

AN UNUSUAL PARLIAMENT?
SOME FIRST IMPRESSIONS

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Everyone I meet tells me that this is an unusual Parliament. I wouldn't know. It's my first. All I can say is that it is the most interesting Parliament of which I have been a Member. Having been elected the Member on March 1st, the next thing to wait for was to find out whether I would be on the Government or the Opposition benches. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of how Labour came to Government in 1974 will be seen to be how Harold Wilson and the Shadow Cabinet conducted itself over that first crucial weekend.

Whilst Ted Heath and Jeremy Thorpe were thrashing about to find a workable formula for the Conservatives to continue to rule, Labour leaders maintained the maximum of silence - and were rewarded with high office. There must be a moral somewhere.

I came to Westminster, no stranger to the place. After all, I had been the Secretary to the Co-operative Parliamentary Group for seven years and in that capacity had trod the well-worn corridors. Not - even yet - all three miles of them or remotely have I entered more than a fraction of the 1100 rooms which are in the place. But I was familiar with the broad setting. Now, now, after two months as a Member of Parliament, does the place strike me from the inside instead of on the fringe?

It is by any yardstick a place of contrasts. One moment, such as listening to the Chancellor present his Budget, the Debating Chamber is a sea of faces, every one of them appearing to be riveted to the Chancellor as he carefully soldiers on through more than 2½ hours of carefully prepared and cogently argued economic analysis and pronouncement. These occasions, when the House is packed,

are rare. When a great debate opens - such as on the Queen's Speech or the Budget, or when it closes on a major debate, when the Front Bench spokesmen respond to the excited atmosphere, goaded on by their excited and exuberant supporters. At other times a place almost of ridiculous pretension. Like when debates on education or on the Sharp Report dealing with the disabled - topics vital and central to the future of so many millions of people. And yet there will rarely be more than a handful of Members on both sides of the Chamber.

And whereas before entry into the House I would get exceedingly angry at what I felt that this conveyed - a scant disregard for the importance of the subject - I now understand how this place tries to work.

A lack of attendance in the Chamber is no indication of a lack of interest in the topic. It may well be an indication of the power of the speaker as an attraction. But whilst the Chamber may be sparsely attended, very often there are literally dozens of other occasions throughout the Palace of Westminster where Members are meeting their constituents, gathering in their subject groups, or quite simply reading the mass of documentation, the better to understand what is happening. It must look strange, as a member of the public, very often struggling to gain a seat, to look down on the empty green benches. But the place still works.

I have discovered that it is all too easy to waste a lot of time. One needs to begin the working day with a fairly detailed idea of how it is to be spent. Correspondence to be cleared. Special meetings to attend. For instance, meetings of the Parliamentary Labour Party, which provide an opportunity for every back bench Member to question and challenge Members of the Government. Perhaps meetings of Standing Committees to attend. These are the Committees which will examine the legislation in detail, amending and seeking to improve the Bill at its Second and subsequent Readings. I have been a Member on the Independent Broadcasting Bill. I now serve on the Prices Bill. This

promises to be an invigorating exercise because the whole philosophy behind the Bill is a challenge to the Conservative philosophy and is central to the economic and social policies of a Labour Government.

On a number of occasions in the past, I have been part of a lobby. With others I have sent in green cards asking for my Member of Parliament to come out and face the music. I was recently on the receiving end. Teachers in Edmonton schools joined with other London colleagues and marched on the House of Commons, demanding that the London Weighting Allowance be given forthwith - or else. I had to meet more than one hundred of them and explain that it was likely to be "or else". It proved to be a worthwhile and satisfying experience. Being able to say that I sympathised with and would support their cause must have helped. Next week I will be meeting my first party of school children and conducting them round the House. Thus the familiar or accepted pattern of how a Member of Parliament is seen by the public is beginning to take shape.

Being a Member of Parliament is more than attending Westminster, listening and making speeches. Some people say it is difficult to get into debates, but whether by good luck or judgement, within the first two months of Membership I have been able to make four speeches, including, of course, my own Maiden Speech. "Get it over quickly". "Wait until there is a subject in which you can show your specialised knowledge". "Wait until the mood takes you, speak extempore, and it will be most effective". I decided to prepare, as carefully as I could, to get in as quickly as I could, on a subject about which I felt I could claim some knowledge. Thus in the first week that the House met, in order to debate the Queen's Speech, I made my Maiden. When I had sat down after thirteen minutes of world-shattering and historic prose, I wondered why I had made so much fuss. It was almost painless - afterwards.

Representing a constituency near Westminster (Edmonton is about 10/12 miles away), it is highly convenient to be involved in constituency affairs. Visits to clubs and groups to meet and discover have, if not exactly poured in, then at least come in a steady trickle. They are an exceedingly good means of meeting the constituents. A regular fortnightly surgery when there has been not less than twenty constituents with problems provides the other side of the picture. If every other Member of Parliament has precisely the same experience as I have, then there are very many unhappy and desperate people with problems which appear to be unsurmountable. Their faith in the ability of their Member of Parliament to solve their problems after they have been rebuffed in a number of places, is touching, and at times alarming. At the same time it is also inspiring and one tackles these human problems with humility and urgency.

I have asked my first Parliamentary questions. Nothing world-shattering. When will the local road controversy be adjudicated on by the Minister? Can the cut-back in educational expenditure announced by the previous Government be restored? How has my Borough complied with the provisions of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Act? Questions are an exceedingly good and quick way of receiving answers. They also demonstrate publicly that one is trying to do a job of work.

I have found that the Administration and the Civil Service is first-class when it comes to assisting a Member of Parliament to do his job of work. Prompt, courteous and efficient have been the responses to my calls upon the time, information and expertise of Civil Servants at Ministries and in the Palace. It may not always be so, but this is how it has struck me in my first two months.

Parliament is a place with enormous possibilities for a new Member. The opportunities are very largely self-made. Given that the Member wishes to represent the views of his constituents, help to shape the policy of his Party and effectively contribute to the Government of the country,

I can already see that there are endless ways in which these objectives can be pursued. Not every Member will look upon the House of Commons as the primary place at which they work. I do. I am, in the hackneyed phrase, a full-time Member of Parliament and as such I would imagine that I will be spending, whilst the House is sitting, not less than twelve hours every working day in the place. That being the case, a lifetime's experience in the Co-operative and Labour Movement will not allow me to waste many hours. Issues will emerge or be discerned and thereafter will be pursued. The need to maintain close and effective links with the Co-operative Movement, the better to represent the Co-operative point of view, will always be part of my commitment. But over all, there is the feeling that one can take part in an institution with historic and dynamic potential. One almost smells the fact that Westminster is the place where things can happen if one wants them to. After two months in the place, I have already decided that I intend to join in this process of helping to make things happen.