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# Planning and the Politicians

and Other Essays

A. H. Hanson



## Planning and the Politicians

First published in 1969, *Planning and the Politicians* is a collection of essays on political subjects, which ranges from a study of the British House of Commons, through a discussion of decentralization in various countries, to an examination of the problems of economic planning in a 'new' state. They are arranged in four sections, entitled Parliament, Administration, Development, and Principles. As the book's title implies, there is a constant preoccupation throughout the essays with the practical issues of politics and public administration, and with the more general problems of political choice that face the individual in the modern world. An introductory essay explains the author's personal approach to political studies. The book will be of interest to students of political science, governance, administration, and economics.



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A. H. Hanson

*Professor of Politics, University of Leeds*



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For Tom  
(who suggested it)  
and Isabel



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## Preface

As is usual when compiling a collection of essays dealing with subjects of contemporary interest, I have been confronted with the question of whether to bring them 'up-to-date'. Experience suggests that this is rarely satisfactory, and there is much to be said for leaving one's work in its original form. The reader then at least has the satisfaction of seeing how right or how wrong one has been. All I have done, therefore, is to make a few obvious corrections of fact or style and to add some footnotes, which may be distinguished from the original ones by their enclosure in square brackets.

With the exception of the Introduction and 'Administration and the Social Order in Twentieth-Century Britain', all the essays here included have been previously published, most of them in journals. The English version of 'Decentralization' and the paper entitled 'Political and Administrative Implications of a Self-Financing Road System' have, however, appeared only in mimeographed form.

*Leeds, 1968*

A. H. HANSON

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# Introduction: On Professing Politics

## 1

The motives of those who opt for a political career are fairly easy to understand. The politician is the possessor, or would-be possessor, of a particular kind of power. His interest in acquiring and exercising it may be the product of family tradition, or of the frustration of some other and preferred ambition, or of a taste for personal publicity, or of a recognition that only political action can adequately defend some cherished 'interest', or of a desire to right wrongs and push society a little further along the path of 'progress', or of devotion to an ideology, or of a mere hankering to be in or around the places where important decisions are being taken. Although politicians are not widely respected, with the result that the less reputable of these motives are too generally ascribed to them, the attractions of the political life are at least intelligible and communicable. By contrast, persons who have chosen to make a profession of teaching what is called 'politics' seem very odd fish indeed. The ordinary man, wondering precisely what it is they claim to teach, sometimes suspects that they are up to no good. If they want to teach something, he is inclined to ask, why do they not choose a more normal and better established subject, such as law, medicine, engineering or economics?

These suspicions and bewilderments are shared even by some of the colleagues of the so-called political scientist. I remember my own difficulty in trying to explain to a professor of modern languages, whose interest in things political was permanently at low ebb, just what I was currently doing. In the senior common rooms of universities there are whispers to the effect that politics is a soft option, taught by people with little sense of intellectual discipline and read by students who have been scared by the difficulties of the 'harder' social sciences, such as economics. Sometimes it is felt that the teacher of politics is really a vicarious and half-hearted politician who, although wanting to keep in touch with what is going on at



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Westminster and Whitehall (and indeed in the White House and the Kremlin), lacks the will and the stamina to become an active party member, get himself elected and then take his chances in one of the toughest and most exhausting of all rat-races.

On the other hand, it is generally recognized that there is a great tradition of political studies the creators of which, such as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Bentham, Mill, de Tocqueville and Marx were certainly not mere politicians *manqué*, even though some of them had political ambitions. As for those who, like Machiavelli, did not take up the full-time study of politics until their unsuccessful, or only partly successful, political careers were over, one can only feel grateful for the circumstances which terminated their statesmanlike activities. Nothing that Machiavelli could have done, even if he had been far more influential in Florentine politics than he actually was, would have seriously affected his city's destiny; but the *Prince* and the *Discourses* are among the most influential books ever written.

No one, of course, would claim that modern teachers of politics are a lot of Aristotles and Machiavellis. It can be argued, indeed, that all the important things that may be said about politics have already been said by the great men of the past. But even if this is true, it is not very relevant. The works of the classics may be there 'for all time', but none the less need to be *studied*, particularly if their applicability to contemporary problems is to be adequately assessed. Moreover, we are today facing both political opportunities and political dangers – the product of the impact of the technological revolution on a world poorly prepared for it – which lack equivalents or even parallels in past ages and which therefore cannot be grasped or avoided by men whose equipment is limited to ancient wisdom. The politician, usually an ordinary man in an extraordinary job, has for the first time to take decisions which can very quickly determine whether our civilization, and even the human race itself, lives or dies. In these circumstances, can it be doubted that the application of energies to the better understanding of political institutions and behaviour is of paramount importance?

It *can* be so doubted, for reasons that I shall discuss later – but mainly in the context of a pessimism so profound that all forms of intellectual effort are written off as futile. In almost every other context the study of politics has to be taken seriously. Admittedly the guidance it can provide is seriously defective; for it has not yet achieved and may never achieve scientific status. There are still radical disagreements about the very grammar of the subject; it is wide open to the impact of prejudice and preconception; and it can as yet make only limited use of exact, quantitative methods. Never-

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theless, I believe that it remains a study of profound practical and human value.

