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**Challenging the Neutrality of the Speaker:  
Gender, Power, and Ceremony in the British House of Commons**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores different ways in which the concept of neutrality is applied to the Speaker of the British House of Commons.<sup>1</sup> The claim that ‘the Speaker of the House of Commons is neutral’ is most commonly interpreted as a statement about the Speaker’s political non-partisanship. To provide some background, section one traces the historical emergence of this norm of Speaker neutrality and the various consequences visited upon Speakers who have been deemed to violate it. Section two considers the claim that the ceremonial duties of the Speaker are essentially politically neutral, in the sense of inconsequential to political power. This (usually unspoken) assumption appears to be widespread amongst political scientists and parliamentary experts. However, the enduring popularity of some ceremonies and rituals, and the intensity with which Commons and Peers debate their alteration or abolition, is indicative of their power. Section three considers the claim that political offices in formally egalitarian, liberal democracies are gender neutral, in the sense of being open equally to women and men. Feminists have unmasked these pretensions to gender neutrality and uncovered the unmistakably masculine norms and forms constituting our central political roles and institutions. However, feminists have not analysed the office of the Speaker specifically, so I extend their frameworks of analysis to the Speaker with some unexpected and contradictory results concerning the putative masculinity of the office. While the argument of the paper is not cumulative – these different debates about neutrality proceed independently of one another – a common theme that runs throughout is a broader scepticism about claims of neutrality.

## 1. The Origins and Evolution of the Speakership

The Speaker is the presiding officer of the House of Commons. Historians disagree about who properly qualifies as the first Speaker. The first member to be described as Speaker on the rolls of the House of Commons is Sir Thomas Hungerford in 1377, but there were presiding officers of some sort before that point, and Sir Peter de la Mare is recorded performing the functions of the Speaker in the parliament of 1376.<sup>2</sup> Equivalent presiding officers before this time were called ‘parlour’ or ‘prolocutor,’ and have been traced as far back as 1258 when Peter de Montfort is understood to have presided over a

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<sup>2</sup> See ‘Speakers of the House of Commons (1376-2004),’ Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/view/theme/92975>, accessed 28 April 2008].

parliament held in Oxford. At any rate, the role of Speaker emerged several centuries before the position of prime minister evolved in the early eighteenth century.

John Field (2002) recognises Sir Peter de la Mare as the first Speaker, and he argues that the Commons' choice of Speaker was felicitous: "When the Lords tried to exclude some of the Commons, Sir Peter refused to proceed until all were admitted. Thus the first official Speaker proved his quality of courage..." (2002: 58). In addition to protecting the rights and interests of the Commons, medieval Speakers were valued for articulacy. Field recounts a time when "the Commons withdrew to the Chapter House, 'where they could take their counsel privately without being disturbed or bothered by other folk.' Here they sat in a circle and Sir Peter de la Mare, Steward to the Earl of March, summarised the speeches so well and advised them so wisely that they asked him to speak on their behalf in the 'Great Parliament' with the Lords" (2002: 57-8).

As the example of Sir Peter de la Mare illustrates, most medieval Speakers were employees or clients of noble households. This contributed to the problem of divided allegiances which faced all early Speakers. From the point of view of the Sovereign, a 'good' Speaker was basically a tool of the King: he should spy on the Commons, and whenever possible, bend them to the will of the Sovereign. But from the point of view of the Commons, a 'good' Speaker should prioritise their rights and interests. This tension sometimes produced dramatic scenes in parliament such as the confrontation between King Charles I and Speaker William Lenthall, an episode frequently eulogised by historians. In 1642, King Charles I invaded the Commons to try to arrest five Members he accused of treason. According to Field, "The king entered the Chamber, leaving the door open so that members could see the troops 'making much of their pistols'. He asked Speaker William Lenthall if the five men were present. Lenthall, on his knees, replied, 'May it please Your Majesty, I have neither eyes to see, nor tongue to speak in this place, but as the House is pleased to direct me, whose servant I am here; and I humbly beg Your Majesty's pardon that I cannot give any other answer than this to what Your Majesty is pleased to demand of me.'" (Field 2002: 107-8). This was the first really clear declaration by a Speaker of "his allegiance to the liberty of Parliament rather than the will of the monarch" (Field 2002: 107-8). Speaker Lenthall survived this challenge to the

authority of the King and served as Speaker for fourteen more years over three different parliaments.

