

HOW PARLIAMENT WORKS

A KORERO Report

YOU TURN the tuning dial on your radio and a clear determined voice is heard saying: "The question is that . . . As many as are of that opinion say 'Aye'—As many as are of the contrary opinion say 'No'—I think the Ayes have it. . . ." The House of Representatives is in session in Wellington, and the voice is that of Mr. Speaker, a gentleman in whom is vested all authority in the control of the House. But why does he deliver this series of formal questions which amount to a monologue? What are Members doing? What is the House of Representatives doing? How does Parliament work?

The House of Representatives comprises eighty Members, representing the electoral districts of New Zealand, and meets under the control of the Speaker, a quorum of twenty being sufficient for a session. The House meets as such, but also is formed into several committees, each with its own important function. For instance, a Committee of the Whole House is the House itself presided over by the Chairman of Committees instead of the Speaker. The Committee of Supply and the Committee of Ways and Means, governed by the Chairman, are also formed by the House itself, principally to consider the details of Bills and resolutions as a preparation for legislation involving finance. The Committee of Supply votes the annual public expenditure as presented by the Minister of Finance, and the Committee of Ways and Means hears proposals for finding the money by taxation as contained in the financial statement, or Budget.

When the House forms itself into a committee it means that a good deal of the formality is lost and Members have a much freer rein; any one Member may speak four times on the one subject, though the time limit for each speech is reduced to five minutes. When debating in the House itself a Member is entitled to speak for half an hour, and provision is made for extensions. There

are many conditions attached to such speeches, however, and it is not permissible to read from a newspaper report on the same session; nor must reference be made to a matter where a judicial decision is pending; nor may a Member use "offensive or unbecoming" words in reference to any other Member. A debate, incidentally, may be interrupted for a variety of reasons, including "words of heat between Members." Almost the same rules for regulating debate, dealing with amendments, taking divisions, and the general conduct of business as those observed in the House apply in committee. The committee becomes the House again when Mr. Speaker resumes the Chair.

Every proceeding in Parliament is based on a motion made by a Member (and seconded, if required), which is put from the Chair and decided by the House; if necessary, on a division. The practice is that after a question has been proposed from the Chair and any ensuing debate is closed, the Speaker rises and reads the question to the House. The Speaker then declares that Ayes or Noes have it, and if that statement is challenged a division follows. When a division is called for, bells are rung, and doors to the Chamber are locked after three minutes, an interval in which Party Whips are very busy assembling Members. Two "tellers" are appointed for each of the Ayes and Noes doors, and they list the names of Members passing through. The numbers are reported to Mr. Speaker, who in turn declares them to the House. In the event of an equality in votes—a circumstance that cannot arise where one party has a really clear majority—the Speaker records a casting vote.

In addition to the committees as outlined above, there are Select Committees appointed from time to time to report on special matters or consider Bills. These Select Committees, consisting of from five to ten Members (the number may be increased by special leave of the House)