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The Office of Speaker in Comparative Perspective

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Even a cursory study of national assemblies in democracies reveals that superficial similarities often mask profound differences in the distribution and exercise of authority, both within the assembly and *vis-à-vis* the executive power of government.¹ The first-order distinction, of course, is between legislatures and parliaments: between assemblies that are constitutionally and often electorally independent of the executive and that compete with it for pre-eminence in a system of separated institutions sharing power, and assemblies that designate members of the executive, often from among the assembly's own members, that governs on behalf of and only with the continuing confidence of the assembly.

To begin to understand the dynamics and activities of national assemblies, however, we must usually go beyond this distinction and differentiate within the class of legislatures on the one hand and parliaments on the other on the basis of differences among them in electoral systems and constitutional relations. To what extent, for instance, do the methods for nominating and electing assembly members make them susceptible to (or more immune from) influence by their party leaders? And to what degree, for instance, is the assembly exposed to the danger of being dissolved prematurely by the president? These and like factors influence the operation of assemblies by affecting such matters as the number and cohesion of party groups, the roles and activities of committees, especially in originating or revising proposed new laws, and the assembly's capacity to affect the national budget and monitor government performance.

Among these potentially important differences, it may seem far less consequential that almost every democratic assembly selects its own presiding officer, whether it be the speaker, chairman or president of the assembly. This officer (to be called 'speaker' here, solely for clarity and convenience) is usually, but not necessarily,

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chosen by the assembly from among its members, and is responsible for presiding over its plenary sessions and representing the assembly in its formal relations with other government institutions. It is often the speaker, for example, who signs bills and other documents to signal their final approval by the assembly, and who also receives communications on behalf of the assembly from the president, prime minister or other executive officials.²

Yet here again, these superficial though essential similarities mask equally important and far more interesting differences. There are various and distinct dimensions of activity – and, consequently, potential sources of influence – to which speakers may devote their time and energies. The national constitution or the assembly's standing orders and uncodified customs, or both, will determine which and how many of these roles each speaker is expected to fulfil. In turn, the relative strength or weakness of the speaker's office will affect other aspects of both the formal distribution of authority and the less formal distribution of influence within the assembly. Like the powers of the presidency, the powers of the speaker are, to some extent, what he (for convenience and with apologies to Betty Boothroyd) makes of them. But the degree to which these powers are or are not effectively circumscribed by law, rule or deeply embedded practice also affects the room for manoeuvre that each incumbent of the office enjoys.

Of particular interest is the essential incompatibility of several of the roles that speakers sometimes play. The speaker may be expected to serve as the assembly's equivalent of both the head of state and the head of government, sometimes embodying, serving or speaking for the assembly as a whole, and sometimes acting as a member, or even leader, of its dominant party fraction.³ A speaker with such dual and apparently conflicting responsibilities has to strike a delicate balance between these two dimensions of his office. A failure to find and maintain this balance can damage the assembly as a working organisation as well as its public reputation.

DIMENSIONS OF THE OFFICE

In addition to the speaker's ceremonial activities and symbolic functions, there are at least six other possible dimensions of activity in which he may be expected to engage and which can provide him with significant influence within the assembly.

First, the speaker is often ultimately responsible for the management of the assembly. Most of the day-to-day administrative responsibilities may be delegated to a secretary general or other chief

administrative officer. However, this officer frequently is accountable to (primarily appointed and removable by) the speaker. If so, the speaker can exercise significant influence over the assembly's facilities – buildings, staff, information resources and so on. In part as a consequence, the speaker may be intimately involved in setting and allocating the assembly's budget. These powers enable the speaker to affect the well-being of the assembly and its individual members who, in anticipation or as a result, can become beholden to him. In ways sometimes obvious and sometimes subtle, a clever speaker who is so inclined can translate administrative responsibility into political influence.

Second, and deriving from the first, the speaker may become responsible for allocating the assembly's resources among members and party groups. These resources always include the mundane but essential: office space, equipment – especially computer and communications systems – and staff. Often the line between resources and perquisites of office becomes indistinct – when, for example, the speaker can control, directly or indirectly, the allocation of official cars and drivers, apartments that the assembly owns or rents for its members, and opportunities to travel abroad as members of official parliamentary delegations. Even when the speaker shares such administrative and allocative powers with others (such as a committee of party leaders or the standing committees that each house of the US Congress has established for this purpose), he still may retain some ability to use them to reward or punish.

Third, the speaker may be involved in determining the assembly's work plan – for the session, but also for the next day and the coming week – especially the agenda of bills and resolutions to be considered and other questions to be debated during plenary sessions. The assembly's standing orders may assign this power to him exclusively, or he may share it with other members of his party or with a multi-party steering committee that often is composed of fraction leaders or their designees. In the last case, the actual influence exercised by opposition parties will depend on at least two factors: the ability that the constitution and the assembly's standing orders give the government and its assembly supporters to control committee and plenary agendas; and the distribution of seats among party groups in the assembly and on the steering committee itself.¹

Fourth, the speaker is to preside during plenary sessions, though he may share this responsibility with others, and to apply and enforce the assembly's standing orders. He has the authority to interpret the rules of procedure, to resolve procedural disputes and