But not all Speakers were so fortunate. Between 1399 and 1535, seven Speakers were beheaded by the Crown. While sovereigns dealt out the harshest forms of punishments, Members of Parliament found their own ways to punish Speakers they regarded as failing in their duties to the Commons. Andrew Thrush (2008) relates how the early seventeenth century Speaker, Edward Phelips, helped King James I manage the Commons, and took credit for single-handedly thwarting the will of the Commons on many occasions. The Commons began to hold Speaker Phelips in open contempt and a Member by the name of Sir Edward Herbert found an unmistakeable way to express this: Not only did he fail to “doff his hat on passing the Speaker in the street but he also twice ‘put his finger in his mouth’ and made ‘a pop at him’” (Thrush 2008: 4).

Until roughly the end of the seventeenth century, the Speakership was still largely the gift of the Crown, and the election of their Speaker by the Commons was only for show. By the end of the seventeenth century, however, the Commons began to assert its right genuinely to choose its own Speaker. Arthur Onslow is regarded as one of the greatest Speakers ever, and is credited with putting in place many of the features of the modern Speakership (Laundy 1984, 1964). He raised it above the political corruption and intrigue that characterised politics during his tenureship. This is also when political parties began to emerge. There was a short period at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century when Speakers were expected to be openly partisan. Onslow is credited with starting to bring this trend to a close, and initiating what Paul Seaward calls the “non-partisan model” of the Speakership (Seaward 2008). But these changes did not happen overnight. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, Speakers were able to remain members of their political party and voice partisan opinions when they were *not* in the chair. James Abercromby, a Whig, was the last Speaker to maintain a close political connection with his party. Charles Shaw-Lefevre was the first Speaker to “detach himself totally from political activity” (Laundy 1984: 50).

While it is not possible to do justice to the extent and complexity of the modern Speaker's role here, a brief overview is in order.<sup>3</sup> As is well known, one of the most important duties of the Speaker is administering the House of Commons. The Speaker does this, for example, by maintaining order and chairing debates in the Chamber (which involves calling Members to speak, and is a fraught process), and as the Head of the House of Commons Commission, which is responsible for the general running and maintenance of the House of Commons. The Speaker carries out constituency duties like any other Member of the Commons. The Speaker also discharges official duties of State such as greeting distinguished visitors, and receiving expressions of condolence (for example, on the occasion of the Queen Mother's death and the London bombings in July 2007) from heads of state around the world. Of particular relevance to this paper, the Speaker also performs colourful ceremonial duties. Every day that the Commons sits, the Speaker makes a formal procession from his official residence in the Palace to the Chamber to open the sitting (see Thorne (1980) for a definitive if somewhat outdated description). The election of a new Speaker is also a formal, ceremonial occasion, which is only completed when the Speaker receives Royal Approbation from the Queen in the House of Lords.

Being politically impartial, and ensuring that Members with unpopular or minority viewpoints get a chance to articulate their positions are the main preoccupations of the government, opposition and media today. But this does not exhaust the subject of the Speaker's neutrality, as I explain in the remaining two sections of my paper.

## **2. Speaker, Ceremony and Power**

The Speaker of the British House of Commons is an ancient office and includes ceremonial duties prominently amongst its list of official responsibilities. This section considers the treatment of the Speaker and his roles and responsibilities by Robert Rogers and Rhodri Walters (2006). Their book, *How Parliament Works* (6<sup>th</sup> edition) is highly regarded, not only by academics but also by parliamentarians and journalists. My

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<sup>3</sup> See Rogers and Walters (2006: 44-54), Griffith and Ryle (1997: 141-49), House of Commons Information Office (hereafter HCIO) Factsheet M2 (2003a) on the Speaker, and James (2001) for more thorough discussions.

analysis sheds light on prevailing assumptions amongst parliamentarians and political scientists about ceremony and ritual – assumptions which I argue should be rejected.

Rogers and Walters devote twelve contiguous pages to describing the office of the Speaker and his powers, functions, and responsibilities. Much of this is given over to describing the roles of the Speaker, including, prominently, his role as the presiding officer of the House of Commons, maintaining order and ‘refereeing’ debates, and his role as the Commons’ representative and spokesperson vis-à-vis the executive, the monarchy, the public, and foreign and international bodies. One page is devoted to explaining the principle of the neutrality and independence of the Speaker and what that means in practice – for example, his resignation from his political party and the permanent severing of ties with former party colleagues and friends. One-and-a-half pages are devoted to the process of electing the Speaker, and mainly discuss the technical, procedural aspects of the election (including the old and new procedures) as well as statistics about the career paths and party membership of Speakers prior to their election. No mention is made of the ceremonial or ritualistic aspects of the Speaker’s election, such as the tradition of ‘dragging’ the new Speaker to the Chair as a show of his reluctance to assume a position with such serious responsibilities and occupational hazards such as execution. Neither is this ceremony mentioned in a separate section describing the series of events that occur when a new parliament is opened (2006: 137). Overall, only about fourteen lines out of twelve pages of text are devoted to the ceremonial duties and traditional aspects of the Speaker. These fourteen lines are divided into (1) a general allusion to the “ancient functions” of the Speaker, together with the specific example of the speech he makes after election by the Commons; and (2) a brief description of his dress and a slightly inaccurate account of the Speaker’s daily procession to the Chamber.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Here is the relevant passage: “He wears formal dress, a court coat and barrister’s bands, and when in the Chair a gown – but as Speaker Boothroyd abandoned the full-bottomed wig and Speaker Martin has followed suit, that particular tradition has probably ended for good. When the Speaker goes to and from the Chamber he is preceded by a trainbearer. Warned by cries of ‘Speaker!’ from the doorkeepers, even the most senior MPs stop what they are doing and bow as he goes by” (2006: 46). The account is inaccurate in that the trainbearer *follows* (not precedes) the Speaker (they get it right elsewhere in the book (149)), and, to the best of my knowledge, it is the *police* – perhaps in addition to the doorkeepers – who shout ‘Speaker!’ as he processes through the House.

