

Short Wave Adapter--Sidelights on Programmes-- Afternoon Sessions for Ladies--2YA "Uncle" arranged

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How the New Zealand Parliament Does Its Work

In this series of talks, Mr. C. E. Wheeler, for twenty years an interested spectator of Parliament from that best vantage point of all, the Press Gallery, will tell radio listeners something of the workings of the "machine" that grinds out legislation so faithfully. The illustration gives a glimpse of the House of Parliament. The whole scheme is not yet complete but the main wing has been in working occupancy for two years.

In this series of talks on the Parliament of New Zealand the aim will be—not to deal with the historical side of this institution (though the story of its development is fascinating)—but to give listeners as vivid an impression as possible of the parliamentary atmosphere and how the machine works. There will be some peeps into the inside mechanism, too.

My impressions of Parliament have been gained in the privileged position of lobby correspondent for many New Zealand papers, an experience extending over twenty years. So I have seen Governments created and Governments disappear—parties spring up, and some of these have also disappeared.

Now, to start with the House of Representatives—the elected part of the machine. The Legislative Council, our colonial House of Lords, can be left for future description.

Parliament sits from Tuesday till Friday inclusive, commencing each afternoon at 2.30, when Mr. Speaker (the equivalent of the chairman at an ordinary public meeting) enters the Chamber in solemn state, preceded by the Sergeant-at-Arms, whose stentorian voice announces "Mr. Speaker." The eighty members immediately stand while the opening prayer is repeated from the Chair.

Parliament always opens with a very beautiful prayer. Only members, the Press, and ladies are permitted to hear this, so that it will be unfamiliar to most people. It was a jocular suggestion of the late Mr. Massey that when Mr. Speaker enters Parliament he bows "first to the Government, then to the Opposition—and prays for the country."

And this is the prayer:

Almighty God, we Thy unworthy servants, do most humbly beseech Thee to grant that we, having Thy fear always before our eyes, and laying aside all private interests, prejudices, and partial affections, the result of all our counsels may be to the glory of Thy name, the maintenance of true religion and justice, the honour of the King, and the public wealth, peace, and tranquillity of the Dominion, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

THE "AYES" AND THE "NOES."

I have never known this supplication against "partial prejudice" to take the keen edge off any of the Opposition question to Ministers, which soon follow but one must give credit to the members for an anxiety to do their best in the Dominion's interests, though the clash arises over what is best. Two points of view are frankly recognised by the existence of the "Ayes" and "Noes" division lobbies. Members often regret that there is not a third lobby. If they cannot make up their mind they have to stay away, for when a division is taken the whole House, except Mr. Speaker, departs into the division lobbies, and the names are taken as the members file back to their places.

Now and again in our own Parliamentary proceedings one notices a form

or a phrase which vividly brings to mind old struggles between the King and Parliament. Our own representative institution has never had to fight seriously for its privileges, but as it follows English precedents it is careful even to this day that there is no encroachment by the Crown. When a Speaker is elected by Parliament he is presented to the Governor-General, as the representative of His Majesty the King, and approval of the choice is requested.

Approval having been given, Mr. Speaker then asserts the authority of Parliament. He says to the King's representative: "Thanking Your Excellency for your approbation of the choice made by the House of Representatives of me to be their Speaker, I have now on behalf of the House of

Parliament we would have to stand 40 hours of speech-making. If a Bill is being considered in committee, a member may speak four times on one question on each occasion for ten minutes. A little arithmetic will soon show why there is so much talk, and you will also notice that Parliament as a rule does not by any means exercise its full debating privileges.

PHYSICAL EXHAUSTION THE CHECK.

How is the stream of oratory kept within bounds? It is by the simple expedient of physical exhaustion. Most Parliamentary decisions of importance seem to be made after midnight. This is a quaint institution which prefers to turn business methods upside down, and work when most sensible are asleep. We have seen Prime Min-

isters in New Zealand with the happy inspiration to start earlier in the day, and finish at a reasonable hour. But the idea has never worked. If those eighty members want to talk, the hours easily slip by, and a Government patiently waiting for decision finds that after the galleries have been cleared of spectators about 10 o'clock the talk stream diminishes until it finally peters out in those trying hours just before the dawn. Only the most determined speaker will sit up all night waiting for his chance, and then the chance comes along after the audience has gone home!

