that there was a vacancy on Betty Boothroyd's team. As this was a Labour nomination [Boothroyd had been Labour and the other two deputies were Conservatives], Martin's experience chairing various different Commons committees made him the obvious choice for the role. On 14 May 1997, Michael Martin became First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means and Deputy Speaker and so was third in the pecking order behind Boothroyd as Speaker and Sir Alan Haselhurst [Conservative MP for Saffron Walden] as Chairman of Ways and Means.¹²

Up until that point, five out of the eight post-war Speakers had served as a Deputy Speaker before being elected to the main job and so, when Boothroyd announced her retirement in July 2000, Martin was clearly one of those who could be considered to replace her. However, the parliamentary sketchwriter for the *Daily Mail*, Quentin Letts, argues that he 'had seen Martin in operation as deputy Speaker for some time and was not impressed by his grasp of detail or his projection of character'.¹³ Nevertheless, Michael Martin was one of the twelve candidates who put their names forward for the Speakership along with the other deputies, Sir Alan Haselhurst and the Conservative MP for Suffolk Central and Ipswich North, Sir Michael Lord. When asked, Baroness Boothroyd, has said that, 'It never entered my head that he would be a candidate [...] I could never believe that he even wanted it'.¹⁴

As seen previously, Michael Martin won the election held on 23 October 2000 and became the 156th Speaker of the House of Commons. The manner in which he was elected, however, was not a good start to his period in the Chair because, as the former Labour MP for Sunderland South, Chris Mullin, wrote in his diary:

Voting was mainly along tribal lines, with most of our side supporting Michael Martin from the outset and most of the Tories falling behind George Young [Conservative MP for Hampshire North West].¹⁵

¹² *Deputy Speakers of the House from the start of the 1945/46 Parliamentary session to the present*, (House of Commons Library, 2006).

¹³ E-mail from Quentin Letts, 31 August 2010.

¹⁴ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 14 September 2010.

¹⁵ Chris Mullin, *A View from the Foothills: The Diaries of Chris Mullin*, (London: Profile Books, 2009), diary entry for 23 October 2000, p. 134.

Martin did not even manage to find someone from the Opposition benches to second his nomination in order to demonstrate that he enjoyed cross-party support which is vital for a successful Speakership. Moreover, the former Labour MP for Durham North, Giles Radice, recorded that, ‘it is noticeable that, contrary to custom, many Tories do not vote for Michael and eight actually vote against him’.¹⁶

Mullin also noted that the ‘Tories were upset because, by convention, it should have been their turn’.¹⁷ Although, as already discussed, this convention of alternating the Speakership between the two main political parties was a very recent phenomenon, the Conservatives had put up a very credible candidate (who had the support of the Labour government front bench) and this had been blocked by the massive Labour majority on the backbenches. Mullin recorded that ‘there is unease on our side as to whether Michael is up to it. ‘The word from the clerks is that he isn’t,’ according to Donald Anderson [Labour MP for Swansea East]’.¹⁸ Knowing this, Labour backbenchers were still prepared to vote for Martin because, as Mullin goes on to admit, ‘I should have voted for George [Young], but faced with a choice between an Etonian baronet and a lad from the slums of Glasgow, my heart overruled my head’.¹⁹ Labour had voted for one of their own for ideological reasons rather than considering who would best serve the House.

Criticism of Michael Martin began from the very outset of his Speakership. The former political commentator for *The Times*, Peter Riddell, wrote on the day after Martin’s election that:

The worst candidate for Speaker was last night elected in the worst possible way. Michael Martin is a mediocrity who has never shown the potential to fulfil the demands of the Speakership.²⁰

¹⁶ Radice, *Diaries 1980-2001*, diary entry for 23 October 2000, p. 470.

¹⁷ Mullin, *A View from the Foothills*, diary entry for 23 October 2000, p. 134.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Peter Riddell, ‘House falls into theatre of the absurd’, *The Times*, 24 October 2000.

Worse still was the onslaught that Martin was going to receive from the *Daily Mail* whose political sketch writer, Quentin Letts, dubbed him ‘Gorbals Mick’.²¹ Letts explains how he came by the nickname:

I came up with it on the day of his election and included it in my *Daily Mail* sketch that day. Martin’s campaign for the Speakership [...] made much of his Glaswegian background. They really played that part of the thing hard. On the morning of the Speakership election, Michael White of *The Guardian* was referring to him in matey fashion as “Mick Martin”. I had not heard him called “Mick” before and it struck me that we had, here, an element of him being hyped as an ordinary Joe [...] Another thing I should point out is that *Private Eye* for many years referred to Charlie Wilson, former editor of *The Times*, as “Gorbals Wilson”, so there was a precedent for “Gorbals” being used as a nickname for cartoon shorthand for someone from Glasgow.²²

This catchy nickname was to stick with Michael Martin throughout his nearly nine years as Speaker and was adopted by other journalists in their columns. The result of this was that Martin’s supporters believed that he was the victim of ‘overt class prejudice’ and speculation that the nickname contained ‘anti-Catholic overtones’.²³ However, in the end, Martin put it down to ignorance of Glasgow because he did not even come from the Gorbals part of the city.²⁴ The Speaker was nevertheless so incensed by the ‘Gorbals Mick’ branding that he attempted to get his own back on its creator. Letts recalls:

It was made known to me that if I persisted with my criticisms of Martin, my Commons pass would be withdrawn. This would, in effect, prevent me doing my job – though I thought it through, and reckoned it would have been possible to sketch from the public gallery (the Strangers’ Gallery) [...] the managing director of the *Mail*, Robin Esser, took the Serjeant (at Arms) out for a drink at the Garrick to calm down officialdom.²⁵

²¹ Quentin Letts ‘Gorbals Mick was set up on the shy and his rivals had to knock him off’, *Daily Mail*, 24 October 2000.

²² E-mail from Quentin Letts, 31 August 2010.

²³ Roy Hattersley, ‘Michael Martin: ‘It was when they started attacking my wife that I knew I had to go’’, *The Observer*, 21 June 2009.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ E-mail from Quentin Letts, 5 September 2010.

This was an extremely drastic stance for the Speaker and it showed just how much the ‘Gorbals Mick’ label had ruffled him. As a politician, Martin should have been used to being criticised and this move was an abuse of his power and a total over-reaction. During his Speakership, Martin became increasingly concerned about the criticism levelled against him by journalists and in 2007 it emerged that he had spent more than £20,000 of taxpayers’ money on the services of the libel firm Carter-Ruck who sent off warning letters to newspapers which had published negative stories.²⁶ Speaker Weatherill had worked with the press when he had been criticised in the late 1980s whereas all Martin did was to fuel even more bad publicity.

Martin was, however, the first Speaker to court the media in a very direct manner, something which had been growing indirectly over the years since George Thomas became the first Speaker to become a household name. One of Martin’s first acts as Speaker was to hold a press conference at Speaker’s House. No previous Speaker had ever done such a thing. Letts recalls that:

Mr Martin was expected to declare his hunger for parliamentary change, but in the event he came across as tepid on reform. It was for others to initiate changes. Classic – the Blair Babes voted for him because they thought him a radical, whereas, in fact he may be a cautious old pussycat.²⁷

These so-called ‘Blair Babes’, the new large intake of female Labour MPs first elected in 1997, had thought that Martin was going to be much more family friendly than Betty Boothroyd had been and so they had backed him over the preferred candidate of the leadership. This press conference, however, gave the first signal that Martin was actually a reversion to the old type of Speaker who did not see it as his job to take a leading role in bringing about procedural reform. The only change it did signal was the Speaker’s evolution into a far more public figure who wanted people to know what he was doing and not just his constituency in the Westminster village. Martin’s employment of Mike Granatt, a former director of the Government Information Service, as his senior media adviser also demonstrated the growing need for the Speaker to

²⁶ Robert Winnett & Gordon Rayner, *No Expenses Spared*, (London: Bantam Press, 2009), p. 26.

²⁷ Quentin Letts, *Letts Rip!*, (London: Constable, 2010), p. 28.

project himself beyond the confines of the Commons. It also showed that Martin felt the need to combat the criticism of his Speakership that was so widespread in the press.

Speaker Martin decided not to reinstate the traditional full-bottomed wig that Betty Boothroyd had chosen not to wear. Martin gave his reason for this during his only television interview whilst Speaker:

The tradition I did get rid of was the wig because I didn't think the wig would have sat well on me as an individual.²⁸

Martin also chose to alter the customary Speaker's uniform by dispensing with the traditional stockings in favour of black, flannel trousers and wearing a normal pair of black Oxfords rather than shoes with a buckle and Tudor heel.²⁹ Unlike his predecessor, Martin did not seek the permission of the two front benches to change his uniform.³⁰ Perhaps he felt that this was unnecessary because the wig had already been discarded but he might also have been asserting his new found authority. In April 2002, the Speaker's advisers put pressure on Martin to wear the wig for the ceremony in which the Queen addressed Parliament on the occasion of her Golden Jubilee. Martin said to the then Leader of the House and Labour MP for Livingston, Robin Cook that:

Right up to the day before they were telling me I needed to wear a wig. I told them I don't have a wig, so they went away and reappeared with the last wig we had around the building, from the fifties. An enormous thing draped over a great big wire cage that you could have kept a budgerigar in. I told them I'm not wearing that.³¹

Martin overcame this attempt to bring back the wig and showed that he was not prepared to be coerced into doing something he did not want to do. He was in charge and that was that.

²⁸ *Politics Show*, BBC One, broadcast on 11 February 2007.

²⁹ Letts, *Letts Rip!*, p. 26.

³⁰ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 14 September 2010.

³¹ Robin Cook, *The Point of Departure*, (London: Simon & Schuster, 2003), diary entry for 1 May 2002, p. 145.

Speaker Martin did not experience as close a relationship with his deputies in the way that Betty Boothroyd had enjoyed. This is possibly because, unlike his predecessor, he had beaten two of his Deputy Speakers in the election for the Chair. The Conservative MP for Saffron Walden, Sir Alan Haselhurst, who was the most senior deputy and one of those Martin beat to become Speaker, has said how much Boothroyd would take the team into her confidence because they would retire upstairs after the formal meeting for a chat.³² However, Haselhurst has said that:

In the nine years that he was Speaker, I never once went upstairs. He didn't talk to us very much, and increasingly he left the work of compiling the lists and so on to the deputies. In that sense there was a detachment about him.³³

Furthermore, Haselhurst recalls that even the formal meetings in the Speaker's Study 'were relatively short and he rarely, put it this way, unbended to us about things'.³⁴ This lack of a collegiate approach to the Martin Speakership perhaps illustrates a lack of trust on the part of the Speaker towards his deputies. It most certainly placed an additional burden on Martin himself.

