

Through a Monocle

THE fear of the "closure," which we hear of occasionally these days, is one of those hereditary fears which we got from our ancestors; precisely as most of us will not go through a graveyard if we can help it. It is true that we do not believe in ghosts; but our ancestors did, and the fear of them is still in our blood. So we have been taught for so long to value above all other things the "sacred right of free speech" that we tremble all over when anybody proposes to interfere with that right, especially in the high court of Parliament. There is precisely where our ancestors had to fight hardest for their "blood-bought right" to say the thing they would. Parliament was their spokesman; and it was Parliament's right to discuss freely any measures proposed by the Crown which they found it most difficult to win and most costly to defend. To propose to limit the free speech of the people's representatives in Parliament would, then, cause these old champions of liberty to turn over in their graves. Unfortunately, the graves of many of their sensations are in the bodies they gave us; and there is consequently a mighty "turning over" in us when some one disturbs one of their old battlefields.

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BUT let us come down to June, 1908. Let us banish for the moment those heroic ghosts of Pym and Hampden and the like, and consider the case of the more or less respectable, but not very heroic, gentlemen whom we elect to do our business at Ottawa. Now suppose they talk a trifle less, will our liberties be in danger? If they were compelled to cut their speeches in two or even three, would we begin to send people to the Tower or would a grim Bastille rise in our midst? Never mind this hereditary passion for hoary phrases that is implanted in us just now. In what way is freedom bound up with garrulousness at Ottawa? This frightful monster—the "closure"—exists in London. Is Britain any the less a free country than it was in the golden days of Pitt and Fox when open bribery was rampant, when Peers nominated a fair proportion of the Commons, and when the great mass of the British people did not have a vote between them?

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THE "closure" has come to be a sign—not of the death of liberty—but of the growth of the nation. All big countries, which are governed by elective bodies, have it. It is the mark of an adult people. Only a small people, whose business is not of much importance anyway, can afford to leave the affairs of State at the mercy of a few long-distance talkers. It is not for a moment a question of which is right or wrong at Ottawa just now. The next time trouble arises, it will probably be the Liberals who will propose to prevent a Conservative majority from doing business. We could take the risk when we had twelve months in which to do about two months' worth of business. Then we could feed that passion in our blood aroused by the old cry for "free speech" and the sanctity of the persons of our members of Parliament. But now we are growing up. Sir Wilfrid or somebody has made us a nation. We have a nation's fair allotment of business to do in our national business session. And we must forget our fear of ghosts and devote our attention to seeing that the national trains run on schedule time.

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IN two words, free speech has ceased to be an issue in democratic countries. It is as firmly established as trial by jury. Indeed, if one heeds the grumbling one hears at the jury system, it is more firmly established. There is not the remotest danger of any tyrannical government daring to interfere to the slightest extent with the full right of everybody—including members of Parliament—to speak freely. That stage in the evolution of human liberty has been accomplished so far as such countries as Canada are concerned. The issue now to the fore is efficiency. How are we to get the public business done in the best way, in the shortest time and at the least expense? In Britain and the United States, they have decided that they must condense the debates of Parliament, which is no more

important, so far as liberty is concerned, than a newspaper's decision that it must condense the reports of Parliament.

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THERE is no deliberative assembly in the world in which speech is freer or more vigorous than in the American House of Representatives, though there the Opposition get just as much time to discuss a measure as the Speaker—who is practically the majority leader—sees fit to allow him. But they can say what they will while they are up; and they get a chance to say much more than the country pays any attention to. If debate were not limited in that body, public business would not get done, and the will of the people as expressed at the polls would not be carried out. Now just so soon as unlimited debate at Ottawa prevents the people from getting their way, unlimited debate will go. The people express an opinion at the polls as to which party they desire to trust with the spending of their money, for instance; and if the power of debate is employed to take this power away from the majority, it will only be a matter of time until the people will demand that business go on. As to the manner in which the "closure" will be introduced, it was introduced, to begin with, in the British House on the simple action of the Speaker who arranged on one day with the Government that at nine the following morning, if the House were still debating the bill at issue, he would arise and put the question; which he did. This disposes of the notion of some that it would take the Government at Ottawa as long to get a "closure" bill through as to pass supply.

N'IMPORTE



A royal portrait in the Academy. Princess Patricia of Connaught.—By J. J. Shannon, A.R.A.

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