

BRITAIN TO-DAY

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A Competition:

THE WORLD'S FORTY BEST BOOKS

This House of Commons by Edward Heath, M.P. ★ Kenneth Young on *Lloyd's of London* ★ Shakespeare productions reviewed by T. C. Worsley ★ C. A. Lejeune on two new films ★ Autumn Books reviewed by the Dean of St. Paul's, R. A. Scott-James and others

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PRICE ONE SHILLING

THIS HOUSE OF COMMONS

By EDWARD HEATH, M.P.

THE present House of Commons, elected in February 1950, has now lasted more than eighteen months, considerably longer than most observers anticipated immediately after the General Election. Some gave it almost as little as eighteen days as they looked at the even balance of Parties, and the small Government majority; others said that it could certainly not last beyond the autumn of 1950. But the end of the second session is now approaching; what looked like a not very "hardy annual" has become almost a "perennial," and it is conceivable that the present House will remain in being for some time. On the other hand, its life may be suddenly terminated by Government wish, or a Government defeat. There lies the fascination of the situation.

Experienced parliamentarians agree that there has not been another House like it in living memory; some dare to prophesy that it will be a long time before there is another in which the Government will carry on with so small an over-all majority as the present one of seven. Others think that the second half of the twentieth century may well be an era of small Government majorities. This would reflect the fairly even division of opinion in the country, and also the greater equality in size of the constituencies, which followed the readjustment of their boundaries before the last Election.

The present House of Commons has acquired fresh characteristics from the even balance of Parties. Each major division has its own interest, as the result can never be entirely foreseen. The debates on important occasions gain in excitement when the outcome may mean the downfall of the Government. This tense atmosphere has caught the fancy of the general public, and the crowds waiting outside the House for admission to the Galleries are larger than they have ever been before. It is also true that it is difficult for the onlooker to understand how it is that the Government's majority may be as low as five or seven one moment, and spring as high as twenty or twenty-five the next. He does not appreciate that the Government's small majority is a majority over all other Parties in the House, and

that if the nine Liberal Members support the Government on any issue, the Government majority is immediately increased by eighteen to a total of twenty-five.

Just after the new House of Commons met, I gave some impressions in *Britain To-day* of the feelings of a new Member. What I described then was the friendliness of the whole House—the contrast between the hard-hitting debates and the relations between opponents outside the Chamber—the fascination of the interplay of personalities, and the large number of activities in which a Member takes part outside the debates. The past year has deepened these impressions. It has also emphasized the limitations arising out of a state of constant tension between the Parties in the House.

In this Parliament Members on all sides have been tied almost continuously to Westminster. Except in the Recesses, they have not been able to go away for more than a day or two at a time without having to return for an important division. Even the last long Summer Recess was interrupted in September by an emergency Session to discuss the rearmament programme. This has meant that Members have been able to spend less time in their constituencies, and that there has been almost no opportunity for them to travel far afield to see for themselves what is happening in the world outside. This is a great drawback, and in the long run must narrow the breadth of vision, the knowledge and understanding of Members of Parliament.

It has meant too that Members find it increasingly difficult to combine with their work in the House of Commons their activities in a profession or business. One or two have found it impossible, and have already announced that they will not be candidates at the next Election. This is a matter for some concern. It presents a danger that if a similar situation continued the House would come to be manned by professional politicians. This would obviously be detrimental to good Government and good debate. Nothing is easier at Westminster than to lose touch with reality, and a profession or business saves a man from this fate.

But if this Parliament has experienced all the disadvantages of an evenly balanced House, it has also enjoyed the benefits of moving into the new debating Chamber. This has given the

debates an intimacy and informality which was certainly lacking when the House was meeting in the House of Lords. The first comment of any visitor to the new Chamber is usually "How small!" but in practice this building proves almost ideal for its purpose. Speaking normally in any part of the Chamber, one can be heard perfectly in any other part—even without the aid of the amplifiers with which the whole Chamber is fitted. The new building also provides Members with many much-needed facilities for their work, including interviewing rooms and dictating rooms, where they can deal with the correspondence which flows ceaselessly in.

The intimacy of the Chamber allows one to see more clearly than ever the play of personalities. Mr. Churchill is obviously more at home. Now not one of his gestures or asides is lost to his listeners. Mr. Attlee's nimbleness of body and mind is also seen to greater advantage. The persuasiveness of Mr. Anthony Eden, with which he often carries the whole House, has greater effect in these surroundings.

The new House has already seen many big occasions since it was opened in October, 1950. Mr. Churchill made one of his finest speeches on the proposed North Atlantic Command, in which he deployed all his arguments in his most masterly way. Few will forget the first Budget Speech of the present Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Hugh Gaitskell, as, for two hours, he lucidly and tirelessly explained the financial and economic position of the nation, and expounded his taxation proposals for the coming year. Neither will the memory of Mr. Aneurin Bevan's resignation speech quickly fade from the mind. It was, possibly, all that a resignation speech should not be, but for every minute of it he held the attention of a packed House. For the short impromptu speech, what could equal Mr. Churchill's tribute to the late Field-Marshal Smuts, when the Prime Minister announced the inauguration of a Fund for a memorial to him. In its ordinary business the House has seen the great controversy over "Prayers," and the longest debate on the Finance Bill for many years.

Perhaps I should explain that a "Prayer" is a process whereby the House debates an Order which has been made by the Government under an existing Act. This process was much

used by the Opposition just before Easter and incurred the great displeasure of Government supporters. Such debates always come after the main business of the day has been finished, and they led to many late-night sittings. The debate on the Finance Bill resulted in a number of all-night sittings, including one of 31 hours, 46 minutes, which was the longest for fifteen years. In all there were seventy-seven divisions on the various processes which the Finance Bill undergoes before it leaves the House of Commons.

There are no proper facilities for Members when the House sits all night, and most Members are not at their best when they debate intricate financial matters after sitting for as long as thirty hours. Looking back on them, the all-night sittings appear to be the least satisfactory part of the past eighteen months in the House of Commons.

It has been a time, however, which no one who is in the House will ever forget. The new Member counts himself fortunate that he should have been elected in time to experience the excitement and uncertainty, the shocks and strains, which come from this new balance of Parties in the House of Commons, and at the same time to sit in it with those with so many links with the past. Winston Churchill, Stafford Cripps, Oliver Stanley and Ernest Bevin; the last three, alas, no longer with us in the House.



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