



**Special Visit of the Speaker of the House of Commons of the United Kingdom**  
*Virginia State Capitol*  
*May 28, 2019*

**Opening Remarks**

**The Right Honourable John S. Bercow, MP, Speaker of the House of Commons of the United Kingdom**

The Right Honourable John S. Bercow, MP:  
Colleagues, ladies, and gentlemen...

Tommy! Senator Tommy, Senator Norment is a lot more experienced than I am. And he has just sagaciously observed to me that he learned a long time ago that if he was getting applause before he started to speak, it was probably a good idea to sit down. Or otherwise colloquially known as, quit while you're ahead.

And indeed I'm bound to say on the strength of that extraordinary generosity from Speaker Cox, buttressed by comparable generosity from Senator Norment, that having heard myself introduced, and notwithstanding your wise counsel, having heard myself introduced, ladies and gentlemen, I can hardly wait to hear myself speak! Whether I'll feel the same way, and more particularly, whether *you'll* feel the same way at the end of my remarks is a matter for legitimate speculation and conjecture.

But I want to start by placing on the record, before I say anything further, my profuse appreciation of and gratitude to you, lead by Speaker Cox and his extraordinarily warm and gracious wife, Julie, because I have been here but an hour or so, and I have been made to feel incredibly welcome. We had not previously met, we did not know each other personally, but within the space of not much more than 60 minutes, I feel there's an umbilical cord that ties us. And that is based, I hope, upon some notable degree of personal empathy, reinforced by the fact of our devotion to comparable and comparably, that is to say by each of us, valued democratic ideals.

Now before I dwell on some of these matters at quite the most propitious and momentous time in the history of Virginia, I just want briefly to rewind the tape, if you will, and to refer to something that was said a few moments ago by Speaker Cox in showing his very considerable familiarity with the evolution of British parliamentary democracy. He referred to really the *raison d'etre* of the speaker.

Because people, you know, often say to me, even now in the UK, “Mr. Speaker, why are you so called, because even though you speak in the chamber as a moderator, as a referee, as an umpire, you don’t speak in debates.” Indeed, my constituents in Buckingham sometimes say that.

Well, the answer is that originally, the Speaker was so called because the speaker was expected to be the Monarch’s, that is to say the King’s, spokesman to Parliament. This was well before - not just decades or generations, but centuries before - the successful resolution of the battle for the establishment and consolidation of parliamentary democracy.

The Speaker in those earlier centuries was not merely expected or exhorted, my friends, ladies and gentlemen, but required as a matter of explicit and continuing obligation, to seek to do the monarch’s will in Parliament. And very specifically, to communicate the wishes of said monarch and to seek to secure the compliance of Parliament with those wishes, which as you correctly and perceptively noted, generally involved securing Parliament’s support in the raising of the requisite taxes to finance the conduct of wars, not least but notably in and with France.

And it is really the story of the development of our democracy in the United Kingdom that the speaker eventually ceased to be the King’s spokesman to Parliament and became instead *Parliament’s* spokesman to the *King*. And over the last 60+ years, Parliament’s spokesman to Her Majesty the Queen.

And therefore I just want to treat one quite sensitive matter, which I think your natural courtesy will probably disincline you to raise with me directly, but which if unaddressed, will lurk mischievously, perhaps from my vantage point, my friends, *perilously* in the undergrowth and therefore must be knocked on the head at the outset. And that is the sensitive and delicate matter of height.

Very specifically, it has been rooted in some of the more downmarket parts of the media that I’m the shortest man ever to be Speaker of the U.K. House of Commons.

Now I always say that there is nothing wrong with being short. We short people should stick together. We may be short, but we might also be perfectly formed, and in any case, we’re environmentally friendly because we don’t take up a lot of space!

Moreover I’m making a virtue of necessity, my friends. I’ve always been short. I’m now 56 years old, and I remain short, and given the known impacts of the aging process on physiognomy, the overwhelming likelihood is that I shall become inexorably and irrevocably shorter still. And I’m completely relaxed about that continued and soon-to-be exacerbated shortness.