This view, I concede, is not universal among students of politics. There are those who maintain that the 'purer' the subject becomes, i.e. the more detached from recognizable human concerns, the greater will be its academic respectability. To them I would reply, not that academic respectability is of no importance, but that I cannot understand why, feeling as they do, they have chosen to become students of politics rather than – say – of mathematics, physics or archaeology. For there are plenty of subjects which offer a much better intellectual discipline. Indeed, the only subjects I can think of that are in as disorderly a condition as politics are sociology and literature. Although all three are gradually acquiring greater rigour – which sometimes looks rather too much like *rigor mortis* – we still study them, not for their inherent toughness but for their immediate importance to human beings who are trying to cope with the problem of how to live in the twentieth century. Take away that importance, and the study of politics degenerates into an amusement for the idly genteel.

I should not, of course, wish to be interpreted as saying that all political studies must be immediately oriented towards the solution of practical problems. For such problems rarely yield their secrets to a strategy of direct approach. 'Facts' never speak for themselves; they have to be made to speak by subjection to the discipline of hypothesis. The formulation and testing of hypotheses, in their turn, rest on the development of theory and methodology. Without these essential tools of the political scientist's craft, he can effect neither the clarification of his values and norms nor the imposition of order and coherence on his all-too-abundant materials. Much of his effort, therefore, will necessarily be devoted to studies of a kind which, from the standpoint of the impatient political practitioner, are 'remote from reality'.

That theory and methodology are still in a confused condition is a major weakness of modern political studies. The attempt to sort out this confusion, which has been largely left to the Americans, does not seem to be making conspicuous progress.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps if there were greater international collaboration better results might be achieved. As it is, many British students, repelled by the formidable jargon that their American colleagues insist on using, tend to adopt an unconstructively critical attitude towards the new so-called science. This sometimes produces good knock-about fun, but makes little contribution to the advancement of knowledge.

However, I must freely admit that my own contribution to political theory as such is very limited. As the present collection of essays

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clearly shows, I have consistently produced work of the 'nose-to-the-grindstone' kind, largely prescriptive in purpose – although not always overtly so. Reference to the 'good old English empirical tradition' might be used in an attempt to justify this habit, but I have no intention of using such an excuse here; for I have no particular affection for the alleged tradition and often feel sceptical about its very existence. To paraphrase Keynes, the empiricist is usually the unconscious slave of some defunct theorist. The real explanation of my 'empiricism' is autobiographical rather than rational.

There *is* a sense in which I am a politician *manqué*. Coming late to the university teaching of politics, I had spent many years of my life as a Communist Party 'activist'. This had two kinds of impact on my approach to politics, one of them positive, the other negative. The positive one was a sense, which I hope I shall never lose, of the decisive importance of political studies for men who wish, not only to exercise more effective control of their collective affairs, but to create a society which (to use a familiar Marxist expression) will be more 'truly human' than the present one. The negative impact was a devotion to a series of dogmas, derived from the works of Lenin and Stalin rather than from those of Marx himself, which put my intelligence in a strait jacket and inhibited my freedom of thought. The combined effect was to direct my attention to practical rather than theoretical problems (for had not the major issues of theory already been authoritatively decided?) and to make me impatient with the 'sterile' discussions of methodology with which many of my colleagues appeared to be almost exclusively concerned.

When I left the Party, in the early 1950s, I inevitably retained these characteristics to a very large measure. Afraid of replacing the theory I had discarded by another that might be equally invalid, I chose to stick closely to the apparently solid ground of factual analysis. The only real change was that, intent on building up a belated reputation for scholarship, I now preferred intensive investigation of narrow-range political problems to extensive investigation of broader-range ones. It was not until 1956, when so many of my friends made their own exits from the Communist Party, that I even attempted a reappraisal of my political values and norms, the results of which are included in the present collection. What stimulated me then was the tendency of the 'New Leftists' to jump out of the frying-pan of Stalinism into the fire of Trotskyism, or to develop forms of Marxist 'humanism' which seemed to me intellectually sloppy.

Any methodology I had consisted of looking at a practical problem from as many different aspects as possible, examining its development over time, and testing a series of rather loosely framed hypotheses for possible relevance to its solution. 'Over-arching' theory I

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deliberately avoided. As far as values were concerned, the instinctive liberalism with which my Communism had always been unconsciously laced spontaneously reasserted itself. Here, then, is the explanation of the 'old-fashioned empiricism' which the reader will recognize as the style of political discourse characteristic of most of the following essays. It has, I believe, strengths as well as limitations; but I must admit that, as I grow older, it is of the limitations rather than the strengths that I become increasingly conscious. However, the reader, thus forewarned, must judge for himself.

## 2

That a man should have spent a considerable part of his life teaching politics and writing politics is, of course, *prima facie* evidence that he considers these activities of value; and I have already stated my reasons for believing that political studies are 'important' in human as well as in academic terms. Yet doubts persist.

At first sight it seems obvious that the acquisition of more information about institutions and behaviour and the diffusion of such information among those who take seriously their responsibilities as citizens should improve the quality of our political life; and it would seem equally obvious that if these things are to be done the universities, as the major sources of new knowledge and the senior institutions for professional education, have a key role to play. Yet, having repeated these clichés, one has to pause for real thought, and ask whether extra effort devoted to political studies is likely to produce commensurate results.

The American 'case', probably the most relevant for us in this country, is hardly encouraging. In the U.S.A., proportionately much greater resources are put into the study of politics at the university level, and one has the impression that, at the lower educational levels, there is much more attention paid to 'civics'. Yet the degeneration of American political life has become notoriously rapid. Of course, no one free from the illusion that education is a cure-all would imagine the likelihood of a clear positive correlation between the extent of political education and the quality of political behaviour. There are too many other factors that enter the equation, including the quality of political education itself and the purposes it is intended to achieve. (In all countries it *tends* to be oriented towards support of the Establishment, and in totalitarian countries such orientation is total.) One might also presumably argue – although evidence for such an argument would be very difficult to find – that if the U.S.A. paid less attention to political studies her political situation might be even worse. A more realistic view, at least *prima facie*, is that

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political studies have very little effect either way. Must one, then, relapse into complete scepticism?

