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Father of the House

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Summary

The Father of the House is a title that is by tradition bestowed on the senior Member of the House, which is nowadays held to be the Member who has the longest unbroken service in the Commons.

The Father of the House in the current (2015) Parliament is Sir Gerald Kaufman, who was first elected to the House in 1970.

Under Standing Order No 1, as long as the Father of the House is not a Minister, he takes the Chair when the House elects a Speaker.

He has no other formal duties.

There is evidence of the title having been used in the 18th century. However, the origin of the term is not clear and it is likely that different qualifications were used in the past.

The Father of the House is not necessarily the oldest Member. However, the title of 'Baby of the House' is held by the youngest Member: Mhairi Black in the 2015 Parliament.

1. Seniority of Members

Summary

The title 'Father of the House' is held by the Member who has the longest unbroken service in the House of Commons. The Father of the House in the current (2015) Parliament is Sir Gerald Kaufman, who was first elected to the House in 1970.

1.1 Determining seniority

The Father of the House heads the 'seniority list' of Members, a list of Members in order of their length of unbroken service. If two or more Members enter the House at the same election, each with unbroken service, their seniority is determined by the date and/or time they took the oath.

The term 'Father of the House' is not used in the House's Standing Orders, although Standing Order No 1 uses the qualification outlined above. This Standing Order determines who presides over the House at the election of a Speaker. This takes place at the beginning of a Parliament, or if the previous Speaker has ceased to be a Member of the House:

Whenever it is necessary to proceed forthwith to the choice of a new Speaker in consequence of the Speaker having ceased for any reason to be a Member of this House, the chair shall be taken by that Member, present in the House and not being a Minister of the Crown, who has served for the longest period continuously as a Member of this House.¹

This is the sole duty of the Father of the House under House of Commons Standing Orders, although there are unofficial duties that he may be called upon to perform (see below). Occasionally the Father has been a Minister, who would be excluded from presiding at the election of a Speaker under the provisions of the Standing Order.

Examples

After the 1983 General Election, two Members remained who had been first elected in 1945 and had continuous service. James Callaghan took the Oath on 2 August 1945, and Hugh Fraser took the Oath on 15 August 1945. Mr Callaghan therefore assumed the title of Father of the House. (Michael Foot had also been elected in 1945, but he had a gap in service.)

After the 1987 election, both Sir Bernard Braine and Mr (later Sir) Edward Heath had been elected in 1950. On 2 March 1950, new Members were asked to report for oath-taking at different hours according to the initial letter of their surnames, and as a result Sir Bernard Braine took the oath around 5.45 pm, and Edward Heath took the oath around 6.50 pm. Therefore, Sir Bernard Braine became Father of the House in 1987.

¹ House of Commons, [Standing Orders of the House of Commons – Public Business, 2016](#), February 2016, HC 2 2015-16, Standing Order No 1(1)

At the outset of the 2015 Parliament, four members shared the longest unbroken service, having first been elected at the 1970 General Election and having remained in the House ever since. In the order in which they took the Oath, they were: Sir Gerald Kaufman; Kenneth Clarke; Michael Meacher (who died in October 2015); and Dennis Skinner. David Winnick was first elected in 1966, but was not in the House between 1970 and 1979.

There has not, so far, been a 'Mother of the House'.

1.2 Duties of the Father of the House

As outlined above, the main duty of the Father of the House is to preside over the election of a new Speaker.²

On certain occasions the Father of the House may be called upon to:

- Move or speak in motions of a ceremonial nature in the House;
- Chair debates where historical precedents are required as evidence;
- If the House agrees a resolution to present a congratulatory address, he may be part of the group appointed to 'wait upon' the person concerned.

From 1945, the Father of the House was often a member of the Select Committee on Privileges. But following the establishment of the Standard and Privileges Committee in 1996, and the creation of a Committee of Privileges and a Committee on the Standards in 2013, the custom no longer operates.

