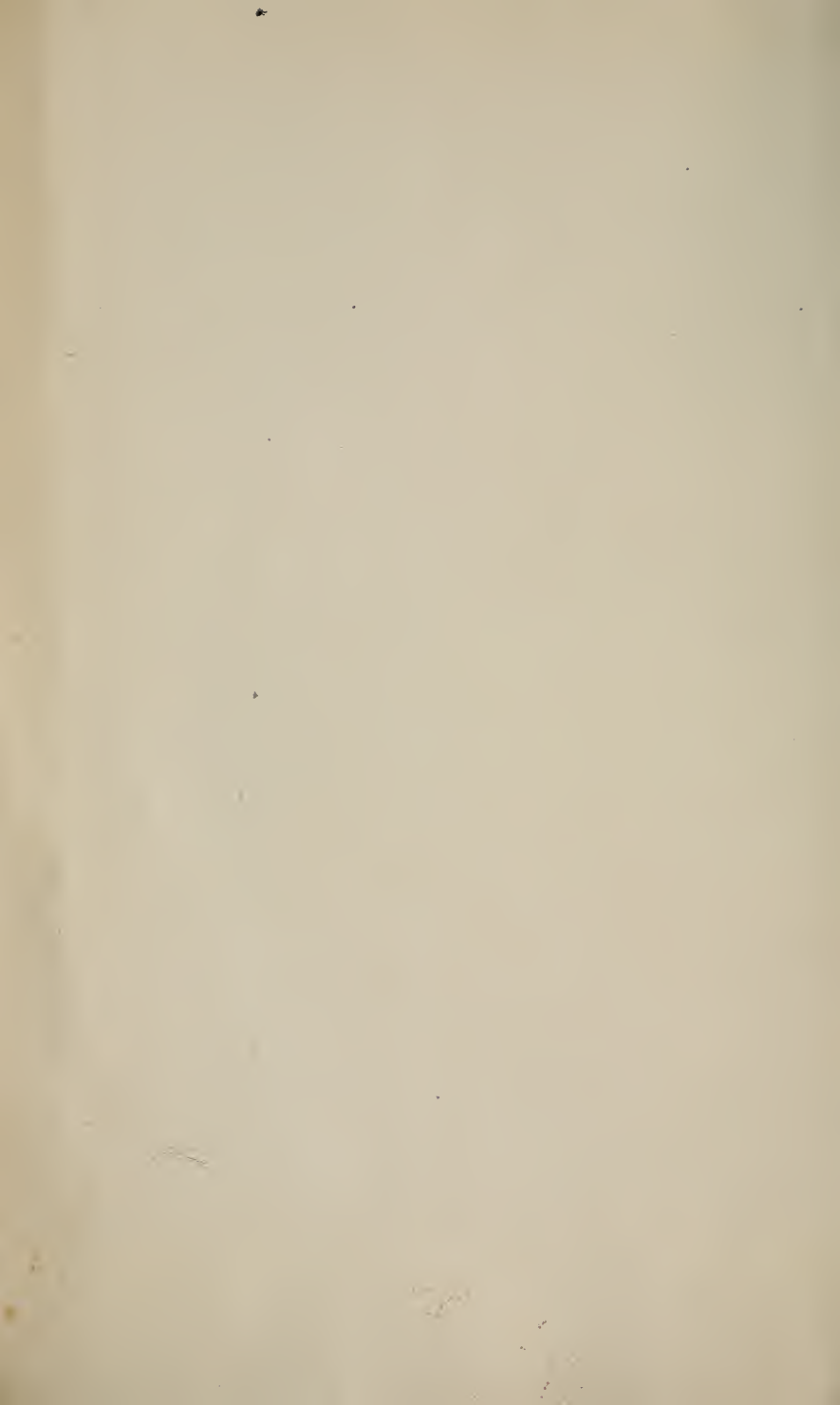




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SUGGESTIONS

FOR

IMPROVING THE MANAGEMENT

OF

PUBLIC BUSINESS

IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS.

BY

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PUBLIC BUSINESS.