Rogers and Walters devote a very small proportion of their discussion of the Speaker to his ceremonial and traditional roles. In this respect, they conform to what Emma Crewe and Marion Müller (2006) argue is a wider trend within political science. They argue that there is almost no research on political ceremony and ritual within the discipline of political science, although they qualify this characterisation slightly with respect to British political science. They suggest that the UK's unwritten constitution has inclined scholars to take "non-written rules seriously" since customary behaviour is a "source of legally binding rules" in the UK. Notwithstanding this exception, Crewe and Müller conclude that there is "widespread disinterest" in political rituals amongst political scientists (2006: 9).

Rogers and Walters *do* make one other explicit reference to ceremony involving the Speaker, and in doing so, they take the opportunity to put question marks around its very existence. Describing the sequence of events that occurs when a new parliament opens, Rogers and Walters write, "The Commons go to the House of Lords, where they are directed to elect a Speaker. Having gone back to their own House and done so, the Commons return to the Lords the next day, where the Queen's approbation of the Speaker-Elect is signified" (2006: 137). Then, in parentheses, they add, "These ancient usages reflect a mediaeval relationship with the Sovereign; but should it ever happen that the Commons were unwilling to go to the Lords on either occasion, it would be difficult to imagine that their choice of a Speaker could be challenged as being somehow illegal or ineffective" (137).

This is an extraordinary speculation and requires some unpicking. One thing to notice is that their hypothetical scenario attributes to the Commons an unwillingness to participate in the ceremonial surrounding the Speaker's election. But there is little evidence to suggest that the Commons as a whole is unwilling to participate in them.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the historical record shows that ceremonies such as the State Opening of Parliament have been popular with MPs. Indeed, for many years, according to one historian, Black

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<sup>5</sup> *Individual* republican MPs have found other ways to express their objection to the monarchy. See, for example, the House of Commons Library Research Paper 00/17 (Walker and Wood 2000) which discusses the Parliamentary Oath and various objections Members have raised. [Available at <http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/rp2000/rp00-017.pdf>, accessed 30 April 2008.]

Rod's knock on the door of the Commons' Chamber was followed by a most unseemly stampede of MPs:

Because, during the nineteenth century, there was not sufficient standing room for all the MPs who sought to attend, the procession of the Speaker and his followers into the House of Lords resembled at its best that of a schoolmaster with an unmannerly group of boys at his heels. An observer in 1837 wrote of first hearing a sound resembling that of sixty horses in the corridor; then appeared a 'torrent of members of the Lower House, just as if the place which they had quitted had been on fire, and they had been escaping for their lives'. The struggle for a place to view the proceedings resembled, indeed, a boxing match at Donnybrook Fair. On that particular occasion, one MP dislocated a shoulder. A few years later the Speaker's robe was torn and his wig knocked awry. On yet another occasion Prime Minister Disraeli was almost knocked to the floor (Arnstein 1990: 184).<sup>6 7</sup>

Admittedly, parliamentary ceremony may no longer inspire such excitement as to send MPs to Accident and Emergency. But, by many accounts, these excursions to the House of Lords are still popular amongst Members. One small piece of evidence: in November 2007, Greg Pope MP tabled an amendment to an Early Day Motion which questioned the need for an annual State Opening of Parliament, due in part to the traffic disruption it causes.<sup>8</sup> His amendment has so far garnered only one other signatory besides himself. So we can assume that his is not a widely shared view. More generally, we should acknowledge that the new intake of MPs in 2005, like longer-serving MPs, hold a variety of views about parliamentary tradition and procedure (Rosenblatt 2006).<sup>9</sup> Although *Rogers and Walters* evidently could do without the traditional rituals, they appear to underestimate how popular they are with the Commons.

