

**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICE  
FACTSHEET**

**No 24**

**THE FATHER OF THE HOUSE**

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

AN ILLUSTRATION APPEARS HERE IN HARD COPY

*The Rt Hon Sir Edward Heath, KG, MBE, MP, (Old Bexley & Sidcup)  
first elected for Bexley in 1950, who became  
Father of the House after the 1992 General Election*

It seems not to be a title which is of any great antiquity. The first printed occurrence of the phrase in our records was for a long time in Sir Henry Lucy's *Diary of the Salisbury Parliament* for 10 June 1888 (published in book form in 1892) where Mr C R M Talbot (noted, incidentally as *a tall, elderly gentleman ... wearing a long woollen comforter*) is described as "father of the House of Commons". This antedates the first example given in the Oxford English Dictionary. A few years later, in a report in the *Daily Telegraph* of 8 July 1893, the Rt Hon Charles Villiers was described so in a report of the theft of his watch.

AN ILLUSTRATION APPEARS HERE IN HARD COPY

*Christopher Rice Mandel Talbot, Father of the House, 1874-90  
from an autographed and inscribed photograph dated 1883*

Another early mention, kindly drawn to our attention by Mr George Chowdharay-Best, is from the obituary of Sir Charles Burrell in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (March 1862) where he is described as *the "father" of the House of Commons*, the inverted commas possibly indicating the informality or novelty of the description. A much earlier occurrence, however, is in an engraved portrait of Whitshed Keen MP by Charles Picart, dated 1 February 1816, subtitled "Father of the House of Commons". This example came to light only in 1990, through the discovery of a printing plate in a shed in Downham, Norfolk.

A list of Fathers of the House over the last 110 years is given in Appendix A, but various commentators have attempted to draw up lists of Fathers in some cases as far back as 1700. No doubt long-serving Members were called upon to furnish precedents and illustrations from the depth of their experience as far back as such a time, but there is no evidence yet known to us which suggests that the phrase "Father of the House" was recognised, or indeed in use before the 19th century. A list of senior members is, however, given at Appendix B for the time up to the mid-19th century, but readers are referred to the disclaimer at the head of it.

The description was probably at first an inexact term. The word "father" was sometime apparently used to denote a senior member of the fellowship of Oxbridge colleges, and in certain learned societies and associations. So it became to be applied, one assumes, at first in an informal way, to senior members of the House. It is perhaps in this loose sense or just possibly in a misapplied specific sense that Disraeli, in his *Lord George Bentinck* (Vol.I,p.9) describes Hume in 1852 as *still the most hard-working member of the house, of which he is now father*. Hume was 75 years old at this time but had only 40 years' broken service compared with the 46 of George Granville Harcourt and Sir Charles Burrell, and would not by modern computation have ever borne the title. Keene also (see above) was by modern calculation never Father, though he did not miss it by much - he entered the House in November 1768, whereas Sir John Aubrey had done so in May. In 1816 Keene was 85 years old, but Aubrey only 77.

There appears to have been some doubt over the recorded life of the term as to how the qualifications for the office (if such it may be called) should be reckoned. There are five obvious possible methods: the oldest Member, the Member with the longest aggregate service, the Member with the longest unbroken service, the Member who entered the House longest ago, and election. Of these the third has during this century been reckoned the proper method, and in effect is given official credence at present by Standing Order No. 1 (for which see below), though it seems at some time in the 19th century the oldest Member may have generally assumed the title.

Which method was 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"*, there apparently having been some question about the computation of service by continuity, both of time and constituency. The question was certainly not decided on the floor of the House: presumably soundings were taken, possibly via the Whips. 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 from 1868 only, when he changed constituencies, whereas Beach's had dated back to 1853 in the same constituency. 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.

There is some indication that the position might have been at one point elective - Sir John Mowbray 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*". So far as is known there has certainly not this century been any question of the position being an elected one. But if during the nineteenth century it had been, or, more importantly, if the oldest Member had taken the title, it would account for the fact that most early sources name various people as Father when their service did not correspond. It should also be borne in mind that establishing an exact birth date for one born before civil registration started in the late 1830s was by no means simple. Another explanation might be that the title was accorded to the most senior Member present at the time - especially as many Members in the old days never or virtually never came to Westminster.

Even as late as 1952 there seems to have been some doubt on the seniority question, since Sir Hugh O'Neill retired "*without having accepted the description of Father of the House*". His successor, Mr. David Grenfell, wrote in no doubt a carefully chosen phrase that he was "*next in order of seniority*" (my italics). The difficulty in both 1951 and 1952 was probably that the Prime Minister, Churchill, had served since 1900, with a break of only months in 1923-24, whereas Sir Hugh and Mr Grenfell had continuous service, but only since 1915 and 1922 respectively. Churchill was also older, by several years. It was not, however, until 1959 that Churchill, at almost 85, actually became Father.

The present calculation method is taken from S O No 1:

"Whenever it is necessary to proceed forthwith to the choice of a new Speaker in consequence of Mr. 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."

The sole duty of the Father of the House under the Standing Order is thus to preside over the House at the election of a Speaker, but only at the beginning of a Parliament, or if for any reason the previous Speaker has ceased to be a Member of the House. This provision has been in force since 1972. It will be seen that the Standing Order does not actually define who should be Father of the House, but simply who should preside among those present on the one occasion. It will be apparent from Appendix A that occasionally the Father has been a Minister, who would be excluded from presiding under the provisions of the Standing Order.