The class struggle was a recurring theme throughout Martin's Speakership. A year after he was chosen Speaker, Martin sacked the Diary Secretary, Charlotte Every, for allegedly being too posh and a 'typical Sloane Ranger'.³⁵ The final straw was apparently when she addressed him as 'Mr Martin' rather than as 'Mr Speaker' and so not giving him his proper status.³⁶ Next to go, in May 2003, was the veteran Speaker's Secretary, Sir Nicolas Bevan, who had served since 1993, allegedly because Martin found him to be 'too pompous'.³⁷ In June 2007, the upper class Serjeant at Arms, Major-General Peter Grant Peterkin, also fell victim to Speaker Martin's class war because, according to Greg Hurst, Political Correspondent for *The Times*, of 'his poor relationship with [...] the Speaker, who is notoriously prickly about his own working

³² Interview with Sir Alan Haselhurst, 29 July 2010.

³³ Sam Macroy, 'Sir Alan Haselhurst Profile: Speaking Up', *The House Magazine*, No. 1352, Vol. 36, 12 July 2010, p. 21.

³⁴ Interview with Sir Alan Haselhurst, 29 July 2010.

³⁵ 'Timeline of Martin's Career as Speaker', *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 May 2009.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Andrew Pierce, 'Unforgettable for all the wrong reasons', *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 May 2009.

class background in Glasgow'.³⁸ Martin had risen to the top of the parliamentary tree and he was determined to show that he was in charge. As a trade unionist he had fought against the establishment all his working life and he was not now going to allow such people to get in his way as Speaker.

These were not the only staffing problems during the Martin Speakership. Bevan's replacement as Speaker's Secretary, the former Crown Prosecution Service lawyer, Roger Daw only lasted 18 months in the job before he felt compelled to resign. Simon Walters, the Political Editor of *The Mail on Sunday* wrote that Daw resigned in December 2004 following a series of rows with the Speaker which 'included Mr Martin accusing Mr Daw, his principal adviser, of entering his study without permission and claiming his aide did not know enough about his ceremonial role, including which outfits to wear'.³⁹ Peter Riddell believes that Martin 'found it difficult to deal with people from different, more middle and particularly upper class backgrounds' and this explains why he fell out with so many of his key office staff.⁴⁰ He, of course, had to employ people with whom he felt he could work effectively but at the same time he needed those who knew the history of the office in order to continue its traditions.

Martin did, however, use his working class background as a force for good while he was Speaker. In the only television interview he gave during his time as Speaker, Martin stated:

When I came in here to the House, I discovered that we have excellent craftsmen with this lovely work - furniture restorers, upholsterers, then your traditional construction crafts, electricians and plumbers but no one serving an apprenticeship. The Clerk of the House said, "You can do anything you want Mr Speaker." I said, "Right, I want the construction people in here. There are schools across the river. Get the pupils from that school to get day release and we're getting an apprenticeship scheme going." I've been able to do, as Speaker, what I wanted someone to do for me – give me a skill. I got a skill as a metal

³⁸ Greg Hurst, 'Speaker's class war claims latest upper-crust victim', *The Times*, 23 June 2007.

³⁹ Simon Walters, 'Commons aide No3 quits over rows with Speaker', *The Mail on Sunday*, 19 December 2004.

⁴⁰ Interview with Peter Riddell, 4 October 2010.

worker and I was pleased at that and I've been able to do it here and I'm proud of that.⁴¹

This scheme demonstrated that the Speakership could have a role which extended beyond the House of Commons. By engaging with the public to a greater extent, Martin should have known that the office he held was becoming more and more accountable to a wider group of people than just the MPs at Westminster.

The way in which Martin was elected with its obvious reliance on the support of the overwhelming numbers on the Labour backbenches meant that any indication of bias was looked for very closely. Martin caused concern in October 2001 following a statement by the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, when he announced that he welcomed the abolition of asylum seeker vouchers.⁴² The former Conservative MP turned political journalist, Matthew Parris, wrote:

Speakers do not comment on the merits of government policies. They just don't. Ever. Some Tories will think Mr Martin was bending the rules, but I expect this may have been a genuine mistake.⁴³

Parris was most probably right about it being a mistake but, nevertheless, Martin had overstepped the mark and he was quick to apologise to the House the next day.⁴⁴

Doubts over Martin's impartiality reached new heights in November 2006 when he stopped the then Leader of the Opposition, David Cameron, in mid question and ruled that he could not ask the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, whether he would be happy for the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, to succeed him.⁴⁵ Martin explained why he had stopped Cameron and ruled that:

⁴¹ *Politics Show*, BBC One, broadcast on 11 February 2007.

⁴² HC Deb 29 October 2001 c647.

⁴³ Matthew Parris, 'Savage nuclear attack causes local fallout', *The Times*, 30 October 2001.

⁴⁴ HC Deb 30 October 2001 c753.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1 November 2006 c291.

Questions should be about the business of the Government. The issue of who will be the next leader of the Labour party is for the Labour party to talk about and decide.⁴⁶

Greg Hurst and Anthony Brown wrote in *The Times* that ‘Mr Cameron, looking perplexed and flushed with anger, rose and tried to challenge the Speaker’s ruling’.⁴⁷ In the end, Cameron got away with asking Blair whether he would be happy for Brown to succeed him as Prime Minister.⁴⁸ Conservative MPs were clearly furious that their leader had been slapped down by the Speaker because there was uproar in the chamber. Whilst Martin had technically been right with his ruling, his timing meant that it looked as though he was shielding his old Labour colleagues from difficult questions. A Speaker has to be careful not to look biased and on this occasion Martin made himself appear partisan because he was being extremely picky during the very public spectacle that is Prime Minister’s Question Time.

Martin can also be accused of helping his old comrades on the Labour front bench by his reluctance to grant Private Notice Questions (which became known as Urgent Questions in 2002). Betty Boothroyd had been nowhere near as generous with PNQs as her predecessor, Jack Weatherill, had been but Martin granted even fewer. In most years the number of Urgent Questions granted by Martin ran only into single figures and the most he ever allowed was fourteen during the 2005-2006 session.⁴⁹ Matthew Parris has said that:

Ministers absolutely hate being dragged to the despatch box because the Speaker has said that they should debate something that ministers don’t find convenient to debate. They hate it. Always will.⁵⁰

With this in mind, it is no wonder that his refusal to allow many Urgent Questions can be seen as Martin protecting ministers from answering awkward questions. Despite

⁴⁶ HC Deb 1 November 2006 c291.

⁴⁷ Greg Hurst & Anthony Browne, ‘Speaker reprimands Cameron over clash with Blair’, *The Times*, 2 November 2006.

⁴⁸ HC Deb 1 November 2006 c292.

⁴⁹ Figures supplied by Matthew Barrow, House of Commons Information Service.

⁵⁰ Interview with Matthew Parris, 5 October 2010.

this, Martin did require the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to answer an Urgent Question on the firefighters' dispute in November 2002 and so it could not be said that he was afraid of exercising his right to call ministers to the despatch box. Indeed, Robin Cook wrote in his diary:

This is the first time I have ever known the Prime Minister obliged to answer such a question, and it is a twenty-two carat innovation by Michael, who is probably now having pins stuck in a wax effigy of him in the Whips' Office.⁵¹

This was not quite an innovation because Speaker Weatherill had required Mrs Thatcher to answer a Private Notice Question during his period in the Chair.⁵² Martin's new stance was, however, not set to continue and this occasion certainly did not mark the beginning of a renaissance in the granting of urgent questions. Martin showed that he had the makings of a good Speaker who was willing to ensure unwelcome scrutiny of the government of the day but, in the end, he failed to build on this early success. Sir Alan Haselhurst, believes that:

I don't think that you could argue really that there was a serious bias at all. I don't think that he was that kind of person but, I mean, he was understandably more friendly with more people in the Labour Party.⁵³

Despite his friendliness with old Labour colleagues, Martin was not afraid to rebuke them if the need arose. On 10 February 2003, the then Father of the House and Labour MP for Linlithgow, Tam Dalyell, raised a point of order with the Speaker concerning his outrage that the government had given the House a dossier on Iraq which had been compiled from an out-of-date Californian PhD.⁵⁴ Dalyell was upset that Martin had not granted him an Urgent Question on the topic so that it could be debated on the floor of the House. Martin was unsurprisingly true to form and not prepared to grant the Urgent Question and so a row ensued. Dalyell would not resume his seat even when instructed

⁵¹ Cook, *The Point of Departure*, diary entry for 25 November 2002, p. 252.

⁵² Lord Weatherill, in 'The Role of the Speaker of the House of Commons', seminar held 25 February 2002 (Institute for Contemporary British History, 2005, <http://www.icbh.ac.uk/uk/icbh/witness/speaker>), p. 64.

⁵³ Interview with Sir Alan Haselhurst, 29 July 2010.

⁵⁴ HC Deb 10 February 2003 c643.

to do so by Martin and finally he walked out. Martin had shown that he would not tolerate having one of his rulings openly questioned in the chamber even by someone as worthy as the Father of the House and a fellow Scottish MP. What this dispute did show was Martin's continued reluctance to grant urgent questions even if they came from Labour backbenchers.

Martin was not always helpful to his former colleagues on the Labour benches as Robin Cook recorded in his diary entry for 25 November 2002:

Today was the debate on Iraq, and Michael Martin dropped a bombshell by announcing that he was going to ignore the pointless and supportive amendment put down by the Conservatives, and select the more critical amendment by the Liberal Democrats. This is another assertion of the independence of the Speaker, as by convention the Chair always selects the amendment of the Official Opposition.⁵⁵

However, this move by Martin once again did not signal the start of things to come. It did, nevertheless, demonstrate that the Speaker was more than capable of using his position to ensure that minority parties were heard and that the government was brought to account. What he failed to do was to continue on this course. If he had done then the accusations of bias would perhaps have been far fewer.

Two years into his Speakership, on 29 October 2002, Michael Martin succeeded in changing the rules so that he could be given the right to miss a Friday sitting of the Commons whenever he wanted without seeking the permission of the House.⁵⁶ Martin clearly felt that he needed to miss Friday sittings when they arose even though the House of Commons does not meet on every Friday it is in session. From March 2003, Speaker Martin never presided over a Friday sitting and instead left it to one of his deputies to take it in turns to be in charge. Although previous Speakers had leant on their deputies, none had done so in such an obvious way and this looked as though he was abdicating his important responsibilities. Unlike his recent predecessors, Martin

⁵⁵ Cook, *The Point of Departure*, diary entry for 25 November 2002, pp. 251-2.

