
Canadian Influences on the British Speakership

Matthew Laban

The office of Speaker of the United Kingdom House of Commons can trace its origins to 1258 when Peter de Montfort presided over 'The Mad Parliament' of that year. In 1376, Peter de la Mare was elected as Parliament's first official spokesman but it was the following year, in 1377, that Sir Thomas Hungerford was the first person to be given the title of Speaker. It is during much more recent history, the period since 1945, however, that this ancient office has undergone its greatest evolution. This article will chart that post-war development and look at how examples from the Canadian Speakership have played a part in shaping its counterpart at Westminster.

Despite the fact that the Canadian Speakership has yet to achieve the same level of independence and impartiality as the much older and more established British one, in many ways it has been one step ahead of its counterpart at Westminster. One province, British Columbia, had the first woman to hold the office of Speaker anywhere in the Commonwealth. The Canadian House had a Speaker from the Opposition benches nearly seventy years before this took place in the United Kingdom and its method of electing the Chair would be copied when the previous system used at Westminster could not cope with more than two candidates for the post.

One change to affect the office of Speaker at Westminster since the Second World War is the manner by which the person is elected to the post. In 1951, following the Conservative general election victory, William Shepherd Morrison, the former war-time minister and Conservative MP for Cirencester and Tewkesbury, became Speaker. His daughter-in-law, Lady Dunrossil recalls:

He was invited obviously. He didn't know what job he was going to get when they 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.¹

During the early post-war period the British Speakership was treated just like a ministerial appointment with the person in question being summoned to Downing Street in the same way as if he were going to become a minister and join the government. The fact that Morrison faced the first contested election for the Speakership since William Gully was opposed in 1895 demonstrates that these days were numbered. Despite the fact that he beat the Labour candidate, Major James Milner, by 318 votes to 251 it did not prevent the emergence of a growing mood against former ministers becoming Speaker.

In 1959, when Speaker Morrison stepped down, the Conservatives yet again put up a former minister in the shape of the Solicitor-General and Conservative MP for the Cities of London and Westminster, Sir Harry Hylton-Foster. The Labour leader, Hugh Gaitskell, voiced his dissatisfaction with the whole process during the Speakership election debate and said:

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, 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] comes straight from a distinguished position on the Treasury Bench, and that, I think, is another difficulty.²

The Opposition and backbenchers wanted an effective champion who was not too close to the government. Nevertheless, Hylton-Foster was chosen as Speaker and Labour did not put up an alternative candidate

Matthew Laban is Headteacher at Kingfisher Hall Primary Academy in London. He is author of *Mr. Speaker: the Office and the Individuals*.

in the way that they had done eight years before. It was not until 1971, when the former Chancellor of the Exchequer and Foreign Secretary, Selwyn Lloyd's name was put forward for the Speakership that this concern came up again. This time it was a Conservative, the MP for Tiverton, Sir Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, who proposed the Labour MP for Kettering, Sir Geoffrey de Freitas (who ironically had been a junior minister in Clement Attlee's government), as an alternative to Selwyn Lloyd. However, Lloyd defeated his opponent by 294 votes to 55. Despite the opposition from the back benches, the Prime Minister could still install his preferred candidate for the Speakership at this point.

In 1972, the system for electing the Speaker was altered following a Procedure Committee report which recommended that, rather than the Clerk of the House conducting the election, it should be either the out-going Speaker or the Member with the longest unbroken service, the Father of the House.³ Canada did not adopt this system whereby the Dean of the House presides over the Speakership election until 1987. When it did, however, it went further and changed the system of voting to a secret ballot.

In 1983, the British Prime Minister's ability to control who became Speaker came to an end. It was widely known that Mrs Thatcher did not want Bernard Weatherill, the former Deputy Chief Whip and Conservative MP for Croydon North East, to become Speaker following her landslide victory at the 1983 general election. She wanted to give the Speakership as a sort of consolation prize to someone who she no longer wanted as a minister in her government rather than to Weatherill, who had been the senior Deputy Speaker in the previous parliament. An article in *The Times* stated:

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.⁴

Mrs Thatcher's henchmen backed down when they knew that Weatherill enjoyed over-whelming support and so he was elected unanimously for the post. This was a major breakthrough for Parliament because, for the first time, backbenchers had asserted their right to elect a Speaker of their own choosing rather than have someone installed by the government of the day.

Betty Boothroyd's election as Speaker in 1992 also marked a continuation of backbenchers choosing the person they wanted rather than the government

candidate. MPs rejected the Conservative government's choice, Peter Brooke, who had been Northern Ireland Secretary, in favour of the Labour MP for West Bromwich West, Betty Boothroyd which resulted in two firsts for the Speakership: the first woman to hold the office and the first time ever that a Speaker had come from the Opposition benches. Prior to 1992, the Speaker had always come from the party that was in power at the time of his election.

