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Original Article

From elite control to democratic competition: Procedural reform and cultural change in UK House of Commons Speakership elections

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Abstract   In 2001, the House of Commons voted to replace ancient procedures for electing its Speaker with a radical new system of election by secret ballot. This was a significant parliamentary reform that has received little scholarly attention until now. This article reveals how and why Speakership elections, in the space of a few parliaments, moved from being largely under the control of a narrow Commons elite to unpredictable contests with multiple candidates. In doing so, it adds a new dimension to two important and widely discussed phenomena in *British Politics*: the increasing independence shown by backbench MPs since the 1970s, and the rise of career MPs at Westminster. These developments, it is argued here, laid the groundwork for the reform by contributing to changes in the prevailing norms around Speakership selection. In addition, this article reinforces existing arguments about the elusive and paradoxical nature of parliamentary reform at Westminster by considering the effects of Speakership selection reform on parliamentary strengthening. Reform can weaken executive control without necessarily strengthening the House of Commons, as illustrated by recent Speakership elections run under both the old and new systems.
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Introduction

The Speaker is one of the most important figures in British parliamentary politics. Speakers are central to the mythology of Westminster, some of them credited with founding the distinctive norms and practices for which the House of Commons is widely known. However, there is a dearth of recent scholarship

on the Speakership. Consequently, the office is at risk of being seen as an ossified artefact rather than a key actor in the complex web of power relations at Westminster and an institution, which is itself always changing. By describing and analysing changes to the Speakership selection process, this article aims to update our understanding of this important office and to explore links between its evolution and the evolution of the House of Commons more generally.

Simply put, the way the Commons elects its Speaker has changed enormously in recent decades. In the space of a few parliaments, Speakership elections moved from being under the control of a narrow Commons elite to largely unpredictable contests with multiple candidates. Speakership elections are great political theatre: leading parliamentarians make solemn speeches about the weighty responsibilities of the Speaker, and two Members ritualistically 'drag' the Speaker-elect, feigning reluctance, to the chair. As interesting as the election is as a spectacle, the processes that precede it and produce candidates should not be overlooked. Speakers of the House of Commons are chosen through a system that combines formal election procedures and informal selection norms. There is no neat separation between them: the formal election procedures express and crystallize prevailing, but contested norms about who the Speaker should be and how he or she should be chosen. Thus, when the House of Commons replaced ancient procedures for electing its Speaker with a radical new system of election by secret ballot in 2001, this reform represented the culmination of years of gradual developments in and changes to the culture of the Commons and the prevailing mindset and career patterns of MPs.

The changes to the Speakership selection system that have taken place over the last 40 years are the main concern of this article. But appreciating those changes requires setting them in the historical context of the selection system that was well established in the Commons by the beginning of the twentieth century. This is the task of the next section, below. Subsequent section sets out the key developments of the reform 'story' of Speakership selection, focusing particularly on developments since 1971. Although opportunities for reforming the Speakership selection system arose before 2001, these were resisted by a parliamentary elite – specifically, frontbench MPs of the two main parties, Labour and Conservative – who wished to maintain control over the selection. Gradually, however, that control began to erode, its decline coinciding with the rise of greater backbench independence across the House. Elections became less predictable and more competitive. It is argued in the penultimate section that the rise of career MPs contributed to this. Finally, in last section, the two selection systems are analysed with respect to their implications for party tribalism and parliamentary strengthening.

Multiple methods were used to gather evidence for this article. Archive and parliamentary documents and secondary scholarly sources on the Speakership

and on parliamentary reform provided much of the background data. Interviews with the current Speaker and two former Speakers, 20 MPs, and 6 parliamentary experts also produced invaluable information on the developments highlighted here. New quantitative data, in the form of a survey of MPs by ComRes commissioned for this research, is also presented. The overarching approach that drives this analysis is historical institutionalism, and it is to a brief discussion of this approach that we now turn for the remainder of this section.

Historical institutionalism is one variant within a new 'paradigm' (Peters, 2009, p. 58) of new institutionalist approaches used in political science. In common with other variants, historical institutionalism holds that institutions should be at the centre of political analysis, and that they can be regarded as political actors in and of themselves (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Peters, 2009). As Kavanagh *et al* (2006, p. 29) put it, institutions 'are created by human activity, but they exist beyond the life of each of the individuals within it'. Historical institutionalism has been employed by many scholars interested specifically in the British parliament (cf. Norton, 2001, 2005; Judge, 2005; Kelso, 2009a). This makes sense, given the way that the great age and long pre-democratic history of Westminster is emphasized as fundamental to an accurate understanding of its nature and tendencies (Judge, 2005).

Historical and other variants of institutionalism supply concepts that help to illuminate and explain the parliamentary procedural reform and wider cultural changes examined in this article. The first and most well-known is the notion of path dependency, which holds that the 'natural path for institutions is to act in the future as they have acted in the past' (Krasner, 1984, p. 235). Path dependency describes the tendency of institutions to be self-perpetuating and static; for particular policies or systems, once chosen, to 'have a continuing and largely determinate influence over the policy far into the future' (Peters, 1999, p. 63). Analysts of public policy-making and policy regimes have made extensive use of the notion of path dependency, but it has increasingly been applied to parliamentary analyses as well (Norton, 2001, 2005; Kelso, 2009a).

A related concept, which helps to explain institutional stasis, is the idea of 'sunk costs'. As Krasner (1984, p. 235) explains, 'Once a given set of institutional structures is in place, it embodies capital stock that cannot be recovered. This stock takes primarily the form of information trust and shared expectations. Long established institutional structures facilitate the exchange of information and tacitly coordinate behaviour. There is more information, and therefore less uncertainty, about existing programmes than proposed ones'. Norton uses this idea of costs to explain why successive British governments have generally worked within the existing rules of the game embodied in parliamentary procedure, even though they usually have had the political resources to change them and thereby make their lives easier.

The costs of changing procedure have proven generally to be too steep in terms of 'time and intellectual resources, in terms of future prices and in terms of legitimacy' (Norton, 2001, p. 25). In the Speakership selection, not only the government but also other powerful actors in the parliamentary establishment had 'sunk costs' invested in a particular system, as will be shown. This contributed to the difficulties reformers faced in persuading traditionalists of the merits of a new system.

Critics of the 'new institutionalisms' have argued that the paradigm struggles to provide plausible accounts of change (cf. Gorges, 2001; Peters, 2009). This problem is thought to be particularly acute for historical institutionalism because of its emphasis on path dependency and its corollary, institutional inertia. Proponents have therefore sought to explain how institutional change can be theorized within the approach. Their attempts can perhaps be boiled down to this simple observation: 'Historical institutionalism does not equate with institutional determinism' (Kelso, 2009a, p. 12). Path dependency does not preclude a switch to a new path, a new policy or system. The concept's central point is simply that it is much harder, that it takes much greater political pressure (Peters, 1999, p. 63) or involves higher costs (Norton, 2001), to bring about change than for an institution to continue in the same path. In this analysis, it will be argued that endogenous changes, particularly increased backbench independence and the rise of career MP as the norm, eventually undermined the traditional system. A new 'system equilibrium' (Norton, 2001, p. 27) appears to have been established with the acceptance of, and usage by, the House of an unofficial 'hustings' followed by a secret ballot voting procedure, but its stability cannot be taken for granted.