⁵⁶ See HC Deb 29 October 2002 c842.

represented a Scottish constituency and so he had to travel back and forth at the weekend and needed extra time although the fact that he never attended a Friday sitting for the majority of his Speakership, shows that he was almost a part-time Speaker. Martin's absence from Parliament for so many days a year might well have meant that he was not as up to speed with certain matters as he should have been later on in his Speakership.

In February 2006, Speaker Martin was admitted to hospital following chest pains which resulted in an angioplasty procedure to clear blockages in his heart. Martin was absent from the House for nearly two months which meant that, under the rules, the Chairman of Ways and Means, assumed the duties of the Speaker.⁵⁷ Sir Alan Haselhurst has said that:

Reading between the lines, he [Martin] hated it when I was doing the job in his absence. Under the standing orders there was this ridiculous business of the clerk having to come in each day and say "in the unavoidable absence of the Speaker" and explain why I was in the chair. The clerk, Roger Sands, found this very tiresome, and I think he spoke to Geoff Hoon [Labour MP for Ashfield], as leader of the House, about regularising this. Geoff told me that the Speaker blew a fuse, but Roger ignored it and did it on a weekly basis anyway.⁵⁸

Martin was bound to be defensive about his position following all the criticism in the press. Nevertheless, this reaction demonstrated that he was insecure and did not want the House coming to the conclusion that it was better off without him.

In 2008, Martin became the first Speaker in twenty years to preside over a Speaker's Conference. The idea of a conference to consider electoral matters was put forward by the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, on 3 September 2007 and on 22 July 2008, Michael Martin announced the terms of reference for the committee as being:

To consider and make recommendations for rectifying the disparity between the representation of women and ethnic minorities in the House of Commons and their

⁵⁷ HC Deb 27 February 2006 c1.

⁵⁸ Sam Macroy, 'People Profile: Sir Alan Haselhurst. Speaking Up', *The House Magazine*, 12 July 2010, p. 22.

representation in the UK population at large; and to consider such other matters as might, by agreement, be referred to for consideration.⁵⁹

Although Martin was the chairman of the conference, in practice he left it up to his Vice Chairman, the Labour MP for Aberdeen South, Anne Begg. Martin did not see the Speaker's Conference to its conclusion because it had only really started to gather evidence by the time he left office in June 2009.⁶⁰

Throughout most of his time as Speaker, controversy surrounded the amount of money claimed by Michael Martin and his wife as expenses for travel, entertainment and other official duties. Question marks over Martin's expenses were first highlighted by *The Mail on Sunday* in July 2004 and they named this saga 'Gorbalsgate'.⁶¹ The article claimed that the Speaker's wife was being paid £20,000 for secretarial duties despite the fact it could not be ascertained what she actually did.⁶² After some further investigation, Simon Walters, the Political Editor of *The Mail on Sunday*, wrote an article the following week stating:

It has also been confirmed that the Speaker has claimed up to £70,000 in housing grants from the Commons meant to help MPs who need second homes to carry out their Parliamentary duties, even though he lives in a palatial grace-and-favour apartment overlooking the Thames.⁶³

Martin's predecessors had worked extremely hard to build up the image and prestige of the Speakership and this behaviour did nothing to further that cause. These articles should have made Martin more careful about what he claimed because from then on his expenses were under the microscope. The Speaker's expenses, however, were discussed again in late 2007 when *The Times* published an article pointing out that Mrs Martin had claimed more than £4,000 for taxis since May 2004 in order to shop for food

⁵⁹ HC Deb 22 July 2008 c659.

⁶⁰ See House of Commons, *Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation)*, Final Report, 11 January 2010, HC239-I.

⁶¹ Simon Walters, 'Gorbalsgate', *The Mail on Sunday*, 11 July 2004.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Simon Walters, 'Speaker quizzed over wife's £100,000', *The Mail on Sunday*, 18 July 2004.

for official functions.⁶⁴ In response to these allegations, Mark Wallace, the Campaign Director of the Taxpayers' Alliance, wrote to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, John Lyon, on 24 February 2008 inviting him to investigate reports that the Speaker had abused the allowance system given to him for his household expenditure.⁶⁵ Following a full investigation by Lyon, his report concluded that:

the use by the Speaker's wife to take taxi journeys funded from public funds in support of the normal official duties of Mr Speaker was reasonable in all the circumstances and was within the arrangements for Mr Speaker's expenditure established in 2002.⁶⁶

Despite being cleared of any wrongdoing, one result of this whole saga was the resignation of the Speaker's media adviser, Mike Granatt, who relinquished his post because he had unknowingly misinformed journalists about the circumstances of Mrs Martin's taxi journeys. Granatt was clearly uncomfortable with the entire affair and was not prepared to do a job in which he was not given all the facts. The columnist Matthew Parris has pointed out that, such episodes 'looked none too good on the front pages of newspapers'.⁶⁷ Although the taxi claims were within the rules, such large expenses claims appeared extravagant and it seemed strange that the Speaker's wife would have to shop for food when there was an entire staff to do such things for them. The fact that a member of the public had reported the Speaker to the Parliamentary Commissioner was a clear indication that the office had moved away from simply being responsible to the House of Commons. The wider world beyond Westminster had expectations of the Speaker and Michael Martin was not meeting them.

At the same time as the taxi journey controversy was going on, in early 2008, it emerged that Martin had been using the Air Miles that he had accrued from official visits to pay for members of his family to fly to London from Glasgow.⁶⁸ It was also revealed that Mary Martin had claimed £50,000 to pay for flights to support her

⁶⁴ See House of Commons Committee on Standards and Privileges, *Conduct of Mr Speaker*, Ninth Report of Session 2007-08, HC 559, 14 May 2008, p. 15.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, paragraph 4, p. 6.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, paragraph 38, p. 14.

⁶⁷ Interview with Matthew Parris, 5 October 2010.

⁶⁸ 'Timeline of Martin's Career as Speaker', *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 May 2009.

husband.⁶⁹ Again, all this was within the rules but it appeared that the Speaker and his wife were making excessive claims.

Michael Martin also faced breaches of security in the House of Commons during his time as Speaker. During 2004, purple powder was thrown from the gallery and fox hunting supporters stormed the chamber. Peter Hain, who was Leader of the House at the time, recalls in his memoirs that ‘the shock of the hunting invasion left him [Speaker Martin] almost paralysed’.⁷⁰ Hain goes on to say that he was dismayed to find out that Martin was not going to allow a discussion on security matters during Business Questions. He concludes that: ‘It reflected both on his [Martin’s] own lack of self-confidence and his determination to keep hold of security matters, not to allow them to be seen as the responsibility of anyone else’.⁷¹

In the end, Hain took it upon himself to outline a series of reforms which gave the police and the Security Service greater operational authority. Martin’s lack of action when it came to addressing serious matters would of course later be his undoing.

Michael Martin’s Speakership suffered yet another blow following his handling of the events surrounding the arrest of the then Shadow Immigration Minister and Conservative MP for Ashford, Damian Green. On 27 November 2008, Green was arrested at his home in Kent because a Home Office official, Christopher Galley, had leaked some restricted papers to the Shadow Minister, who had passed the documents to the *Daily Mail* and other newspapers.⁷² The police had decided to arrest Green for ‘aiding, abetting, counselling or procuring misconduct in public office’ by Galley and a judge granted a search warrant for the MP’s home and constituency office.⁷³ The judge did not, however, grant a search warrant for Green’s parliamentary office and it is here where Martin’s role in the affair came into question. At about 2.08pm on Thursday 27

⁶⁹ Simon Walters, ‘Speaker’s wife claims £50k for flights to ‘support’ him’, *The Mail on Sunday*, 20 January 2008.

⁷⁰ Peter Hain, *Outside In*, (London: Biteback Publishing Ltd, 2012), p. 362.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

⁷² House of Commons Committee on Issue of Privilege, *Police Searches on the Parliamentary Estate*, First Report of Session 2009-10, HC 62, 22 March 2010, p. 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

November 2008, officers from SO15, the Counter Terrorism Command of the Metropolitan Police Service, began a search of Green's offices in Portcullis House on the Parliamentary Estate.⁷⁴ The veteran columnist, William Rees-Mogg, branded this action as 'An historic attack on liberty and democracy' because it constituted 'the most serious breach of the privilege of Parliament in modern times'.⁷⁵ The Professor of Constitutional Law at King's College, London, Robert Blackburn, and the Deputy Principal Clerk of the House of Commons, Andrew Kennon, describe parliamentary privileges as follows:

The privileges claimed by the Speaker from the sovereign at the beginning of each Parliament, are freedom of speech in debate, freedom from arrest, and freedom of access to the Queen "whenever occasion shall require".⁷⁶

In 1642, Speaker William Lenthall had refused to help Charles I in his attempt to arrest five MPs thus establishing the fact that the Chair was the servant of the House and not of the Crown. Nearly 400 years later, it appeared that Speaker Martin was not living up to this illustrious history and pressure mounted for Martin to make a statement to the House. Martin waited until the State Opening of Parliament and made his statement on 3 December 2008.⁷⁷ In that statement, Martin made it clear that privilege did not make the parliamentary estate 'a haven from the law' and claimed that:

I must make it clear to the House that I was not asked the question of whether consent should be given, or whether a warrant should have been insisted on. I did not personally authorise the search.⁷⁸

Martin appeared to be shirking his responsibilities and was pushing the blame onto his staff. In his diaries, Chris Mullin records that:

⁷⁴ House of Commons Committee on Issue of Privilege, *Police Searches on the Parliamentary Estate*, First Report of Session 2009-10, HC 62, 22 March 2010, p. 4.

⁷⁵ William Rees-Mogg, 'An historic attack on liberty and democracy', *The Times*, 1 December 2008.

⁷⁶ Robert Blackburn & Andrew Kennon with Sir Michael Wheeler-Booth, *Griffin & Ryle on Parliament: Functions, Practice and Procedures*, (London, Sweet & Maxwell 2003), p. 125.

