

# STILL ASKING WHY

## *Catherine Stewart's Quest For Knowledge Has Taken Her From Glasgow Local Bodies To A Seat In New Zealand's Parliament*

ONCE upon a time there was a little girl who always wanted to know the reason why, even more than most little girls, and when she grew up she became the only woman member of the New Zealand Parliament. But this isn't a fairy story, it is the tale of a woman who has spent her life in the pursuit of knowledge, the knowledge of humanity rather than of books.

Catherine Stewart, M.P., married and settled down in Glasgow when she was eighteen years of age. By the time she was 24 she had three sons, but she did not allow domesticity to bound her horizon. One night she asked her husband the meaning of a political cartoon in the paper, but he said it was something she could not understand, for those were the days when women were supposed to be contented with home and family.

However, this did not satisfy Mrs. Stewart, and one night as she was tucking up the baby she thought, "Now, why can't I understand these things?" She determined to find out more about such matters, and by persuading her relations to mind the children she managed to attend the meetings of the Glasgow City Council. Here she earned the title of the "lone woman in the gallery," and at the same time learned a lot about local government.

### University Lectures

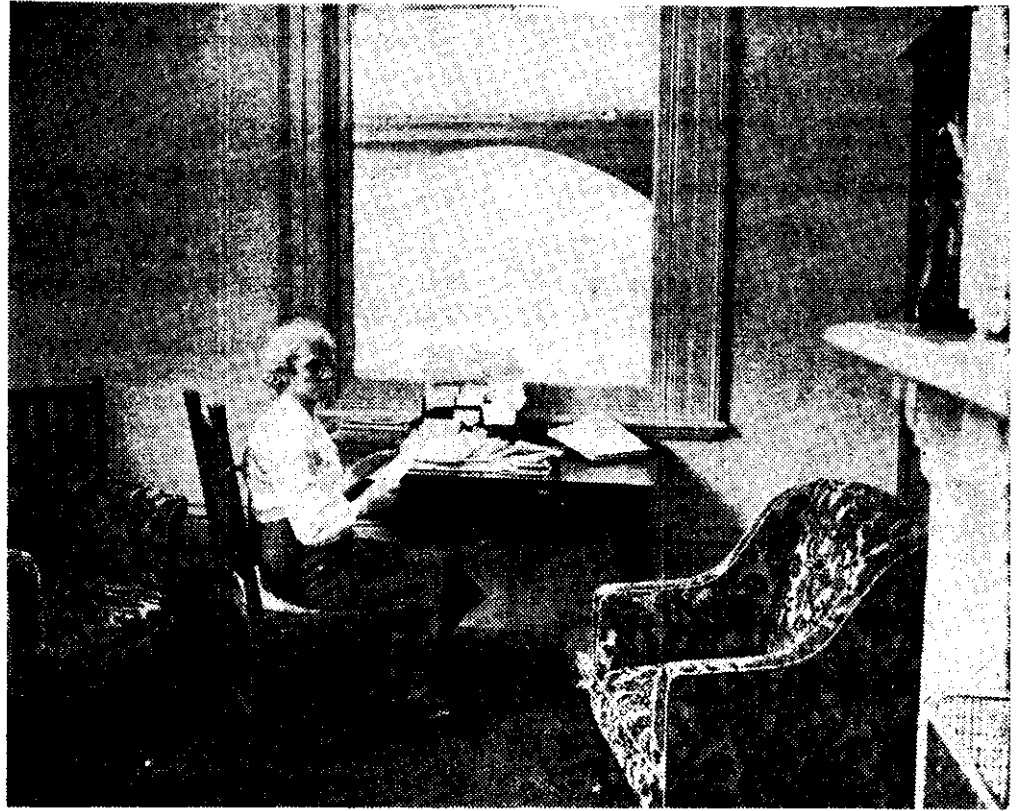
Her next venture was attending classes in Economics and Sociology at Glasgow University. This she managed to do by getting up at 5 a.m. in the morning and getting all her household chores done so that by the time evening came she could pop the babies into bed and go off to the lectures with a free conscience. While her women acquaintances were attending musical evenings and card parties, Mrs. Stewart was still asking "Why" about every question she did not understand. So she was drawn into societies of thinking people, and received a good grounding in committee and organisational work. Naturally, too, she became involved in the Suffragette Movement, but here her rather frail appearance saved her a lot of trouble, for though she was three times taken into custody, each time the police officials told her to go home and behave herself.

### To New Zealand

In 1921 the Stewart family moved to New Zealand, Mrs. Stewart bringing with her the fixed intention of having a rest, and letting public affairs run themselves without her assistance. But her reputation had preceded her, and before long she found herself the first President of the Women's Co-operative Guild. She was also before long active in the Women's Study Circle, the Aftercare Association, the Children's Club, and then in the National Council of Women.

### The Wrong Nomination Papers

Politics did not concern her unduly, although she was an active member of the Wellington Women's Labour Branch, and worked for Mr. Semple in the 1934 Election Campaign. Her friends, however, had



*SHE SITS ALONE: But Mrs. Catherine Stewart, New Zealand's only woman Member of Parliament, has had comfortable quarters provided for her in Parliament House. Here she is at her desk in her cosy but business-like room*

bolder plans for her than she had herself. After a lot of persuasion she allowed herself to be nominated, as she thought, as a candidate for the Hospital Board elections, but after signing the necessary papers she found that what she had signed were Parliamentary nomination forms! "I was flabbergasted. I had no thought or intention of standing for Parliament, so I went along to the meeting of the Labour Representation Committee with the fixed intention of withdrawing my nomination." But after several speeches had been made advocating her nomination a man got up and said that he would certainly not support the nomination—he was convinced that a mere woman

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*Mary Scott's Special Article will  
be found this week on page 51*

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could not represent the Labour cause adequately. The Stewart blood was up. No man should cast such a slur on the female sex. Mrs. Stewart decided at once that she would accept nomination.

### In Parliament

Now Mrs. Stewart is the possessor of a bench in Parliament, and a lovely light room in Parliament House. The authorities appear to be looking after her, too, for this, her room, is a very cosy place, with big windows, comfortable armchairs, and a bright fire burning these cold days.

Mrs. Stewart, when she was interviewed, admitted that the life of a new and feminine member of Parliament was not without difficulties. The swearing-in ceremony was a rather nerve-racking event, for the members were sworn in in batches in alphabetical order, and by the time "S" was reached the new lady member's knees were knocking together at the thought of the long walk down the floor of the House. But with Mr. Semple on one side and Mr. Sullivan on the other to support her, she managed it somehow. This ceremony broke the ice, so that when the time came for her to make her maiden speech she did not feel quite so nervous, though half an hour before she had a panicky fear that she might let down the women of New Zealand and spoil her speech. As everybody now knows she did no such thing.

### What To Wear

Mrs. Stewart, though a grandmother, and a proud one, too, retains the enthusiasm of youth. Slender and white-headed, she looks very smart as she occupies her bench in the House. She admitted that that eternal feminine problem of what to wear had worried her a little before her maiden speech, but she did as many a woman has done before and fell back on her "old black lace dress," so that she looked a dignified and capable figure when she spoke for the women of New Zealand in the House of Representatives. It is her desire to follow in the path blazed by Mrs. McCombs, working for the betterment of women and children by co-operating with the men in solving the many problems that lie ahead.