But the critic still thinks that Mr. Smith has been telling tarradiddles, so he cautiously words his opinion in this way: "The honourable member for Wellington has made a seriously inaccurate statement." This is quite polite and parliamentary.

Notice the difference between the curt phrase, "You are wrong," and the Parliamentary method of indirect address, "The hon. member is wrong." Thus the Standing Orders help to keep the peace.

I remember one occasion when a legislator highly incensed commenced to trounce an opponent, and it became quite evident that he was proceeding to call him a liar. However, Mr. Speaker stopped him in time, so the member naively asked "Mr. Speaker, may I say it and then withdraw it?"

There is a lively debate, feeling is

ORATORY IS ABSENT.

Most visitors are disappointed at the lack of oratory in Parliament. Parliamentary speech, one must admit, is very commonplace. Now and again we are stirred by a great speech-making effort, but that is a rare treat. There has to be a suitable subject worthy of oratory, but ninety-nine per cent. of the subjects before Parliament are best discussed in tones almost conversational. Occasionally a new member fresh from the election platform makes a stirring effort, but he seldom repeats it, because he notices that everybody refuses to be stirred. Some of his best friends, if it is late at night, may be lying asleep just in front of him, and most of those who are awake display an air of genial tolerance, while a critical opponent is very liable to interrupt with advice to "Get off the soap-box."

Who can work up genuine enthusiasm over the many important but dull subjects which Parliament must handle. This is the reason why we hear so few fine and finished speeches—there is no incitement to flowers of oratory. And as for making any impression on one's audience by the arts of oratory, well, they are all fairly skilled in the tricks of that trade.

The most interesting, the brightest public speeches are made when the audience is responsive. Experienced speakers even like a little interruption—it shows how the collective mind of the audience is acting. A Parliamentary audience—like my present one—is unresponsive. If I could see you smiling when I have tried to work off a joke it would help. A few "Hear, hears" would be encouraging.

An old Parliamentary friend once arranged for an interruption. The interjector at a certain point had to shout out something from the back of the hall. And the candidate was ready with a really witty response on Biblical lines.

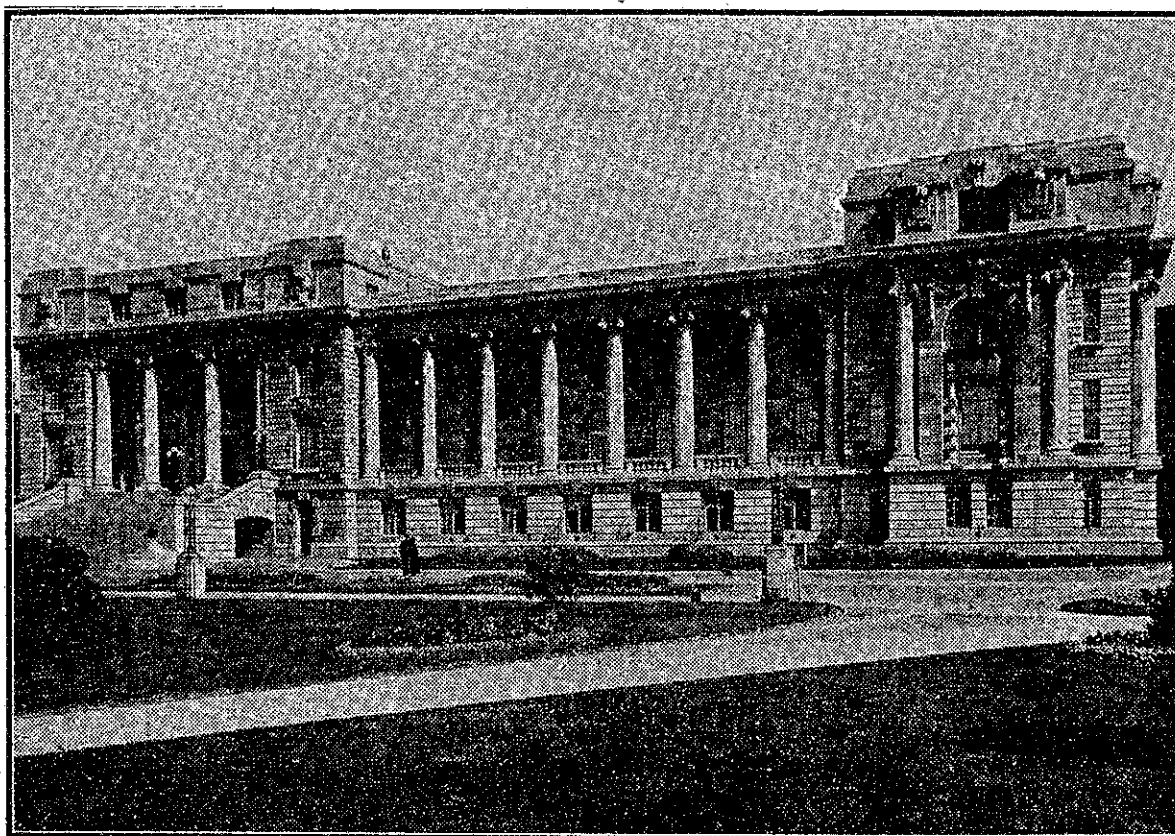
Alas for the little plot. The candidate's committee was not in the know, so when the interruption came a couple of committeemen handy to the interjector told him angrily to "keep his mouth shut," and roughly bundled him out.

