

A DAY IN PARLIAMENT

*How Members at the
the Interests of*

*Capital Spend their Time in
Canada and Hansard*

By

AUGUSTUS BRIDLE



IT'S a peculiar thing to be a member of Parliament in Ottawa. I often wonder how certain kinds of men stand the pace. Here again we have the implied contrast: the pace is both swift—and insufferably slow. Much depends on the man. There are a few members in Ottawa whom

neither time nor circumstance nor people and events could ever jolt out of their two-by-four grooves; men who went up to Ottawa originally with the local preacher idea and have hung to it ever since.

But not many! The average M. P. in Ottawa is liable to make discoveries as the session goes on. If you could obtain a diagram of his efficiency curve, as they do in power stations, getting his peak load, and his intermediate and all his variations, he would be a picture of disturbed equilibrium. Because it is quite palpable that the mean-average M. P. goes to Ottawa for the first time with one set of ideas and leaves it with many.

Speaking a few days ago concerning an eminent Ontario politician who is sometimes known as the Ajax of the Legislature, a very prominent Liberal member who is one of the most efficient in the House said with a covertly knowing grin:

"By George! If ever he gets down to Ottawa in a political capacity and tries to play Ajax we'll put a few crimps in him."

Which is what happens quite often on Parliament Hill; and the man who keeps his strait-jacket and his up-country idolatry among an aggregation of crimpers must be a man of excessively pronounced idioms—to say the least. Pity such a man; for though he may be an excellent patriot and a good member he is doomed to miss a lot of the really human diversion which is his for the having anywhere from the main entrance of Parliament to the top row of books in the library.

There is no college of human experience in Canada quite the equal of Parliament—when you comprehend all that Parliament implies. I should say that a man might enter the House a neophyte and leave it a philosopher, provided he should stay long enough and profit by his experiences. Just the sort of philosopher, whether a Stoic or a Cynic or an Epicure or a little of each, must depend very much upon himself. The show is all there as it has been for many years and it doesn't change much except to become more so. There are all the big-ring acts and the zoo and the side-shows and the trapeze performances, the clowns and the concert after the circus; all a large human study with quite as much underground solemnity as belongs to any such serio-comedy as a real circus.

Indeed, it is a wonder that Parliament and the circus have not long ago been regarded as analogues. Civilisation seems doomed to have both; whereas barbarism neither needed nor tolerated either.

Wherefore let us not misapprehend the member's life, but as far as possible enter into its joys and its sorrows, its *ennuis* and its exhilarations, its comedies and tragedies and farces. A day in Parliament is a study in human diversion. It is a spectacle of how men put in the time from eleven a.m. till eleven p.m. with two hours off for lunch—though as in the case of the St. Lawrence Power Bill a few days ago it may mean an all-night session which again is part of the comedy known as the surprise element.

Forenoon from eleven till one o'clock, on an average finds half the members in attendance on committees, some of which meet every morning. There are several committees; which are really sub-parliaments; and it is in these assemblies that many a member who in the House never rises above the dead level goes up by a curve to his peak load.

The Railway Committee.

OF all committees the Railway Committee is the most like a circus ring. It is the largest of all the committees; almost as large as all the others combined and it well represents the relative importance of transportation interests in a country which is handing out charters for railways by the hundred, a large number of which never get further than paper and talk.

I don't profess to understand the Railway Committee; but I have been hugely entertained by it. The time I saw it at its real bear-garden height was perhaps a common episode to the members; but it was the nearest resemblance to a parliamentary pandemonium I have ever seen outside the House itself on unusual occasions. There were times when it got very much like the wheat pit in Chicago. A hundred men or more, many of them smoking; scores of them lounging; half of them talking; on the platform surrounding Chairman Hugh Guthrie, the Minister of Railways with his good-humoured red tie; members of deputations; corporation lawyers; members of Parliament—and there seemed to be others: though precisely who was who was by no means so easy to determine as in the House, where once in a while at least the Speaker has the right to decide the rules of debate.