IN the Minutes of Evidence before the Select Committee of the House of Commons, in 1871, on the Business of the House, I note the following remarks made by the then Speaker, the late Lord Ossington:—

“There is another point to which I have always attached great importance, and that is, that there should be some certainty with regard to the business which is to occur on each particular day. There cannot be anything of more consequence to a public assembly than to know when they meet together what business is to be brought before them. But, according to the practice of late years, with from ten to twenty Notices of Motion put down before going into Supply, that certainty has been entirely destroyed, and nobody has known how long each discussion might occupy. Nobody has known which of those amendments might be proceeded with or omitted; and, in short, as a rule, there was utter and entire *uncertainty* instead of certainty about it.”

These observations applied immediately to the inconvenience of allowing all sorts of Motions to be made on going into Committees of Supply; but

admitting (as I am not prepared now to question) this privilege, I think the same remark will apply with equal force to the prevailing practice of placing an almost unlimited number of Government Orders on the daily paper, when it is quite evident that not more than one can be brought forward: by this custom a block in the ordinary business of the House is created, which, commencing about May or June, goes on increasing, until, in the middle of July, (when Members are beginning to count the weeks before the close of the Session,) it becomes quite intolerable.

Any one who has watched the directions given by the Member in charge of the ordinary Government business of the House at the close of the evening's sitting, must have been struck with the want of previous arrangement in disposing of the remaining Government Orders on the paper of the day. The House may have been occupied all night with one Order; but, when this is over, every other Order in succession must be disposed of in some way or other. As each subject is read by the Clerk at the Table, the Government Member in charge calls out "To-day"—"To-morrow"—"Thursday"—"Friday"—and this formal but necessary proceeding may apply to twenty or more questions, which are thus fixed as Orders of the Day for times when it is perfectly well known that not one in twenty can be brought under the consideration of the House. This is all done on the same night at the close of Government business; perhaps at 12—or even at 1, 2, or 3 o'clock in the morning—when everybody—even the Member in

charge of the business—is too wearied to be able to give due consideration to this part of his duty. The result is, as Lord Ossington states, entire uncertainty as to the business to be really brought before the House.

It is a perfect marvel how the detail prepared by the Clerks of the House at the Table can be got through. Every Notice given between the commencement and end of each day's proceedings has to be duly entered in its proper order: that is, in connection with the debate or discussion to which such Motion or Amendment refers; and yet this is all arranged by the Clerks at the Table in such a perfect manner, that an error scarcely ever occurs, every Notice being duly entered in its proper place. This detail of most intricate proceedings is completed and printed, and is on the breakfast-table of every Member on the following morning—sometimes within six hours of the close of the business of the House.

I do not think that one-half the credit due is given to these Officers of the House for the admirable manner in which this duty is performed.

But this work imposed on the Clerks is not the only evil attendant on this want of arrangement: the expenses of printing the daily proceedings of the House is enormously augmented. I understand that during the early part of the Session the weight of the Votes, &c., as delivered every morning, is about 2 ounces, and the cost of printing for one day about £40. In the month of July, when the block of business has attained its height, the weight of a similar paper of Votes is 8, 10, or sometimes 12 ounces; and the cost above £90.

Is not this worthy of consideration by the Secretary of the Treasury?

Before suggesting a remedy, I should be glad to disarm those who join in a very common cry, that it is most undesirable to attempt to curtail the privilege of any Member, or to diminish the utmost freedom of discussion, during each stage of every measure in progress.

I would not propose to change the usual period for the meeting of Parliament, nor to shorten (except to a very small extent) the duration of the Session; nor would I interfere with the privilege now enjoyed by every Member of bringing forward any question of grievance on going into Committee of Supply (though I think that this privilege is frequently unduly exercised), nor would I interfere with the most ample power of discussing the merits of every Government Bill up to its second reading, or with the right of every independent Member to bring forward any measure he desired during the Session.

But what I do wish to see altered is the mode of proceeding now adopted with respect to Government Bills in Committees of the whole House.