The difficulty here is that of having to think simultaneously on different levels. As a professional, the teacher of politics can hardly avoid believing that the 'measurement and publicity' in which he is engaged will have some significant effect, presumably beneficial, on people's political behaviour. Indeed, if he did not believe this he would have some difficulty in justifying his choice of occupation. But when he lifts his eyes from the particular problems that are engaging his attention, to look at the global situation of the human race in the second half of the twentieth century, his scepticism begins to show.

He sees a 'statesmanship' which, confronted with the imminence of world famine, enlists men's energies on behalf of the so-called conquest of outer space and in the production of military hardware. He suspects that, this Gadarene gallop having developed an irreversible momentum, the swine have now passed the point of no return. He knows that living in the 1970s and 1980s will be an unpleasant experience for almost everybody and an intolerable burden for the inhabitants of that two-thirds of the world we euphemistically label 'developing', who will respond to their hunger, frustration and alienation with a violence that has already reduced several areas of the Third World to a bloody shambles. He rates very highly the chances that someone will start a nuclear – or, even worse, bacteriological – war. And all he has to throw on the other side of a balance so heavily weighed down with misery and death is – political education.

Admittedly, there *are* other items on the side of happiness and life.<sup>2</sup> The Cold War, which was the major cause of the missed opportunities of the post-war years, will probably come to an end, at least in its familiar form, as soon as the Americans succeed in extricating themselves from Vietnam. Capitalist regimes in the developed countries have, to a previously unimaginable extent, humanized themselves, while communist regimes are in the process of doing so, albeit hesitantly and unevenly. More serious efforts are being made to cope with the population explosion, and there is at least a possibility that the new 'Mexican' wheat strains may stave off the onset of a world starvation that some agronomists have perhaps over-confidently predicted for the year 1975.<sup>3</sup> Above all there is the contemporary 'revolt of youth' which, chaotic, directionless and even dangerous though it may be, has at least begun to dissipate the miasma of helplessness through which men of good will have been wretchedly drifting. But when all this has been said, it remains a truism that we are facing the gravest of all crises in human history – perhaps the ultimate crisis.

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Why should this crisis, however, be of special concern to the student of politics, as distinct from other professionals? Can we not all read the papers, listen to the radio and watch television? Does not anyone who follows world events, rather than treat them as screen entertainment, see the same things? Of course; but it is rather easier for other professionals to find escape by keeping their noses in their books, or the equivalent. The doctor, chemist, engineer or even civil servant can, if he so wishes, absorb a great deal of his intellectual and emotional energies in his immediate professional task, leaving the wider problems, hopefully or unhelpfully, to the 'statesman'. But the student of politics has a professional as well as a human interest in the wider problems themselves, at least to the extent that these are political problems demanding political solutions. For him, therefore, the two levels of awareness are peculiarly difficult to separate. What he sees in the world of politics he also sees in his books, and vice versa. It is true that he can try to escape by immersing himself in the pseudo-mathematical fascination of election statistics, never to emerge, or take refuge in a hard-boiled 'ethical neutrality' that affects to by-pass all the urgent issues now on the agenda;<sup>4</sup> but in either instance he solves his personal dilemma only at the cost of becoming, in the deepest sense of the word, irresponsible. Yet it is precisely to the degree that he is actively aware of the agonizingly human importance of his chosen subject that he becomes sceptical about its ultimate utility.

Nevertheless, he continues teaching and researching, not only because these are his chosen ways of making a living (and he may not be able to do anything else very well) but because, on pain of truncating his humanity, he must needs perform a specific act of faith. The forces of death are powerful and perhaps irresistible; but countervailing forces, weak as they may be, still exist. If he can contribute his specialized knowledge to their reinforcement, by seeking to discover local and global conditions for a consensus sufficient to preserve civilized ways of life, he is at least making some contribution to the cause of what we used to call progress. On this showing, therefore, he is justified in continuing to assert the value of his subject both in the university curriculum and in the wider processes of education, both formal and informal.

Affirmations of this sort, perhaps, underline rather than resolve a dilemma which, for me, becomes more and more obsessional as I grow older. Having moved a long distance from the optimistic dogmatism of my Marxist youth, I am now quite openly afraid – not for myself, for I have lived the greater part of my life, but for the young people whose dawns are so much less blissful than mine was, and for the achievements of past and present generations. There is

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no parapet to the high and narrow ledge along which mankind is stumbling. If there is still a 'good old cause', it is not socialism, liberalism, conservatism or even anarchism, but collective self-preservation, the oldest cause of the lot. It seems a sad outcome of several thousand years of civilized life that we should have come back to this most basic of purposes; but should the study of politics be able to make even the smallest contribution towards it, something will have been achieved. At least, this is the belief that will continue to give point to my work as a teacher, and it is this, if anything, that can justify the very 'practical' orientation of the modest papers that make up the present book.

# 1

## Parliament

It is only natural that a student of political institutions in this country, however wide his interests may be, should devote at least some attention to what we still, but with decreasing appropriateness, term the 'legislature'. My own concern, illustrated by the following articles, has been with the reform of the structure and procedure of the House of Commons. On the still reasonable assumption that an elected parliament is essential to a democratic way of political life, we must ask how our old and venerable institution can best be adapted to serve the needs of a political culture that, under the impact of the twentieth-century socio-technological revolution, is inevitably becoming more plebiscitary in character, more bureaucratized, more pressure-group-dominated. To this most general of questions about parliament I have tried to give an answer in the first of these articles. Originally, when presented as a paper to the 1962 Conference of the British Political Studies Association, it provoked a lively controversy in which several M.P.s participated. Today, the recommendations that it makes are far less controversial, since many of them have been incorporated in recent reforms of parliamentary procedure.