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<sup>6</sup> House of Lords and Lower House are not capitalised in the original.

<sup>7</sup> Historically, the swearing in of new Members has also caused scenes of bedlam. See this humorous account of oath-taking by new MPs to the 1895 parliament, published in the *New York Times*, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9803EEDD1E30E333A2575AC2A96E9C94649ED7CF>, accessed 8 May 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Early Day Motion 170A2 'Queen's Speech Traffic Disruption'. [<http://edmi.parliament.uk/EDMi/EDMDetails.aspx?EDMID=34340&SESSION=891>, accessed 5 July 2008]

<sup>9</sup> Concluding a chapter on new MPs' views on parliament, Gemma Rosenblatt writes, "Some dismissed many of the traditions as an unnecessary inconvenience that inhibits the work of the legislature. Others acknowledged the so-called archaic nature of many practices, but believed it gave colour and life to the Commons and that the traditions had a proven track record in terms of effectiveness" (2006: 65).



More dramatic than the question of the Commons' collective attitude to traditional ceremonies is Rogers and Walters's prediction that the Commons could abolish the ceremonial aspects of the Speaker's election without endangering the status or authority of the Speaker or the Commons. I take it that this is the upshot of their opinion that a Speaker elected *sans* the traditional ceremony could not be challenged as "being somehow illegal or ineffective."<sup>10</sup> This is probably *not* off-the-cuff speculation, as the authors have a combined experience in Westminster Palace of more than sixty years, according to the book jacket (Rogers is currently Clerk of Legislation in the Legislation Directorate of the House of Commons; Walters is currently Reading Clerk and Clerk of the Overseas Office in the House of Lords.) Unfortunately, however, they fail to elaborate on this conjecture, for example, by pointing to relevant historical precedents. So we need to imagine what events or considerations they might appeal to in order to reach this conclusion.

One way they might have argued the case would be to consider instances where breaks with established parliamentary tradition have occurred. There is no shortage of examples here. To take just one, Emma Crewe (2006) documents recent changes to the Lords' introduction ceremony for new Peers, which dates to 1621, and traditionally involves a lot of doffing of hats and bowing. She writes,

with the permission of the Queen, a few reforms came into effect in April 1998: they abolished hats, replaced the 'placing ceremony'<sup>11</sup> with a short procession through the chamber, deleted kneeling before the Lord Chancellor and the reading the Writ of Summons, and added a new convention (that the peer and supporters should return to the chamber without robes and sit where the new peer intends to sit in future). Despite the protests when reforms were proposed, no one has since complained that the ceremony has lost its way; in fact, abolition of the doffing has probably ensured its survival (2006: 97-98).

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<sup>10</sup> It is actually unclear from their wording whether they mean to refer to the potential for the Commons' *choice or decision* to forego Speakership ceremonial to be illegal or ineffective, or to the Speaker him- or herself occupying the office illegally or ineffectively. My discussion assumes the latter interpretation, but I do not think it matters much either way for thinking about what this passage says about their attitudes toward parliamentary ceremony.

<sup>11</sup> The placing ceremony saw the Garter King of Arms placing the new peer and his or her supporters on a bench appropriate to their rank in the peerage.

However, one problem with appealing to this example is that it reflected a desire for change in *internal* relationships between Peers. As Crewe notes, it was “particularly the aspects... inconsistent with their moral values that many wished to reform. They found... kneeling before the Lord Chancellor and ‘placing’ of peers out-of-date and humiliating. They did not like the implication that the equality between peer was in question” (2006: 97). Rogers and Walters’s hypothetical scenario, however, implies a desire to change the relationship *between* the three constituent parts of Parliament: the Commons, the Lords, and the Crown. More precisely, it has the Commons rescinding the right of the Crown and the Lords to play a role in the election of their Speaker. And this points to another problem with the example. Crewe’s analysis suggests how parliamentary ceremony is *flexible*; Rogers and Walters, on the other hand, appear to suggest that the ceremonies for selecting and approving the Speaker are potentially *dispensable* – that we could abolish them altogether. I am not an expert on this, but my preliminary reading of the literature suggests that it would be much harder for Rogers and Walters to find a historical precedent of this nature to which they could appeal.<sup>12</sup>

It is something of a puzzle that even though the Speaker is one of the most splendid, ritual-encrusted figures in Westminster, this does not attract the interest of political scientists. This (non) treatment of the rituals and ceremonies surrounding the Speaker seems indicative of bigger issues and undercurrents. Specifically, it seems to stem from a view which depends on an over-determined and taken-for-granted distinction between ‘pure ceremony’ and ‘real function’. As their book’s title implies, Rogers and Walters aim to describe how parliament *works*, and it might be thought that such an orientation necessarily entails a greater focus on functional and procedural aspects of the various offices of Parliament, the Speaker included, rather than their symbolic qualities. But this begs the question for those – including me – who maintain that *how parliament works* cannot be ascertained in the absence of considerations of its ceremonial and symbolic elements, and that the two things – function and ceremonial – are inextricably