⁷⁷ HC Deb 3 December 2008 cc1-3.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

The Speaker made a statement that only dug the pit deeper. It turns out that the police had no warrant and that Speaker Martin appears to have given the go-ahead without even taking legal advice. Ominously, and ungallantly, he appeared to be dumping on the Serjeant at Arms, Jill Pay, who was looking very miserable [...] But the bottom line is that Mr Speaker Martin has let us all down. If we'd had someone like George Young, this would never have happened.⁷⁹

Martin's statement had indeed placed the blame on the Serjeant at Arms despite the fact that his predecessor, Betty Boothroyd, has made it clear that the 'buck stops' with the Speaker.⁸⁰ The entire episode was a mess and the Speaker was seen as being at the centre of it. For someone like Mullin to suggest that George Young would have made a better Speaker shows that Martin was losing the confidence of his core supporters on the Labour benches. Matthew Parris believes that Martin 'was already in trouble before the Damian Green affair and so people found in that affair further ammunition'.⁸¹ Peter Riddell believes that these events were important because the Damian Green affair 'meant that when he [Martin] wanted friends he didn't have them and that was crucial in spring 2009'.⁸²

In the end, the Crown Prosecution Service decided that it was not going to bring charges against Damian Green. The result of this affair was that the Speaker issued a new protocol on 8 December 2008 which stated that, 'In future a warrant will always be required for a search of a Member's office'.⁸³ Following on from the Speaker's instruction, the Commons set up a Committee on Issues of Privilege just after Martin resigned to investigate the matter and complete a report entitled 'Police Searches on the Parliamentary Estate'.⁸⁴ After taking evidence from all the key players, the Committee concluded that:

⁷⁹ Chris Mullin, *Decline & Fall: Diaries 2005-2010*, (London: Profile Books, 2010), diary entry for 3 December 2008, pp. 290-291.

⁸⁰ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 24 October 2005.

⁸¹ Interview with Matthew Parris, 5 October 2010.

⁸² Interview with Peter Riddell, 4 October 2010.

⁸³ House of Commons Committee on Issue of Privilege, *Police Searches on the Parliamentary Estate*, First Report of Session 2009-10, HC 62, 22 March 2010.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

While the House and its Speaker could and should no doubt have been better served by their officials, the Speaker himself should have been asking the right questions and he should have taken more responsibility for exercising the authority of his high office.⁸⁵

This was a damning indictment of Michael Martin's handling of the whole affair and served to confirm what many had already known. This case was undoubtedly the beginning of the end for Martin because his poor handling of the events lost him some support that would have been crucial in the months ahead. He had failed to act to defend the rights of a Member of Parliament and the fact that the Speakership was now such a high profile job meant that his mistake was common knowledge beyond Westminster.

Having already been wounded by the Damian Green affair, it was to be the revelations on MPs' expenses exposed by *The Daily Telegraph* in early May 2009 that eventually brought down Martin's Speakership. As Chairman of the House of Commons Commission, the body which runs the administration of the House, Martin was ultimately responsible for the Fees Office and the expenses regime. Since 2005, Martin had been working to ensure that the precise details of MPs' expense claims were not revealed to the general public with the journalist and Freedom of Information campaigner, Heather Brooke, claiming that he was 'the man who did the most to stymie my campaign to open up Parliament to the people'.⁸⁶ Indeed, in 2006, when Brooke was pursuing her investigation with another Freedom of Information request on MPs' expenses, Martin signed a certificate stating that the disclosure of the names of people working for MPs would be 'likely to prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs' and would also endanger their 'health and safety'.⁸⁷ Over the next two years further information about MPs' allowances and staffing was extracted and in May 2007 the *Sunday Times* disclosed that Derek Conway, the Conservative MP for Old Bexley and Sidcup, had used public money to employ his son as a parliamentary researcher even

⁸⁵ House of Commons Committee on Issue of Privilege, *Police Searches on the Parliamentary Estate*, First Report of Session 2009-10, HC 62, 22 March 2010, paragraph 39, p. 68.

⁸⁶ Heather Brooke, *The Silent State: Secrets, Surveillance and the Myth of British Democracy*, (London, William Heinemann 2010), p. 223.

⁸⁷ Brooke, *The Silent State*, p. 232.

though he was a full-time student at Newcastle University at the time.⁸⁸ A month later, Martin appealed against the Information Commissioner's decision to publish the details of fourteen named MPs' expenses.⁸⁹ The subsequent tribunal upheld the decision of the Information Commissioner and so Martin's attempt to shield colleagues from embarrassing revelations was defeated. However, as the journalists Robert Winnett and Gordon Rayner have pointed out:

Even the Speaker's own legal team advised him against any further appeals, telling him the game was up. But Michael Martin wasn't about to let a trio of journalistic upstarts [Robert Winnett, Holly Watt and Heather Brooke] poke their noses into what he regarded as the sacred world of MPs' finances.⁹⁰

On 25 March 2008, Martin announced that he would be taking legal action and lodging an appeal to stop the release of the full details.⁹¹ The journalist, Andrew Rawnsley, has commented that:

Behaving like the shop steward he once was, Martin was at the fore of the futile court battle to try to shield MPs from exposure of the corrupted expenses system over which he had presided.⁹²

On 7 May 2008, the appeal was heard at London's High Court with Nigel Griffin QC appearing for the Commons and arguing that the publication of receipts would be a 'substantial intrusion' into the lives of MPs.⁹³ On 16 May the High Court judges ruled that details of MPs' expenses should be published thus dealing a final blow to Martin's campaign to keep such information private.⁹⁴ Martin had been trying to protect the interests of fellow Members just as he had done when he was a trade unionist in Glasgow. He was also trying to protect himself from the embarrassment that

⁸⁸ Winnett & Rayner, *No Expenses Spared*, p. 23.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁹² Andrew Rawnsley, *The End of the Party: The Rise and Fall of New Labour*, (London, Penguin Viking 2010), p. 650.

⁹³ Winnett & Rayner, *No Expenses Spared*, p. 26.

⁹⁴ Brooke, *The Silent State*, p. 246.

revelations about MPs' expenses would cause. With the failure of the court appeal, the Speaker would now have to reap the whirlwind that he had personally whipped up.

Michael Martin's position could have been saved if the raft of expenses reforms put forward by the Members Estimate Committee, which he chaired, had been accepted by MPs. However, in July 2008, MPs voted against reforms, which would have required them to submit receipts with every claim and be subjected to spot checks, by 172 to 144.⁹⁵ One of Martin's closest allies, the Labour peer and Member of the Scottish Parliament, George Foulkes, claimed that 'reforms suggested by him [Martin] have been sabotaged by those now seeking to smear him'.⁹⁶ Perhaps the Speaker was trying to turn things around but this was too little, too late. In early 2009, MPs plotted to exempt their expenses from the Freedom of Information law which would have nullified the High Court ruling.⁹⁷ After some confusion, the Leader of the Opposition, David Cameron, made it clear that he would be urging his fellow Conservative MPs to vote against such a move thus stopping it dead in its tracks.⁹⁸ *The Daily Telegraph* managed to obtain a leaked disc containing some details of MPs' expenses and so on 8 May 2009 the newspaper began publishing these files on a daily basis.⁹⁹ Martin was now pushed to the fore because, as the figurehead of the House of Commons and the man responsible for the allowance system, he was expected to remedy this state of affairs. What he did not grasp was that, as a modern Speaker, this expectation did not just lie with fellow MPs; the wider British public also looked to him to take action. As Peter Riddell wrote, 'Mr Martin seemed an apologist for MPs rather than a champion of voters'.¹⁰⁰

On 11 May 2009, Speaker Martin publicly displayed just how rattled he had become over the expenses scandal when he rebuked the Labour MP for Vauxhall, Kate Hoey,

⁹⁵ HC Deb 3 July 2008 c1121.

⁹⁶ Lord Foulkes, 'Lord Foulkes: Speaker won't stand down for hypocritical scapegoats', *The Sunday Times*, 17 May 2009.

⁹⁷ Brooke, *The Silent State*, p. 249.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Robert Winnett, 'MPs' expenses: how Brown and his Cabinet exploit expenses system', *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 May 2009.

¹⁰⁰ Peter Riddell, 'An apologist for MPs, not a champion for voters', *The Times*, 19 May 2009.

when she raised a Point of Order suggesting that calling in the police to investigate the leaked disc was a waste of money.¹⁰¹ Martin snapped back saying:

I listen to her often when I turn on the television at midnight, and I hear her public utterances and pearls of wisdom on Sky News – it is easy to talk then.¹⁰²

Martin then went on to admonish Norman Baker, the Liberal Democrat MP for Lewes, and branded him as ‘Another individual Member who is keen to say to the press whatever the press want to hear’.¹⁰³ Such a personal attack on other Members from the Chair was totally unprecedented in the post-war period. Chris Mullin, who was present in the chamber at the time, wrote of the Speaker:

I’ve never seen him so worked up. Actually it was way over the top. Gave the impression that he is rattled, which I imagine he is.¹⁰⁴

The following day, the Labour MP for Walsall North, David Winnick, asked Martin to apologise to Hoey ending with ‘Should not the Speaker always refrain from personal comments?’.¹⁰⁵ When Martin refused to apologise, Winnick remarked, ‘That is not adequate’ to which the Speaker responded, ‘If that is not adequate, the hon. Gentleman knows what he must do’.¹⁰⁶ With that comment, Michael Martin had fired the starting pistol of the moves that were to bring about his downfall as it invited a motion of no confidence in his Speakership. His challenge to David Winnick made him look arrogant and that he thought himself to be untouchable. By the Sunday, the Leader of the Liberal Democrats, Nick Clegg, announced on the *Andrew Marr Show* that he had

arrived at the conclusion that the Speaker must go. He has proved himself over some time now to be a dogged defender of the way things are, of the status quo, when what we need very urgently is someone at the heart of Westminster who will lead a wholesale, radical process of reform.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ HC Deb 11 May 2009 c548.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., c549.

¹⁰⁴ Mullin, *Decline & Fall*, diary entry for 11 May 2009, p. 328.

¹⁰⁵ HC Deb 12 May 2009 c682.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., cc682-3.

¹⁰⁷ *Andrew Marr Show*, BBC One, first broadcast on 17 May 2009.

The support of the leadership of the main political parties was crucial to Martin's survival and so Clegg's announcement was a clear indication that his days in the Chair were numbered. The Conservative MP for Harwich, Douglas Carswell, seized on the opportunity to oust the Speaker because:

It wasn't just a sort of ad hoc response to the expense scandal. Some people talk about my campaign to remove the Speaker as though it was a consequence of the expense scandal. In fact, a year before the expense scandal broke [...] we had published a plan that set out what we wanted to do.¹⁰⁸

Indeed, in 2008, Carswell co-wrote a book with the Conservative MEP Daniel Hannan called *The Plan: Twelve months to renew Britain* in which they wanted to elect a new Speaker by secret ballot with a mandate to sort out Parliament's problems.¹⁰⁹ The expenses scandal was, however, the catalyst Carswell needed to bring about what he had proposed in his plan and so he set about putting together a motion of no confidence in Speaker Martin. Carswell explains:

I spoke to the Table Office. I did a draft. I did a lot of it on the Internet. I blogged it and got a lot of suggestions [...] drafted some text, was able to sort of raise interest in the campaign through blogisphere in a way which would have been unimaginable pre-Internet.¹¹⁰

At 3.30pm on 18 May 2008, Martin made a statement to the House in which he apologised to the country on behalf of the Commons saying, 'we have let you down very badly indeed.'¹¹¹ He added, 'We must all accept blame and, to the extent that I have contributed to the situation, I am profoundly sorry'.¹¹²

Despite calling for an emergency meeting with the Prime Minister and leaders of all the other political parties to agree a way forward, this was not good enough for many

¹⁰⁸ Telephone conversation with Douglas Carswell, 30 June 2010.