1.3 Baby of the House

There is an equivalent description for the youngest Member of the House – the "Baby of the House". This is attached to the youngest Member and carries no duties or rights. The Baby of the House in the 2015 Parliament is Mhairi Black, elected for Paisley and Renfrewshire South in 2015.³ Lists of Fathers and Babies of the House, together with lists of the oldest and youngest Members, have also been compiled by an external website.⁴

² For further information, see Commons Library Briefing Paper, [The election of a Speaker](#), SN05074

³ For a list of recent Babies of the House, see: Parliamentary Information List, [Youngest Members of Parliament since 1979](#), SN04416

⁴ See <http://www.leighrayment.com/commons/fathercommons.htm>

2. History

2.1 Origin of the term

The description 'Father of the House' was probably an inexact term at first and does not appear to have deep historical roots. The word 'father' was sometimes used to denote a senior member of the fellowship of Oxford or Cambridge University colleges, and of certain learned societies and associations. Therefore, it may have come to apply informally to senior Members of the House of Commons.

2.2 Early usage

1788 A short obituary in the June 1788 edition of the *Gentleman's Magazine* described Thomas Noel as "father of the House of Commons":

At Exton, co Rutland, aged 83, Thomas Noel, esq, cousin to the Earl of Gainsborough, MP for the county of Rutland and father of the House of Commons, having represented the county in that House nine sessions, the first in the year 1727.⁵

1816 An engraved portrait of Whitshed Keen MP by Charles Picart, dated 1 February 1816, is subtitled "Father of the House of Commons". This example only became known in 1990 through the discovery of a printing plate in a shed in Downham, Norfolk.

1852 Benjamin Disraeli described Joseph Hume as "still the most hard-working Member of the House, of which he is now father".⁶

1853 The grand-daughter of Benjamin Bathurst MP referred to him (in the memoirs of her father, Dr Henry Bathurst) as "father of the House of Commons at the same time that his brother, Earl Bathurst, was the father of the House of Lords".⁷ Benjamin Bathurst was an MP from 1713 to 1767.

1862 In the obituary of Sir Charles Burrell, in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (March 1862), he was described as the "father" of the House of Commons, the inverted commas possibly indicating the informality of the description.

1888 In Sir Henry Lucy's *Diary of the Salisbury Parliament* for 10 June 1888 (published in book form in 1892), Mr C.R.M. Talbot (noted as a tall, elderly gentleman ... wearing a long woollen comforter) is described as "father of the House of Commons".⁸

⁵ *Gentleman's Magazine*, June 1788, p566; History of Parliament, [Thomas Noel](#)

⁶ Benjamin Disraeli, *Lord George Bentinck: A Political Biography*, Colburn & Co, London, 1852, vol.1 p.9

⁷ Henry Bathurst, *Memoirs of the late Dr Henry Bathurst, Bishop of Norwich*, A.J. Valpy, London, 1837, p.17

⁸ Henry W. Lucy, *A Diary of the Salisbury Parliament 1886-1892*, Cassell, London, 1892, p.70

2.3 Fathers of the House

Long-serving Members were probably called upon to share the depth of their experience as far back as 1700, but there is little evidence that the phrase 'Father of the House' was recognised or indeed in use before the 19th century. The list of Fathers of the House during the twentieth century includes many distinguished politicians. The list includes four ex-Prime Ministers: Campbell-Bannerman was Prime Minister and Father simultaneously.

- Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman
- David Lloyd George
- Sir Winston Churchill
- Sir James Callaghan
- Sir Edward Heath

The list also includes others who attained Cabinet rank, for example:

- R.A. Butler
- Earl Winterton
- Sir Michael Hicks-Beach

Sir Hugh O'Neill had been Speaker of the Northern Ireland Parliament, and several other Fathers of the House had held ministerial office. Since World War II, all, with two exceptions (John Parker and Tam Dalyell), have been Privy Counsellors.

A list of Fathers of the House, since 1901, is given in the Appendix.

2.4 Previous qualifications

It is unclear what qualifications have been used for the Father of the House in the past. There are four possible means of qualification:

1. The oldest Member;
2. The Member with the longest aggregate service;
3. The Member with the longest unbroken service;
4. The Member who entered the House longest ago, but may have had broken service.

