The House of Commons at Work

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Eric Taylor

NINTH EDITION

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Preface to the Ninth Edition

BEFORE the last edition of this book appeared, the House of Commons, in one of its periodical outbursts of reforming zeal, put into effect most of the changes which were foreshadowed in previous editions. Not all the changes were really improvements, and they have certainly made the task of explaining the procedure much more difficult and the book therefore rather more complicated.

Further changes have been made since then, of a less fundamental nature but still requiring extensive alteration of detailed descriptions, particularly in the sphere of committee work. With the imminent threat of devolution, still further and more drastic changes may be needed. Who can say that the procedure of the House never changes? For the student and the writer it changes far too much. All that can be done is to indicate what has already happened and what is likely to happen in the future.

I am indebted to my colleagues H. M. Barclay, W. R. McKay, R. J. Willoughby, S. A. L. Panton, R. B. Sands and M. H. Cooper for help in preparing the corrections and reading the proofs of this edition; and to my secretary, Miss Beatrix Hawkins, who kindly typed the new material.

E. T.

Introduction

PARLIAMENT, like the great Duke, might reasonably complain that it has of late been 'much exposed to authors'. Varying in scope and excellence from the latest edition of Erskine May's *Parliamentary Practice* to the least informed criticisms, more books on this great institution have appeared in the last ten years than, probably, the previous thirty years. It may safely be assumed that so copious a supply must accurately reflect the urgency of the demand. Even without the appearance of these new books on Parliament, the vast increase in the sales of *Hansard*¹ and the long queues which every day wait patiently in rain and sun outside St Stephen's porch in the hope of admission to the galleries are evidence enough of the new and intense interest in Parliament and matters parliamentary. It is undoubtedly a healthy interest. No one can deny that it is to the advantage of a democratic state that its members should be anxious to know as much as possible about the workings of their State and its Government. No one can deny that the desire for such knowledge should be as fully satisfied as possible. There is every justification for as great an abundance of books on this and related subjects as can be provided.

I do not, however, offer this work merely as a contribution to this desirable abundance. At the time when it was first projected (1943) there were hardly any books on the procedure of Parliament which were not either out of date or unprocurable or both. The standard works on the subject, such as the great *Parliamentary Practice* of Erskine May, were not in fact designed for the general reader, even if they had been in print. I wished to provide an account of the procedure of the House of Commons –

¹ The total daily issue of *Hansard* reached 12,100 copies in May 1946: the total issue of the *Weekly Hansard* reached a peak of 16,500 at that period, and although the figures have since declined, they are still running at between 10,000 and 15,000. Up to 1944, the total sales of *Hansard* were less than 3,000.

nothing more – which should be of a reasonable size, intelligible to the educated reader, and readable. I also wished it to be completely accurate in all its details, holding as I did that in a work which is a description of fact, accuracy was essential. It was not my desire to provide a ‘child’s guide to Parliament’. I considered it justifiable to assume a certain knowledge of fundamentals in my readers: for instance, that there are two Houses of Parliament, the one elected, and the other hereditary, and that the Government was selected by the Prime Minister from both Houses. On the other hand, I did not consider myself justified in assuming that the unprofessional reader was equipped with a much closer acquaintance with the facts than this. I wished to take him by the hand and guide him through the intricacies – for they are intricacies – of parliamentary procedure.

A large section of the British public is probably unaware even of the essentials of the procedure of the House of Commons. But an increasingly large number of people has become very much aware of it, through the reports of Parliament in the press and daily broadcasts. Fairly elementary questions, such as who decides the programme of Parliament, how long does the House sit and why, what is the Adjournment which is so much discussed, I felt needed an answer; and I attempted to answer them in this book. There was another kind of question which I felt also needed an answer – the question asked by the new Member of Parliament, ‘How can I put down an amendment to a Bill? What opportunities will I have of speaking on this subject? How can I oppose this measure?’ These questions also I set out to answer.

Certainly the position with regard to books on Parliament has greatly improved since this book was first projected. But I still feel that there is too great a gap between the sublime, formidable, almost unreadable quality of books like Erskine May,¹ and the ordinary handbook on Parliament, so often grossly inaccurate, pretentious, undignified, and often almost as unreadable as May. There is no reason why a readable book should not be a book of reference. There is a class of worthy people who continue to reiterate that Parliamentary Procedure is out of date and ought to be reformed. They know nothing about Parliamentary procedure, but they know it needs to be reformed because the Press says so. There is here a chance for such people to remedy their ignorance (and perhaps to change their opinions).

¹ The first edition of Erskine May’s *Parliamentary Practice* was in fact an elegant treatise. Constant amendment over the years has produced the railway time-table book with which Members are familiar.

The method of approach which I have employed is perhaps unusual. The effect of the physical accidents of the chamber in which the House of Commons meets is undeniably great. I have, therefore, devoted a first chapter to describing it. But thereafter I have attempted to follow the ramification of the various parts of procedure from the firm basis of formal motion. Though the procedure of the House of Commons is, like so many things English, to a great extent empirical, it is also ultimately based upon firmly held theoretical postulates: upon legal fictions which are almost as old as English history. It has seemed to me that it was in this way possible to bring to the study of procedure a greater unity of view than has usually been achieved in such works. Thus, though the material does not yield itself easily to literary graces, I hoped to produce a book which would combine pleasure with profit, or perhaps offer profit with the minimum of weariness.

It remains for me to express my deep sense of gratitude to the great writers of the past upon procedure, whose works I have pilfered, to the late Lord Campion, Clerk of the House, to the late Commander Sir Stephen King-Hall whose generous encouragement was primarily responsible for my attempting the book, and to my former colleagues, L. A. Abraham, C.B., C.B.E., and the late Sinclair Kingdom, who so kindly revised the work and assisted me in various ways.

Chapter 2 was first published as an article in *Parliamentary Affairs*, some years ago.