The earlier essay on 'The Use of Committees by the House of Commons', written in collaboration with Professor H. V. Wiseman, develops in greater detail one of the major themes of 'The Purpose'. Submitted in evidence to the 1958-9 Select Committee on Parliamentary Procedure, it had little immediate influence, since the views of that body were as conservative as those of its successor, still in existence, were radical.

That parliamentary reform, which fared so poorly in the 1950s, should again become a lively issue in the 1960s is to some small measure attributable to the work of the Study of Parliament Group, of which Wiseman and I have both been active members. A much greater influence, however, has been the influx of a number of young, highly-educated and somewhat iconoclastically-minded M.P.s, by no means exclusively on the Labour side, and to the happy accident



## *Parliament*

that R. H. S. Crossman became leader of the House for a period long enough to enable his reforming zeal to find practical expression. The effect of all this has been to outdate some of the remarks I made both in 'The Purpose of Parliament' and in my much earlier article, also here reproduced, on 'The Labour Party and House of Commons Reform'.

This piece, which was written before the post-war Estimates Committee got fully into its stride and before the creation of the Select Committee on Nationalized Industries, seriously underestimated both the persistence and the long-term effectiveness of back-bench efforts to find more effective means of criticizing and supervising the administration. It also suggested, wrongly if understandably, that in respect of the procedure of the House of Commons members of the Parliamentary Labour Party had drifted into a complacency from which they were not likely to emerge. Nevertheless, the article remains of some interest as an account of the evolution, up to the middle fifties, of the ideas on the subject produced by one of our two great political parties. Very much of a preliminary sketch, it might well be expanded by some industrious research student into a full-length thesis.

The two remaining essays present unorthodox views on two special aspects of parliament's advisory and supervisory functions. The memorandum on 'Ministerial Control', written for the benefit of the Select Committee on Nationalized Industries, argues a case which, although rejected by the other academics with whom I gave oral evidence (Professor Robson, Mr Chester and Mr Thornhill) is still, I think, worth considering. The article on Parliamentary Control of University Expenditure (stimulated by the proposal, now accepted, to 'open the books' of the Universities to the C. and A.G. and the Public Accounts Committee), expresses opinions which commended themselves only to Lord James among the academic witnesses who gave evidence to the Public Accounts Committee when it considered this subject. Although many well-informed colleagues in my own university and other universities were inclined to accuse me of selling the pass, I continue to believe that, if operated with common sense, tact and a proper understanding of what university education is all about, the new system *can* be beneficial to parliament and the universities alike.

## The Purpose of Parliament\*

The adaptability of British parliamentary institutions is not only the most familiar theme of the constitutional historian: it is almost literally known to every schoolboy. It is none the less astounding. That a deliberative body originating from the medieval royal council should have successively served the purposes of the fifteenth-century feudal baronage, the sixteenth-century monarchy, the seventeenth-century 'gentry', the eighteenth-century aristocracy, the nineteenth-century plutocracy, and the 'mass democracy' of our present age, is one of the world's political wonders, justifiably displayed for general admiration.

There are also, as everyone knows, practical advantages in being ancient. Even in the teen-age-oriented 1960s, it inspires respect. The British Parliament would need to behave far more outrageously than any upstart legislative assembly on the Continent to create a substantial public opinion favourable to its abolition or radical reform. But there are equally evident disadvantages. Narcissism becomes the occupational disease of parliamentarians, sometimes taking the extreme form of what Lenin rudely called 'parliamentary idiocy'. Admiration for the long-established inhibits willingness to promote, and sometimes even to contemplate, procedural changes fast and fundamental enough to keep pace with a socio-economic situation which, in the twentieth century, evolves with frightening and unprecedented rapidity. Of this there is at least *prima facie* evidence in the very thin deposit of reforms left by the Select Committee on Procedure of 1945-6 and in the extreme timidity displayed by its successor of 1958.

A degree of self-satisfaction is, perhaps, inevitable among the immediate beneficiaries of the present system. Few Cabinet ministers can see anything wrong with a collection of devices and conventions which, under the impact of an increasingly disciplined two-party system, gives them an authority which would have been the envy of their predecessors. Nor is it surprising that, when in office or enjoying

\* *Parliamentary Affairs*, Summer, 1964.

### *The Purpose of Parliament*

the immediate prospect thereof, the left tends to be procedurally even more conservative than the right. Constitutional socialists are under a special obligation to emphasize their constitutionality. To find orthodoxy in its purest form, one turns to the late Lord Morrison of Lambeth's *Government and Parliament*. More surprising, perhaps, is the fact that back-benchers, although bemoaning their political impotence, show so little enthusiasm for the various curatives that have been suggested. Some of them, of course, expect to find eventual remedy in the fruits of office. Others, over-persuaded by the constitutional historians or content with the modest achievement of having been elected or reluctant to allow parliamentary duties further to trespass on time devoted to more interesting and remunerative occupations, are genuinely suspicious that any change would be a change for the worse. Only a few, like Hinchingsbrooke, Philip Goodhart, Wedgwood Benn and Michael Foot, are active reformers. The Mother of Parliament's embrace can be almost stifling.