The question before the committee was the right or wrong of a certain railway company in British Columbia being allowed an extension of time to construct a traffic and railway bridge; as against the claim of the municipalities to build the same bridge. Said bridge would be three thousand miles by rail from the dooryard of the honourable member for Pictou; but said member was as much interested as though it had been down in his own province. There were spouters for and belligerents against; corporation delegates who insisted and explained and municipal representatives who ex-

plained and insisted. There was neither Grit nor Tory. Speech was unpartisan and for the most part free. There were as many sides to the controversy as there are kinds of weather in Canada. Sometimes two sides were up at once. Members who in the House would be as demure as unshorn lambs, in the committee roared like bulls of Bashan. In fact if a man doesn't sometimes get up on his rear heels and roar in that committee he must be like a tin whistle in a full orchestra. By some process of mental gymnastics the same thing could be both clearly right and absolutely wrong in one minute. A man might speak as long as he felt like it; but the chances were he didn't feel like it more than five minutes. A member popped up and delivered a broadside; subsided again, and before he had struck his chair another was up in the midst of a sonorous sentence.

Blessed bedlam! where no man has the opportunity to bore the members; where it is the common right of any in the audience to interject advice; where sometimes the whole committee swung into a whoop of laughter and the redfaced orator laughed also—but lammed in again with a strenuous soul. And as it is sometimes a mystery how the wheat pit or the Wall Street Stock Exchange suddenly decides to inject a pandemonium round a common centre, so it is a mystery how the Railway Committee, seized of some element of comedy or some hiatus in the etiquette, goes into a paroxysm of concerted and simultaneous noise. The chairman calls order; knowing by experience and somewhat by intuition the point where order leaves off and disorder begins—when to the lay mind it is all disorder and all too utterly interesting to stop. Suddenly one member points a lurid finger at another and bawls in a furious way:

"Do you mean to say you haven't agreed with So-and-So to talk this bill out?"

"I mean to say you are absolutely wrong—"

Cries of "Oh! oh!" and some groans with much laughter.

"But I myself heard you getting instructions from So-and-So—"

Groans with more laughter and derisive cries of "Oh-oh-oh!"

Whereupon the Minister of Railways rises and with that blandly sonorous trombone of his paternally chides the tumultuous members, reminding them that there may be many a man in the room guilty of talking bills out; coupled with homely advice—to try and get together outside the committee and compromise; since agreement in the committee is out of the question.

One o'clock; time up; but there are still members who would go on with the talk. Adjournment. Precisely what was done and what it all amounted to—well the chairman knows: he is used to the game and it is all part of the show; the programme of extracting as much amusement out of a dry subject as is possible and as far as may be finding out what's what, even if who's who remains in doubt.

There is nothing dull or tedious about the Railway Committee. It is the liveliest aggregation in Parliament and it sets the pace for dramatic interest for all the other committees. Private Bills sometimes becomes a hula-balloo—as it did recently over the St. Lawrence Power Company bill. Public Accounts is invariably a rogues' gallery, and once in the writer's recollection developed an intimation that if so-and-so member would not take back his words at the decision of the chairman it might be necessary to go out in the back yard.

One committee which held sessions every day for almost two months was a real relief—the Anti-Gambling Committee instituted by the anti-race track bill of Mr. H. H. Miller, the chairman, and empowered to hale witnesses from anywhere in Canada to give evidence to show—that there were many rogues outside of Parliament.

A House of Commons Siesta.

FOR pure religious ennui commend us now and again to the House of Commons in session. There may be duller functions than some of these sessions. But an essay at a women's club or a chapter in the Book of Numbers done on a phonograph could scarcely be more classically tedious than the House—say in Committee of Supply with Hon. Mr. Pugsley reading Leviticus about wharves and slips and cribwork, and Dr. Sproule opposite in a front bench, mirthless and persistent, quizzing the Minister as to cost per cubic yard of stone-work and cribwork and cement; thirteen drowsy-eyed members on each side of the House—twenty-five is a quorum—stifling yawns, reading newspapers, writing letters and counting the panels in the ceiling.

But of course the House in Committee of Supply is usually the deadliest dullness this side of the grave; and it is only rivalled by many a humdrum afternoon or evening when the members seem