In both cases, the British Speakership was playing catch up with its Canadian counterpart because the Federal Parliament in Ottawa had elected Jeanne Sauvé in 1980. Canada had also seen an Opposition MP elected as Speaker as far back as 1926 when the Liberal MP, Rodolphe Lemieux, continued in the Chair despite a change in government without an election. In 1979, Liberal James Jerome remained as Speaker after the Conservatives won the election.

The British Speakership election of 2000 witnessed an even greater change to the way in which the process was conducted and was the catalyst behind the adoption of the system used in Canada. A record twelve candidates put themselves forward for the position which in itself shows how the office had become far more sought after by aspirational politicians. Lord Weatherill remarked 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!'⁵ Speakership elections became a genuine competition rather than a done deal completed behind the scenes.

The Labour MP for Glasgow Springburn and Deputy Speaker, Michael Martin, emerged as the victor in October 2000 thanks to his party's dominance of the Commons. His election broke the tradition that had been building up during the post-war period that the Speakership should be alternated between the two main parties. What happened was a reversal to the previous position whereby the Speaker came from the majority party. The entire election took nearly seven hours and this demonstrated that the existing procedure, which was only designed for one or two candidates, could not cope with the new enthusiasm and competition for the office.

The matter was referred to the Select Committee on Procedure which looked at the method used by legislatures across the world including the Canadian House of Commons. In March 2001, the committee recommended replacing the traditional use of voting by divisions in favour of the exhaustive secret ballot system used in Ottawa.⁶ The winner has to secure at least fifty per cent of the vote which means that several rounds might be necessary in which the lowest

scoring candidate and anyone who obtains less than five per cent of the votes cast are eliminated. This is the system which was used on June 22, 2009 when the Conservative MP for Buckingham, John Bercow, was elected Speaker.

The post-war period has established the fact that the Commons does not like a former high-ranking government minister becoming Speaker and this is similar to what has transpired in Canada. Although George Thomas, the Labour MP for Cardiff West, had been Secretary of State for Wales in the 1960s, he had become Deputy Speaker afterwards and then went on to become Speaker. Other than that, the House of Commons has resisted being palmed off with a failed ex-minister as its Speaker. Instead, the role has become the zenith of a career for someone who has chosen to be a professional backbencher rather than for those who seek ministerial office. Speakers Clifton Brown, King, Thomas, Weatherill, Boothroyd and Martin were all Deputy Speakers before they were Speaker and Bercow served on the Speaker's Panel of Chairmen and presided in Westminster Hall. The British Speakership is no longer a swan song for a distinguished ex-minister and this has also emerged in Canada. Nowadays, the Speakership election is more like the Conclave choosing a long-serving and respected priest rather than a great cardinal to be Pope. Of course, in Canada, there is nothing stopping a former Speaker continuing with a political career in the way that convention prevents this from happening in the United Kingdom.

The biggest impact on the Speakership in the United Kingdom has been the introduction of sound broadcasting of the House of Commons in 1978 and then television broadcasting in 1989. Again, Westminster was behind Ottawa in this because television broadcasting had been introduced in the Canadian House of Commons in 1977. George Thomas, who was Speaker between 1976 and 1983, 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 of proceedings in the Commons. Thomas wrote in his memoirs how the introduction of sound broadcasting affected the Speakership: 'as people listened in their homes, or in their cars on the way to work in the mornings, they began to realize the Speaker played a much bigger role in the running of Parliament than they had realized.'⁷

Thomas's 'Order! Order!' in his wonderful Welsh accent was recorded by the BBC and used as the opening to their programme *Today in Parliament* and so immediately became famous. Thomas became a

household name and so propelled the Speakership into a much greater importance in the eyes of the public. 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.

Thomas's successor, Bernard Weatherill, who served between 1983 and 1992, was the first Speaker to be broadcast on television while chairing the debates in the House of Commons.

The Speaker was the focal point of the televised debates so he soon became a very recognisable figure in his wig and gown.

Weatherill's successor, Betty Boothroyd, was also the first Speaker not to wear the traditional wig that had been the trademark of the Speaker's uniform. Boothroyd explained that she would have been uncomfortable wearing the full-bottomed wig and so sought the permission of the two front benches to do away with this tradition. She did, however, become a political superstar thanks to her theatrical background as a former dancer and the way in which she carried out the job. The former Conservative MP and journalist, Matthew Parris, has said that Boothroyd 'entirely understood the celebrity status of Speakers [...] I think she saw her status as a kind of mascot for politics, as being at least as important as anything she might do in terms of the mechanics of government'.⁸ Boothroyd travelled the globe representing Parliament and achieved world recognition. The first Madam Speaker at Westminster was able to build on what George Thomas and Bernard Weatherill had started and made the Speakership into one of the highest jobs in British politics. The fact that 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. The result of this increased fame was greater scrutiny from beyond Westminster which eventually brought down Boothroyd's successor, Michael Martin, following the expenses crisis of 2009.

