

# The Parliamentary Machine---Cabinet and Upper House

It is characteristic of our British way of "making things work," adapting methods to the need of the moment, that Cabinet, the all-important influence in politics, the main-spring of the whole business, finds no place in our Constitution. There is the Executive Council, which meets in a formal way now and then, with His Excellency the Governor-General presiding, and his ministerial advisers in attendance.

But the business transacted by the Executive Council has been already decided at meetings of Cabinet, highly confidential affairs with no secretary and no formal record. To-day's Cabinet meetings are held in the Prime Minister's room on the ground floor of Parliament Building. A Cabinet room specially designed, with its handsome panels of Canadian maple—a gift from our sister Dominion—is never used mainly because it is not accompanied by a sufficiently extensive or convenient suite of offices for the Prime Minister's large staff. But there it is, with the conventional double doors to ensure secrecy—the inside door of the usual type, and the outside covered with heavy thicknesses of baize.

Only a minister can describe the Cabinet meeting from the inside, but one picks up impressions of it as an informal gathering for frank and open criticism. One minister, self-centred in his own affairs, brings forward a proposal, and colleagues viewing it from the wider angle of the possible effect on the country and the popularity of the ministry, pull it to pieces in a friendly way.

And the Prime Minister, supreme chief, sits listening, and at the right moment gives a decision. That is the final word.

There is no resolution and no division. The opinion of Cabinet is always unanimous. Any Minister who differs strongly on an important issue has no alternative but to resign.

Cabinet is a political team, with the Prime Minister as captain and sole selector. In picking his team the captain has to consider many factors, such as geographical representation, and important interests. He tries also to secure a good debating team, because the Government's policy must be ably presented and defended in Parliament, and on the public platform.

## HOW IS THE CAPTAIN PICKED?

You will probably be asking by this time: "How is the Captain of the Cabinet team selected?" It happens in this way:—A general election results in the party which went to the country as the Government, being returned without a majority in the House of Representatives. Parliament meets, His Excellency the Governor-General delivers the Speech from the Throne, which is heard by the members of both Houses. Our elected members then proceed to debate the document on a formal motion: "That a respectful Address be presented to His Excellency, in reply to His Excellency's Speech."

The leader of the party having a

This is the last of Mr. C. E. Wheeler's present series on "Parliament and How It Works." From his observations, listeners have gathered a more vital impression of the "talking shop" and its functioning than was theirs before, but we do not think Mr. Wheeler has created any burning desire for Parliament to be put "on the air" as one of the standard items on the programme—not at least while stone-walling is in fashion. On this point, however, there is the experience of a European Parliament which was being broadcast. One long-winded speaker was holding forth at length, when he began receiving messages from his constituents telling him to "shut up." And he did! That promotes thoughts.... The day may come when major statements—the budget, for example, or a first class pronouncement of Imperial topics—may go direct to listeners from a microphone before Mr. Speaker, but, broadly speaking, listeners will be content to allow Mr. Wheeler and his friends to sift the wheat yet a while.

majority as a result of the elections moves an amendment something on these lines: "We deem it our duty to inform Your Excellency that your advisers have not the confidence of this House."

If that amendment is carried, out goes the Government, and the defeated leader's final official responsibility is to recommend the Governor-General to send for someone who probably commands the confidence of a majority. He, of course, names the member who moved the successful amendment. This gentleman interviews the King's representative, and undertakes to form a ministry. In due course, the team is selected, and proceeds to Government House, arrayed in the ceremonial frock coat and box hat, to take the oath of allegiance.

## LIVELIER TIMES EARLIER.

It has not always been so decorous and formal, according to what I have read of the lively times of early days in New Zealand politics. When the centre of government was in Auckland, a gentleman who moved the fatal amendment of no-confidence went home to bed, not thinking a division would come that night. But it did, and he was pulled out of bed with a hurried injunction to see the Governor at once. "All right," said he, "wait till I get on a clean shirt!" And the "clean shirt ministry" it was christened. I think it lasted about as long as the cleanliness of the garment.

There are fourteen members of our New Zealand Cabinet, but the interesting phenomenon of a smaller "inside" Cabinet is not unknown in politics. One is speaking too close to events to mention whether this is a feature of the present Government, but old parliamentary hands could name off-hand the inside Cabinet of the late Mr. Massey—the few ministerial colleagues whose advice he never neglected to take when big affairs had to be settled. Thus there are "insiders" as well as "outsiders" in Cabinet.

When a Prime Minister resigns, the whole Cabinet goes out of office, and in the creation of a new ministry the Governor-General consults only one person, the man most likely to command the confidence of a majority of the House. If he undertakes to form a ministry, he exercises his choice unfettered by any meeting of his party.

