The Speaker of the British House of Commons here explains the way Parliament works and the nature of his job as Speaker.

TRADITION AND EFFICIENCY IN PARLIAMENT

Do you think, Mr. Speaker, that Parliament clings too much to ceremony and ritual and tradition nowadays?

I would not want one scrap of that tradition which embodies the history of the growth of British democracy to go. For example, when Black Rod comes and we shut the door in his face, we are reminding ourselves of the time in history when the House of Commons was deciding that Charles II's brother should not become King of England because he was a Catholic, and Charles had sent Black Rod to dissolve Parliament, while the Commons were insisting on passing their law before Charles dissolved them.

While it is helpful to remember such a thing, when Black Rod does come, and the Commons proceedings have to be interrupted to go to the Lords to hear, say, the Royal Assent, isn't it often very inconvenient to members, and haven't they often protested about this?

No, very rarely: we usually know when Black Rod is coming; though there have been two or three times since the war when Black Rod's entry has been a little inconvenient and when the Commons (or some of them) have protested their own inalienable right to carry on with the business they wanted to.

Isn't it possible that the ritual and ceremony, because it is so deeply rooted in history and tradition as you pointed out, induces an atmosphere which is resistant to change, particularly in matters of parliamentary procedure?

Maybe in parliamentary procedure, but not in the issues which divide the House. Do not imagine the procedure of Parliament is merely romantic; most of it

is 300 years' diluted common sense. It is not to prevent members from fighting, but to see that they fight in a clear, honest, and courteous way.

Could I remind you of what you said when you gave evidence as Deputy Speaker, before the Select Committee on Procedure: you said that you were a traditionalist, and that traditions were part of the glory of Parliament, but you also said 'I would say cut out the mumbo-jumbo by all means'. What did you have in mind when you were talking about 'mumbo-jumbo'?

Sometimes when the House wants to show displeasure with a Minister, we reduce the vote that we are giving to that Minister's department. My Deputy has to put that in a form in which a sum of £16,123,900 is moved and the amendment is to be £16,123,800. I think we could shorten that. There are little bits of the formulae that we use that might conceivably be shortened.

In other words, if tradition stands in the way of efficiency, you would try to deal with it?

That is roughly what I said before the committee.

There has been a spate of articles and books in recent years critical of Parliament, suggesting that its reputation has declined, its prestige has suffered. Do you agree with this? Do you think there is any ground for this — are you worried about it?

It is one of the myths of Parliament that the old Parliament consisted of Gladstone and Pitt and Burke, all the great figures, making wonderful orations without any scenes: this is the best behaved Parliament of the century.

But do you not sense today, Mr. Speaker, a mood for change in the way Parliament goes about its work, among many of the younger generation?

We have probably the keenest and most intelligent intake into this Parliament of any in the last fifty or sixty years, and obviously they want to make their contribution; obviously they feel a little frustrated. Democracy is participation, and the problem of democracy, and the problem of Parliament, is to make the fullest use of

abilities of every member. This has got to come. This is what the uneasiness is about.

As one who has given over 1,000 lectures in your time, on Parliament and how it works, do you think that the way Parliament work is adequately understood by the electorate as a whole?

I believe in communication. I said at Geneva, about six weeks ago, to the parliamentarians of Europe, that parliamentary democracy has got to make the fullest use of all the resources of modern techniques. I think they must come to terms with television, for instance. I would want this Parliament, any Parliament in the world, to make the fullest use of this new instrument of communication.

When Parliament considers this matter, as it is going to do in the Select Committee on the subject, how would your views be given?

Televising Parliament

If the Committee asked me I would give evidence before them, as Speaker, or really as a Member of Parliament of some years' standing. There is a case for and against the televising of Parliament. I would not want Parliament to become merely a show. There is something very intimate about the debating in the House: it is person to person. The fear of some of the older members is that televising may make it a sort of formal performance. Nobody will want that. On the other hand, I think this is a tremendous new means of communicating to the democrats of Britain the heart of their democratic institution.

May I ask you to explain a couple of points which perhaps are not properly understood by the public, and certainly not understood sometimes by students of Parliament. Why is it that there sometimes seems to be a difficulty about someone like the Prime Minister making a statement on some worldshaking event, even when the House wants him to do so?

Somebody once said: 'Parliament can do anything except make a man a woman'. But Parliament must be unanimous if it wants to break its own procedure. If the

House of Commons unanimously wants to do something it can do it. And on the two very rare occasions you have in mind there was a difference in point of view between the Government and the Opposition. But if the Government and the Opposition made up their minds that something had to be done, procedure would not stand in the way. And indeed the Prime Minister, perhaps as of right (and the Leader of the Opposition similarly), can overrule most of the basic procedures of the House.

Turning to all-night sitting, which is another thing that puzzles people, how do you justify that — if indeed you do justify it — as a sensible way of conducting business?