Partly, no doubt, this complacency is due to the success with which parliament *has* adapted itself to the more obvious of twentieth-century political needs. A disciplined party system has given us stable, long-term governments, committed to more or less coherent policies. Procedural devices first introduced to cope with Irish sabotage have been used to give the administration that control over the parliamentary time-table which it undoubtedly requires. Delegated legislation has simultaneously conferred administrative flexibility and prevented the legislative process from becoming bogged down in a mass of detail. For these and a host of minor adaptations we might perhaps feel more gratitude than we normally display. At least we have a *workable* system of parliamentary democracy, and I strongly suspect that this very fact gives it a much higher place in public esteem than it sometimes seems to possess.

### *Radical reformers*

This workability of the system has killed interest – at least for the present moment – in most of the radical schemes of reform that were so widely canvassed in the 1920s and 1930s. Some of these, such as the 'Jowett Plan', first put forward in 1906 to become the subject of a twenty-year one-man campaign, were based on a demonstrably primitive view of democracy and therefore doomed to perish as a result of the growing political sophistication of the party which their protagonists hoped to convert. Others, such as the 'bifurcated' parliament, originally recommended by the Webbs and unexpectedly if momentarily supported by Mr Winston Churchill, may be regarded as either idiosyncratic or the product of a temporary flirtation with

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Italian 'corporatism'. The most serious of the pre-war schemes, those advanced by the socialist 'left' in the 1930s and supported by constitutional authorities of the stature of Harold Laski and Sir Ivor Jennings, owed their influence to a widely-held conviction that an unreformed parliament was inherently incapable of delivering the goods that a frustrated electorate would vociferously demand.

The purpose of most of them, indeed, was not to restore parliamentary life to an imagined condition of pristine democratic vigour, but to enhance the capacity of the *executive* to put through 'popular' measures which would be resisted to the last ditch by capitalist vested interests. Parliament, in fact, was being required to adapt itself not to the more efficient performance of its current duties but to the requirements of a potentially revolutionary situation. Admittedly, Laski and Cripps had much to say about the creation of specialized committees to supervise administration, but it was G. D. H. Cole who put the essence of the reformers' case most succinctly, because it was he who cared least, of all the constitutional socialists, for the conventions regulating the operation of parliamentary institutions.

The Socialist Government [he wrote] will not be able to spare several hundreds of its picked men to sit day after day in Parliament listening to one another talk, when it will need for vital administrative and pioneering work every competent Socialist on whom it can lay hands. It will be best, as soon as Parliament has conferred on the Government the necessary emergency powers, for it to meet only as often as it is needed for some clearly practical purpose, leaving the Socialist administrators to carry on with the minimum of day-to-day interference. There will be no time for superfluous debating while we are busy building the Socialist commonwealth.<sup>1</sup>

The experience of a Socialist government between 1945 and 1951, together with the suffocation by 'affluence' of revolutionary aspirations, have made such views too irrelevant to seem even dangerous. Even Laski's *Parliamentary Government in England*, Cripps's *Democracy Up-To-Date* and Jennings's *Parliamentary Reform*, which put the case less brutally and with more qualifications, today bear the invisible label, 'Of Historical Interest Only'. It may be, of course, that we shall eventually face a situation in which their relevance is re-established. Richard Crossman, at least, seems to be currently envisaging such a possibility.<sup>2</sup> But one can hardly base a practicable policy of parliamentary reform on speculative extrapolations deriving from a conviction of the inevitable collapse of our mixed economy.<sup>3</sup> For the present few of us can regard with anything but distaste the prospect of Socialist – or any other – administrators 'carrying on with the minimum of day-to-day interference'.

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The problem that faces us today is a fundamentally different one. In a sense, it is the traditional problem of parliamentary government in the new setting of mass democracy: how to keep the system as democratic as possible without making it unworkable (or reducing its efficiency to an unacceptably low level). Reformers of the 1930s were certainly conscious of this problem, and many of their proposals for its solution are, in my view, still worth the most serious consideration. But their ideas on the subject brought them into undesired alliance with many Conservative and Liberal reformers, from whom they were anxious to distinguish themselves as sharply as possible; while the domination of their thinking by the 'final crisis' of the capitalist system made them a little ashamed to be caught playing around too frequently with ideas about 'specialized committees' and similar devices to enhance the parliamentary responsibility of the executive. Such niceties would have to await the advent of the Socialist Commonwealth, whose establishment demanded comparatively rough-and-ready methods. Today, more sceptical about Socialist Commonwealths and more informed about what the rough-and-ready really involves, we find these 'trivialities' much nearer the centre of our thoughts.

### *Parliament in danger?*

We need to be on our guard, however, against exaggerating the problem. Since the war, there has been a fair number of books and pamphlets with apocalyptic titles such as 'The Passing of Parliament', 'Parliament in Danger!' and 'Can Parliament Survive?'. I suspect that in twenty or thirty years' time these will seem as old hat as Lord Hewart's *New Despotism* or C. K. Allen's *Bureaucracy Triumphant* seem today. The British Parliament, with all its faults, remains a remarkably prestigious institution. I see no real evidence that it is in danger and am sure that, unless we experience a catastrophe which destroys much else besides, it will survive. There seems more than a possibility, moreover, that it will not only survive but produce new, creative answers to the perennial problem of liberty and authority. For the picture, presented by Lord Hewart and re-done by many subsequent writers, of a Parliament standing still in impotent fascination while the executive goes its own dictatorial way, is clearly a false one; and only somewhat less false is the more recent and more sophisticated picture of an executive fixing things up with the more powerful of the pressure groups and then presenting an equally impotent Parliament with a series of *faits accomplis*.