The Traditional Speaker Selection System: Twentieth Century Overview

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there was an accretion of rules, norms and practices around the selection of the Speaker that collectively comprised an established, though not uncontested, institution in its own right. The most important underlying principles of the British constitution informed this institution. First, there was the principle that the governing party was entitled to get its way in the House of Commons by virtue of its democratic mandate. Study of this principle has focussed mainly on the ways in which governments have dominated the legislature in order to pass public laws, but executive dominance over the House's internal affairs and procedures has been just as extensive (Seaward and Silk, 2004, p. 150; Giddings, 2005; Kelso, 2009a, p. 18). With regard to the Speakership, it was accepted on all sides of the House that the government should take the initiative in selecting a candidate it thought the House would find acceptable. Even though nominally a 'House of

Commons matter' (Giddings, 2005, p. 266), it was not uncommon for the Prime Minister to make known his preference for the chair with the expectation that this would have a decisive influence over the outcome.

Second, the development of the two-party system and the subsequent intensification of party cohesion within the Commons (Norton, 2000, p. 4; Seaward and Silk, 2004) played their parts in the consolidation of the Speakership selection system. In practice, the two-party system limited the competition for the chair because an MP would have to be a member of one of the major parties – which in turn would have to be the party of government – to stand even the remotest chance of being elected. The entry of third party candidates into the race did not happen until the very end of the twentieth century. Although contests for the chair were infrequent by virtue of the first constitutional principle described above, when they did take place 'the voting inevitably follow[ed] party lines' (Laundy, 1964, p. 14). Officially, as a quintessential House of Commons matter, MPs should not have been whipped on these rare votes. Unofficially, it seems clear that they were, at least on some occasions (cf. HC Deb. 27 April 1921). But, as Laundy implies in the quote above, even unofficial whipping was usually unnecessary anyway since most MPs naturally incline to the party view (cf. Seaward and Silk, 2004, p. 147).

Despite the real implications of majoritarian party government for the Speakership selection system, features developed within it that emphasized other underlying principles of consultation and consensus. According to Kelso (2009a, p. 15), 'consultation as a means to legitimate executive actions' became a 'foundation stone of parliamentary government' as it developed over centuries in the United Kingdom. Similarly, Judge (1992, p. 533) argues that there is a 'consensual dimension' to parliamentary procedure which 'recognize[s] the pre-eminence of the executive within the House and its control of business. The British political system as a whole, in short, is one of majority rule with minority rights, and this was replicated in miniature in the Speakership selection system. For instance, government was expected to take soundings from its own backbenchers and opposition parties about its preferred candidate or shortlist of candidates. Election day itself presented several opportunities for government and the House to portray the selection process as a consultative, consensual one, such as the tradition which developed whereby one government and one opposition Member would propose and second the nomination of the Speaker-elect.

The sidelining of backbenchers in the selection of the Speaker was a result, though certainly not a principle, of these other conventional governing arrangements. While the rhetoric used by party leaders in speeches on election day paid homage to the notion of the Speaker being the choice of the whole House, in practice, 'the heavy hand of agreement between the front benches has played a far greater role than any notion of … choice' (Kelly, 2010, p. 10). Both government and opposition backbench MPs were often largely shut out

of the process of negotiation, which favoured instead the Commons' infamous 'usual channels' (Giddings, 2005, p. 257), or the small group of party business managers in the main parties. In a minor dust-up over the 1921 Speakership election, a spokesman for a group of government MPs who objected to their marginalization complained that, 'the government regarded their nomination of a candidate for the Chair as so completely tantamount to his election that there was no occasion even to pay homage of decent pretence to the idea of any initiative in the matter residing beyond the narrow limits of the Treasury Bench' (HC Deb. 27 April 1921). However, the Commons evolved traditions to try to disguise this reality: the custom grew up that backbenchers, never frontbenchers, would propose and second the nominations of candidates, as a 'token of the Speaker's immunity from ministerial, or even shadow-ministerial, control' (Laundy, 1964, p. 15).

The forces that informed and shaped the Speaker selection system that was in place by, and throughout much of, the twentieth century were unwritten, underlying constitutional principles and norms. However, actual written rules were part of the system too and prescribed in some detail the procedures to be followed on the day. By 'about 1700' these procedures 'had become fixed and [were] to continue unaltered until 1972' (HC 40, 2001, Paragraph 17). They were eventually recorded in Erskine May.[1] Under these rules, the Clerk of the House presided:

> The Clerk, by rising and pointing, called a Member to propose that another Member 'do take the Chair of this House as Speaker', this motion being seconded. If no alternative candidate was put before the House, the Member proposed was called to the Chair without any question being put …. If another Member was proposed, a similar motion was put in respect of him and both candidates address the House. A debate could then ensure, in which the Clerk acted as presiding officer. At the end of the debate he would put the question, that the Member first proposed do take the Chair, and a division [or vote] would ensue. When the House had reached its decision, either unanimously or following a division, the Member elected made a short speech submitting himself to the House. (HC 40, 2001, Paragraph 17)

As Blackburn and Kennon (2003, 5–018) have pointed out, this formal decision procedure, which was identical to that used for any decision facing the House, was designed to produce an answer to 'yes/no (binary) questions and not multiple-choice ones', so that even in the event 'of a contest with more than two candidates, the House can consider no more than two at a time'. The formal procedures did not present a serious problem, while the antecedent informal norms and practices limited competition for the chair, usually to one

candidate and at most two. When these norms and conventions changed, the rules became incapable of, or at least very awkward in, facilitating the process of Speaker selection, as we shall see.

This, then, was the Speaker selection system that obtained for much of the last century. Table 1 gives details of all Speakership elections from 1905, showing the governing party, the successful candidates and their party affiliation. The 'election' column summarizes how the event unfolded in the chamber. For example, if any MPs besides the proposer and seconder made a speech, this is indicated since such speeches were usually made to register support for or disapproval of the process or the Speaker-designate.

As the table shows, just 11 Speakers presided over the House of Commons between 1905 and 2000, serving an average of 8.5 years in the office. All were re-elected at least once following a general election, even if the government changed. This reflects the principle of the continuity of the Speakership, which was established gradually over centuries (Laundy, 1964, p. 68).

Q4

The Reform 'Story'

There have been several waves of parliamentary reform fervour over the course of the twentieth century, though, as Power notes, actual reforms have generally proceeded 'at a glacial pace' (2007, p. 492). Unlike the sustained and broad-based campaign to establish select committees in the Commons (cf. Kelso, 2009a), Speakership selection reform did not attract the interest of reformers outside parliament.[2] Even within the Commons, concern about the traditional system was spasmodic and limited, as Table 1 suggests. This changed, however, in 1971, and since then, Speakership selection reform has been a more regular feature of at least internal debates about parliamentary reform and modernization.