The party meeting, known as the caucus is, however, an important factor in politics. As with Cabinet, it is a very secret affair, though its secrets are more difficult to keep—too many people are sharing. From time to time a party leader consults his parliamentary supporters, and from them obtains a good indication of how the Government's policy ap-

peals to the country.

Let me break the thread of the narrative just for a moment on a most interesting personal theme. This wonderful medium of broadcasting has, I had brought into our unseen audience prominent representatives of the past and the present in our New Zealand politics. I am sure you will be interested to know that listening in with you to-night is Mrs. Seddon, widow of a notable Prime Minister who passed away 21 years ago but whose name is not by any means forgotten. Greetings, Mrs. Seddon, from us all! And we have had in our circle the present Prime Minister, the Right Honourable J. G. Coates, who was good enough to tell me that he heard every word of the first lecture, and enjoyed it. In his breezy way, which carries him so far and so cheerfully along the rather rough road of politics, he told me to "carry on."

And now I will carry on the story.

## THE "UPPER HOUSE."

Now I must tell you something about the Legislative Council.

The peaceful atmosphere of the Upper House is always a tempting subject for the outsider's wit. Lower House legislators envy the "Lords" their easy times, and their invariable habit of becoming a sitting in the afternoon. This second chamber business seems an easy affair everywhere. A parliamentary sketch writer has amusingly pictured a sitting of the English House of Lords. The time is approaching for the Lord Chancellor to take the chair. The writer describes the scene of intense activity in corridors and offices. Waiters are running around with trays, conveying last-minute refreshment—beef tea and toast. Orderlies hurry up with official papers—everyone is screwed up to concert pitch for the important occasion.

The Lord Chancellor takes the chair, reads the opening prayer—and then puts a motion:

"The question is, that this House do now adjourn."

And they adjourn!

That is just how it appeals to the hard pressed elected legislator of the Lower House.

## MEMBERS ARE NOMINATED

Our Legislative Council attracts very little public attention, because it is not so self-assertive as the House of Representatives, not so closely in touch with the people. A member of the Lower House has never far from his mind the jury of public opinion, before which he appears for trial every three years. Our Legislative Councillors enjoy immunity from the rough and tumble of contested elections. They are appointed on the

nomination of the Government for seven years. Formerly we had life members, but this system disappeared many years ago, and the last of the life members is dead.

Now we have 40 Legislative Councillors, more than half of whom have been members of the elected chamber. Political wisdom is stored up in this the opportunity of bringing into our legislative affairs a type of useful man who has either excelled in practical affairs, or in thoughtful study of the problems of Government. Some of the best of these men are not cut out for the rough and tumble of an election campaign.

As the wife of a legislator once said: "I never knew what a scoundrel I married until he stood for Parliament!"

The country needs, somewhere in its scheme of government, those capable but retiring men who can be useful, and it would be my ideal of a Legislative Council to see such men, representative of many interests and activities, appointed to the Upper House, though they had never shown any aptitude for fighting party battles.

## POSSIBLE CHANGES

In Britain at this moment, they are considering a somewhat radical innovation in connection with the House of Lords—the "mending or ending" of the House of Lords has been a phrase in party battle ever since the Gladstonian days, if not earlier. In this country, too, there have been threats to the Colonial counterpart of the Lords. As a matter of historical fact—I am sticking to facts you might notice, and not venturing too far to express opinions—there have been important changes. Our Legislative Councillors were formerly appointed for life, but this was changed for a seven year term many years ago, and the last of the "lifers," the Hon. Captain Bailey, of Marlborough, died a few years ago.

Every seven years, a Legislative Councillor is due for a renewal of his term, and the people who appoint him are the advisers of His Majesty's representative in New Zealand. How far this might tend to affect the important powers of the Upper House in reviewing the work of the elected chamber is a point for you to consider.

Our whole political scheme is a wonderful system of checks and balances, in which the Legislative Council may, if occasion arises, play an important part. The crisis might not come once in a generation, but it might happen that the electors, swayed by passion

in a time of national excitement, elect a Parliament, a majority of members pledged to some extreme action which turns out, in the light of colder reasoning, to be unjust. We could imagine an elected House, Chamber. The last three gentlemen who have been High Commissioners for New Zealand in London are there, also the former Speaker and Chairman of Committees of the Lower House. The nominative system gives fresh from the excitement of the hustings taking precipitate action—and we can hope that the Legislative Council will take a colder and more dispassionate view, not fearing intimidation from the public opinion of the moment. Herein lies the chief value of the bi-cameral legislative system. A statute is not law until it is approved by both branches of the legislature and signed by His Excellency the Governor-General. If the Legislative Council disapproves, it cannot pass.