But I'm not intensely relaxed about the historical accuracy. It's quite wrong what some of these more downmarket scribblers say, that John Bercow is the shortest man ever to be Speaker of the U.K. House of Commons. Sir John Bussy, Speaker of the House from 1394 to 1398. Sir John Wenlock, Speaker of the House from 1455 to 1456, and Sir Thomas Tresham, Speaker of the House in 1459, are all believed to have been shorter than I am, although I do have to admit that it was true only after all three of them had been beheaded.

Indeed, as you rightly observed, Mr. Speaker, no fewer than seven of my predecessors met their end on the executioner's block. One was killed in battle, and a further poor unfortunate soul was brutally murdered. So you will understand that this does enable me to view the weights and challenges which afflict and confront the House of Commons, and which can periodically afflict and confront *me*, with an appropriate sense of historical perspective. That is to say, whatever else happens to me, I'm not likely to lose my head, notwithstanding the occasional rumors and the printed wishlists to the contrary.

And it is a joy to be here. I won't say that I'm a regular, frequent, prolific visitor to the United States, but I've been several times. I remember my first experience aged 12 going to Disney World with my sister and my mother on a much enjoyed holiday, and I've been a number of times to Florida. I've been to Washington on a number of occasions, and indeed to New York. And indeed last time I was here, I also went, as I should be going tomorrow, to Boston as well.

I've never been to *this* building, and what a treat it is. Because we are marking and celebrating 400 years since the establishment of a representative legislature. That calling together, very similar to the evolution of the British story, of those 22 burgesses, was the sign post. It was the mission light, which led to something very much greater, richer, and fuller in later years, decades, and centuries.

And to see that history writ large here so magnificently, but also in a sense, my friends, ladies and gentlemen, so compactly in one place-- You're in the sight of the old chamber, the presence of the new chamber. The House of Delegates, the Senate, the significance of the Lieutenant Governor in the Senate, even the beautiful symmetry of the two houses meeting for different periods of time in odd years and even years, depending upon, as I understand it, the passage of the budget and therefore the requisite allocation of time that was needed in the light of the extent of the duties-- All of that speaks to your priorities, the needs of your legislature, and of course the presence of those two chambers underscores quite an important principle of some sort of diffusion, very very consistent with the whole American tradition of power, so that there isn't an exclusive concentration in one person or even in one assembly.

And what do we celebrate? Because we do; I'm not here just in a spirit of politeness, although there is no harm in good manners and much harm in bad. We do celebrate the fact that we believe in legislatures. We believe that representatives have a duty not to act as nodding donkeys, but to serve, to use their judgment, to study, to question, to probe, to scrutinize, to challenge, periodically even to contradict or expose the errors of omission or of commission of the executive of the day, be it at a very local level, at a state level, or indeed for that matter, at a federal level.

And all of those concepts, those notions, are encapsulated and almost enshrined and emblazoned right across this building, with wonderful depictions of people who played an important role in Virginia legislatures. Not to mention your great presidents of the United States, several of whom are here featured-- People very special to you, but also, if I may say so, hugely revered by us in the United Kingdom. And the values that we share, notwithstanding differences on individual issues from time to time, are values that have stood the test of time.

I, in my country, am obliged to be impartial between the political parties, between the government and the opposition. But I always say I'm impartial within the chamber. But I'm not impartial *about* the chamber. I'm not impartial about democracy. I'm not impartial about the rule of law. I'm not impartial about the merits of representative democracy. I'm not impartial about the compelling requirement, the crucial imperative, of the distribution of power amongst several different forces in any free society.

And there's something else about which, if I may say so, representatives, members of civil society, ladies and gentlemen, I'm not impartial. I'm not impartial in my conviction that for all its shortcomings and its sharp edges and its weaknesses, the society that creates wealth through business, through entrepreneurship, through self-reliance, is likely to be a much more successful generator of wealth and motive force in the creation and maintenance of decent living standards, compatible with human liberty, than a society which is characterized by a command economy, an absence of enterprise, and by overweening state, or in your case federal, power.