The 1971 Speakership election and its aftermath

In January 1971, John Selwyn Lloyd (Conservative) became the 152nd Speaker of the House of Commons. His election followed a Commons vote and what *The Times*' parliamentary correspondent described as a 'mini-revolution against the party establishments' (Noyes, 1971). This revolution was led in the chamber by three MPs, one from each of the main parties, who roundly criticized the election. They complained about the anti-democratic nature of the selection process, arguing that the two frontbenches had decided on the new Speaker between themselves and without consultation among back-benchers (HC Deb. 12 January 1971 cc8-21). Documentary evidence from the

Table 1: Election of Speakers, 1905–2009

Date	Party in government	Elected	Original party of elected Speaker	Election
1905	Conservative	James William Lowther	Conservative	No debate; no vote
1921	Wartime Coalition	John Henry Whitley	Liberal Coalition	Short debate in which three conservative MPs complained about lack of consultation over nominee, and worried about pattern whereby Chairman of Ways and Means would automatically be 'promoted' to Speakership. No vote
1928	Conservative	Edward Fitzroy	Conservative	No debate; no vote
1943	Wartime Coalition	Douglas Clifton-Brown	Conservative	Short debate in which three MPs supported the Speaker-designate and one MP complained about past Speakers according priority to frontbenchers. No vote
1951	Conservative	William Shepherd Morrison	Conservative	Long debate in which Prime Minister Churchill and Opposition Leader Attlee aired competing accounts of informal negotiations about who should be offered the chair and on what conditions. Labour nominee proposed. Vote to elect Morrison passed (Ayes 318; Noes 251)
1959	Conservative	Harry Hylton-Foster	Conservative	Long debate in which Prime Minister Macmillan and Opposition Leader Gaitskell described unsuccessful negotiations to select a Labour MP for the chair. Gaitskell stated that it was not 'in order' for a division to occur but he wished to register a 'strong protest' on behalf of the Opposition. No vote
1965	Labour	Horace King	Labour	Labour had a tiny majority following the general election and was initially reluctant to 'sacrifice' an MP to the Speakership. But the party also wanted to see the first Labour Speaker and this consideration ultimately prevailed. No debate; no vote

1971	Conservative	John Selwyn Lloyd	Conservative	Long debate with cross-party complaints about the lack of consultation with backbenchers. Labour candidate proposed and seconded, but he asked that his name be withdrawn; no vote held on his nomination. Vote to elect Lloyd passed (Ayes 294; Noes 55)
1976	Labour	George Thomas	Labour	No debate; no vote
1983	Conservative	Bernard Weatherill	Conservative	Short debate in which several Scottish Labour MPs aired concerns about being given enough speaking time in the chamber. No vote
1992	Conservative	Betty Boothroyd	Labour	Long debate in which six backbench MPs made various comments about the norms surrounding the Speakership and the selection process; several also explicitly mentioned their support for Boothroyd. Conservative and Labour nominees proposed. Vote to elect Boothroyd passed (Ayes 372; Noes 238)
2000	Labour	Michael Martin	Labour	Very long debate, which began with 17 MPs making speeches on the appropriateness (or not) of the election procedures, followed by the nomination, seconding and submission speeches of 12 candidates. Motions to elect 11 candidates were negatived. Final vote to elect Martin passed (Ayes 370; Noes 8)
2009	Labour	John Bercow	Conservative	First election with new exhaustive ballot procedure. Of 10 initial candidates, eight were eliminated or withdrew after first two ballots. Final ballot saw Bercow receive 322 votes to George Young's 271

time and afterwards suggests that these complaints were well founded. For instance, 1 month before the Speakership election, the government briefed journalists that Lloyd would become Speaker (Wood, 1970). The Labour shadow cabinet also appears to have thought it unnecessary to consult their backbenches before informing Government of its support for Lloyd (Benn, 1988, p. 319, cited in Kelly, 2010, p. 10). The critics also complained about the unsuitability of the Speaker-elect agreed upon by the frontbenches. They argued that it was inappropriate for former ministers, especially someone of Lloyd's stature and importance, to become Speaker. Lloyd was Chancellor from 1960 to 1962 and Foreign Secretary 'at the time of the ill-fated Suez adventure' (Laundy, 1964, p. 79). Blackburn and Kennon (2003, p. 204) note that since 1945, the House has tended to select a Member with some ministerial or whips' office experience but even given this tendency, Lloyd was 'exceptional' in the extent of his experience in high office. Although the critics mounted a sustained protest about the election, going so far as to nominate an unwilling Labour MP as an alternative to Lloyd, the government ultimately got its way.

The 1971 election was significant for the degree of hubris displayed by the frontbenches in announcing the winner in advance of the election, thus treating the House as a mere rubber-stamping body. But it was also significant that discontent about the way the election was handled was sufficiently high to lead to an organized, cross-party, public protest in the chamber designed to embarrass the party frontbenches. Leaders could not dismiss it as an effect of party tribalism nor assert that it was limited to a handful of chronic complainers. It was the first time, probably in the history of the Speakership, that backbenchers specifically pushed the contest to a vote. The only other Speakership vote in the twentieth century arose because the leaderships of the two main parties could not agree a candidate; their respective parties remained united behind them as the voting results in 1951 indicate. With hindsight, the 1971 Speakership election appears to have marked the beginning of the end of the traditional system, which was predicated upon backbench docility. We now know that this is roughly the time at which backbenchers of all parties began to display growing independence (cf. Rush, 2001; Cowley, 2002; Norton, 2005, pp. 25–28). The literature which has established this pattern focuses mainly on the voting behaviour of MPs debating government bills. But it is reasonable to believe that greater backbench independence and assertiveness would also reveal itself on 'House of Commons' matters' such as Speakership elections, and both this and subsequent ones appear to confirm that belief.

In the wake of the 1971 election, a House of Commons procedure committee was appointed to review the system for electing the Speaker. In their evidence to the committee, two of the MPs who led the protest argued that the House

should adopt a secret ballot procedure for the Speakership election. This, they argued, was the only way to reduce 'the power of the party to influence Members' choice' (HC 111, 1971–1972, p. 3) and to take the executive out of a process that properly belonged to the whole House. Conservative and Labour party leaders, on the other hand, made it clear in their written and oral evidence to the committee that they favoured the existing system in large part because it gave the leading role in the Speakership selection to the government and party managers. The Leader of the House, for example, said that it was his 'duty' to lead on consultations about the nominee, and argued that a secret ballot would diminish the Speaker's status and accentuate division within the House (1971–1972, p. 37). The Chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party told the committee, 'I do not think the House can, unaided, find its own Speaker, and I think it must recognize that it must have some help and support from the leaders of the parties' (1971–1972, p. 42). The Opposition Chief Whip sketched a prophetic – and, to him, alarming – scenario if government were to withdraw from the process: 'One could have an extraordinary situation where there might be as many as 10 people nominated for the job. In that case, the Speaker would be elected by a process of elimination. Therefore, the Government of the day must take the initiative and, given the right of consultation, put its candidate forward' (1971–1972, p. 41).