For despite its characteristic procedural conservatism, the House of Commons since the war has done something to improve its

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capacity to assert, *vis-à-vis* the executive, what it conceives to be the public interest. Select Committee work, for instance, has now been restored to something approaching its nineteenth-century importance. The Scrutiny Committee, although perhaps too limited in its terms of reference, has at least exorcized the bogey of executive dictatorship via delegated legislation. The Estimates Committee has acquired prestige and self-confidence, and now subjects important administrative policies and procedures to searching inquiries which can hardly be said to spare the government's feelings. The Select Committee on Nationalized Industries, still only six years old, has found its feet with remarkable rapidity and is now providing what is certainly the best solution to date for the problem of parliamentary supervision of a vital administrative no-man's-land. Among the other gains of the post-war period should be mentioned the standardization of the practice of sending bills upstairs for their committee stage; the frank recognition of the real purpose of most of the twenty-six 'supply' days, which can now provide the *point d'appui* for policy debates throughout the parliamentary session; and, partly as a consequence of this, some improvements in the procedure for financial control, e.g. Estimates Committee Reports on supplementary estimates, new opportunities for debating the Reports of both Estimates and Public Accounts Committees, and the presentation, in the spring and autumn, of White Papers on proposed capital expenditure.

Most of these reforms, it should be noted, were directly or indirectly the product of back-bench pressure, coming from comparatively small groups of unusually persistent and independent-minded Members. Few of them have evoked strong ministerial enthusiasm – although it must be said that in general Conservative front benches have displayed a greater willingness than their Labour counterparts to accept novelties. The Scrutiny Committee owes its establishment to the persistence and nuisance value of Sir Herbert Williams's 'Active Back Benchers'; the Select Committee on Nationalized Industries is the brain-child of Sir Hugh Molson and a few other Members from both sides of the House; and the recent changes in financial procedure would probably not have been made if Lord Hinchinbrooke and about half a dozen colleagues had not begun to throw spanners in the supply day works. As for the Estimates Committee, there was considerable reluctance on the part of some ministers to see it re-established in 1946 and it has been periodically getting into hot – or at least warm – water ever since.

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### *Old questions in a new setting*

All this, to my mind, has been to the credit of the back-benchers concerned. But it has also been a bit of a muddle, and one may well doubt whether parliament can seriously equip itself for the performance of its mid-twentieth-century task through the simple expedient of periodical government concessions to the pressures of back-bench minorities for the introduction of procedural novelties. Something more coherent might have come from the Select Committees on Procedure, but unfortunately both of these – and especially the last one<sup>4</sup> – have tended to adopt a ‘bits-and-pieces’ approach, despite their receipt of closely-argued memoranda from the Clerk of the House.

What has vitiated the work of both is their failure to think about the fundamentals of parliamentary government. Perhaps it is impossible now for an all-party committee to undertake so great a task, but it was more feasible in the immediate post-war ‘dawn’, when the opportunity was missed. Admittedly, the 1945–6 Committee recognized that the adaptation of procedure ‘to the growing pressure of business’ represented an ‘acute’ problem, but it deliberately refused to consider the much deeper problem of parliament’s essential purpose, for reasons which must have seemed better then than they do now.

Your Committee have been appointed at a time when the country has recently emerged from a war in which parliamentary activity was maintained and contributed in large measure to its successful prosecution. Consequently there is not at the present time any strong or widespread desire for changes in the essential character of the institution. Indeed, the prestige of Parliament has probably never been higher.<sup>5</sup>

This may still represent the basic attitude of a majority of Parliamentarians, to the extent that they can find the time and energy to think about such long-term issues. But it cannot be the attitude of the student of parliamentary government, particularly if he finds himself in broad agreement – as I do – with Dr Crick’s assertion that ‘Parliament has fallen hideously behind the times both in its procedures and in the facilities that it extends to its Members, and there is good ground for thinking that it would benefit from some fairly drastic internal alterations and repairs which would go far beyond mere patching’.<sup>6</sup> If this is so, then one must ask oneself again, in the mid-twentieth-century context, the old questions about the purpose of parliament, the opportunities which it can and ought to provide for democratic self-expression, and the limitations of its intellectual and functional capacities. Unless these questions are asked and

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answered realistically, proposals for reform may be no more than airy scheme-building – a sort of new Jowettism. Even ‘patching’ is better than that.

#### *Back to the past?*

The traditional functions of parliament are to pass legislation, to grant supply and to control the executive. The traditional sanction that it wields is the power to make and unmake governments. The effectiveness of its performance of these functions depends on the strength of this sanction. Today, as a result of developments too well-known to need stating, the sanction has virtually disappeared. *De facto*, it has been handed over to the electorate. Hence the fears of Keeton, Hollis, Einzig and the rest.

Too simple a statement? Obviously. For so long as parliament ‘represents’ the electorate and members remain responsive to public opinion, the ultimate deterrent affects proceedings in the House of Commons. Hardly ever used except at four- to five-year intervals, it hangs Damocles-wise over the heads of all good party men, and grows ever more menacing as the appointed day approaches. Nevertheless, it remains true (a) that nearly all important legislation is the government’s, and can be forced, more or less unchanged, through the House of Commons with the help of an obedient party majority; (b) that the process of granting supply is a formality, so far as the exercise of any real financial control is concerned, and is increasingly recognized as such; (c) that ‘firmness’ on the part of the Cabinet, if backed, as it normally is, by the disciplined party ranks, can effectively protect an erring minister from the most damaging parliamentary criticism. To all this must be added the manifest incapacity of a body of 630 amateurs, employing a procedure devised in other days for other purposes, to supervise an administrative machine now become so ubiquitous and complex that it penetrates every corner of the national life.