Like most believers in liberal democracy - and I am passionate about liberal democracy, about pluralism, and about the principle that there is a "we" as well as a "me", that there are others as well as the self, that we are part of something wider - of course I believe that there is a protective role for government. There is an important principle that some services must be delivered by publicly funded sources or even directly by government agencies.

And I believe passionately that there should be both equality before the law for every citizen, regardless of race, of color, of creed, of gender, of sexual orientation, of disability. That to me should be part of the DNA of a decent society, and I think it's a sense that is widely shared across my country and, I am sure, across yours. But I do believe that there has to be a very, very, very substantial space for enterprise to flourish, for local representatives to serve their communities, and indeed for there to be one or another form of separation of powers.

Here in the United States, you have a very explicit separation of powers, to the extent that members of the administration don't sit in Congress, and you respect that principle of judicial independence.

In the United Kingdom, our separation of powers is a little different. We have a very strict separation of powers between Parliament and the judiciary and that concept of comity with the courts. Our recognition of their role, their recognition of ours, crucially underpins what I would call the democratic settlement in the U.K. We don't have quite the same separation of powers, as you know, because members of our government, members of the executive branch, members of

that body of people called ministers, do sit in Parliament, both in the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

Though they are very much the smaller part. We've got about 18 ministers in the House of Commons. We've got about 650 MPs. So MPs' role, the vast majority of MPs' role, is not to serve in government at any one time. The MP's role, as I said a few minutes ago, is to question and to probe and to scrutinize, to review legislation, to amend legislation, to improve legislation. And to study and challenge and question and probe and hold to account those responsible, not just for the presentation of legislation on behalf of government, but the pursuit of policy, and the administration of government business, and the conduct of the government as a whole. MPs are there to question and challenge that. And that is an incredibly important principle. A principle dear to your free society, and it's a principle dear to ours.

I think it was that great American Walter Lippmann who famously said, "In a free society, the state does not administer the affairs of men." In modern parlance, I hope he would've said, "it does not administer the affairs of men and women," but he said, "In a free society, the state does not administer the affairs of men. It administers justice among men," - and I would now add women - "who conduct their own affairs." An absolutely critical principle.

And you know, there's another thing in common with us. I think we're proud of our democracies. We're proud of our legislatures. We're proud of the civic commitment that people make.

I've just met one of your great civic representatives, who has now served 39 years as a legislator. And I jokingly and teasingly said to him, and he did not seem to look askance or take umbrage, that I wondered if he felt able, confidently, to say that he had now reached the midpoint of his legislative career. But he hinted to me that with the approach of elections, he would make no such commitment. He was not going to pronounce his prospective retirement, and it may well be that he's got more to go.

And I've met somebody else. Cause, you see, you're all part of the mix that makes you the happy, successful, thriving, proud, self-confident, sense of history-orientated legislature. I've just met your wonderful Virginia photographer, who started in 1968. Began over half a century ago - he looks very well on it.

And of course all these great Virginians who've gone on to the highest things in public service. I don't know whether it's something in the water, something about the Virginia diet, something about the countryside areas, but there seems to be a very high intelligence quota amongst the people of Virginia.

I said you are proud of who you are, and what you've done, and where you're going, and the values you embody. You're also proud about and conscious of your responsibility in this regard disseminating and inculcating into the young those values.

Because you reference very generously that I am passionate about the UK Youth Parliament. I chair it every year and have done since 2009. And I said to the UK Youth Parliament, which is an elected parliament and considerably more diverse in gender and ethnic terms, in fact, than the House of Commons, I said, "Look, I'm not going to picket you. I'm not going to turn up uninvited. But if you want, I promise you that I'll come to your conference wherever it takes place in the United Kingdom every year to talk."

And if you're a real cynic, you'll say, "Well, John, you'll do that because John, generally speaking, is generally speaking. And you like speaking, and you want to speak to them." And of course, you'd be right.

But I go for another reason into the Speaker's chair to chair their session, on the green, leather benches of the House of Commons, once a year and to their conference. And that is because I believe, as you clearly in Virginia believe, with 70 years track record of having a model legislature for young people from across Virginia-- I believe that if we want to be respected *by* young people, who are, after all, the future of our democracy and, in a very real sense, the future of our country, we have to show respect *for* young people. Respect is not our automatic right; it's an earned credit, or a two-way street if you will.

