

AN INTERVIEW WITH MR. SPEAKER

Those "Noises Off" During Parliamentary Broadcasts

LISTENERS who tune in to broadcasts of Parliament—and it is probable that 2YA has a larger audience than any other station when the House is in session—are frequently puzzled by the extraneous noises which form a background to speeches. And they are apt to gain the impression that the New Zealand House of Representatives conducts its business to the accompaniment of continuous cross-talk and interruptions. With 80 members in session, a certain amount of noise from whispered conversations and interjections, and the rustling of papers on the desks, is inevitably picked up by the microphones, but in reality Parliament is conducted with dignity and decorum.

Some publicity having been given to listeners' complaints about distracting sounds accompanying Parliamentary broadcasts, *The Listener* interviewed the man who has supreme control over the Members, clerks, orderlies and messengers, the Hansard staff and the Press Gallery, and everybody who, while Parliament is sitting, is in the buildings. His powers are extraordinarily wide, but very rarely is he called upon to exercise them to the full. He is the Hon. Robert McKeen, the twelfth Speaker of the New Zealand Parliament.

The interview took place in Mr. Speaker's private room during a luncheon adjournment, after a heavy morning's work. The imposing wig, which catches the eye of every visitor to the House, sat on its special stand in a corner.

Protection of Privileges

Our first question was: "What amount of freedom is allowed to Members during a debate, and how far do restrictions go?"

"The Speaker's duties are to protect the rights, privileges, and liberties of every Member," said Mr. McKeen. "And, of course, the conduct of the House is always subject to Standing Orders. Radio listeners are quite wrong when they think uproar is the usual thing in the House."

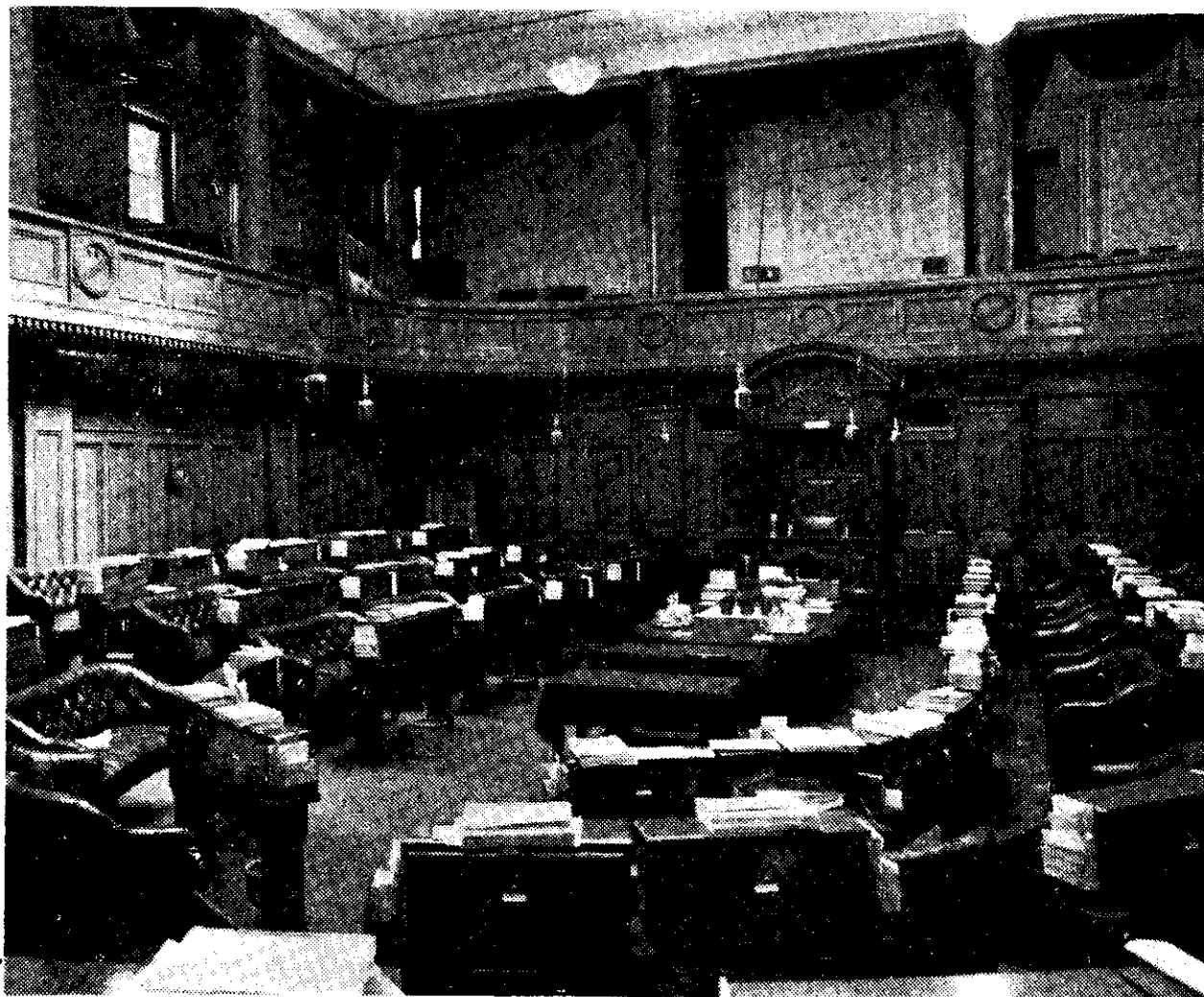
It was curious that although the House might be perfectly quiet and calm, many sounds, unconnected with the debate, went over the air, he added. Those noises—in audible to most members, and to him, as Speaker—were picked up by the extremely sensitive microphones, and magnified out of all proportion.