¹⁰⁹ Douglas Carswell & Daniel Hannan, *The Plan: Twelve months to renew Britain*, (London, 2008), p. 48.

¹¹⁰ Telephone conversation with Douglas Carswell, 30 June 2010.

¹¹¹ HC Deb 18 May 2009 c1205.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

Members who had expected some indication of when Speaker Martin would step down. Martin clearly wanted to cling on to office and hoped that his statement would at least appease enough MPs to help him achieve this. Gordon Prentice, the Labour MP for Pendle, immediately rose after the Speaker's statement asking whether a motion of no confidence in Martin would be debated and voted upon the following day.¹¹³ When the Speaker told Prentice that his question was not a point of order, the Labour MP defied the Chair by exclaiming, 'Oh yes it is'.¹¹⁴ The next to speak was Douglas Carswell who talked about his substantive motion, one which takes a decision, to remove the Speaker. Carswell recalls:

On several occasions during interviews before I tabled it, I allowed the interviewer [...] to refer to it as an Early Day Motion because that meant they were underestimating the significance of it and it had a rather fortuitous consequence in that, in the crucial moment in the debate in the chamber, the Speaker showed he was unaware as to the precise state of the motion and a row ensued, lots of shouting, that I think made for visibly ceding that he was out of his depth.¹¹⁵

Indeed, when Martin argued with Carswell over whether his motion was a substantive motion or an Early Day Motion, the Speaker remarked, 'Please give me credit for having some experience in the Chair'.¹¹⁶ Martin was immediately made to look inadequate when the Conservative MP for South Norfolk, Richard Bacon, called out, 'It is a substantive motion. The Deputy Leader of the House just told me that it is a substantive motion'.¹¹⁷ Despite having been an experienced chairman of committees, a Deputy Speaker and a long-serving Speaker, Martin felt compelled to consult the clerks in front of him. This public show of uncertainty prompted David Winnick to ask:

will you bear in mind that it would be very useful for the reputation of this House – I say this with reluctance, but I say it all the same – if you gave some indication of your own intention to retire? Your early retirement would help the reputation of the House.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ HC Deb 18 May 2009 c1205.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Telephone conversation with Douglas Carswell, 30 June 2010.

¹¹⁶ HC Deb 18 May 2009 c1206.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

For a Labour MP to say this was a crippling blow to Martin who, after all, had become Speaker thanks to the support of back bench Labour colleagues. Shortly afterwards, the veteran Conservative MP for South Staffordshire, Sir Patrick Cormack likened the mood of the House to that of the country at the time of the Norway debate in 1940 which brought down Neville Chamberlain's premiership.¹¹⁹ Martin's old ally, the Labour MP for Middlesbrough, Sir Stuart Bell, attempted to support the Speaker but, as Mullin recorded, his intervention 'attracted only mild hear-hearing (all from the Labour side)'.¹²⁰ Winnick's response to Bell's call for support for Martin was 'What world is he living in?'.¹²¹ Such open criticism and defiance of the Chair was unprecedented with Vince Cable commenting that:

The day when he defied the growing clamour to go and was shouted down in the House ranks as perhaps the most excruciatingly embarrassing in my memory of the place.¹²²

Martin's stumbling on procedure and his failure to maintain order during the debate clearly displayed that his time was up as Speaker. He now looked more of a liability than a man who could lead the Commons out of the expenses scandal. The result of this was that additional MPs were now prepared to sign Douglas Carswell's motion of no confidence. One of these MPs was Charles Walker, the Conservative Member for Broxbourne:

The reason I signed it was that I was in the chamber the day that everything just seemed to deteriorate and fall away [...] that day when he was heckled and booed and I couldn't bear to see someone I actually like very much being treated in such a way. It was just appalling and I signed that motion because, clearly, the end had been reached and it was just unfair for a man such as Speaker Martin, who really just wanted to do good, to be treated in such a way and it wasn't fair, in my view, to allow it to continue.¹²³

¹¹⁹ HC Deb 18 May 2009 c1207.

¹²⁰ Mullin, *Decline & Fall*, diary entry for 18 May 2009, p. 332.

¹²¹ Andrew Gimson, 'A gruesome disaster as he tried to save his own job', *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 May 2009.

¹²² Cable, *Free Radical: A Memoir*, p. 316.

¹²³ Interview with Charles Walker, 14 September 2010.

In the end, Carswell had twenty-four signatures although he maintains he could have obtained many more if necessary.¹²⁴ Martin's fate was now in the hands of the government who had the final say over whether time would be given up to debate the motion of no confidence. However, the political historians Anthony Seldon and Guy Lodge note that the Secretary of State for Culture and Labour MP for Exeter, Ben Bradshaw, was ready to publicly demand Martin's resignation and they conclude that '[Gordon] Brown was not in control of events'.¹²⁵ Rawnsley explains that shortly after Martin's mauling in the Commons, the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, paid him an unexpected call and made it clear that the government could no longer shield him from the no confidence motion tabled by backbenchers.¹²⁶ The following day, at the end of the Cabinet meeting, an official passed the Prime Minister a note stating that the Speaker would resign that afternoon.¹²⁷

Following prayers on 19 May 2009, at 2.34pm, Michael Martin made a statement to the House:

Since I came to this House 30 years ago, I have always felt that the House is at its best when it is united. In order that unity can be maintained, I have decided that I will relinquish the office of Speaker on Sunday 21 June. This will allow the House to proceed to elect a new Speaker on Monday 22 June. That is all I have to say on the matter.¹²⁸

The second longest-serving Speaker of the post-war period bowed out abruptly. The headline of *The Daily Telegraph* the next day read, 'First Speaker forced to quit in 300 years quits in 33-second speech'.¹²⁹ Although Dr Horace King had been pushed out quietly behind the scenes in 1970, Michael Martin was the first Speaker to be forced to resign publicly since Sir John Trevor was voted out of office in 1695 for accepting 1,000 guineas from the City of London to push through the Orphans' Bill.¹³⁰ Martin

¹²⁴ Telephone conversation with Douglas Carswell, 30 June 2010.

¹²⁵ Anthony Seldon & Guy Lodge, *Brown at 10*, (London: Biteback, 2010), p. 267.

¹²⁶ Rawnsley, *The End of the Party*, p. 650.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ HC Deb 19 May 2009 c1323.

¹²⁹ Andrew Porter, 'A very British revolution', *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 May 2009.

¹³⁰ Philip Laundry, *The Office of Speaker*, (London, Cassell 1964), pp. 250-1.

presented himself as a King Lear figure sacrificing himself for an ungrateful brood of MPs who he had tried so hard to protect. In an interview with his old colleague, the former Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, Roy Hattersley, Martin insisted, ‘If I had fought, I would have won’ stating the reason for his resignation as the hurtful press stories saying that the Speaker’s wife was not fit for the task because she had been a factory worker.¹³¹ It is difficult to see how he could have survived without causing a constitutional crisis in Parliament. If the government had shielded the Speaker then there would have been uproar and even if Martin had survived the motion of no confidence he would have no longer enjoyed the support of a large section of the House. Considering his wife, Mary, had come under constant criticism during his Speakership, Martin was yet again making out that he was a victim of snobbery. Matthew Parris believes:

Michael Martin was just a disappointment. It was partly because Michael Martin couldn’t be that sort of modern Speaker that he so conspicuously failed. Michael Martin wasn’t by historical standards a particularly bad or a particularly good Speaker and he would have been an entirely unremarkable Speaker in a pre-television, pre-radio age.¹³²

Martin stepped down on 21 June 2009 after nearly nine years as Speaker. The manner of his departure meant that even the customary peerage for a retiring Speaker was questioned. The former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lord Lawson of Blaby, led calls by peers for Martin to be blocked joining the upper house saying that he had ‘let parliamentary democracy down’ and did not deserve the honour.¹³³ Even the independent House of Lords Appointments Commission warned that Martin’s presence could ‘diminish’ the upper house.¹³⁴ There were also calls for Martin to break with convention and stay on as an MP because Labour had recently lost the Glasgow East

¹³¹ Roy Hattersley, ‘Michael Martin: ‘It was when they started attacking my wife that I knew I had to go’’, *The Observer*, 21 June 2009.

¹³² Interview with Matthew Parris, 5 October 2010.

¹³³ Gordon Rayner & Rosa Prince, ‘Michael Martin faces backlash over possible peerage’, *Telegraph.co.uk*, 21 May 2009.

¹³⁴ Nicholas Watt, ‘PM warned that elevation of Michael Martin could damage Lords’ *The Guardian*, 1 July 2009.

by-election and could not afford to lose the former Speaker's neighbouring seat.¹³⁵ Martin did, however, resign his Glasgow North East seat and the tradition of a retiring Speaker being elevated to the House of Lords was upheld when he was raised to the peerage as Lord Martin of Springburn and introduced on 13 October 2009. Labour comfortably won the resulting by-election beating the Scottish National Party challengers by over 8,000 votes.¹³⁶ This result demonstrated that Labour was not dead in Glasgow and was perhaps a testament to all the work that Michael Martin had done in his part of the city. Despite the manner in which he fell from office, Lord Martin has not hidden away and he is a regular attender in the Upper House.¹³⁷

Michael Martin has consistently refused to grant an interview in order to put his side of the story and defend his record as Speaker.¹³⁸ What is clear is that he had an extremely troubled Speakership which appeared doomed from the very outset. The tribal way in which he was elected to the Chair always left him open to accusations of bias towards the Labour backbenchers and old Scottish colleagues who had put him there. Despite these accusations and question marks over his expenses, Martin is widely spoken of with affection by fellow MPs and those who worked with him. Martin was undoubtedly the victim of regular negative press stories whose magnitude was unprecedented for any Speaker but that is the nature of the modern Speakership which had become such a highly public political office. He also suffered from class snobbery but the fact that he laboured his humble origins only served to inflate these attacks. Martin's attempts at the end to try to sort out the expenses crisis might possibly have worked and prevented his resignation but for the fact that he had been trying to cover up revealing the facts for the previous few years. Martin went back to his roots and behaved like a trade union shop steward trying to protect his members but in the end those members turned against him in an attempt to save their own skins. Martin might well have survived in the period before Parliament was televised but now the Speakership was accountable to the

¹³⁵ Gordon Rayner & Rosa Prince, 'Michael Martin faces backlash over possible peerage', *Telegraph.co.uk*, 21 May 2009.