And you know, I often say to people in my own constituency who know nothing of the work of the Youth Parliament that it's important. And I tell them about the education center that we've built in Parliament, adjacent to the House of Lords, which opened in 2015. You've had a brilliant visitor center in Washington for as long as I can remember. We've only just recently established our education center. A digital, interactive, high-tech, state-of-the-art, cutting-edge facility which is allowing us to bring 100,000 young people a year to Parliament to learn about the journey from the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 to the rights and responsibilities which citizens enjoy today.

Well, we can't exactly be accused of hurrying matters, because the center was opened in the year that marked the 800 year anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta. But all these things speak to the premium that we attach to building a rapport, with an offering of respect and encouragement, to the next generation of citizens, of voters, of legislators, of executive office holders, and of others in public service.

And what a joy it is to be with you to mark the 400th anniversary, and so much imagination is being brought to bear. So much loving care addressed with four centuries of prominent women who made a difference to Virginia. A wonderful guide focused on so many features of the history of Virginia, of the way in which you've cherished, honed, nurtured, and built upon your Democratic principles. And you certainly know, if I may say so-- Your guides know how to pluck at the heartstrings of a visiting British speaker, because not only did you tell me about your great presidents-- I've read about some of your great presidents. Indeed, my favorite book, my favorite American book is actually Robert Caro's four volume biography of Lyndon Johnson. The most stunning book about a quite extraordinary individual. Remarkable in all sorts of different ways, remarkable in good, remarkable in bad, but an amazing figure. And in fact Caro,

in the end of the fourth volume, hasn't actually got to talking about the war in Vietnam or the Great Society programs. I gather that awaits the fifth volume of his extraordinary work.

But you also know to talk about heroes dear to Britain. And let me just finish with saying that I feel incredibly proud to come [here] where one of the great British statespersons of all time, one of the greatest British statesmen ever [also came]. There's no greater British statesman in wartime than Winston Churchill. And if there's anybody here who could even remember Churchill alive, well you have the advantage on me. Churchill died sadly for me when I was two. But Churchill really was a great, and we were just talking about Nancy Astor and his famously feisty, some would say toxic, relationship with Nancy Astor.

But I want to finish on a slightly different note, which is testament to how some people, no rhyme or reason to this, just seem to endure and endure and endure and keep the sharpest of wits. Many of the stories about Churchill are very well known, but I just want to finish in thanking you and celebrating the Virginia legislature and Virginian democracy by telling you this:

On the occasion of Churchill's 90th birthday, there was a rookie reporter on the London *Evening Standard* who was really keen to report on this party Conservative MPs were holding for Churchill in the House of Commons. And the young reporter went in to see the editor and said, "Sir, I was brought up by my parents to admire Churchill. I've got memorabilia of Churchill. I know some of the great speeches of Churchill. Conservative MPs are holding a great party for Churchill. May I go, sir, and report on it?"

And the editor said, "Yeah, you go, and you file your copy." And the young man goes to this great party in one of the great rooms of the House of Commons. And he wrangles his way to the front where Churchill is sitting and having attendance danced upon him, really, by Conservative MPs.

And the young reporter is completely overcome with emotion. He manages to get himself introduced, and he says, "Wow, Sir Winston, you know, this is the most extraordinary honor for me. I'm a new reporter on the London *Evening Standard*. But I've always admired you, my parents admire you. I've been brought up to admire you. This is a really quite remarkable day."

And Churchill said absolutely nothing, just sort of sat there and nodded. And the young man, becoming completely overcome, said, "Sir, in wishing you a happy 90th birthday - this is the happiest day of my life - I just hope, Sir, if it isn't presumptuous of me, that I may be able to come back here in ten years time on the occasion of your 100th birthday to offer you my birthday greetings."

To which Churchill at the age of 90, with barely a pause for breath, replied, "I don't see why not, young man. You look perfectly healthy to me."

So there you are. Thank you very much indeed. Here's to the next 400 years of Virginian democracy and the next 400 years of United States democracy. Thank you. Thank you.