

Point of order

Neil Parpworth on why maiden speeches in the House of Commons are a continuing unnecessary distraction



Sam Carling MP makes his debut in the House

The principal point to note about the 4 July 2024 general election result was, of course, the scale of the Labour Party's victory at the polls, in terms of the number of seats won. Few would have predicted back in mid-December 2019, when the last general election was held, that the political pendulum would swing so far from right to left in such a short space of time.

A further point, which has also received media attention, is that more than half of the 650 members of the House of Commons are new to Parliament. While some change was inevitable, given that more than 100 sitting MPs chose not to stand in the election, the scale of the change is far greater than in 2015, for example, when 177 new MPs were elected. This influx of new faces has meant that already, maiden speeches are consuming a precious commodity: parliamentary time.

The opportunity

Erskine May is quite brief in its treatment of the subject. It explains that where a new member wishes to deliver their maiden speech, they are 'generally given some priority over other Members seeking to speak in the debate' (para 21.9). What it does not say is that if called to speak, a new member may be exempted from a time constraint which has been imposed on other MPs. A recent example of this occurred in relation to a debate on the King's Speech in the House of Commons on 23 July 2024. Not long into it, the Deputy Speaker stated: 'Unfortunately, there will have to be an eight-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, although those making a maiden speech are exempt from that' (*Hansard*, HC, Vol 752, col 544).

Erskine May also informs the reader that making a maiden speech is essentially a matter of custom at the discretion of a new MP. Thus, if they want to, they may opt to forgo this opportunity by engaging fully in the proceedings in the Chamber (and Westminster Hall) from the very beginning of their tenure. Alternatively, they may refrain from participating until they have delivered their maiden speech, or instead 'ask questions and intervene on speeches without losing the opportunity to make a traditional maiden speech' (para 21.9). A House of Commons briefing note ('Maiden speeches: guidance for new Members', (December 2019)) provides further clarification as to parliamentary activities which do not compromise an MP's eligibility to make a maiden speech. These include: tabling a question for an oral or written answer; tabling amendments to bills; taking part in any committees; or presenting a private member's bill (para 9).

The content

The briefing note explains that a maiden speech is 'usually uncontroversial and fairly brief', and that it will include 'a tribute to the Member's predecessor in the seat, irrespective of party, and favourable remarks about the constituency'. Two recent examples of maiden speeches illustrate significant variations in the extent to which this guidance may be complied with in practice. The Independent MP for Leicester South, Shockat Adam, used his maiden speech to inform the House as to his background, both family and professional (*Hansard*, HC, Vol 752, cols 593–594 (23 July 2024)), and to extol Leicester's sporting traditions and achievements, including its

football club having 'defied all the odds' to become premier league champions at the end of the 2015–16 season. He also reminded MPs that Leicester is 'where we found the remains of the last Plantagenet king', and invited them to 'come and visit him at our beautiful cathedral' (col 595). In keeping with tradition, the new MP also paid tribute to his predecessor, Jon Ashworth, a former shadow cabinet member, who he described as a 'dedicated champion for our city' (col 594).

While the new Reform UK MP for Clacton, Nigel Farage, also recognised that there are customs and traditions associated with maiden speeches, his words signified a limited compliance with them. Thus, his tribute to his predecessor was largely confined to describing him as a 'very decent, nice, honourable man', and his favourable remarks about his constituency merely consisted of noting that it was once a place for a 'traditional English seaside holiday' (col 568), but that it has become less popular due to foreign package holidays. Flouting the custom to avoid controversy, Mr Farage remarked that there are 'more supporters of Brexit in the European Parliament than I sense there are in this Parliament of 2024' (col 568), and suggested that 'it is really a rejoinders' Parliament'. He also attacked the immigration policies of previous Labour and Conservative governments and contended that the European Court of Human Rights has now 'completely outlived its usefulness' (col 570). His maiden speech ended thus: 'I have a fun suggestion that would liven up politics, engage the public and see a massively increased turnout. Why do we not have a referendum on whether we continue to be a member of the ECHR?' (col 570).

Conclusion

Writing in this journal four years ago, I argued that 'maiden speeches in their current form are an extravagance which ought to come to an end', and that this could be achieved by 'new MPs collectively exhibiting self-restraint' (see 170 *NLJ* 7879, p22). Regrettably, recent proceedings in Parliament indicate that there is little sign of this tradition being ended or modified.

With parliamentary reform on the horizon in the shape of a bill to remove the remaining hereditary peers from the House of Lords, the rather more modest change being argued for here could be accomplished without the need for a single vote. On the assumption that each new MP will make a maiden speech, and that they will last on average for 10 minutes, do nearly 56 hours of parliamentary time really need to be consumed by this continuing self-indulgence?

NLJ

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