The third qualification is used now, and it was generally considered the correct method throughout the 20th century. However, it appears that at some points in the 19th century the oldest Member may have assumed the title. Looking at historical examples of people referred to as 'Father of the House', it is clear that there were no exact qualifications for the title and that a combination of the above methods was used. The method used in the early years is uncertain, but in 1898 a newspaper recorded:

The House decided informally that the fatherhood rested with whoever had been longest in the House irrespective of constituencies represented.⁹

⁹ [*London Daily News*](#), 28 May 1899, p.6

There has been some question about the calculation of service by continuity, both in terms of time and constituency. The question was certainly not decided on the floor of the House; it may be that opinions were canvassed via the whips. Some examples to illustrate this are:

- Joseph Hume was 75 years old in 1852 but had only 40 years' broken service compared with the 46 of George Granville Harcourt and Sir Charles Burrell. He would not, by modern day convention, have become Father of the House.
- In 1898 Sir John Mowbray, aged 83, had been recognised Father rather than W.W. Beach, aged 72, even though Mowbray's service was continuous only from 1868 whereas Beach's had dated back to 1853. In 1899, however, after the "decision" mentioned above, W.W. Beach succeeded rather than Sir James Fergusson, who entered the House three years before Beach (though he was 7 years younger), but who had a significant break of service.

2.5 Possible elections for Father of the House

There are indications that the Father of the House may have been elected at some point. Sir John Mowbray, Father of the House in 1898 and 1899 wrote: "...the feeling of the House is very much in my favour" and records another Member saying "...I shall vote against you on one ground only".¹⁰ In the 20th Century, there is no evidence that the post was subject to the approval of the House. There are a variety of explanations that demonstrate why there appeared to be no exact qualification to be Father of the House. If the post was subject to election during the nineteenth century, or, more importantly, if the oldest Member had taken the title, this would account for the fact that most early sources name various people as Father. Their service does not appear to demonstrate a continuity of qualifications for the post during these early years.

Another factor to consider is that, before civil registration began in the late 1830s, it was sometimes difficult to calculate someone's exact age. Also, it may be that the title was accorded to the most senior Member present at the time; many Members in previous centuries almost never came to Westminster.

¹⁰ John Mowbray, *Seventy years at Westminster*, Blackwood, London, 1900, pp.323-4

Appendix: Fathers of the House, since 1901

The following list is sourced from *British Political Facts 1900-2000* and from the website of *Leigh Rayment's Historical Peerage*.

		Born	Died	Age on leaving the House
3 Aug 1901	Michael Edward Hicks-Beach	23 Oct 1837	30 Apr 1916	68
Jan 1906	George Henry Finch	20 Feb 1835	22 May 1907	72
22 May 1907	Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman	7 Sep 1836	22 Apr 1908	71
22 Apr 1908	Sir John Henry Kennaway	6 Jun 1837	6 Sep 1919	72
Jan 1910	Thomas Burt	12 Nov 1837	13 Apr 1922	81
Dec 1918	Thomas Power O'Connor	5 Oct 1848	18 Nov 1929	81
18 Nov 1929	David Lloyd-George	17 Jan 1863	26 Mar 1945	81
Jan 1945	Edward Turnour, Earl Winterton	4 Apr 1883	26 Aug 1962	68
Oct 1951	Sir Robert William Hugh O'Neill	8 Jun 1883	28 Nov 1982	69
Oct 1952	David Rhys Grenfell	27 Jun 1881	21 Nov 1968	78
Oct 1959	Sir Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill	30 Nov 1874	24 Jan 1965	89
Oct 1964	Richard Austen Butler	9 Dec 1902	8 Mar 1982	61
Jan 1965	Robert Hugh Turton	8 Aug 1903	17 Jan 1994	70
Feb 1974	George Russell Strauss	18 Jul 1901	5 Jun 1993	78
May 1979	Herbert John Harvey Parker	15 Jul 1906	24 Nov 1987	76
Jun 1983	Leonard James Callaghan	27 Mar 1912	26 Mar 2005	75
Jun 1987	Sir Bernard Richard Braine	24 Jun 1914	5 Jan 2000	77
Apr 1992	Sir Edward Richard George Heath	9 Jul 1916	17 Jul 2005	84

		Born	Died	Age on leaving the House
Jun 2001	Sir Tam Dalyell	9 Aug 1932		73
May 2005	Alan John Williams	14 Oct 1930	21 Dec 2014	79
May 2010	Sir Peter Hannay Bailey Tapsell	1 Feb 1930		85
May 2015	Sir Gerald Kaufman	21 Jun 1930		

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