

How the Canadian Parliament Does Its Work

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IN view of the recent Dominion elections, the following description of Parliamentary methods, recently published in *East and West*, will be of interest:

As you are watching, in the very earliest stage of a sitting, some member rises, and informs Mr. Speaker that he begs to present to the House the petition of So and Sc, for legislation of such and such a character. It may be a request that an Act be passed to charter a railway. A man may be asking Parliament to change his name from some too frequent patronymic to one which suits him better. A body of citizens may be demanding a stricter law governing the observance of the Lord's day. Another set of electors may be protesting against the passage of some measure before the House, of which they disapprove.

Whatever it be, the British subject has a right to petition Parliament; it is one of the very oldest of our rights. Moreover, certain bills cannot be brought into the House without the presentation of a petition.

The members, you will notice, have each a printed document—the Order Paper. On it is set down all the business which the House could possibly touch to-day. At the very head stands "Petitions"; next, one or two things such as, "Reading and Receiving Petitions," "Presenting Reports of Standing and Special Committees," and "Motions," which for the moment we may dismiss as formalities. Then you will observe, "Introduction of Bills," and, under that heading, a number of entries which show that Mr. A—intends to introduce a bill to charter a certain railway; Mr. B— a bill to amend the electoral law; the Honorable Mr. C—, a minister, a bill to consolidate the laws relating to Dominion Lands; and so on.

In other words, before a bill is introduced at all, as a rule, notice is given of its general purport, and this notice is printed.

Let us leave the Order Paper now, and watch the House, when this order is called by the Speaker. One member after another rises, and begs to present Bill Number So and So, intitled So and So—"intitled" is the Parliamentary way of pronouncing "entitled"—and to move that it be now read a first time. Usually the House passes it at once; but if it is of unusual interest, cries of "Explain," will be heard, and the member will tell the House what are the bill's main features.

Sometimes when the Government is introducing a measure of importance, which has been awaited with curiosity and interest, the minister in charge will make a detailed explanation. Instances of this are the speeches in which Sir Wilfrid Laurier brought in the National Transcontinental Railway and the North-Western Autonomy bills. The principle of this is, that the House has, at this stage, the right to know the main features of a bill; as a matter of convenience, it usually is not printed for a few days after the first reading.

Every important piece of Parliamentary business is done by passing a bill, and the bill, when passed and assented to, becomes an Act; observe now how carefully this is guarded.

First of all, there are two sorts of Acts, public and private. Public Acts are general laws, dealing with the interests of the whole people. An Act to change the manner of holding an election; an Act to build an extension to the government railway; an Act to provide for the observance of the Lord's day—these are public Acts.

Private Acts confer some benefit or right upon individual persons. If a man owns a patent and wishes to have it extended, Parliament can, if it chooses, pass an Act granting him that favor. If a body of men wish to bind themselves into a railway company, and to get powers to build a railway from one town to another, they must be chartered by Parliament, for in so building they will come into conflict with other men's rights and wishes, and must straighten out their differences under the guidance of Parliament. In getting this private legislation, it frequently

happens that strong efforts are made, by sharp and unscrupulous business men, to procure unfair advantages, and so Parliament has made special provision for the watching and testing of all private bills.

If the new bill is a private one, the men asking for it—the promoters—must first advertise their intention for several weeks, so that all persons interested may know what they are doing. They must then petition the House. Next, the member introducing any bill, private or public, must give at least a day's notice. Then it must be read a first time.

Let us follow our bill. Once it has been read a first time, nothing is done until it has been printed; if it especially concerns any particular city, town, or township, copies are sent to the municipal officers. Then, when time for scrutiny has been given, it comes up for its second reading. It is at this stage that the regular debate on the principle of the bill takes place. While explanations may be given at a first meeting, debate is not customary. The second reading debate is formal, each member being allowed only one speech; if an amendment is moved—such as, "that this bill be not now read a second time, but be read on day six months hence"—the debate starts afresh so far as members' rights to speak are concerned.

When at last a second reading has been given—supposing that the bill is not defeated—a further stage awaits the measure. If it is a public bill,—that is, a measure of government, such as the passing of a law,—it must be put through Committee of the Whole. If it is a private bill, it must go to what is styled a Select Standing Committee.

At the beginning of every session, the House selects a number of large committees—one on railways, another on banking and commerce, another on miscellaneous private bills, and so on. These committees meet periodically, usually in the morning when the House is not sitting.

To one of these committees each private bill goes when given its second reading. There it is discussed informally, evidence is heard, persons who are affected by it are allowed to speak, explanations are given, and government officials who have knowledge bearing on the subjects make their statements.

Public bills, as a rule, do not go through this ordeal, but sometimes the House appoints a special committee to deal with one. An instance was the small committee which considered and heard evidence on the Lord's Day Observance Act; another was the committee which debated last session a proposal to establish co-operative societies.

Once it has passed the ordeal of the committee, our bill has to be considered in Committee of the Whole. This means that the House itself embarks on a discussion of the details of the measure. A little form is observed—the mace is put under the table, the Speaker leaves the chair, and a Deputy Speaker presides, seated at the head of the table.

At this stage, members can speak as often as they like, and, instead of considering the bill as a whole, they debate the separate clauses. At last it is through with this. Then comes the third reading. Once it has passed this, the House is free of it, unless the Senate should subsequently make some amendments; these the House must consider.

Often, when a bill is being fought, the third reading is contested, the Opposition moving that it be "referred back to committee," with instructions to make such and such amendments. An Opposition takes this course when it desires to show that it approves the general idea of legislating on the subject, but thinks the government has not gone the right way about it.

Now the bill must go to the Senate, and experience anew the whole round of first, second, and third readings, Committee of the Whole, and possibly discussion in select committee as well.

How very deliberate all this is.