A primitive reaction to this situation is to demand that the clock be put back. Michael Foot, the latest of a distinguished company of utopian reactionaries,<sup>7</sup> is original only to the extent that to support with unimpeachable authority his demand for back-bench freedom he goes back to Peter Wentworth and not merely to Edmund Burke, as is more common.

It is the great and special part of our duty and office, Mr Speaker, to maintain freedom of consultation and speech. . . . I desire you from the bottom of your hearts to hate all messengers, tale-carriers, or any other thing, whatsoever it be, that in any manner infringe



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the liberties of his honourable Council. Yea, hate it or them, I say, as venomous beasts. . . . We are incorporated into this place to serve God and all England, not to be time-servers and humour-feeders. . . . Therefore I would have none spared or forborne that shall henceforth offend therein, of what calling soever he be, for the higher place he hath, the more harm he may do; therefore, if he will not eschew offences, the higher I wish him hanged.<sup>8</sup>

Those who concentrate their fire on the functional incapacity of the House, rather than on the stifling of the back-bencher, turn to the nineteenth century for their precedents. Hewart, as straight-laced an exponent of *laissez-faire* as only the more old-fashioned type of common lawyer can be, said that if a heavy legislative programme made delegation inevitable the obvious remedy was for parliament to pass fewer laws. More sophisticated versions of his particular form of utopianism have been produced in recent years by Professors Hayek and Keeton. Paul Einzig, who deplores both government expenditure and parliament's incapacity to control it, quotes with nostalgic approval the following proceedings in a late-nineteenth-century Committee of Supply:

The Vote of Royal Parks and Pleasure Grounds was attacked . . . on July 7, 1887. Plunket moved a reduction by £2,000, representing the Government's contribution to the cost of four bronze figures at the pedestal of the Wellington monument at Hyde Park Corner. He was at pains to emphasize that this Amendment meant to imply no disrespect to the memory of the Iron Duke. The Amendment was carried.<sup>9</sup>

One of the many reasons for Kelf-Cohen's dislike of nationalization is the alleged total inability of parliament to exercise effective control of a nationalized industry.<sup>10</sup>

Fewer laws, less expenditure, a drastic reduction of governmental responsibilities, and the destruction of party discipline – these seem to be the wholly negative means of restoring to parliament its original 'rights and privileges'. That they are utopian hardly needs to be argued; for they imply the existence of a totally different socio-political situation, in which Britain could be effectively governed by a somewhat haphazardly-organized assembly of independent-minded 'gentlemen', engaged in taking leisurely counsel on matters concerning the public good. The fact is that, for as far ahead as one can foresee, we shall continue to be confronted with a situation in which party discipline is at least as strict as it is at present, governments are not likely to be thrown out by adverse votes, speeches in debate have virtually no influence on final policy, and important decisions are

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taken secretly in the Cabinet or semi-secretly in party caucus rather than openly in the House of Commons, many of them being fixed in advance after consultation with the major pressure groups concerned. In other words, the advent of mass democracy and 'positive' government has put an end to the old concept of parliamentary representation.<sup>11</sup> The question is whether parliament can adapt itself to these new circumstances. Will it continue to function as the main channel for the transmission of democratic impulses or degenerate to the condition of a dignified monument?

### *Parliament in a managerial society*

I have already expressed my belief that adaptation is both possible and probable and quoted some evidence – admittedly inconclusive – to suggest that it is already taking place. Nevertheless, powerful arguments are advanced by those who claim that, in a predominantly managerial society, the functions of parliament can at best be of a vestigial kind. Schumpeter, for instance, develops his conception of democracy as 'competitive struggle for the people's vote' in a way that minimizes the function of the politician as well as that of the elector. Not only must the voter confine his political activity to voting: the member of parliament must recognize the narrow limits of his own capacity. He must treat the bureaucracy as a 'power in its own right', entitled to exemption from 'political meddling', and in particular must restrain himself from interfering with the main economic agencies in 'the fulfilment of their current duties'. Schumpeter's whole approach, although less pessimistic than Max Weber's, is clearly inspired by the great German sociologist's dictum that it was 'utterly ridiculous to see any connection between the high capitalism of today . . . and democracy or freedom in any sense of these words'.<sup>12</sup> If it represents the only political possibility short of overt totalitarianism, then it would seem to require not only of the elector but of the politician himself an attitude of apathetic acceptance comparable with that recommended as a preservative of democracy by Professor Morris Jones in his well-known 'Political Studies' article.<sup>13</sup>

Schumpeter does not spell out the functions of parliament in his managerial-democratic society, but the implication of his thought is that they should be confined to the following:

- (1) to sanction the formation of a government of a type that the electorate, through its vote, may be considered to have approved of;
- (2) to subject that government to criticism of a general kind, thereby

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acting as a forum for the 'competitive struggle for the people's vote'; and

(3) to secure, where possible, the redress of specific grievances.