¹³⁶ Angus Macleod, 'Labour poll victory in Glasgow as SNP challenge is crushed', *The Times*, 13 November 2009.

¹³⁷ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 14 September 2010.

¹³⁸ See letter from Mr Speaker Martin to Tam Dalyell, 21 October 2004 & E-mail from Lord Martin, 29 June 2010.

wider British public who could see the events unfolding live from their homes. Fortunately, the office itself was not greatly damaged by Martin's downfall although it undoubtedly became a slightly devalued currency from its heyday under the previous three incumbents. Martin's problem was that he took over from Betty Boothroyd who had personified the Speakership, set a high standard and was such a hard act to follow. He also remained in office for too long. If he had only served six or seven years like Speakers King, Lloyd or Thomas then he would have retired with his head held high rather than in disgrace and having lost control of the House. As it was, Speaker Martin will always be remembered as being the fall guy for the expenses scandal and as the first Speaker to be forced from office in over 300 years.

CONCLUSION

THE EVOLUTION OF AN ANCIENT OFFICE: HOW THE SPEAKERSHIP HAS CHANGED IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD

As Labour Members have said, the role of the Speaker has changed and continues to change. When the right hon. Member for Chesterfield [Tony Benn] and I first came to the House, the Speaker was like a High Court judge. One did not speak to him or see him socially.

Sir Peter Emery, former Conservative MP for Devon East and first elected for Reading in 1959, 2001.¹

The Speaker, having been a mainly internal figure in Westminster, is now much more a public figure for two reasons: one is sound broadcasting and the other is TV.

Journalist and author, Peter Riddell, 2010.²

The office of Speaker is defined by its values: the concept of free speech, the notion of scrutiny, the importance of the rights of backbenchers, the requirement that ministers be held to account [...] the notion of even handedness and fairness and impartiality.

Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, 2010.³

The one thing that has changed a lot, of course, is the degree to which [...] their [Speakers'] time is spent in the administration of the House.

Sir Robert Rogers, Clerk of the House of Commons, 2010.⁴

Whilst the essential elements of the office of Speaker have remained intact since 1945, the role has also witnessed a continuous reshaping thanks to the different characters who have occupied the Chair and the events and parliamentary reforms which have taken place over the period. Having looked at the changes that have been made to how a Speaker is elected, the powers and responsibilities of the office and the way in which each of the post-war Speakers have carried out those duties, this conclusion will analyse

¹ HC Deb 22 March 2001 c518.

² Interview with Peter Riddell, 4 October 2010.

³ Interview with John Bercow, 26 October 2010.

⁴ Interview with Robert Rogers, 16 December 2010.

just how far the Speakership has developed in more than sixty years. Are the changes merely minor adaptations and natural evolution or has the office seen a major transformation within the overall development of Parliament since 1945?

The way in which a Speaker is chosen by fellow MPs has undergone several changes during the post-war era. At the beginning of the period, the Clerk of the House controlled the proceedings and, if Members were given a choice, there were at most two candidates for the office. In 1972, the Clerk's role was abolished in favour of having either the outgoing Speaker or the Father of the House chairing the election.⁵ February 1976 was the only time when a retiring Speaker, in this case Selwyn Lloyd, has presided over the election of his successor and since then it has always been the Member with the longest unbroken service.⁶ The Speakership election of 2000, in which the system of divisions could not cope with the unprecedented twelve candidates, resulted in the change to the secret ballot method first employed in June 2009.⁷ Rather than having to have a separate division per candidate, the one who gains more than 50% of the vote is the winner. If this is not achieved on the first round then those who received the fewest votes or less than 5% of the vote in the ballot are automatically knocked out thus enabling a quicker process.⁸

The change in procedure is the result of the shift in power over who actually decides who becomes Speaker. Peter Riddell has argued that:

It's no longer the prize of the executive. It's the MPs' choice by election, not fixed beforehand behind the scenes. Because it's all done in public, the accountability is much broader than it was in the past.⁹

In 1951, William Shepherd Morrison was invited up to Downing Street to be offered the Speakership by the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, as if it were a ministerial

⁵ See House of Commons Select Committee on Procedure, First Report 1971-72, *Election of a Speaker*, Stationery Office, HC 111, 28 January 1972.

⁶ See HC Deb 3 February 1976, cc1140-1.

⁷ See House of Commons Select Committee on Procedure, Second Report 2000-01, *Election of a Speaker*, HC 40, p. xxiv.

⁸ See *Standing Orders of the House of Commons*, 2010 (New Parliament), 8 April 2010, pp. 4-5.

⁹ Interview with Peter Riddell, 4 October 2010.

position in the government.¹⁰ Indeed, the political scientist, Peter G. Richards, wrote in the late 1950s that when a vacancy occurs in the Speakership ‘the selection is made by the Cabinet’.¹¹ The fact that Morrison was challenged for the Speakership demonstrates that MPs were starting to resent a Speaker being imposed on them by the executive. Speaker King wrote in the early 1970s that, ‘The choosing of a Speaker is now a House of Commons matter. For centuries it was so in theory only’.¹² King was a bit premature in this assumption because he was most definitely the agreed choice of the two front benches and his successor, Selwyn Lloyd, was the government’s chosen candidate. It was not until Jack Weatherill’s election as Speaker in 1983 that what Riddell and King describe has become the case. Weatherill was most definitely the choice of the backbenchers because he was not the preferred candidate of the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. She would have rather seen one of her former Cabinet colleagues, such as Humphrey Atkins or Francis Pym, take on the role. This was not to be the case and from that moment on the backbenchers have asserted the right to choose their own Speaker rather than have a government backed candidate forced upon them. Neither Betty Boothroyd, Michael Martin nor John Bercow were the preferred front bench candidate and this most definitely went in their favour and gave them the Speakership. Having the support of the government and Opposition front bench is now no longer an advantage when it comes to electing a Speaker as it was in the first half of the post-war period. It is a clear disadvantage.

The other change related to the election of a Speaker is the way in which the House has come to prefer a professional backbencher rather than a former minister. Six out of the ten post-war Speakers have served as a Deputy Speaker before they were elected to the main job and John Bercow had experience of chairing the House in committee as a member of the Chairmen’s Panel. Out of these seven, only George Thomas had served as a minister before going on to become a Deputy Speaker and Speakers Weatherill and Boothroyd had both been whips. Nevertheless, it has become a distinct advantage, if

¹⁰ Interview with Mavis, Lady Dunrossil, 19 March 2005.

¹¹ Peter G. Richards, *Honourable Members: A Study of the British Backbencher*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), p. 71.

¹² Parliamentary Archives, HC/LB/1/131 (Part 1 of 2), *Journal as Speaker*, an unpublished first person account of his tenure by Lord Maybray-King, c. 1970, p. 262.

not a necessity, for a potential Speaker to have had experience chairing the Commons. The controversy surrounding the election of Speakers Morrison, Hylton-Foster and Lloyd based on the fact that they had all previously been ministers, demonstrates that the House is not keen on having someone who is parachuted in by the government because of convenience and patronage rather than their ability to chair the House. Backbenchers want the Speaker to be their champion and not the placeman of the executive. This change has allowed the office of Speaker to become even more independent but this new found freedom has been problematic and caused the Chair to face far more criticism as Jack Weatherill's Speakership clearly shows.

The last two Speakership elections have seen a perverse twist away from backbenchers choosing a mutually acceptable champion towards a competition to see which side could get one over on the other. Labour backbenchers elected Michael Martin in order to ensure that one of their own was in the Chair even though he did not enjoy the approval of the Conservative Opposition or indeed the backing of the Government front bench. In 2009, Labour backbenchers again used their numerical superiority to elect John Bercow who, despite being a Conservative, was not the preferred candidate of that side of the House. Bercow's transformation from a right-wing Conservative into a more liberal parliamentarian married to a Labour supporting wife meant that the *Daily Mail's* parliamentary sketch writer, Quentin Letts, went as far as to say that the 'Commons' Labour majority voted for Bercow to spite the Tories'.¹³ This was undoubtedly the case and it seems that backbenchers have seized the power to choose a Speaker but are now prepared to abuse that power in order to score party political points.

Previously, the judicial nature of the Speakership had meant that the office had gone to those from a legal background. Speakers Morrison, Hylton-Foster and Lloyd had all been lawyers and so had the vast majority of their predecessors since the 1700s.¹⁴ Any requirement for legal expertise has ceased and being a backbencher with experience in the Chair is clearly now more preferable. This shows that a Speaker's ability to give

¹³ Quentin Letts, *Bog-Standard Britain*, (London: Constable, 2009), p. 183.

¹⁴ Philip Laundy, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, (London: Quiller Press, 1984), p. 65.

complicated rulings has become less important than the ability to be a fair chairman. Sir Robert Rogers, the Clerk of the House of Commons, explains why:

The House itself is less procedurally minded. You very rarely see Members getting hold of a copy of [*Erskine*] *May* and looking things up [...] but in the past, I think, many more Members have had an instinctive understanding of how the House works and the rules and what lies behind them. That's far less the case now.¹⁵

The characteristics and background of a Speaker have clearly altered to suit the changing nature of the House of Commons and the type of Member now elected to it. The role of an MP has changed because the public expect their local representative to be a community champion working hard in the constituency rather than a skilled parliamentarian who spends all his or her time at Westminster. The office of Speaker has, therefore, evolved with that change. Rather than learning all the rules, a modern Speaker has got to be more conscious of allowing Members the opportunity to raise the concerns of their constituents on the floor of the House.

The one big change that the office has undergone is the increased workload of the Speakership. Sir Donald Limon, who was Clerk of the House between 1994 and 1998, pointed out:

I think Speakers have become increasingly busy people. I doubt if Speaker Morrison spent anything like the hours on the job, studying upstairs what he was going to do, as recent Speakers under whom I served have had to do. I don't think that older Speakers under whom I served did nearly as much real work outside the Chamber of the House as current Speakers have had to do.¹⁶

One of Limon's colleagues, Robert Rogers, confirms this by saying, 'I don't think George Thomas would recognise the job that John Bercow does in chairing the House of Commons Commission'.¹⁷ The *House of Commons (Administration) Act 1978* certainly added to the workload of the Speaker because it invested all the responsibility

¹⁵ Interview with Robert Rogers, 16 December 2010.

¹⁶ Sir Donald Limon, in 'The Role of the Speaker in the House of Commons', seminar held 25 February 2002 (Institute for Contemporary British History, 2005, <http://icbh.ac.uk/icbh/witness/speaker>), p. 39.