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<sup>12</sup> In considering the historical record for relevant precedents, we also need to consider who initiates the reform. It is one thing for established and significant parliamentary ceremonies to change because a key player voluntarily declines to take part, and another thing when a second party decides for them that they should be excluded. The State Opening of Parliament ceremony was obviously changed when Queen Victoria refused to open parliament in person after the death of Albert (see Arnstein 1990), but this does not tell us anything about the likely constitutional or other consequences if the Commons had tried to prevent her from coming.

entwined and actually shade into one another. A rigid, binary distinction between procedures and rituals cannot in fact be located in the Palace of Westminster. As Edmund Leach (1970) argues, “actions fall into place on a continuous scale. At one extreme we have actions which are entirely profane, entirely functional, technique pure and simple; at the other end we have actions which are entirely sacred, strictly aesthetic, technically non-functional. Between these two extremes we have the great majority of social actions...” (1970: 12-13). The vast majority of practices in Parliament are in the blurry middle: partly functional, partly ceremonial or ritualistic. Divisions in the House of Commons provide an excellent example (HCIO 2003b). If we take this premise on board, then the task is not sorting parliamentary practices into discrete categories of ‘useful, important function’ and ‘embarrassing, superfluous ritual’ so that the latter can be ignored, relegated to the margins, or patronisingly tolerated. Rather, the task is to anatomise and document how function and ritual come together in virtually all parliamentary practices, and to ask what those (mixed or hybrid) practices *do*.<sup>13</sup>

Linked to the above premise is another one that should be taken on board: that parliamentary ceremonies and rituals are not inherently good or bad, but rather that they can have good and bad effects.<sup>14</sup> Our task as scholars of parliament should be to empirically establish and understand these dynamics, and not presuppose, for example, that archaic ceremonies contribute to public disengagement. This will depend upon a re-thinking and re-imagining of procedures, ceremony and ritual in parliament.

### **3. Feminist Theory, Gender Neutrality, and the Speakership**

There is a built-in gender bias to the office of the Speaker. But this is hardly unique. In contemporary political theory and real-world politics, the ‘individual,’ the ‘citizen,’ and the ‘elected representative’ are commonly represented as gender neutral or ‘gender

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<sup>13</sup> The danger here, as colleagues have already repeatedly pointed out, is that then suddenly *everything* that happens in Parliament is ritualistic or ceremonial, and the concepts are emptied of meaning or substance. And we may find ourselves back at our (deprecated) starting place: i.e. studying the ‘core’ functions and activities of Parliament, and ignoring the obviously ceremonial aspects. I acknowledge that this is a real danger, but it not only seems more productive, but also more empirically accurate, to work from the assumption that both function and ritual are constitutive of most practices in Parliament.

<sup>14</sup> Conversations with Meg Russell and Emma Crewe have been particularly influential on my thinking here.

blind'. But the struggle women faced to be recognised as full citizens and political beings demonstrates that this is a false neutrality. As Nirmal Puwar puts it, "Today, women and racialised minorities can enter positions that they were previously excluded from. However, social spaces are not blank and open for any body to occupy" (2004: 8). Moreover, it "is white men, with a changing classed habitus, who have for hundreds of years filled the higher echelons and over time it is they who have come to be seen as the 'natural' occupants of these positions" (Puwar 2004: 33).

Throughout the twentieth century, as the franchise was extended to women in most western liberal states, dominant discourses represented citizenship as gender neutral and inclusive. Thus, even though constitutions and bills of rights typically stated that 'all *men* are created free and equal' (or words to that effect), politicians, constitutional lawyers, and political theorists hastened to add that of course, 'men' included women now too. Feminists have convincingly established that the great Enlightenment thinkers imagined incorporating men and women into the modern nation-state in sexually-differentiated ways. Perhaps most famously, Carole Pateman (1989; 1990: Chapter 2) shows that social contract theory establishing the modern nation-state and its communities of supposedly free and equal citizens is grounded on an antecedent, patriarchal, sexual contract which formalises women's subordination to men. "The fraternal social contract story shows that the categories and practices of civil society cannot simply be universalized to women. The social contract is a modern patriarchal pact that establishes men's sex right over women, and the civil individual has been constructed in opposition to women and all that our bodies symbolize, so how can we become full members of civil society or parties to the fraternal contract?" (1989: 52).