Morning Sittings generally begin during the last seven or eight weeks of the Session; that is, when Government business begins to get in arrear. For a time, these Morning Sittings are tolerated without much grumbling; but it is not long before the Government, through this operation, gradually absorbs the whole time of the House, and all chances for discussing matters specially brought forward by independent Members are found practically at an end for the year.

Now, my proposal is, to commence these Morning Sittings at a very early period of the Session, and solely for the purpose of considering in Committees of the whole House such Government Bills as may have passed a second reading, which are ready for discussion, and which are of importance for settlement during the Session.

Before entering more fully into this proposal, I wish to point out what has been the progress during the past Session of the most important Government Bills.

I assume, as beyond dispute, that the measures recommended specially in the Queen's Speech are considered by the Government ripe for immediate discussion; and probably, that, in all cases, Bills have either been already prepared, or are in such a state of progress as will enable the Government to introduce them without delay.

In the Speech from the Throne at the commencement of the Session 1876, six measures were specially recommended for immediate consideration:—

1. The Appellate Jurisdiction Bill.
2. The Merchant Shipping Bill.
3. The Universities Bills.
4. The Elementary Education Bill.
5. The Commons Inclosure Bill.
6. The Prisons Bill.

1. The first reading of the Appellate Jurisdiction Bill took place on 21st March, having been brought from the Lords on the 16th March. It was read a second time on 12th June. Debate, on going into

Committee, commenced on the 4th July, and occupied three days; and further consideration on the Report two days; and the Royal Assent was given on 11th August.

2. The Merchant Shipping Bill was read a second time on 17th February,—Committee deferred five times. Debated in Committee ten days; read a third time and passed, 26th July; and, after various considerations of Lords' Amendments, received the Royal Assent on 15th August.

3. Universities Bills withdrawn for want of time.

4. Elementary Education Bill, after several adjournments, read a second time, 19th June; debated on going into Committee, and in Committee fourteen days; on receiving Report, two days; read a third time, 5th August; and received the Royal Assent on the 15th August.

5. Commons Inclosure, read a second time 18th February; Committee deferred eleven times, and debated in Committee four times; again debated on Report, and read a third time and passed on 22nd June; again debated on Lords' Amendments, and received the Royal Assent on the 11th August.

6. Prisons Bill withdrawn for want of time.

Respecting the other Bills alluded to generally in the Queen's Speech as "other important measures," it would hardly be too strong an expression to say that scarcely one was brought forward at the time ordered, and a great number were not considered and debated in a satisfactory manner.

Surely, the leaders of the House of Commons will not deny that this state of affairs requires very serious consideration.

My plan is to submit all these Government Bills, as soon as they have passed a second reading, to a Committee of the whole House during Morning Sittings, such Committee to sit continuously; and after the Speaker has obtained the assent of the House to go into Committee, he should not be required to resume the Chair on any of these Morning Sittings, nor until the Chairman of the Committee was able to report to the House that the business of that Committee was brought to a close.

It has happened during the last and in former Sessions that after the Speaker has left the Chair, say at 5 or 6 o'clock, his presence is not required again for six or seven hours; but during this whole time he is compelled to remain ready at any moment to be recalled to the House,—consequently having no time for entire rest or for exercise, and subject to almost as much fatigue as if he had been for the whole period in his seat in the House.

Surely, if such a tax on the Speaker is unnecessary, it is most unwise to impose it.

I firmly believe that any one of the Bills I have alluded to could have been most amply discussed in a Committee of the whole House during three or four of these Morning Sittings.

In such Committees of the whole House, I think that a quorum of twenty-five might be sufficient.

Only Members who felt some interest in the Bills under consideration would think themselves bound to

attend,—the clauses would be much better discussed, and probably there would be fewer notices of amendments, as every Member would be better able to calculate on the precise time when such amendments should be brought forward; and, to repeat Lord Ossington's words, Members would know what they had met to discuss.