It is clear from the committee's official report and accompanying documents that its members shared the views of party leaders, not reformers. Even though the committee noted that a secret ballot procedure 'received the greatest support among the witnesses', it ultimately rejected this option. The committee took evidence from proponents that the 'chief merit' of a secret ballot would be to 'greatly reduce' the influence of the leadership and establishment of the major parties and of the Executive (1971–1972, p. xii). The committee ducked responding to this important claim and instead rejected a secret ballot on the grounds that Members should be publicly accountable for their votes and that it might lead to canvassing and lobbying (1971–1972, p. xii). Indeed, its response indicates that the committee shared the establishment view that the House could not find an appropriate Speaker without the 'help' of party leaders (1971–1972, p. xii). The committee did recommend some changes to the system, which were subsequently adopted by the House, but these were relatively minor, procedural reforms.[3] It – and the House which approved the committee's recommendations – left the fundamentals of the established system in place. Path dependency and institutional inertia made themselves strongly felt, most importantly in terms of the substantive outcomes: that is, the decision to preserve essentially the same system, despite the recent uncharacteristic 'scenes' in the chamber. But they were also evident in the report's language. For example, the committee stated that it 'did not wish the House to depart from the traditional form of proceedings further than is necessary' to

meet the criticisms (1971–1972, p. xiv) and that it was desirable for the slightly tweaked procedures to approximate 'as closely as possible … the procedure established by ancient usage' (1971–1972, p. xvi).

The Speakership election subsequent to Lloyd's was largely free of public signs of discontent. It appears to have benefitted from the new 'system equilibrium' (Norton, 2001, pp. 27–28) established following the 1971 election and inquiry, which allowed reformist MPs to air their grievances and reminded party establishments not to take their backbenchers for granted. Evidently, the House was unanimous about electing George Thomas as Speaker in 1976. In his memoirs, Thomas (1985, Chapter 17) records how the leaders or whips of all the parties represented in the Commons approached him before the election to let him know that he had their support. Newspaper reports in the run-up to the election and afterwards also indicated that there was little controversy (cf. Noyes, 1976). In addition to better consultation between frontbenchers and backbenchers in all parties, two other factors are likely to have contributed to the harmony. First, it was generally accepted that it was Labour's 'turn' to provide the Speaker. Not only was there a Labour government, but by 1976, Labour was the long-established second party in the two-party system at Westminster. Yet it had only provided one Speaker to date. The dominant view then (as today) was that the principle of Speaker impartiality is protected by ensuring that one party does not monopolize the office. Second, despite being an ex-minister (Secretary of State for Wales), Thomas was a much less divisive figure than Lloyd, and MPs made no objections about Thomas's ministerial career in the debate. Furthermore, he had experience in the chair, as Chairman of Ways and Means since 1974, which Lloyd had lacked.

The next Speakership election followed closely on the heels of the general election of 1983. It was reported that the newly re-elected Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, had offered the Speakership to two of her ministers 'as if it were yet another government slot to fill' (*The Times*, 1992). In the event, however, Bernard 'Jack' Weatherill was elected unopposed. Unlike the men reportedly preferred by Thatcher, Weatherill had no ministerial experience but had instead spent most of his parliamentary career as a Conservative whip, as well as 4 years as a Deputy Speaker. Weatherill's contemporaries were convinced that he owed his victory to Conservative backbenchers, not the party leadership. For example, the chairman of the Conservative group for Europe wrote to Weatherill after the election that, 'in so many ways to be chosen by one's own parliamentary colleagues rather than by one's leader for high office is much more satisfactory' (Goldsmith, 1983). Later analyses drew the same conclusion. For example, a procedure committee established in 2001 stated that the 'striking feature' of the election was 'the assertion of independence by the backbenches: 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' (HC 40, 2000–2001, Paragraph 29).

The relatively harmonious 1983 Speakership selection thus appears to have been a product of several factors. Opposition MPs evidently adhered to the principle that the post should alternate between the two main parties. The Prime Minister was thwarted and party leaders appear ultimately to have decided to allow their backbenchers to 'find their own' Speaker. There was no division lobby 'rebellion' to record here; instead, backbench independence was expressed behind the scenes. Speakership selection reform, officially, was off the parliamentary agenda for 20 years after the 1972 procedure committee report. Nevertheless, it is clear, particularly from events around Weatherill's election that the 'structured institutional context' (Kelso, 2009a, p. 14) around the Speaker's selection had been changing in the interim. Informal cultural change – in particular, growing independence and assertiveness by backbench MPs – was taking place, increasing the gap between the prevailing norms and expectations of MPs and the institution's procedural mechanisms.

The next reform 'moment'

The Speakership election in 1992 also immediately followed a general election, in which a majority Conservative government was returned to office. This was an unexpected victory, at least until the last moment, as opinion polls throughout the campaign showed a narrow Labour lead and experts predicted a hung parliament (Butler and Kavanagh, 1992). That the Speaker's chair was vacant and needed filling was apparently overlooked by Conservative party leaders until the last moment, according to newspaper accounts. As one long-serving Tory backbencher told a reporter, 'We are frankly fed up at the way this has been handled. Our people are running around like headless chickens, trying to find out who the strongest candidate is' (reported in Hughes, 1992). Similarly, the election's ultimate victor, Betty Boothroyd, recorded in her memoirs that her win was at least in part attributable to Tory 'disarray' (2001, p. 143). While the Labour Party succeeded in winnowing down the internal competition until there was one consensus Labour candidate,[4] the Conservatives, unusually, did not. Thus, on the day of the election, there was an unprecedented five candidates for the chair: Boothroyd from Labour's side, plus four Conservative MPs.[5] Having multiple candidates from one party was thus an important new development seen for the very first time in this election. The argument that this development was due in part to the rise of career MPs is advanced in the next section.

In accordance with the procedures adopted by the House in 1972, the Father of the House, Edward Heath, presided over the election. He did not announce

the names of the candidates or the order in which they would be called. Conservative MP Peter Brooke was proposed first, followed by Boothroyd. The House then voted on a motion to elect Boothroyd, which passed by 372 votes to 238. Because the House had approved a nominee, the names of the three other candidates were not proposed. In addition to the support of MPs from her own party, 74 Conservative MPs also voted for Boothroyd (Oakley, 1992). Not only had the House elected its first woman to the chair, Boothroyd was also the first person in modern times to be elected from an opposition party, not the party of government.

There was some disquiet about the 1992 Speakership election. In particular, questions were raised around the seeming unfairness of the system in that it did not allow the other Conservative candidates, who potentially had greater support than Boothroyd, to be considered (HC 386, 1995–1996, p. viii). In addition, there was concern about the burden it placed on the Father of the House accurately to judge the strength of support for each candidate (HC 386, 1995–1996, p. ix). However, such worries were evidently insufficient to provoke an immediate review. The House did not hold a postmortem on the election until 1996, when, facing the next general election, the procedure committee conducted an inquiry into proceedings at the start of a new parliament and included a review of the 1992 Speakership election.