The democratically-elected representative is also typically represented as gender neutral in mainstream discourses. As in the case of citizenship, officially, female sex is no longer a disqualification. But in reality, gender bias against women persists in both the theory and practice of democratic representation, because – like the citizen – the figure of the representative is masculine. A dominant theory of liberal representation holds that elected representatives (should) check their personal or private identities and concerns at the door of the chamber in order to represent the interests of all of their constituencies and to better adopt the perspective of the common good. On this view,

then, it does not matter who our representatives are. Feminists argue that the dichotomy between public and private that this view invokes is a gendered dichotomy. Women's issues and women themselves have traditionally been confined to, and defined by, the private sphere. At the same time, the public sphere has been defined by men's presence and men's interests; constructed as the sphere where women – almost by definition – are absent. Obviously, then, the implication of elected representatives checking their private identities and concerns at the door of the legislative chamber is to effectively exclude those attributes and issues traditionally coded as feminine.<sup>15</sup>

The election of a record number of women MPs to the House of Commons in 1997 generated a substantial literature, academic and popular, documenting their experiences.<sup>16</sup> Much of this literature examines how the women negotiated their new roles within an institution frequently described as the best gentlemen's club in London. Concrete examples demonstrating that the job of MP in the UK was for centuries open exclusively to men (and, we must add, mainly white, wealthy, propertied, educated men) are numerous: the Palace of Westminster contains a rifle range, but no crèche; there is a 'Smoking Room' and it is basically off-limits to women; lavatories for women are few and hard-to-find; policemen and other staff shooing women out of Members-only lifts and rooms, mistakenly assuming that the women are cleaners or caterers. From this literature we learn that some men had a hard time accepting the influx of women into a place they considered 'theirs,' and that this attitude manifested in blatant sexism and hostility in the Chamber, corridors and committee rooms.<sup>17</sup>

Feminists have paid close attention to gender bias in the formulation and practice of citizenship and representation. However, as far as I am aware, there are no academic feminist analyses specifically of the Speaker of the British House of Commons. The assumption seems to be that it is (at least) as gender-biased as the role of MP is. Still, because it is a distinct role – and a powerful one – it is worth considering it separately.

The role of Speaker is gendered in ways it shares with the role of the elected Member of Parliament. Like the representative, it is rooted in an institutional history that

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<sup>15</sup> For influential accounts, see Anne Phillips (1998); Melissa Williams (1998); and Iris Young (1990).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Puwar (2004); Sones, Moran and Lovenduski (2005); McDougall (1997); Childs, Lovenduski, and Campbell (2005); Lovenduski (2005); Childs (2001, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> For some particularly appalling stories, see McDougall (1997: 50), and Sones et al (2005: Ch 4).

officially excluded women until the last century. Once legal and political discrimination against women ended, the informal barriers that made women's progress into the Commons difficult by extension impeded their progress into the Speaker's Chair. These were mainly economic and social barriers: women were discouraged from gaining the qualifications and experience that facilitate becoming an MP, including higher education and especially professional qualifications as barristers or lawyers; paid work outside the home; and positions of leadership in business, the media, and local government. In short, even after the franchise was extended to them, women lacked the education, the work experience, the social networks, the independence (financial and familial), and the social expectation and approval to become MPs, and by extension, the Speaker.

Turning to more recent history, issues that many women MPs and academics identify as obstacles to more equitable gender representation in Parliament also affect access to the Speakership. For example, reformers identify the Commons' traditional sitting hours as operating to exclude women, since they presuppose Members do not have familial and caring responsibilities. The sitting hours of the Commons have changed quite often in the last two decades. They were substantially reformed in 2003 following recommendations by the Modernisation Committee, but then these changes were partially rolled back, in favour of traditionalists' preferences, in 2005. Currently, the House sits from 2.30pm to 10pm on Mondays and Tuesdays; from 11.30am to 7pm on Wednesdays; from 10.30am to 6pm on Thursdays; and from 9.30am to 2.30pm on Fridays.<sup>18</sup> Many women MPs nevertheless report that, even with the reformed hours, it is still extremely difficult to manage the workload of an MP and the domestic responsibilities that even fulltime working women are still expected to assume. Today, the Speaker is expected to open the daily sitting of the Commons, and chair the proceedings for at least the first two hours, before being replaced by one of his or her deputies. The Speaker is then expected to take the Chair for at least the last hour of debate in the evenings (HCIO 2003). These debates can run overtime, and sometimes last all night, so it is easy to see how that would

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<sup>18</sup> See Rogers and Walters (2006: 147-149) for an overview of changes to sitting hours from 1946 to the present.

discourage Members (in practice, mainly women) who take primary responsibility for children and other dependents.<sup>19</sup>