TOO REALISTIC!

RUGBY MATCH BROADCAST.

This is how a Christchurch enthusiast recently expressed his appreciation of the description of a Rugby match: "For the past two weekends I have been fixing up my wireless, and consequently my garden has had to suffer. It was very hard this week-end to have to stop away from the football (being, by the way, a great lover of Rugby), but I felt that I simply had to get the garden into something like decent order. Well, I made a start, but during the mowing of the lawn I thought I would just listen in and hear how the match was going. The game was getting along all right. When it was finished I thought that the sooner I got home the better, because I had promised the wife I would stop at home and do that garden. Now, the trouble is that I am not certain whether I went to that match or not. I say that I did, but my wife will have it that I did not. The description was certainly excellent."

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GENERAL VIEW OF THE NEW WING OF PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS.

—Photo., Publicity Department.

Representatives of New Zealand to lay claim to all their privileges, and especially to freedom of debate, and to free access to Your Excellency whenever occasion may require it, and that the most favourable construction may be put on all their proceedings."

His Excellency in reply gives the assurance. That he will at all times place the most favourable constitution upon their proceedings, and he also confirms all the rights and privileges to the same extent, he says, as they have been granted hitherto.

NOW THE TALKING BEGINS.

Now, having installed Mr. Speaker, we get back to the proceedings—the talk shop gets to work—talking. This is a favourite jibe at Parliament, but the institution will always be a big talking machine, and it cannot be avoided. If some Mussolini arose who could cut down the volume of words, criticism from outside Parliament would be worse than ever, for this is the right place to let off steam. Eighty constituencies are represented here, and they all have the right to have their point of view placed before Parliament. Every member may speak for half-an-hour on a question, and if they all took the op-

portunity we would have to stand 40 hours of speech-making. If a Bill is being considered in committee, a member may speak four times on one question on each occasion for ten minutes. A little arithmetic will soon show why there is so much talk, and you will also notice that Parliament as a rule does not by any means exercise its full debating privileges.

It is just as well that Parliament works slowly, because it deals with tremendous issues at times, and what it decides has to be carried out. A Parliamentary statute is enforced by all the machinery of the law—police, magistrates, judges, and in extreme cases the army. I have listened to our Parliament passing a law which forced every able-bodied man within certain ages to leave his home and his work, and enter an Expeditionary Force for five shillings a day. It was very reassuring then to realise that Parliament, with its cumbersome machinery, could not work too fast. Every oppor-

heated, and Mr. Smith has stirred up trouble with his tongue. A rival politician proceeds to demolish his arguments. We may even want to show that Mr. Smith has said something untrue. If he remarks across the floor of the House, "You are a liar!" Mr. Speaker intervenes in very severe tones, and demands a prompt withdrawal, which has to be made.

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