The committee seemed predisposed toward the status quo system and its underpinning values and norms. For example, in response to worries that the formal procedures had effectively shut some candidates out of the race, it argued that the 'onus is plainly on the parties concerned to agree on their favoured candidate' (HC 386, 1995–1996, p. ix). In other words, the committee upheld the traditional view that parties should winnow down candidates behind-the-scenes so as to pre-empt the possibility of multiple candidates. The committee did not take evidence from MPs or officials on this occasion, but instead canvassed the Speakership election procedures of Commonwealth and European parliaments, some of which used ballot procedures. Although this evidence gave a varied picture of the different systems, the committee selectively cited evidence that supported its own negative views of ballot systems.[6] In general, the committee seemed to take a dim view of systems designed to handle multiple candidates, both for instrumental – that is, efficiency – and intrinsic reasons. Path dependency and institutional inertia were therefore again much in evidence, as in 1972, both in terms of the substantive 'policy' outcome recommended by the committee – that is, retention of the existing system in toto despite evidence of developments within the Commons and among its Members that confounded that system – and in terms of the language used in the report. It concluded: 'there is in our view no better system and many worse' (HC 386, 1995–1996, p. ix).

The end of the traditional system: Speakership election 2000 and its aftermath

In accordance with recommendations by the 1972 procedure committee (HC 111, 1971–1972, p. xiii), Boothroyd deliberately stood down as Speaker mid-session. The committee urged this so as to avoid Speakership elections occurring immediately after general elections, which may produce a change of government and numbers of new MPs lacking knowledge of the candidates and the procedures. In her autobiography, Boothroyd (2001, p. 305) states that 'seven centuries of fixing the succession' was ended by her own victory in 1992, and that she wanted to see this precedent continued. The date for the Speakership election was set for 14 weeks after the announcement of Boothroyd's retirement, allowing plenty of time for candidates to emerge. As the day drew near, it became clear that the House would face an unprecedentedly competitive election, with the names of many MPs being mooted in the media. Concerns were aired both inside and outside the House about the number of candidates and the ability of the traditional procedures to produce a fair contest. Eighty-nine MPs signed an Early Day Motion calling, *inter alia*, 'for amendments to Standing Orders to provide for democratic elections in which each honourable Member may cast a vote for his or her chosen candidate' (EDM 1034, 1999–2000). This did not happen, however, and when election day arrived in late October 2000, 12 candidates ultimately submitted themselves to the House for consideration (see Appendix A for a table of candidates in 2000 and 2009). There were six Conservative MPs; four Labour MPs and, unusually, two MPs from the House's 'third party', the Liberal Democrats. In all previous elections, where there was a contest, it had always been confined to candidates from the two dominant parties (which meant Conservative and Liberal candidates before the 1920s, after which Labour replaced the Liberals as the second party).

In the chamber, the election was again chaired by the Father of the House, Edward Heath, using the 1972 procedures. As in 1992, Heath had discretion to call candidates in any order he preferred. Although he was not required to announce the order, he did so in part, it seems, to try to quell the objections of MPs who argued that the election should be postponed in order to allow the House time to reform the system. Heath argued that he did not have a mandate to do so, and could only act according to the existing rules. Labour's strongest candidate, Michael Martin, was proposed and seconded first, followed by each of the 11 challengers in turn. The House divided on each proposed amendment – to substitute X for Martin as Speaker. It took about 7 hours for all the speeches to be made and all the candidates to submit themselves to the House. The closest contest was between Martin and Sir George Young (Conservative), which Martin won, becoming the 156th Speaker.

The election was much criticized by MPs and the media before, during and after the event. The procedure committee, which had been to some extent

sidelined on parliamentary reform debates because of the creation by the New Labour government of the modernization select committee (Seaton and Winetrobe, 1999), was revived and undertook what it termed a 'fundamental review' of procedures (HC 40, 2000–2001, Paragraph 2). Conservative MP Nicholas Winterton, who was himself a candidate in the 2000 election, chaired the committee. Its review was both more extensive and more focused than that undertaken by its predecessor in 1996. It administered a questionnaire to MPs on their views; took oral and written evidence from parliamentarians, including a sample of backbenchers, party managers, and the two living former Speakers (Weatherill and Boothroyd); gathered evidence from the Clerk of the House of Commons and from other legislatures for their Speakership election methods; and received a report from the Electoral Reform Society.

In February 2001, the committee published its report, recommending that the traditional system be replaced by an exhaustive ballot system. It drew strength for its recommendation from the fact that all the evidence it had received, including the survey of MPs and oral and written evidence, indicated that the vast majority of MPs favoured such a change.[7] The committee as a body favoured a secret ballot system, but recommended that the House take a separate decision on whether to adopt an open or secret ballot system because it was not confident it had ascertained the majority view in the House on this matter. The House of Commons debated the committee's report and recommendations in March 2001. It narrowly defeated an amendment that would have made Speakership votes open, rather than secret. It then approved without a division the more general motion to adopt the recommendations of the procedure committee. The next section draws on historical institutionalism and the wider literature on MPs and reform at Westminster to characterize and explain this reform.

Historical Institutionalism and Career MPs

At first glance, it may be tempting to portray this reform as constituting a sudden and total break with established institutional practice. Such a portrayal would be difficult to reconcile with historical institutionalism, which, although it does not rule out such change, generally insists that institutions experience incremental change. In fact, a closer look at the package of reforms that the committee recommended and the House accepted reveals that it contained radical change and important elements of continuity. In other words, considered as a whole, the Speakership selection reform represents the sort of incremental change that is compatible with historical institutionalism.

Continuity, or path dependency, is evident in the committee's valorization of many of the norms and customs surrounding the Speakership election. The list

of traditional elements reproduced, essentially unchanged, in the new system includes the following: that either the outgoing Speaker or the Father of the House should preside (HC 20, 2000–2001, Paragraph 46); that candidates should avoid 'strident campaigning' (Paragraph 53); that candidates should have the opportunity to address the House in the chamber (Paragraph 54); that the continuity of the Speakership should be protected by operating a procedure that favours the re-election of a sitting Speaker who is returned to the House after a general election and who wishes to return to the chair (Paragraph 76); and that traditional rituals surrounding the ceremony should be preserved (Paragraphs 77–85).[8]

On the other hand, the House clearly set itself on a new path by adopting a secret ballot procedure, a method entirely foreign to the customs (and according to some MPs, the ethos) of the House. Krasner and Norton's notion of 'sunk costs', outlined in the introduction, describes how the parliamentary establishment's investment in existing procedures and systems – whose levers they control to largely predictable results – tends to produce intense resistance to change. Once those levers stop working, however, the investment is lost. The costs of change to the Speakership selection system were lowered, eliminated even, by the fact that the party machines no longer possessed the power to dominate or control key elements of the system, in particular, to discourage 'undesirable' candidates from standing. As it became less and less legitimate for the two frontbenches to decide on the candidate among themselves, the influence of the whips in 'suggesting' to backbenchers how they should vote was also diminished. Simply put, by 2001 it was evident that the parliamentary establishment had little to lose in taking a chance on a ballot system because its control over the old system had evaporated.