This led us to ask Mr. Speaker about the duties of his office in general. How, for instance, was the order of speakers in a debate arranged?

Catching the Eye

"A Member simply rises to his feet—generally one in turn from either side of the House—and catches the Speaker's eye. If several rise at once, it is usually the Member who shouts 'Mr. Speaker' most loudly and effectively who gets the floor."

In the case of full-dress debates, of course, the order of speakers is usually arranged by the Whips on each side of the House.



THE CHAMBER of the House of Representatives. On the left of the photograph are the Government benches, on the right are those occupied by the Opposition, and above the front benches on both sides can be seen the microphones used in relaying debates. A special microphone stands by the Speaker's chair (centre background)

"What is the status of the front and back benches?"

"The first two front rows are occupied by Ministers of the Crown. In the Opposition ranks the Leader and his deputy have positions in the front benches. In each case the Party arranges where its Members shall sit, but when there is a vacancy, individual preferences are also considered."

"In debate, what privileges of interjection does a Minister possess?"

"He may interrupt if what he has to say is relevant and to the point, for very often he can assist the debate by amplifying and clarifying the matter or point being discussed. But all interjections must be relevant and not disorderly. When they become too frequent it amounts to heckling and heckling is absolutely forbidden."

Noises on the Air

"Is it part of your duty to try to minimise interference and irrelevancies,

with an ear to how the House sounds over the air?"

"As far as possible, yes. But, as I said before, many of these noises are quite inaudible to me, and to Members, and that, as far as I can see, is something that can't be helped. For instance, two Members may be talking in undertones beneath a microphone. The result is that their voices may sound as loud as, if not louder than, that of a Member speaking to the House from a position further away from a microphone. And they, themselves, are not aware that they can be heard by listeners. It is a problem that throws a good deal of responsibility on the Speaker."

It was suggested that, with the small difference in numerical strength between the two Parties, Standing Orders might be appealed to more than usual this session.

"Yes, that is quite likely," agreed Mr. McKeen.

"What does it mean when you say to a Member, 'I will name you!'"

"If a Member commits a serious breach of the rules of debate he is first warned. And then, if he persists, he can be 'named.' Then the Leader of the House can move that he be censured or be suspended from that particular sitting. 'Naming' very rarely occurs, as members are most co-operative. Mr. Speaker has considerable power, but is reluctant to use it. He can always, of course, put an end to what he considers unjustifiable interruption. Actually, it is the House itself that deals with a breach. I have found that Members conduct themselves extremely well. They co-operate and are helpful."

"Does it take long for a new Speaker to familiarise himself with Members' names or their constituencies?"

"Yes, but one soon gets used to it. The changes in the electoral boundaries have made it a little more difficult this session."

The last question to Mr. Speaker was: "What special forms of etiquette are observed in the House?"

Mr. McKeen explained that on entering or leaving the House during a session, Members bowed to the Speaker's Chair. They observed the same courtesy when crossing the floor of the House.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES SUPPLEMENT

WITH this number of "The Listener" our readers will receive a Supplement containing photographs of all the Members of the present Parliament and a plan of the House of Representatives showing where each Member sits.

A limited number of extra copies of this issue (with the Supplement) will be available on application to "THE LISTENER" PUBLICATION DEPARTMENT. These will be posted to any address on receipt of fourpence a copy in stamps.