Another interesting historical fact is that there is in existence on our statute-book, a law providing for an elective Legislative Council, returned on a very different basis from that of the Lower House, the number of proposed constituencies being four instead of eighty. This Act could be made operative to-morrow by the issue of an Order-in-Council—but many years have passed without that Order-in-Council—so it may be taken for granted that the powers that be are not altogether satisfied with the elective system instead of nominative for the second chamber.

The official Opposition, however, has no uncertainties. Its platform provides for abolition.

## NECESSARY PECULIARITIES.

In these talks I have endeavoured to show that Parliament has its peculiarities. Its ways are the ways of circumlocution, it seems to be trammelled with ancient forms, and it works most in the hours when we would prefer to sleep. There are reasons for all this as I hope I have made clear. We are a democracy, and when we feel critical about our greatest representative institution, remember that it is but a reflex of the community it represents. You and I have a direct responsibility for it. Our vote settles its constitution, and if we see by intelligent exercise of our voting privilege that we return honest practical men, with a blending of idealists, then we get a Parliament to be proud of.

A highly qualified European writer on parliamentary institutions, Professor Seigfreid, summed up his impression of our little democracy in these words: "New Zealanders have made to use institutions, often antiquated, to perform new functions, and that, after all is one of the happiest secrets of the English spirit."

I take leave of you all in the hope that these necessarily scrappy efforts to interpret Parliament to the man in the street will lead to a better appreciation of an institution, sound at heart, and working as best it knows in our interests.

# The Singapore Base

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## NO THREAT AGAINST JAPAN.

Another objection is that the establishment of a naval base at Singapore is contrary to the spirit of the Washington Conference, and that it can only be regarded as a threat against Japan. To this it is answered that the Washington Treaty, which among other things prohibits fortifications in certain areas, was explicitly drawn so as to exclude Singapore from the sphere of this prohibition, and that Singapore is situated at such a distance from Japan that no reasonable mind could regard it as a threat against that nation. It has been said that if the comparative distances are taken into consideration it might just as well be argued that the fortification of Gibraltar could be regarded as

## SHIPS USELESS WITHOUT A BASE.

a threat to the United States of America.

Finally the objection has been made that it is unnecessary to have a base in the East at all, but it is here that the supporters of the base find their strongest argument. They point out that a fleet is helpless without an adequately protected and equipped base in which it can in safety refuel, refit, and repair; that with the increase in size of modern capital ships and the alteration in their structure to provide protection against torpedoes (the "bulge") existing docks in the Pacific and in the East are unable to accommodate the modern capital ships.

They call attention to the startling fact that at present, and until

the Singapore base has been completed, British capital ships cannot in time of war operate in the Pacific at all.

The nearest suitable base is at Malta, some 6000 miles away, and should circumstances ever necessitate the defence by arms of the British possessions in the East, or in the Pacific, then the British capital ships now in commission might just as well, for all practical purposes, be laid up—they could render no assistance in these circumstances so much useless expenditure and so much useless scrap iron.

They say, "If we are to have a fleet at all, and if that fleet is to contain, as it does at present, capital ships, then it is absurd that these ships should not be able to operate in any

portion of the world where British territory requires defence."