It may be said that such functions are not very different from those on which the British parliament at present concentrates its energies; and it could be argued that the existence of a parliament is not absolutely essential for the performance of any of them. The sanctioning of a government could be done by some sort of electoral college which disbanded as soon as it had registered the people's choice of a Prime Minister. So long as parties and pressure groups exist and have freedom of expression, there is no need for a parliamentary forum to ensure that the government is criticized and that the 'competitive struggle' continues to be waged. As for grievances, there may be a positive disadvantage in having them presented to a body so largely dominated by the 'competitive struggle'; a suitably empowered 'Ombudsman' might be able to deal with them more expeditiously, expertly and satisfactorily.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, one has only to present these somewhat specious alternatives to realize that, even if confined within Schumpeterian limits of competence, parliament continues to have its uses. As long as it still enjoys the prestige of antiquity and 'supremacy' and as long as there is a sense in which it represents – or is thought of as representing – the general interest as distinct from particular interests, it remains the most important forum for the criticism of government policy and the ultimate tribunal for the hearing of grievances. The very status of the Opposition in the House of Commons is, as Jennings has said, the 'symbol of freedom'. Indeed, it is much more than that, for if there were no parliament, and therefore, *ipso facto*, no official Opposition, one can hardly conceive how politicians of the party hoping for office as a result of the next election would gain the necessary knowledge and experience of public affairs – they would be far too distant from the centres of power. It is also fairly obvious that a government which did not have to wage the parliamentary battle – sham though it may often appear – would behave very differently from one which daily submits itself to this necessity. To say the least, it would become more arbitrary, more self-satisfied, less responsive to the movements of public opinion. Lastly, there is still a very real sense in which parliament continues to do the almost intangible things that Bagehot, with his unerring political instinct, held to be of supreme importance, *viz.* to 'express the mind of the people', to 'teach the nation what it does not know', and to make us 'hear what otherwise we should not'.

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### *The rationalization of procedure*

A parliament *à la* Schumpeter, therefore, is by no means the peripheral or largely ornamental body that it might superficially appear to be. Without it, even the most limited form of democracy would have a very poor survival value. Hence one might do worse than simply take the minimum requirements for twentieth-century parliamentary government, as summarized above, and inquire how parliament could fulfil them more efficiently.

To begin with, it could very easily, and without in any way reducing its prestige, jettison a whole quantity of ancient junk. The time has long passed since we could readily tolerate a situation in which the House of Commons 'nearly always appears to do something which is quite different from what it really is doing',<sup>15</sup> as during the 'mysterious and esoteric'<sup>16</sup> processes of the supply system. That a radical simplification of procedure has become long overdue is obvious to any reader of 'Hansard' and should be obvious to any Member who has not fallen in love with tradition for tradition's sake.<sup>17</sup>

Second, the House could make much better use of its time. Partly, this is a matter of acquiring a sense of proportion. I have suggested elsewhere that 'a Parliament which spends about six hours debating an almost uncontroversial bill for the provision of cattle grids on the highways and an equal time debating an equally uncontroversial bill to increase the number of High Court judges has no right to complain when it finds that it has no more than a day to devote to the affairs of the National Coal Board'.<sup>18</sup> But there are also time-wasting procedures that ought to be eliminated or curtailed. If Diversions (most of which are precisely predictable) were reduced in number, mechanized, and planned for stated times, not only would considerable time be saved but a totally unnecessary and inherently absurd burden lifted from the shoulders of the individual Member. Further time could be saved, without – as far as I can see – any damage to the essential fabric of parliamentary government, by sending the Finance Bill upstairs, omitting the financial resolution stage of ordinary bills (or taking it in committee), amalgamating the committee and report stages,<sup>19</sup> generalizing some of the powers acquired by individual local authorities via Private Bill, and permitting Members (within limits) to 'read into' the record of proceedings material of their choice. All these and many other time-saving reforms have been proposed by reputable and informed people (including Clerks of the House) only to encounter insuperable obstacles discovered by governments and select committees. It is time that a way past these road-blocks was found.

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It should also go without saying – but unfortunately does not – that the efficiency of parliament would be greatly improved if Members were provided with better facilities for their work and better opportunities for acquiring information. There would be no point in repeating what Dr Crick has said on these important matters in his *Reform of the Commons*<sup>20</sup> except to express agreement with his view that there is an ‘overwhelming case’ for the development of secretarial and office facilities and for the expansion of library and research services.

### *Bureaucracy in a democracy*

This much, it would seem to me, is obvious. The aim is no more than to enhance parliament’s capacity to perform its basic, minimum functions in our twentieth-century managerial-democratic society. But can one go further? In this context, ‘further’ inevitably means ‘interference’ by parliament in the processes of administration, with the presumed object of making administration more ‘democratic’. It is here that Schumpeter draws the line. The administrative agencies, he says, must be ‘sufficiently exempt in the fulfilment of their current duties from interference by politicians, or for that matter by fussing citizens’ committees or by their workmen’ as to display ‘no inefficiencies other than those associated with the term bureaucracy’. The joker in that pack is obviously the word ‘sufficiently’. It is one’s judgment of what is sufficient that determines where the line should be drawn, and Schumpeter chooses to draw it well over to the ‘right’. He could claim, quite fairly, that to put it there in no way limits any realistically-defined democratic freedom; for once we admit that parliamentary interference reduces administrative efficiency, we cannot simultaneously claim that it enhances democracy. Efficiency and democracy are obviously not absolute opposites; if they are opposites at all, their opposition is of the Hegelian kind, interpenetrative in character. To put the matter more plainly, if parliamentary interference reduces administrative efficiency, its effects on democracy are equally deleterious; for if the administrative apparatus is geared to the performance of democratically-determined objectives, clearly the maximum of efficiency in their pursuit is itself an expression of the democratic way of life. It is basically for this reason that we have attempted to withdraw certain ‘sensitive’ areas of administration – particularly the administration of the nationalized industries – from the more direct forms of parliamentary control. It is also for the same reason, ostensibly, that ministers and administrators look suspiciously at the activities of parliamentary select committees.

Yet this is a grossly over-simplified way of considering the problem.