I am aware it may be said that, according to existing practice, every discussion on clauses in Committee may be re-opened on the reception of the Report. Perhaps it might be found desirable hereafter to re-consider the advantage of continuing this latter power; but, without any such change, I venture to express a very confident opinion that if important Bills were considered in a Committee of the whole House in the manner I have suggested, fewer mistakes would be made, and, therefore, fewer errors would require correction; and the probability would be greatly increased of the Report being received without the necessity of further amendments.

These Morning Sittings would be held at a time when neither private Bills Committees or public Committees had commenced; or, at least, before any large number of Members would be particularly occupied in the business of the Session.

Had this course been adopted in the Session of 1876, I think it very probable that three, if not four, of these important Government Bills might have been discussed in Committee before Easter.

Presuming, as I have already stated, that these more prominent Government Bills, relating to the

special measures recommended in the Queen's Speech, have been prepared by the commencement of the Session, the leader of the House would be able, on the first or second day after the opening, to inform the House in what order he proposed to bring forward these several measures.

As soon as the first had been discussed and had passed a second reading, Supply might be taken on Army and Navy Votes, so as to enable the Government to introduce the Mutiny Bill and a Vote on account of Civil Service, according to the wants of the Treasury.

This first Supply being over, a *second* one of the above referred to Government Bills might be introduced, without in the smallest degree interfering with the first, which would then be making progress in Committee at Morning Sittings; and so on, as time would admit, before Easter.

After Easter, the House, having previously made substantial progress with Government Bills, would be prepared for the Budget of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and to consider any financial measures which might be thereby rendered necessary.

Then, if all the more important Bills had not been introduced, they would naturally be proceeded with as before Easter, and there would be ample time, not only for the consideration of other public measures alluded to generally in the Queen's Speech, but also for the consideration of many Bills or Motions by independent Members, who would not be deprived, as heretofore, of all opportunities for bringing under the notice of Parliament such questions as they might severally consider of importance.

After all the suggestions which have been made before various Committees as to the time of commencing the Session, I do not think that any alteration has commended itself, either to Parliament or to the Government, as to the usual Meeting in the first week of February; but if the suggestion I have ventured to propose were adopted and found successful, respecting the consideration of Government Bills in Committee of the whole House early in the Session at Morning Sittings, I think it would be quite possible to conclude the discussion, and to obtain the Royal Assent to all these important Bills by the 1st July; and, if so, it might then be quite easy to bring the Session to a close a fortnight earlier than is now generally the case.

But by far the most important benefit which could be derived by such a change would be to get rid of this block of Government business, which is now almost intolerable in the month of July, and thus to remove the consequent very discreditable hurry and scurry and hasty legislation now scarcely ever avoided towards the close of every Session.

If this proposal were seriously entertained, it would clearly be necessary to alter the hours of meeting for Morning Sittings, as it would be manifestly inexpedient for a Committee of the whole House to commence business at 2, when the House was to meet at 4, or $\frac{1}{4}$ before 4.

It might be, perhaps, desirable, in order to try as an experiment for one Session how far such a change were expedient, for the Committee, on the first sitting in the present usual way after the Speaker

had left the Chair, to resume its work on the following morning at 11.30, and to close its proceedings at 3.30. But, should the plan of thus conducting the work of Committee of the whole House on Government Bills at Morning Sittings be adopted permanently, it would then become desirable to have a room for such meetings specially provided. If none of the present Committee-rooms up stairs were considered sufficiently large when fitted up for the purpose, I believe that ample room could be provided on the same floor as the House.

I repeat, then, with some confidence, that the measure I have suggested would tend to carry out the views of Lord Ossington that it is most important in any public assembly that every member ought to know what business was coming on for discussion. And I am the more inclined to press for a consideration of the subject by those whose position and experience in the business of the House can alone secure a favourable reception, because I believe that I have expressed no opinions which are antagonistic to the views so fully expressed before the Committees which sat for the consideration of the better mode of conducting the business of the House, in 1861 and 1871, by our highest authority in such matters, our Solon in all parliamentary proceedings, our universally esteemed friend, Sir Thomas Erskine May.

THOMSON HANKEY.