¹⁷ Interview with Robert Rogers, 16 December 2010.

for running the parliamentary estate in the office. The change to the Speaker's job is summed up by Lord Martin when he said that:

I had been a Deputy Speaker for some time but being a Deputy Speaker and being Speaker are light years apart because as Deputy Speaker what you did was you took your share in the Chamber whereas you soon learned when you became Speaker, and I have described the Clerk as the Chief Executive of the organisation, as Speaker you are like the Chairman of the organisation, and therefore you deal with all sorts of things. There is security [...] there is maintenance, and it is a caring organisation because there are many thousands of people employed here in the precincts of this Parliamentary Estate.¹⁸

At the beginning of the post-war era, the gap between the amount of work undertaken by the Speaker and one of his deputies would not have been so great. Most of the Speaker's time, just like a Deputy Speaker, would be spent in the Chair. Now, this role is just the tip of the iceberg with the real work going on behind the scenes in meeting rooms and offices beyond the chamber.

The other change to the workload is the ambassadorial side to the Speakership. This has been gradually growing throughout the post-war period ever since Colonel Clifton Brown became the first Speaker to travel abroad and represent the House of Commons at international functions. Horace King was described by Robin Turton, the veteran Conservative MP for Thirsk and Malton, as having 'gained the reputation of being the most travelled Speaker of the House of Commons' thanks to all the official visits abroad he undertook.¹⁹ Betty Boothroyd was, and still is, a strong advocate of the Speakership's representative role and boasts, 'I left the Speaker's job with nearly 20 invitations still outstanding [...] because I was in such demand to go abroad'.²⁰

The Westminster Speakership is a model that has been adopted by the countries of the Commonwealth within their Parliaments. The newer parliaments and assemblies of the Commonwealth look to Westminster for advice and guidance thanks to its long

¹⁸ See House of Commons Committee on Issue of Privilege, *Police Searches on the Parliamentary Estate*, First Report of Session 2009-10, HC 62, 22 March 2010, Ev 17.

¹⁹ HC Deb 29 June 1970 c3.

²⁰ Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, 24 October 2005.

established procedures and precedents. Robert Rogers has commented that ‘It is fairly frequent that I get e-mails, or other colleagues get e-mails, saying, “We’ve got this problem...” I had one from the Caribbean last week’.²¹ The office of Speaker in the United Kingdom is, therefore, influential in shaping how other parliaments create institutions to carry out the same or similar functions.

The ancient nature of the office of Speaker means that Commonwealth countries have not found it possible to re-create the totally non-partisan element that is present at Westminster. Commonwealth Speakers do not resign from their political parties in the way that the British Speaker does. Canada tried to copy this model in the late 1960s and early 1970s when Speaker Lucien Lamoureux was re-elected as an Independent rather than continuing with his Liberal Party affiliation.²² However, this move has not continued and Lamoureux’s successors have returned to being re-elected on their party tickets.

Even the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies have not managed to replicate this important gesture of impartiality. The only two Speakers who have continued beyond an election are Dafydd Elis-Thomas in Wales and William Hay in Northern Ireland and both men retained their party affiliations when standing for re-election to their respective assemblies. Being a presiding officer does not preclude people from returning to party politics in the devolved legislatures as it does at Westminster. Indeed, Lord Elis-Thomas and Alex Fergusson, the former Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament, have both returned to the benches of their party grouping after having given up the chair. The fact that these newer legislatures within the United Kingdom cannot emulate a tradition that goes on at Westminster shows what a unique position the Westminster Speakership is in. Even long-established institutions such as the Canadian House of Commons cannot imbed the complete impartiality that is so important to the British office. The historic and continually evolving office of Speaker at Westminster is very difficult, and perhaps impossible, to replicate.

²¹ Interview with Robert Rogers, 16 December 2010.

²² Laundy, *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth*, p. 107.

The growing nature of the ambassadorial role of the Speaker is linked to the increased public awareness of Parliament thanks to the introduction of radio and then television broadcasting in the 1970s and 1980s. As already seen, radio made George Thomas a household name and television made the job of Speaker much more identifiable during Jack Weatherill's time in the Chair. Television also made Betty Boothroyd, as the first Madam Speaker, into a world famous political personality. The downside of this spotlight on the Speakership, as Peter Riddell has commented, is:

A Speaker who is not very effective in the Chair, like Michael Martin, is immediately exposed because what he says and does is so much more in the public eye. I think that's the crucial difference with the past, because of radio and TV, the whole club is opened up to exposure from outside. I think that's the biggest change.²³

It is doubtful whether Sir Harry Hylton-Foster or Dr Horace King would have survived very long as Speaker if Parliament had been televised during their time in the Chair. Hylton-Foster's failure to stand up to unruly MPs and King's fondness for sherry would have all been quickly exposed if proceedings had been broadcast on television. As it was, any shortcomings in a Speaker could be easily covered up because they were not open to the instant scrutiny that their successors in the Chair would have to deal with. The additional prestige and importance bestowed on the Speakership thanks to radio and television broadcasting is a double-edged sword because that new prominence also means that anyone not up to the job might not last. Michael Martin did well to continue in the role for as long as he did but, in the end, he could not survive. The new found prominence of the Speakership can propel a lesser-known backbench MP into political stardom; it can also ruin the reputation of someone who cannot cope with the pressures of the job.

The biggest visible change to the Speakership in more recent years is the downgrading of the Speaker's uniform. Speaker Boothroyd decided not to wear the traditional full-bottomed wig when she was elected in 1992 and her successors, Michael Martin and

²³ Interview with Peter Riddell, 4 October 2010.

John Bercow have chosen not to reinstate what was the most prominent part of the regalia. Lord Weatherill disapproved of the abolition of the wig and commented that:

Although I am well aware that my very distinguished good friend Speaker Boothroyd couldn't wear a wig, I think it's a great pity the present Speaker [who was at that time Michael Martin] doesn't because George Thomas – I was George's Deputy – regularly would say in my day, 'There is going to be a very difficult debate: the old wig will protect me'. And there is no doubt, and I found this myself, that the 'old wig' of the Speaker in the Chair has an authority which the Deputies who don't wear wigs don't have.²⁴

Boothroyd disagreed with her predecessor and said, 'I felt that, if you didn't have the personality and the confidence yourself, you shouldn't be in that Chair relying on props to do the job for you'.²⁵ The discontinuation of the wig is symbolic of the change to the Speakership. When proceedings were first televised it was the Speaker's uniform that made the office stand out. Now the media focus on the personalities and so the regalia has become less important.

Not only has John Bercow decided not to re-introduce the wig, he has also chosen to wear a simple black academic gown over a normal business suit because he has said that, 'My view is that the office is not defined by the dress but by the values'.²⁶ This is reminiscent of Chris Patten's decision not to wear the full colonial uniform when he was made Governor of Hong Kong in 1992. Patten's reason for dispensing with the ceremonial dress was because he wanted to be 'more open and accessible and without some of the flummery'.²⁷ This is exactly the same rationale behind Bercow's decision not to wear the Speaker's full regalia. Baroness Boothroyd, however, believes that this decision has had a negative effect on the office and, because of it, she argues that Speaker Bercow 'doesn't perhaps have the respect that I would like him to have from people of my generation and people up and down the country who watch it'.²⁸ It could be that the Speakership has risen to such importance that it no longer needs a lavish

²⁴ Lord Weatherill, in 'The Role of the Speaker in the House of Commons', p. 32.

²⁵ Baroness Boothroyd in Ibid, p.33.

²⁶ Interview with John Bercow, 26 October 2010.

²⁷ Quoted in Jonathan Dimbleby, *The Last Governor: Chris Patten & the Handover of Hong Kong*, (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), p. 3.

²⁸ *The World This Weekend*, first broadcast on BBC Radio 4, 16 January 2011.

outfit to project authority. On the other hand, this might be a token gesture of reform following the downfall of Michael Martin and is symbolic of Parliament being less extravagant after the expenses scandal. It is most definitely a visible diminution of the office.

Despite having become such a high profile position, the Speakership has also become less formal over the years. This was summed up by the late Sir Peter Emery at the beginning of this chapter and, to this end, Quentin Letts believes that the Speaker ‘has become a less Olympian figure, less judicial in flavour, less awesome in the proper sense of the adjective’.²⁹ The Speaker is undoubtedly not such a distant figure now as he was at the beginning of the post-war period. Speakers Clifton Brown, Morrison and Hylton-Foster would not have socialised with fellow Members or conducted visits around the country to anywhere near the extent that more recent holders of the office have done. Of course, the introduction of television broadcasting has made the Speaker the focus of proceedings as he or she holds court from a throne-like chair in the centre of the chamber. Letts’s comment only really comes from the fact that Michael Martin was not of the same ilk as his predecessor and because John Bercow has chosen not to wear the traditional court dress. The fact that so many parliamentarians now aspire to become Speaker shows that it is most definitely a job that such people believe is worth having.

Another big change affecting the office is the way in which journalists have become much less deferential when reporting the Speaker. This can trace its origins to Andrew Alexander’s *Daily Mail* article of 23 April 1988 in which he badly criticises Speaker Weatherill for weakness in the Chair.³⁰ Negative press stories about Speaker Martin were commonplace and were started by Quentin Letts with his ‘Gorbals Mick’ label.³¹ Ever since, the Speaker has been fair game and subject to the same amount of criticism as any government minister. The Speaker is no longer untouchable. This is the result

²⁹ E-mail from Quentin Letts, 23 September 2010.

³⁰ See Andrew Alexander, ‘Sorry, there’s a fault in the Speaker’, *Daily Mail*, 23 April 1988.

³¹ See Quentin Letts, ‘Gorbals Mick was set up on the shy and his rivals had to knock him off’, *Daily Mail*, 24 October 2000.

of the fact that the office now has much wider ownership and is as accountable to the general public as it is to the House of Commons. The increased media scrutiny of the Speaker is a consequence of the increased media scrutiny of Parliament itself.

Although there have been many changes to the Speakership, in the main there has been continuity. Robert Rogers believes that:

I think in the chamber it has changed very little because the pattern of tensions, activity, aspirations may have changed but the constituent parts remain the same.³²

The impartiality of the Speakership is still closely guarded by parliamentarians and the way in which the Speaker presides over the debates in the Commons chamber remains unchanged. The office has grown and developed but the underlying concept of the Speaker being the neutral, fair umpire continues to be the lynchpin of the office.