If I were a selfish human being I would be against all-night sitting, because whenever the all-night sitting takes place, one thing is quite certain: that I and my Deputy, Sir Samuel Storey, carry the biggest burden; we are there all the time. But I would fight to the last gasp for the all-night sitting. This is one of the resorts of democracy. If a man does not like what the Government has done, it is his job to use every vestige of his parliamentary power to impress that on the Government, and that includes all-night sittings. And when do you get most of the all-night sittings? On the Finance Bill, as I know to my sorrow, having taken the longest and most complicated Finance Bill through. It was painful for me but it was very precious for the country.

Some Speakers in the past have left their mark on parliamentary democracy; they have influenced the way Parliament has developed. Can a Speaker hope to do that nowadays?

Artist and technician

It is difficult to be objective about yourself. In the line of Speakers, I would hope not to let the job down. It would be a myth to say that the Speaker is merely a machine interpreting the rules of parliamentary procedure. He must know the law of Parliament, but he is dealing with 630 human beings. Politics is an art as

well as a science. The Speaker should be an artist as well as a technician.

You said in your evidence to the Select Committee: 'I am one of those who think that the power of the executive is growing and that it ought to be diminished'. What can you do as Speaker to support that philosophy and put it into action?

My predecessor, a long time ago, said that 'if the Speaker keeps the House to the rules of order he is by that same token preserving the rights of the individual member against the executive'. All the procedure of Parliament has been devised with two ends in mind: one is to preserve the rights of the individual back-bencher, of the tiniest minority, while closures and guillotines on the other hand see to it that in the end the majority rules. Both have rights; I have to preserve both rights.

Do you think that your policy — with the co-operation of the House, that is — of speeding up Question Time as much as you have done, might weaken the pressure which Parliament can put upon the executive by going a bit too quickly?

I talked to the House about that recently. It is not my policy: the House of Commons itself felt that questions were taking too much time, and I had a pretty clear instruction from the House to speed up questions. There is a danger; for every man his question is the most important one in the world. This is what he came to Parliament for, so did 629 waiting for their questions. The Chair's job is to see that he allows the full rights of a questioner without jeopardizing the full rights of somebody else who is waiting in the wings to come and take the stage. This is a matter of judgment, it is a matter of balance, and it must also be a matter of seeing if the question itself is a $60,000,000 question that the House has a chance to get its teeth into it.

One of the greatest academic authorities on the British Constitution, Sir Ivor Jennings, said about the Speakership: 'The qualities required of a Speaker are not really very high, and so great is the prestige of the

office, and so careful are all parties to maintain his independence and authority, that any reasonable man can make a success of the office'. Is that fair, do you think?

I have had that at the back of my mind for a long time, and I bow to Sir Ivor Jennings. I spoke at a grammar-school dinner recently and the Headmaster referred to boys of ability who were there, and boys of modest ability, and I said to the diners: 'If you are of modest ability don't worry; you may not become Prime Minister or Leader of the Opposition but you have the chance to become a Speaker'. I think that's about it.

What is the most difficult part of your job? Because there are some very difficult aspects indeed, despite what Sir Ivor Jennings said.

I think the real heartache of the Speaker is choosing who is going to speak in a debate.

How do you do that? Do you make up your mind before the debate, or do you make it up as you go along?

All the time. Members write to me to say: 'I'd like to be called in such a debate; this is my reason, I'm an agriculturist, I'm a great farmer, this is an agricultural debate, I've not spoken for the last six months'. That is happening all the time. They come to me in the Chair, they stand up in the House. For instance, at least forty-five men wanted to be called in the Territorial debate. It is almost true to say that all of them had equal claims. My job is to balance these minutiae of equality or disparity between them. It is a heartbreaking job.

One has heard it said, indeed one has read it in authoritative works, that in fact the Whips of the main parties make their list of people whom they would like to see called to go in to bat for them, as it were. *Do you get such a list, and do you pay any attention to it?*

That may have been true in history. Neither of the chief Whips would dare to come to me and say 'I think you ought to call so-and-so'. I make my own choice.

And do you choose people according to whether they are likely to make a more interesting contribution in debate? Are you concerned with how good the debate is?

This is one factor — but there are a hundred factors. And there is the fact that a man has not spoken for a long time. There is the fact that a man have very intimate and special reasons — he has just come from Japan and we're debating Japan: a hundred and one things. And in the last resort, if two men have exactly the same right on the Speaker to be called, you may be inclined to call the man who does not speak as long as the other one.

Do you ever get bored sitting in the Speaker's Chair?

Never.

Is this because of the constant factor that you might be called upon to make a ruling, or are you always interested in any speaker, however boring he may be?

I am interested in Parliament; I took this highly complex Finance Bill through last year but was not bored. I was fascinated all the time, even though we were on abstruse and difficult technical subjects. At any moment, too, a speaker may drift out of order. The Chair must be awake and aware all the time.

You have to make a number of very quick decisions, don't you, in which you cannot always refer to your advisers?

This is true. I meet the clerks every day; we discuss what is going to happen, what is likely to happen, the implications. But when Parliament is sitting the issues are arising, and most of the issues that arise are those you have not prepared for. The decisions are on the spot.
— *From 'People to Watch' (BBC-2)*