Norton (2001) argues that the general adherence to parliamentary procedures seen at Westminster by individual MPs and parties rests on two equilibria of legitimacy: between government and opposition, and between frontbenchers and backbenchers. Bargaining between the frontbenchers 'may exclude the interests of backbench MPs on both sides. Just as opposition parties can refuse to cooperate, so too can backbenchers. An occasional recalcitrant MP may not cause too many problems, but a feeling on the part of several that the rules of the game are tipped against them, or being unfairly used or changed, can engender problems for government' (Norton, 2001, p. 28). The historical record of Speakership elections throughout the twentieth century (and earlier) shows that there have always been individual backbench MPs who objected to executive/frontbench control of the Speakership selection, but they appear to have been in the minority until roughly the 1970s or 1980s. The 2001 procedure committee's survey of backbench opinion about the traditional system merely confirmed what was already evident from their behaviour in the Speakership elections of 1983, 1992 and 2000; namely, that the attitude of 'benevolent paternalism' that

was embodied in the old selection processes had ceased to command support within the House (HC 40, 2000–2001, Paragraph 39) and that 'the House [was] no longer willing to entrust the choice of candidates to the party machines' (Paragraph 44). In other words, a persistent majority within the House had come to take the view that it was no longer legitimate for the two party frontbenches only to influence the outcome.

The last three Speakership elections have been the only multi-candidate contests in the long history of the institution. While this recent competitiveness might be a fleeting phenomenon,[9] the 2001 procedure committee took the view that it was a permanent feature. It predicted that 'multi-candidate elections are likely to become the norm' (HC 40, 2000–2001, Paragraph 44). This belief was one of its main motivations for recommending a ballot system expressly designed to handle multiple candidates. It is difficult to know precisely what has contributed to the recent competitiveness. Some possibilities can be advanced on the basis of evidence derived from interviews conducted for this research as well as the scholarly literature on the professionalization of MPs. In general, it seems likely that it is an effect of a number of factors, some connected to the post itself, and some to the characteristics of contemporary MPs.

In terms of the post itself, in modern times the Speakership has been inherently quite attractive. It comes with rights to reside in Speaker's House, a set of magnificent state rooms in the palace; a salary equivalent to that of a cabinet minister (thus, in 2001, the Speaker earned approximately £116 500; (Blackburn and Kennon, 2003, p. 204), and in 2009, £141 647; (House of Commons Information Office, 2010a)); the prospect of as much international travel at VIP status as one can handle; a high ranking in the official Order of Precedence in the United Kingdom (Laundy, 1964, p. 8; cf. House of Commons Library, 2001, p. 26); the privilege of acting as the representative of the House of Commons, which among other things entails hosting some of the most important political figures on the planet (viz. South African President Nelson Mandela in 1996 or American President Barack Obama in 2011); discretionary power over some aspects of business in the House with the potential to affect the course of government; and the potential to exercise influence in British parliamentary and public affairs in general.[10] (This is not, of course, to deny that the job also comes with intense pressures and responsibilities.) Such enticements are surely sufficient on their own to attract interest in the job, but a new development in recent decades has given the Speaker an even higher profile, particularly outside the House: the public broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings. Radio broadcasting of chamber debates began in 1978; television broadcasting in 1989 (House of Commons Information Office, 2010b). As a result, the Speaker has become a much-more widely recognized figure, and this increased public profile has been argued to have increased the appeal of the job.[11]

Some recent developments in the typical career pattern of MPs at Westminster seem likely also to have contributed to the greater competitiveness. In essence, since about the 1970s, most MPs have been 'professional' or 'career' MPs: that is, politicians who enter Westminster at a relatively young age, spend most of their professional lives there, and do the work of an MP full-time and to the exclusion of other outside occupations (cf. King, 1981; Rush, 2001; Riddell, 2003; Norton, 2005). The upshot of this development, to put it colloquially, is that many more MPs hang around at Westminster for much longer than they used to. The aspiration to ministerial office is a common one for such career MPs (cf. Searing, 1994; Rush, 2001; Wright, 2003), but many will not realize their ambition because the change in the dominant career pattern has created ranks of long-serving and/or senior backbench MPs surplus to ministerial and shadow-ministerial requirements. Nevertheless, it is to be expected that such MPs need or feel they deserve some sort of outlet for their knowledge and talents. Chairmanships of select committees have been portrayed as one such outlet for career MPs (cf. HC 224-I and II, 2001–2002). So, in interviews for this research, has the Speakership:

> You would be going for the Speakership if you didn't have a chance of getting any other high office. I think if you've been there for a long time, like Patrick Cormack, it's an obvious thing to do …. [For] Bercow, I would guess it's a mixture of he's a person who cares deeply about parliament, but I'm also sure there was a political calculation that he wasn't going to become a minister and therefore this was his next best option. (Interview C)

> If you're a frustrated backbencher of longstanding, then the Speakership is something you can aspire to. (Interview D)

In short, the rise of the career politician has increased demand among MPs for jobs of all sorts, inside and outside of government, and including the Speakership. It represents the kind of broad, institutional change that, alongside increasing backbench independence, laid the groundwork for the procedural reforms adopted in 2001.

Conclusions: The New System and Its Implications for the Commons

The Commons used its new Speakership election procedures for the first time in June 2009. This contest followed the retirement of Michael Martin – the first Speaker forced from the chair for 300 years – in the midst of the MPs' allowances and expenses crisis (Kelso, 2009b). Ten MPs declared their

candidacy for the Speakership in the weeks preceding the election. All participated in a hustings on June 15 organized by the Hansard Society and broadcast on parliamentary television. When the Commons convened on June 22 for the election, the candidates made speeches to the packed House, and then the voting began. The public gallery was also filled to capacity, and people could be seen furiously making calculations and scribbling figures as the ballots proceeded, trying to predict the outcome. There was an air of high excitement throughout the House, but also a certain leisureliness since close to 2 hours elapsed between each ballot (Stanton, 2009). Some MPs lounged around the Table in the chamber as they waited for events to unfold. Four candidates were eliminated after the first ballot. One was eliminated after the second ballot, and three more MPs voluntarily withdrew their names, leaving MPs with a final choice between two Conservative MPs, John Bercow and Sir George Young, in the third and final ballot. Bercow secured 322 votes; Young 271.