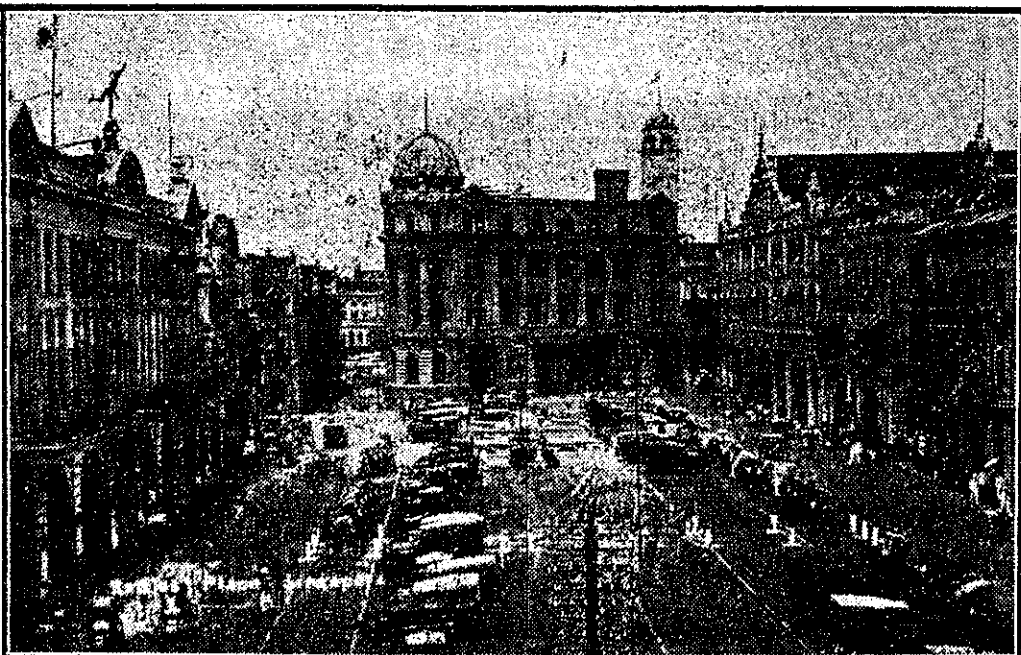
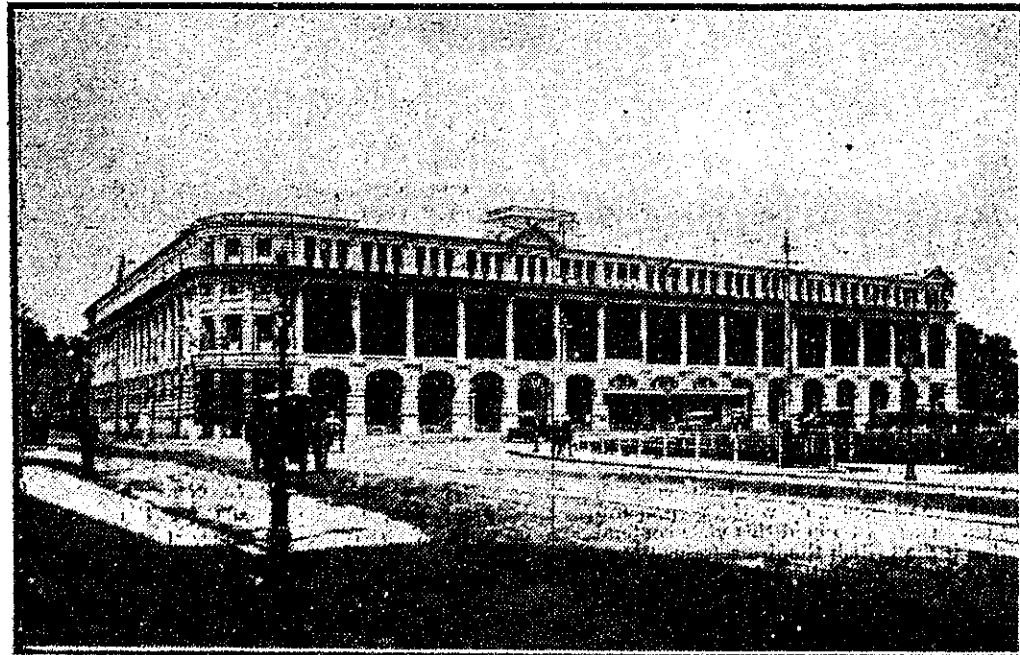
## LESSON OF THE LAST WAR'S RAIDERS.

Let us conclude by quoting what Mr. Amery, then First Lord of the Admiralty, said as long ago as 1923: "One small German squadron beginning in the China Seas caused us infinite anxiety, and at one moment was in serious danger of affecting our whole strategic problem. Imagine a position in which von Spee's squadron had been appreciably stronger. Imagine it had been what the battle fleets of other great nations in these distant waters are—a mighty fleet comparable and even equal to our own. How could you then cope with such a situation except by being able to take out your battle fleets? It has been said that we have the command of all the seas. We have not."

We are not in a position to-day nor shall we be for many years to come to put a battle fleet into

the Pacific or even as far as Singapore.

In all these waters, with their immense consequences to us from the strategical point of view, and from the point of view also of the Empire of which we are the trustees and the main defenders, we are helpless, and reliant on the good-will of a friendly and lately allied Power. But no self-respecting Power can afford indefinitely to be dependent on another Power for its security and even its existence, and it is because we wish the Navy to be free to fulfil its historic function—to operate freely anywhere in the world and to operate with an additional freedom because we have so cut down the margin of naval strength—that these are the general grounds on which the Board of Admiralty have come to the conclusion that it is essential to develop—not hastily nor in any manner which would appear to aim to hit anyone—but steadily and surely to develop a base with which we can maintain the Navy in those waters."



Views of Singapore. On the left is the chief shopping centre, Raffles Place, named after the first Governor, Stamford Raffles. On the right is the Hotel de Europe, famed throughout the East for its "million dollar cocktail."