The office of Speaker has faced many challenges, changes and threats during the post-war period but has managed to overcome them all so that it has remained the highest and most prestigious parliamentary position. At the very beginning of the period of this study, on 1 August 1945, Winston Churchill, said on Clifton Brown's re-election to the Chair that he was part of a 'long and distinguished line of Speakers who have maintained the reputation of the First Commoner of England'.³³ Although the Speaker had lost this rank in 1919 and was now behind the Prime Minister and Lord President of the Council, it shows what high esteem the office still held at the end of the Second World War.³⁴ Political changes and differing priorities during the post-war era have not changed this view of the office. In fact, thanks to the radio and television broadcasting of the House of Commons, the Speakership is now one of the most high profile roles in British political life. This has most definitely changed the dynamics of the role because the House of Commons can no longer shelter weaker Speakers in order to protect the institution. This was shown so clearly with Speaker Martin and, although this episode perhaps temporarily made the office a devalued currency, the fact that ten MPs put

³² Interview with Robert Rogers, 16 December 2010.

³³ HC Deb 1 August 1945 c12.

³⁴ Philip Laundy, *The Office of Speaker*, (London: Cassell, 1964), p. 8.

themselves forward to replace him demonstrates that it is still a job to which politicians aspire.³⁵

At that election on 22 June 2009, Nick Clegg, the Leader of the Liberal Democrats, urged John Bercow ‘to reinvent the role of Speaker as a catalyst for radical change’.³⁶ Whether this is the next stage of the evolution of the Speakership, and of the wider development of Parliament, is yet to become clear. What is most definitely the case is that each holder of the office can have a very personal impact on the role. The Liberal Prime Minister H. H. Asquith’s famous comment that, ‘The office of the Prime Minister is what its holder chooses and is able to make of it’ equally applies to the Speakership of the House of Commons.³⁷ The strengths and weaknesses of every occupant of the Chair have affected the office and shaped it into the job it is today. Whilst the task of chairing the debates in the chamber has changed little, the administrative burden and the media spotlight have greatly added to what is expected of a modern Speaker.

As the champion of the Commons, the Speaker is central to much wider debate of ensuring that the legislature is not by-passed by an overmighty executive. In the past thirty years, this has manifested itself when Speakers have complained about successive government’s announcing policy changes in the media rather than at the despatch box. Speakers Weatherill and Boothroyd fought hard to ensure that governments with large majorities did not forget about Parliament in favour of making announcements on television or on the radio. Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair’s Director of Communications, recorded in his published diaries that the government was conscious of causing a ‘Betty problem’ if new initiatives were announced in the media before being presented to Parliament.³⁸ This demonstrates that the powerful Blair government was reluctant to annoy the Speakership thanks to its enhanced status and public recognition. Despite the efforts of Speakers Weatherill and Boothroyd, however, they

³⁵ The 10 candidates were Margaret Beckett, Sir Alan Beith, John Bercow, Sir Patrick Cormack, Parmjit Dhanda, Sir Alan Haselhurst, Sir Michael Lord, Richard Shepherd, Ann Widdecombe and Sir George Young.

³⁶ HC Deb 22 June 2009 c638.

³⁷ Earl of Oxford and Asquith, *Fifty Years in Parliament*, vol. 2, (London: Cassell, 1926), p. 185.

³⁸ Alastair Campbell, *The Alistair Campbell Diaries Volume 2: Power and the People 1997-1999*, (London, Hutchinson 2011), diary entry for 3 December 1997, p. 222.

only really scored minor victories because powerful governments are very difficult to rein in. Even a Speaker at the height of his or her powers can find it difficult defending the rights of the legislature in a system which gives such dominance to the executive.

Linked to the struggle between the executive and legislature are the debates stimulated by the political scientists Philip Norton and Bernard Crick. Norton's question 'Does Parliament Matter?' and Crick's look at the decline of Parliament both involve the office of Speaker and its role in representing and leading the House of Commons.³⁹ Certainly the Speakership plays a part in this wider debate about parliamentary reform. The office's greater public exposure means that it is now seen as being key to the process of bringing about change. Norton argues that Parliament needs to strengthen its relationship with the citizen and clearly the Speaker's role in determining matters for urgent debate and which MPs get to ask questions is important in achieving this. Bernard Crick wrote in 1970 that:

The power of Parliament was never great, so cannot be restored; but its authority influence and prestige was [sic] once greater, and should be greater again.⁴⁰

This is still true more than forty years later and particularly in light of the damage caused by the expenses scandal. The 2009 Speakership election certainly made it clear that MPs, and the general public prompted by media pressure, expected the new Speaker to take the lead in improving the way Parliament works and to make it even more accountable to the electorate. Norton and Crick barely mention the office of Speaker in their studies and this shows how far the Speakership has travelled in more recent years. The Speaker is now very relevant in making Parliament more powerful because, thanks to the spotlight now on the office, the general public, the media and MPs expect the holder to encourage and facilitate such a stance.

³⁹ See Philip Norton, *Does Parliament Matter?*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) & Bernard Crick, *The Reform of Parliament*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964).

⁴⁰ Bernard Crick, 'Whither Parliamentary Reform?' in A. H. Hanson & Bernard Crick, *The Commons in Transition*, (London: Fontana, 1970), p. 276.

Each of the post-war Speakers has added something to the office. As already seen, Colonel Clifton Brown gave the office an overseas ambassadorial role. W. S. Morrison gave the Speakership the strength and respect that was required to weather the parliamentary storm created by the Suez crisis of 1956 and Sir Harry Hylton-Foster had the legal mind to give complicated rulings such as defining what constitutes a Hybrid Bill. Dr Horace King was the first Speaker who had to take on the massive task of being charged with some of the administration of the House such as the catering, library and accommodation in the building and so had to take on the additional meetings and the accountability that this task involved. Selwyn Lloyd enabled the introduction of a third Deputy Speaker in order to help with the chairing of the debates. He had seen that the work of the Speakership had killed off Sir Harry Hylton-Foster and had driven Horace King to drink and so he did not want to follow suit.

George Thomas changed the Speakership from an internal House of Commons job into a well-known and acclaimed public office thanks to the fact that his period in the Chair coincided with the introduction of sound broadcasting. The hundreds of cards and letters and requests for autographs in Thomas's archives at the National Library of Wales are testament to this new found stardom for the Speakership.⁴¹ His successor, Jack Weatherill, was the first Speaker to be seen chairing proceedings when the House was first televised. Although Weatherill became nowhere near as famous as his predecessor, he did make the role even more understood and recognisable thanks to television. His main accomplishment was being the first Speaker to be the genuine choice of the backbenchers and the first to take on a very public campaign to undermine the Chair and win.

Betty Boothroyd's very nature and her theatrical background raised the Speakership up another notch so that the office gave her political stardom. The first ever female Speaker was also the first holder of the office to come from the Opposition benches. The journalist and broadcaster, Matthew Parris believes that Boothroyd 'entirely understood the celebrity status of Speakers [...] I think she saw her status as a kind of

⁴¹ See The Viscount Tonypanody papers, National Library of Wales.

mascot for politics, as being at least as important as anything she might do in terms of the mechanics of government'.⁴² Boothroyd travelled the globe representing Parliament and achieved world recognition. The fact that a record twelve candidates put their names forward to succeed Boothroyd when she retired in 2000 shows that she had managed to make a job, which essentially has no political power, into one that MPs would nevertheless like to have.⁴³

Whilst Michael Martin's Speakership ended in him being forced to resign, at the beginning of his period in office he did prove that he was prepared to facilitate the scrutiny of a powerful government when he made Tony Blair come to the despatch box and answer an Urgent Question. Such moves, however, did not continue and Martin's Speakership was beset with regular criticism from the right-wing press. The other side effect was that the general public and the House of Commons expected the new Speaker to take a lead in cleaning up Parliament and although the expenses scandal brought down a Speaker it also conferred on the office additional responsibilities. This is the mandate that John Bercow has to live up to.

Even though the office as an institution has always remained respected and prestigious, the incumbent determines whether or not that status is enhanced. Clearly, the halcyon days for the Speakership were the 1980s and 1990s when George Thomas, Jack Weatherill and Betty Boothroyd were in the Chair. This was when the Speakership as an office was at the height of its prestige and authority because it gained the public recognition that had eluded it thanks to the introduction of radio and television broadcasting of Parliament. The fact that these three individuals were respected and effective parliamentarians meant that they could rise to the challenge of greater media exposure. This could not be said of all their predecessors who managed to survive in a pre-broadcasting age precisely because they were not under a constant spotlight. Only W. S. Morrison and, to a lesser extent, Selwyn Lloyd seem to have had attributes such

⁴² Interview with Matthew Parris, 5 October 2010.

⁴³ The twelve candidates were Alan Beith, Menzies Campbell, Dr David Clark, Sir Patrick Cormack, Gwyneth Dunwoody, Sir Alan Haselhurst, Michael Lord, Michael Martin, John McWilliam, Richard Shepherd, Nicholas Winterton and Sir George Young.

as presence and command of the chamber that would have allowed them to fulfil the role of the Speaker in more modern times.

The rise in status of the Speakership is proven by the fact that so many MPs now aspire to the office. Becoming Speaker is now most certainly on a par with becoming a Cabinet minister if that route is not open to them. Although the Speakership does not carry political power, the public recognition and profile that comes with the job is no less than that enjoyed by any member of the Cabinet. Moreover, the Speaker is probably more well-known than the holders of some of the more junior Cabinet posts. This is summed up by the journalist and former Conservative MP for Wycombe, Paul Goodman, when talking about John Bercow:

It was as though he [Bercow] said to himself, “Well, look, I’m not going to be Home Secretary, Chancellor, Prime Minister so let’s do something different but no less prominent. Let’s have a shot at being Speaker”.⁴⁴

The post-war era has transformed the Speakership from a revered internal parliamentary job into a very high profile, much sought after role that enjoys much greater recognition beyond the confines of Westminster. This greater recognition also brings with it greater scrutiny because it has created increased media attention. The Speakership is similar to the role of a school teacher in that, like a teacher, the Speaker now has to earn the respect of those with whom he or she works rather than just rely on the authority that comes with the office. Gone are the days when the ‘old wig’ will save the Speaker because MPs and the public at large expect him or her to be up to the job and not have to fall back on the trappings of office. He or she cannot appear to be weak or indecisive in the Chair. The Speaker is, however, no longer simply the parliamentary referee; he or she has to be a skilled administrator and diplomat who can rise to the challenge of holding a high profile public position which is now heavily scrutinised by the media. This spotlight has meant that there are even greater expectations on the Speaker when it comes to ensuring that Parliament remains a strong, democratic institution which is relevant to the British people and fully capable of scrutinising the government of the

⁴⁴ *The Politics Show*, broadcast on BBC 1, 30 January 2011.

day. The Speakership remains the greatest honour that the House can bestow on any Member although this thesis has charted how that honour now places far greater challenges and responsibilities on its holder than it did at the beginning of the post-war period.

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