The same factors that it has been argued propelled multiple MPs to put themselves forward in the previous two Speakership elections were probably also relevant to this one. In fact, six MPs who stood in 2000 also ran in 2009 (see Appendix A). But new factors – in particular, the election's context of crisis over MPs' expenses and Martin's handling of it – are likely to have played a part too. These events arguably damaged the office of the Speaker, and made it seem both more accessible and ripe for reform.[12]

The election was secret so no one can be sure how Members voted, but it was widely seen by MPs and observers to be a 'tribal' one, particularly in the final vote between Bercow and Young (cf. Riddell, 2009). Although both men were Conservative MPs, at the time, Bercow was unpopular with his party's leadership and had been rumoured to be on the verge of defecting to Labour. Labour MPs were said to have voted for Bercow to avenge the defenestration of Michael Martin, and – to use Chris Mullin's (2010, p. 333) words – 'plant the odd booby trap' for an incoming Conservative government by saddling it with an unwanted Speaker.[13] The fact that most Conservative MPs sat on their hands, looking sour, and the Labour benches cheered while Bercow was dragged to the chair tends to support the theory of a tribal vote.

What have been the wider implications of Speakership selection procedural reform for the House of Commons? Answers to this question must be tentative and speculative because only one election has so far been run under the new system and every Speakership election is unique in terms of the personalities centrally involved (that is, candidates and party managers), party strengths in the House and the wider political context. In other words, it is too soon to tell what longer-term effects the reform might have on the Speakership itself and on dynamics in the House, but four interim observations can be made.

First, and notwithstanding the fact that the 2009 Speakership election left a bad aftertaste in some MPs' mouths, support for the new system in the House

seems to be robust. This is supported by subsequent reports from the procedure committee assessing the election (cf. HC 341, 2009–2010; HC 1573, 2010–2012) and by a survey of MPs commissioned for this research. The survey, by ComRes in June 2011, of a representative sample of 152 MPs suggests that, overall, three-quarters prefer the new system to the old. Support for the new system is weaker among Conservative MPs than MPs from other parties, and this is likely due to the specific circumstances of the 2009 election and the aforementioned partisan aspect. There appears to be no consistent pattern between MPs' length of service in the House and their support for the old or new system (see Appendix B for survey results).

Second, it may have hastened the arrival of more internal democracy in the House of Commons. While Bercow's election in 2009 by secret ballot was unprecedented, it was soon followed by a spate of secret ballot elections for other positions within the House, including the Deputy Speakers, the chairs of the main select committees and the chair and members of the new Backbench Business Committee. By July 2010, 'Members of the Commons had participated in elections for no fewer than 36 positions within the House, of which 22 were contested and decided by ballot' (HC 1573, 2010–2012, Paragraph 1). These were brought on mainly through the work of the Committee on Reform of the House of Commons (better known as the Wright Committee after its chair, Labour MP Tony Wright), which was formed to make recommendations to help deal with the fall-out of the MPs' expenses crisis. However, the new Common's Speaker announced his personal support for the principle of electing Deputy Speakers by secret ballot, and this public commitment may have bolstered the case for more internal Commons democratization.

Third, while the 2009 election was widely seen as stoking up (or at least, not damping down) party tribalism, it cannot be concluded from this that that is inevitable under the new system. Circumstances and personalities involved in future elections are the main determinants here, and these are largely unpredictable. The new system opens up the competition to the widest array of candidates by levelling the playing field. When the House reformed its procedures in 2001, it made the threshold for entry into the race low by requiring candidates to be sponsored by between 12 and 15 MPs, three of whom must be from a party other than the candidate's own. In its latest assessment, the procedure committee raised the bar only slightly, arguing that candidates should have a minimum of 15 sponsors in order to enter the race (HC 1573, 2010–2012, Paragraph 9). It is entirely conceivable that, in the future, an MP who is popular and respected across the House will be persuaded to stand and be carried into the chair on a tidal wave of cross-party support. If this does not happen, the fault lies less with the system than it does with Members themselves.

Furthermore, we should not romanticize the apparent consensus and supposed lack of tribalism in previous Speakership elections. Lamenting party votes in Speakership elections before 1964, Laundy (1964, p. 14) argues that 'it is clearly in the interests of both the Speaker and the House when the former is the unanimous choice of the latter'. This claim glosses the extent to which the old system depended upon elite consensus only, predicated upon an assumption of widespread backbench docility. It has been argued here in relation to the Speakership, but echoing much recent scholarship about general patterns of behaviour in the House, that backbench deference towards party leaderships has been in decline since the 1970s. However, this should not be taken to imply that backbenchers therefore vote as if they were social atoms, independent of party. Research on MP voting behaviour in unwhipped or 'free' votes shows that party cohesion is as high or nearly as high in these votes as in whipped ones (cf. Read *et al*, 1994; Cowley and Stuart, 1997). Simply put, British MPs are party animals and tend to show their colours in votes, including Speakership ones. The tendency for 'tribalism' to out on these occasions too is nicely, if anecdotally, illustrated by excerpts from the memoirs of two celebrated contemporary Westminster diarists. Writing about the 1992 election of Betty Boothroyd, which has to some extent been mythologized at Westminster as a non-partisan election, Conservative MP Gyles Brandreth (2000, p. 89) recalls, '[Boothroyd] spoke so much better than Peter Brooke, but when it came to the vote I voted for Brooke on the basis that I didn't know either of them and at least he's a Conservative'. In the 2000 Speakership election, Labour MP Chris Mullin, who gained a reputation for independence and integrity during his career, recounts casting his 'partisan' vote: 'Voting was mainly along tribal lines, with most of our side supporting Michael Martin from the outset and most of the Tories falling in behind George Young …. I should have voted for George, but faced with a choice between an Etonian baronet and a lad from the slums of Glasgow, my heart overruled my head' (2009, p. 134). The similarity of their (reported) thought processes when the moment of decision came is striking. According to them, they each instinctively, and somewhat against their better judgements, voted tribally.

These observations illuminate the last one; namely, that the Speakership selection system should be placed in its wider context in order to draw conclusions about parliamentary strengthening. To the extent that party tribalism is seen as antithetical to, or in conflict with, strengthening the House of Commons as a whole, both the old and new systems can claim no special virtues or powers here. Arguably, the Commons as a whole is strengthened by having a Speakership selection system that is seen by the majority of Members as having at least procedural legitimacy due to its fair and equal treatment of all candidates. The old system lost this type of legitimacy because of its 'benevolent paternalist' assumptions and its inability to facilitate a fair contest

when there were multiple candidates. 'Output legitimacy' – that is, having a Speaker with which the House is content – is a much more delicate and complicated achievement because the 'interests of front and backbenchers, government and opposition, are frequently in conflict' (Giddings, 2005, p. 258). Actions likely to increase a Speaker's popularity and standing among backbenchers are unlikely to endear him or her to frontbenchers, and vice versa. What is clear from the 2009 election is that the House has a Speaker who is prepared to make the government's life a bit uncomfortable. One widely cited indicator of this is the rate at which Bercow has been acceding to requests for Urgent Questions (or UQs). Urgent Questions can be used by MPs to ask a government minister to make a statement to the House on an important public matter at short notice. They are granted at the discretion of the Speaker. In the 12 months following his election Bercow granted 25 UQs, compared with two granted by Martin in the previous 12 months.[14] This points up the fact that the extent to which the Commons, collectively, is strengthened *vis-à-vis* the executive in and through the Speakership ultimately depends on the winner's actions throughout his or her tenure.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 *Erskine May* is shorthand for an eponymous guide to the Commons' procedures, first written in the nineteenth century by its head clerk and continually updated since then.