Someone might object that my argument is outdated. The Speakership *used* to be male-biased, but we've had a popular woman Speaker and both society and Parliament have changed enough so that women are no longer systematically disadvantaged. One way to assess this view is to consider how Speakers are applauded and censured. If it is truly gender neutral, then the men and women who occupy the office should be praised and criticized for the same sorts of things. It is immediately clear, from a look at academic and media discourses, that Speakers have been celebrated and criticised in highly gendered terms. Here is part of a speech by Sir Patrick Spens in 1955 as he proposed the re-election of Speaker William Shepherd Morrison (Speaker from 1951-59):

“My right hon. and learned friend is a fine figure of a man, with a great and natural dignity which often enables him to dominate those occasions [of ceremony], as a representative of this House always should. He has also a voice which we all know and respect. He has a diction which carries throughout the House, and his speeches, founded on his wide classical learning, are always models of what the speeches of a Speaker on ceremonial occasions should be.’ These physical attributes were an undoubted advantage to him when it came to quelling excitement. The appearance of his tall, commanding figure, clothed in the raiment of parliamentary authority, rising to full height, was an almost invariable deterrent to tumult (Laundy 1964: 344).

This is quite a hymn to what R.W. Connell has termed “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 2005). It is hard to imagine how the “average” woman (small of stature, weak of voice, feeble of mind...) could be more definitively disqualified from the office. Compare with media commentary on Betty Boothroyd:

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<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, when Betty Boothroyd ran for election in West Bromwich (the seat she ultimately won), she tried to make the fact that she was single and had no children an indication of her fitness for elected office. She was challenged by a woman at a party selection meeting who said, “You won’t be any good to us. You’ve never been married, you’ve never had children and you’ve never run a home.” Boothroyd replied, “Well, then, I’ll have all the more time for you, dearie, won’t I?” (Boothroyd 2001: 94-5). This anecdote underlines how women candidates are damned if they do have children, and damned if they don’t. If they do, then who is looking after the children while they are selfishly pursuing their careers? If they don’t, then what is the matter with them? Even if they aren’t child-hating lesbians, they aren’t appropriately motherly.

“Deep down, there is inside your average backbench male MP a little boy who really just wants to be loved. Deep down, there is also inside your average backbench male MP a little boy who wants to be punished. They all want somebody who will both cherish and chide, cradle heads and smack bottoms. The role, played in lost childhoods by matron, schoolmistress or nanny, is now amply filled by Madam Speaker” – Andrew Rawnsley, *Guardian*, May 1992.

“Miss Boothroyd’s style combines the glamour of a minor diva with the bearing of a kindergarten headmistress and the lip of a barmaid” – Matthew Parris, *Times*, April 1993

“Her main task as Speaker was to keep order in a House containing more than 500 men. She won over MPs by appearing in many different roles depending on the mood of the House: at times the stern dominatrix, at others the sassy schoolmistress, at others the parliamentary wit” – Michael Cockerell, *Mail on Sunday*, Dec 2000

That the media were preoccupied with Boothroyd’s sex throughout her time as Speaker is a gross understatement. References to her appearance, body, hair, clothing, and her short, early, career as a professional dancer (a “Tiller Girl”) were ubiquitous in newspaper reports about her from the moment she became a Deputy Speaker until long after retirement.

These quotations show how male and female Speakers are being measured against different, gendered, yardsticks. And the fact that they are being judged on their *appearances* comes to the fore. But even internal qualities such as authority, which is central to the job of Speaker, are assessed in a gendered way. Consider this description by Philip Laundy of Speaker Edward Fitzroy (Speaker from 1928 to 1943): “Fitzroy tended to be authoritarian in manner, probably because of his military background – he was the first soldier to reach the Chair of the House of Commons in many centuries – but he won the esteem and affection of all parties in the House (Laundy 1964: 340). Laundy



suggests that Fitzroy's authoritarianism was to be expected and should be excused. It is unlikely an authoritarian woman would be allowed to get away with that tendency.