If two or more Members entered the House at the same Election, each with unbroken service, their seniority is determined by the time of the original taking of the Oath. After the 1983 General Election, two Members remained who had been first elected in 1945 and had continuous service. Mr (later Sir) James Callaghan took the Oath on 2 August 1945: Mr Hugh Fraser did so only on 15 August 1945. Mr Callaghan therefore assumed the title of Father. After the 1987 Election, the situation was that Sir Bernard Braine and Mr Edward Heath had both 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: Sir Bernard took the Oath about 5.45 pm, and Mr Heath at about 6.50 pm: hence in 1987 Sir Bernard

became Father. (Mr Michael Foot had been elected in 1945, but he had a gap in service; two other Members (Messrs Benn and Amery) also entered the House in 1950, but did not have continuous service. Sir Edward Heath succeeded to the fathership after Sir Bernard's retirement in 1992.

Since 1945, the Father of the House has generally, but not always, been a member of the Select Committee on Privileges, though it has always included a very long serving Member. The Father may also be called upon on occasions to move or speak to motions of a ceremonial nature in the House, or on debates where historical precedents are adduced, or where an historical perspective may be desirable. If the House agrees a Resolution to present a congratulatory address, he may well be made part of the group appointed to 'wait upon' the person concerned.

It will be seen that the list of Fathers during this century has been a most distinguished one, including as it does five ex-Prime Ministers, (the present Father; Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, Sir Winston Churchill, David Lloyd George, and Sir James Callaghan) and a number of others who attained Cabinet rank (eg R A Butler, Earl Winterton, and Sir Michael Hicks-Beach). Sir Hugh O'Neill had been Speaker of the Northern Ireland Parliament, and several others also had held ministerial offices. Since World War II, all Fathers with one exception (Mr Parker) have been Privy Counsellors.

The compiler wishes to thank the Rt Hon Sir Edward Heath KG, MBE, MP, for permission to reproduce a portrait, and colleagues in the Department of the Library for reading a draft of these notes. He is much indebted to Mr George Chowdharay-Best, for the references from Disraeli's *Lord George Bentinck* and the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and for the references to the Keene printing plate, to Malcolm Hay, Christine Weeds, and its owner, Anne Marriott.

C C Pond  
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## APPENDIX A

### FATHERS OF THE HOUSE - 1874 to date

Years entered	Father	Date	House
1874 - 90	Christopher Talbot		1830
1890 - 98	Charles Villiers		1835
1898 - 99	Sir John Mowbray		1868
1899 - 1901	W W Beach		1857
1901 - 06	Sir Michael Hicks-Beach		1864
1906 - 07	G H Finch		1867
1907 - 08	Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman		1868
1908 - 10	Sir John Kennaway		1870
1910 - 18	Thomas Burt		1874
1918 - 29	T P O'Connor		1885
1929 - 44	David Lloyd George		1890
1945 - 51	Earl Winterton		1904
1951 - 52	Sir Hugh O'Neill		1915
1952 - 59	David Grenfell		1922
1959 - 64	Sir Winston Churchill	1900-22,	1924
1964	R A Butler		1929
1965 - 74	Sir Robin Turton		1929
1974 - 79	George Strauss	1929-31,	1934
1979 - 83	John Parker		1935
1983 - 87	Sir James Callaghan		1945
1987 - 92	Sir Bernard Braine		1950
1992 -	Sir Edward Heath		1950

Campbell-Bannerman was Prime Minister and Father of the House at the same time.

Hicks-Beach was Chancellor of the Exchequer during part of the time.

## APPENDIX B

The following is a list of senior Members from the beginning of the eighteenth century, calculated in 1907 by Alfred Beaven, apparently according to the modern premise of unbroken service. The period of this unbroken service is given after the name. The writer has seen no evidence (except in the case of Sir C. Burrell) that these Members were actually recognised as Father of the House, and as mentioned above, has encountered several other names apparently reckoned by contemporaries to have been 'Father'.

	Sir J Fagg	1654 - 1701	
	T Turgis	1659 - 1702	
	Sir C Musgrave	1661 - 1704	
	T Strangways		1673 -
1713			
	Sir R Onslow		1679 -
1716			
	General Erle	1679 - March 1718	
	E Vaughan	1679 - December 1718	
	R Vaughan	1685 - 1724	
	Lord W Powlett	1689 - 1729	
	Sir J Isham	1694 - 1730	
	Sir C Turner	1695 - 1738	
	Sir R Bradshaigh	1695 - February 1747	
	E Ashe	1695 - June 1747	
	T Cartwright	1701 - 1748	
	R Shuttleworth	1705 - 1749	
	P Gybbon	1707 - 1762	
	Sir J Rushout		1713 -
1768			
	W Aislabie	1721 - 1781	
	C Scudamore		1733 -
1782			
	Earl Nugent	1741 - 1784	
	Sir C Frederick	1741 - 1784	
	W Ellis	1741 - 1790	
	W Drake	1746 - 1796	
	Sir P Stephens	1759 - 1806	
	C Tudway	1761 - 1815	
	Sir J Aubrey	1768 - 1826	
	S Smith	1788 - 1832	
	G Byng	1790 - 1847	
	C Wynn	1799 - 1850	
	G Harcourt	1806 - 1861	
	Sir C Burrell	1806 - 1862	
	Hon H Lowther	1812 - 1867	
	T Williams	1820 - 1868	
	H Lowry Corry	1825 - 1873	
	Hon G Forester	1828 - 1874	