Greater expectations have been placed on the Speakership thanks to the expenses scandal which rocked Westminster. John Bercow promised to be a new broom and he has said that he 'ought at the very least to be a facilitator of desired change'.⁹ A very noticeable change is that not only has Bercow decided not to re-introduce the wig, he has also done away with the other formal dress associated with the Speakership. He has 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'.¹⁰ Perhaps the Speakership has risen to such importance that it no longer needs a lavish 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. In Canada, the Speaker still wears the formal court dress and has not seen fit to dispense with that part of the pageantry of the office.

The biggest change to the Speakership during the post-war period is the way in which it has been transformed from an internal parliamentary office into one which now engages beyond the confines of Westminster. This began at the end of the Second World War when Colonel Clifton Brown became the first Speaker to travel abroad when he paid visits to the front and to war-torn Europe. Dr Horace King travelled widely as Speaker in the 1960s and would regularly attend international conferences to lecture on his role and the work of Parliament. George Thomas opened up Speaker's House, the grace and favour apartments within the Palace of Westminster which come with the job, and entertained dignitaries from across the world. Betty Boothroyd also liked to entertain and she was also keen to travel the globe to inform people about the functions of the House of Commons. When she stepped down in 2000, she still had twenty outstanding invitations to visit foreign parliaments because she was in such demand to go abroad.¹¹ John Bercow has taken what he terms as outreach work even further. Not only does he entertain dignitaries and attend parliamentary conferences, he also goes around the United Kingdom talking to schools, colleges, universities, community groups and voluntary organisations about the Speakership and Parliament. He also receives these groups at Westminster and supports the work of charities. The result of this greater interaction with the wider public has been much more intense scrutiny from the media and this has not always been welcome.

The other big development for the Speakership at Westminster has been the massive increase in administrative duties and responsibilities undertaken by the office. This move has also taken place in Ottawa and in the other legislatures of the Commonwealth. At the beginning of the post-war period, the Speaker's role was mainly confined to the visible work of chairing the proceedings in the House of Commons chamber. Since the mid-1960s, the Speaker has been responsible for all the accommodation within the House of Commons part of the Palace of Westminster and he or she is also responsible for security and for employing all the staff. The traditional job of presiding over the debating chamber is now a small part of the overall role because it is now

the administrative function which takes up most of the time. It is this additional burden which got Michael Martin into trouble during the expenses scandal because as Speaker he was ultimately responsible for the way in which MPs' expenses were administered.

The office of Speaker of the United Kingdom House of Commons has grown dramatically during the post-war period because of the increase in administrative work and the development of the role outside Westminster. The office is a very personal one and is shaped by the individuals who hold it. Thanks to those who held the office in the late twentieth century, coupled with the newly found fame brought about by the introduction of radio and television broadcasting, the British Speakership has become one of the most recognised and admired political offices in the world. The result of this fame has been to make competition for the role much more widespread which caused the traditional method of election to become unfit for purpose. Fortunately, the United Kingdom House of Commons was able to look at the experiences of other legislatures which follow the Westminster model when examining ways of adapting to new circumstances. Despite the fact that Commonwealth legislatures have all tried to emulate the model of the British Speakership, they have also shown that their experiences can shape the evolution of that original office. Canada has always been a prime example. This sharing of good practice will continue as all the Speakerships of the Commonwealth continue to evolve.

Notes

- 1 Interview with Mavis, Lady Dunrossil, March 19, 2005.
- 2 United Kingdom House of Commons, Official Report, October 20, 1959, c7.
- 3 United Kingdom House of Commons Select Committee on Procedure, First Report 1971-2, *Election of a Speaker*, House of Commons Paper 111.
- 4 Julian Haviland, 'Weatherill elected without dissent', *The Times*, June 16, 1983.
- 5 Letter from Lord Weatherill to Nicholas Winterton MP, December 6, 2001.
- 6 United Kingdom House of Commons Select Committee on Procedure, Second Report 2000-01, *Election of a Speaker*, House of Commons Paper 40, p. xxiv.
- 7 George Thomas, *Mr Speaker: The Memoirs of Viscount Tomypany*, Century Publishing, London, 1985, p. 188.
- 8 Interview with Matthew Parris, October 5, 2010.
- 9 Interview with John Bercow, October 26, 2010.
- 10 Interview with John Bercow, October 26, 2010.
- 11 Interview with Baroness Boothroyd, October 24, 2005.