While reporters and MPs were willing to grant that Boothroyd possessed authority, in many cases, their statements are immediately qualified in ways that we would be unlikely to see for men. Thus, for example, her fellow MP Roy Hattersley remarked in a column for the *Daily Mail* that "she has presided over the Commons with friendly authority which none of her predecessors could have matched" (Hattersley 2000). Dominic Lawson, editor of *The Spectator*, reportedly said that "Never for a moment has her authority over this obstreperous chamber wavered. This is a Speaker who, despite appearances, really does wear the trousers." He was quoted in a *Daily Mail* report headlined "Betty Boothroyd is 'Man of the Year'" for being awarded the Parliamentarian of the Year in 1992. Both the headline and Lawson's tribute suggest how 'woman' and 'authority' are normally understood to be mutually exclusive, while 'man' and 'authority' naturally cohere. Thus, while Boothroyd was allotted by media and colleagues a measure of legitimate authority, commentators were ever watchful that she not overstep the line. Reporting on her decision to 'gag' Members debating an issue devolved to the Welsh assembly, Nicholas Watt, political correspondent for *The Guardian*, quoted a source as saying that "Ms Boothroyd had been far too aggressive and was in danger of 'castrating ministers'" (Watt 1999). There is an obvious sexual double-standard in operation here: men are expected and encouraged to be authoritative, and they are excused when they cross the line into authoritarianism. Women are not expected to be authoritative. They are rewarded for exhibiting a certain kind of non-threatening authority, but punished when they are deemed to go too far.

The story I have told thus far boils down to the familiar point that the Speakership, like other political offices and roles, is *not* gender neutral. It is inherently gendered, and a sexual double standard is in operation, incorporating men and women into the office on different, gendered, terms. It is a story wherein the House of Commons in many ways emerges as a leading enforcer and transmitter of traditional gender binaries, locking intelligent and able women and men into limiting, old-fashioned gender roles. So far, so familiar. But a different story can be told. The figure of the Speaker also potentially disrupts the traditional, gendered, binaries and heteronormativity

operating in the House of Commons. A clue as to how this might happen is revealed in these two images, and in their juxtaposition:



Speaker Martin being assisted by his trainbearer  
(Photo credit: Deryc Sands, in James (2001).)

# Gender identity issues?

## Who? Me?



Postcard designed by Adrienne Gusoff, 2000.

We are in the habit of reading the Speaker's dress as masculine, but with the most minor of adjustments, that reading slips. This subversive reading is indebted to Judith Butler's (1999) theory of gender as performative. Butler argues that drag and other forms of gender parody reveal that the seemingly natural coherence of sex, gender, and sexuality is actually culturally constructed through the repetition of stylised acts in time. Butler

proposes the practice of drag as a way to poke fun at the notion that there is an ‘original’ gender, and to demonstrate playfully that all gender is in fact scripted, rehearsed, and performed. Men who occupy the office of the Speaker wear its traditional eighteenth century court dress of velvet, lace and shiny buckle shoes. By today’s standards, this is essentially women’s clothing. The Speaker is thus an excellent site for gender parody and drag.

I do not wish to suggest that this is something everyone goes around acknowledging. MPs and the media regularly refer to the Serjeant at Arms and other staff who wear the traditional dress as ‘the men in tights’. But the full implications of the potential that Westminster holds for gender parody and for collapsing rigid masculine/feminine norms, are rarely articulated. Instead, they are suppressed. What is masculine is what we tell ourselves is masculine. We need some way to assimilate and interpret the world around us, and dominant gender regimes help us to do this, according to Georgia Duerst-Lahti and Rita Mae Kelly (1995). But these are under constant threat from the anomalies. Gender boundaries are porous and unstable, and norms governing ‘appropriate’ sexual desires are too. The constant reiteration of normative gender binaries in the House of Commons and elsewhere reveals our anxieties about these very norms.

There are dangers in pointing out how the Speaker lends itself to a disruption of gender binaries and heterosexism. This could reduce the urgency of needing to reform Parliament, if we believe that there is already space for people to challenge traditional gender roles and sexual norms. So I do not want to overstate the potential of the figure of the Speaker and other offices with ceremonial dimensions to challenge traditional gender norms and expectations. Nevertheless, the House of Commons is relaxing in some ways its long-standing norms about what offices and occupations are appropriate for women and men, and how they should behave therein. This is evident in the figure of the Speaker, as I have argued here, but also in another ancient, ritual-encrusted, office: the Serjeant at Arms, an office which dates back to 1415. In early 2008, Jill Pay became the first female Serjeant at Arms, and she only person in Parliament permitted to carry a sword.

To sum up, in this section I have applied feminist lenses to the office of the Speaker. This produced contradictory results, which is not surprising since ‘feminist’ arguments are not unified. On one hand, using what can over-simplistically be called a liberal or equality feminist lens, the Speakership emerges as enforcing women’s political inequality through the use of sexual double-standards. On the other hand, using a post-structuralist feminist lens, we find that the Speaker is a potential site for gender norm transgression, and particularly for upsetting discrete and dualistic categories of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. Offices once reserved exclusively for men are now being occupied by women. And when men occupy them, the supposed disjuncture between masculine embodiment and feminine garb provokes (what seem to be good-natured) jokes but not scandal or censure. In both instances, individuals will be cognizant of, and conform to, prevailing gender norms to varying degrees. But, the point is, this suggests how they are more open to negotiation than ever before.

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