2 One reason may be that the status of the Speakership makes addressing its reform particularly delicate. There are procedural and customary restrictions in the Commons that prevent MPs from debating the office and its incumbents. Outside reformist voices may also be stifled. For example, the Hansard Society, a major contributor to parliamentary reform debates for decades, has the Speaker as its *ex officio* president, and it has been said that this connection prevents the organization from conducting studies about the office.

3 It recommended: that the senior Member of the House, also known as the Father of the House, should replace the Clerk and henceforth preside over Speakership elections; and that the chair should have discretion to determine the order in which to call the names of candidates. It also urged party leaders to do a better job of consulting backbenchers, but noted that this reform was entirely up to the parties and could not be enforced in standing orders.

4 At the time of the election, two Labour MPs were Deputy Speakers: Harold Walker was the senior one as Chairman of Ways and Means, and Betty Boothroyd was the junior member of the team as the third Deputy Speaker. Routledge (2000, pp. 216–217) argues that party leaders offered Walker the inducement of a peerage to step aside and let Boothroyd become the party's nominee.

5 According to Oakley (1992), they were: Peter Brooke, Giles Shaw, Terrence Higgins and Janet Fookes. Blackburn and Kennon (2003, p. 207) note that there were 'several genuine candidates in the field' in 1992 although they do not give names.

6 For example, it called particular attention to a 1979 Speakership election in the Swedish Rikesdag using a ballot system whose result was subsequently invalidated, and a Canadian Speakership election in 1985 that took a long time to run (HC 386, 1995–1996, p. ix). But it could equally have pointed to many other elections using ballot systems that came off efficiently and were undisputed.

7 One hundred and thirty MPs returned the committee's questionnaire and 86 per cent of respondents favoured a ballot system (HC 40, 2000-2001, Annex 1).

8 In fact, the committee recommended a change in one ceremonial area (that is, that the traditional wording of the ceremony, as it continues in the House of Lords, should be altered to reflect the fact that the Commons makes a 'free and unfettered choice of their own Speaker, not subject to approval by the head of state'), and remained agnostic on others, arguing, for example, that each Speaker-elect and their supporters could decide for themselves whether or not to continue the dragging ritual. The dragging ritual was performed in 2009 by Bercow and his supporters, as was the customary address to the Crown and Lords. Ceremonially, then, the new system so far resembles the old.

9 In his evidence to the committee, Sir Alan Haselhurst, the Chairman of Ways and Means from 1997 to 2010 and a candidate in the Speakership elections of 2000 and 2009, was one of a handful of MPs to argue against adopting a ballot system. He was not convinced that the contests for the chair would continue to see multiple candidates.

10 See Laundy (1964) for an extensive, if dated, description of the Speaker's many roles and responsibilities, and Blackburn and Kennon (2003) for a shorter, sharper update.

11 Interviews for this research, which support this view include Interviews B, D and E. For discussion of the Speaker's public profile and broadcasting, see also George Thomas (1985) and Boothroyd (2001).

12 Interviews for this research that support this view include Interviews A, B, C, D and E.

13 Similarly, in an interview, Peter Riddell commented, 'In 2009, John Bercow's appeal was "I'm the new, fresh candidate". That was reinforced by Labour's desire to spite the Tories after Michael Martin was forced from office. To elect a Tory who was loathed by Cameron, the Tory leadership and most Tory MPs was quite appealing for many Labour MPs, who were bruised by earlier events, but accepted that they couldn't have one of their own after Martin, but they didn't want to give it to a Tory' (Interview E).

14 Or, to compare like-with-like, that is, Martin's and Bercow's first 12 months, we have 9 and 27 UQs, respectively. I am grateful to House of Commons Clerk Anne-Marie Griffiths and her colleagues in the Commons Library for obtaining these figures.

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Interviews

This article draws implicitly on close to 30 interviews, as described in the introduction, but where I have quoted from these interviews, I have cited them in the text and reference these below:.

Interview A (24 November 2009) Mr Speaker John Bercow.

Interview B (25 January 2011) Baroness Betty Boothroyd, Speaker of the House of Commons, 1992–2000.

Interview C (4 April 2011) Greg Power, Special Advisor to Robin Cook (2001–2003) and Peter Hain (2003–2005) as Leaders of the House.

Interview D (28 April 2011) Sir Nicolas Bevan, Private Secretary to Speaker Boothroyd and Speaker Martin, 1993–2003.

Interview E (13 May 2011) Sir Peter Riddell, The Times political commentator; Chair, Hansard Society; Senior Fellow, Institute for Government.

Appendix A

Table A1: Candidates in Speakership elections of 2000 and 2009

2000 election	2009 election
Alan Beith (LD)	Margaret Beckett (Lab)
Menzies Campbell (LD)	Sir Alan Beith (LD)
David Clark (Lab)	John Bercow (Con)
Sir Patrick Cormack (Con)	Sir Patrick Cormack (Con)
Gwyneth Dunwoody (Lab)	Parmjit Dhanda (Lab)
Sir Alan Haselhurst (Con)	Sir Alan Haselhurst (Con)
Michael Lord (Con)	Sir Michael Lord (Lab)
John McWilliam (Lab)	Richard Shepherd (Con)
Michael Martin (Lab)	Anne Widdecombe (Con)
Richard Shepherd (Con)	Sir George Young (Con)
Nicholas Winterton (Con)	—
Sir George Young (Con)	—

The names of candidates who stood in both elections are shaded in grey in the first column.

Appendix B

This is an extract of the data. Please email the author for full survey results.

Thinking about the role of the Speaker of the House of Commons, to what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

'It is better for the new Speaker to "emerge" through consensus rather than be elected by secret ballot.'

Q11

Table B1:

	Party				Length of service							
	Total	*Conservative*	*Labour*	*Liberal democrats*	*Other*	*1986 or before*	*1987– 1991*	*1992– 1996*	*1997– 2000*	*2001– 2004*	*2005– 2009*	*2010 +*
Unweighted total	152	50	81	12	9	9	7	13	25	15	23	60
Weighted total	152	72	60	3	7	9	6	10	25	14	22	67
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
AGREE	29	18	11	—	—	2	2	1	6	2	1	16
	19%	25%	18%	—	—	17%	26%	10%	23%	14%	4%	24%
DISAGREE	113	48	47	12	6	8	3	6	18	12	18	48
	75%	67%	77%	90%	95%	83%	49%	66%	75%	86%	82%	72%
Do not know	4	2	1	—	*	—	—	*	1	—	—	3
	2%	3%	2%	—	5%	—	—	3%	2%	—	—	4%
Not stated	6	3	2	1	—	—	2	2	—	—	3	—
	4%	5%	3%	10%	—	—	24%	20%	—	—	14%	—