

The Unseen Work of Parliament¹

Some persons, and even some important organs of liberal opinion, have censured the programme of the session as uninviting. It has seemed to them that there is enough of promise in it. It has seemed to them that so elaborate, and in some respects so cumbrous, an apparatus as the English Parliament should this year do more than pass a few laws of unattractive usefulness. They have wished for something more exciting, and as the subject is very important, it may be as well to examine whether such wishes are reasonable.

We believe that, when all the necessary circumstances are duly taken account of, they are in an extreme degree unreasonable. We believe that the true working of the representative government very much depends on the fact that the nation is not inclined to require excitement from it. We are confident that if, as has been the case in some foreign countries where the representative experiment has been tried unsuccessfully, the country should ever look on the proceedings of Parliament as an intellectual and theatrical exhibition, no merit in our laws, no excellence in our national character, could save our institutions from very serious danger.

The reason of this is, in truth, plain and familiar. It is not possible that every year should be a constitutional era; and even if it were possible, it would not be desirable. Large changes in our fundamental institutions are grave tasks: they can only be proposed when the public mind has been thoroughly familiarised with their necessity; when the evil to be remedied is keenly experienced; when the preliminary discussion has been sufficient and effectual. These conditions can rarely be satisfied. Great evils are rare: effectual discussion is slow: the public mind does not readily apprehend anything new. Moreover, a constitution is but a means to an end; it is only important in so far as it is an instrument of good government. No machine can work well if subjected to incessant alteration, and if we impair the efficiency of an institution by the frequency of our innovations, we are sacrificing the end to the means. We are purchasing a satisfactory constitution at the price of a satisfactory government.

The public mind of England is sufficiently familiar with these arguments. We feel from our long experience and from our practical habits that we must know what we are doing when do so change – that we must not make changes for the sake of change – that we must regard the Imperial Parliament not as a theatrical exhibition or an intellectual stimulant, but as a practical machine. Perhaps, however, we do not sufficiently bear in mind how much Parliament really does. We have had for many years a vast number of important legislative measures which have occupied exclusive attention. We have not, perhaps, sufficiently thought of the *unseen work* of Parliament, nor adequately considered how needful it is to prevent that work from being impaired by pompous suggestions and by unnecessary attempts at showy legislation.

The first part of the duty of Parliament is the choice of the cabinet who are to administer the affairs of the country. It is upon the cabinet, as we all know, that everything which is important in our public business rest and must rest. They are the executive committee – the board of directors of the English nation: if they administer well, our affairs will be well; and if they administer badly, all our affairs will go wrong. And with the

¹ This article was first published in *The Economist* for February 9 1861, Volume XIX, p. 141-2.

increasing complexity of the world, the difficulty of administration, as well as its importance, is rapidly on the increase. All this is easily comprehended. But on certain occasions it is for the most part overlooked. Because of the choice of a ministry is an occasional act, done once and not repeated for a considerable interval, it is not counted as one of the habitual functions of Parliament, it is not taken account of in reckoning the results of each session. No error, however, could be more complete on this subject. The constant proximity of Parliament is the real force which makes ministers what they are – which prevents their being arbitrary – which prevents their being eccentric – which ensures their attending to public opinion – which enforces a substantial probity throughout the administration. It may sound like a rhetorical illustration, but it is literally true, that it would be a sufficient account of the laborious sittings of a long session if it were found that by those labours a good ministry had been kept in for the whole time. Burke said that the end of the British Constitution was to bring twelve men into the jury box; it would be truer to say that it was to bring fifteen good men into a dingy room of Downing Street.

Again, Parliament as a function of its own which is distinct from legislation, but which in the present state of the world is at least as important. It has an *expressive* function. An immense and most miscellaneous mass of topics are brought before the English nation every year; the stupendous growth of our trade, the extension of our empire, the increase of our philanthropy, the refinement of our public spirit, and an augmented national intelligence, increase these subjects year by year. On all these it has an opinion and it needs an organ for expressing it. Parliament is that organ. Whatever be the defects in its constitution (and a theorist will find many), it thoroughly expresses the substantial opinion of the average of Englishman. Its voice is not the voice of Lord John Russel, nor the voice of Mr. Disraeli, nor of Lord Palmerston – nor the expression of any casual individual or of any eccentric idiosyncrasy, but of the English nation. It is this which gives it such a singular efficiency in foreign countries. England *thinks aloud*, and her voice is heard in all the world. Nor is it a paradox to say that Parliament performs this expressive function better in consequence of what might at first seem to be its principal defects. We grieve over the commonplace loquacity of ordinary members, and certainly some of it performs no useful purpose and might well be immediately dispensed with, but much of this loquacity is really useful. It shows by the best evidence that opinions so expressed are not the solitary judgments of great statesmen, nor the long-sighted anticipations of forecasting minds, but the average judgments of ordinary men. And for this purpose bad speaking is more effectual than the very best. Mr. Gladstone is the greatest orator in Parliament, but there is something which Mr. Gladstone is less able to express than any one else, and that is the simple opinion of ordinary men. His reputation for originality is an insuperable obstacle: whatever he says is suspected of being his own. On all occasions if he is cited as a witness to public opinion, the answer is ready, “Oh, *that* is Mr. Gladstone”. At any rate, no one will impute excessive originality to ordinary members of Parliament: what they say is a nearly perfect test of the average English opinion, for they are themselves excellent specimens of the average Englishman.

It is not, of course, our object to depreciate or to speak lightly of the legislative duties of Parliament. They are so well understood and so obvious, that we are apt to think of them as its only duties. We should expect from Parliament every year, *not* indeed astonishing reforms, *not* statutes that will be an era in the history of our legislation, but an adequate supply of moderately useful measures – we should expect some business either of actual legislation, or of inquiries that may result in legislation from each session – but than we must remember that *this* business will have the qualities of *all* business. It will look dull and uninviting; it will administer no excitement; every part of it will be entirely untheatrical. “Tedious usefulness” is

said to be “the acme of civilisation”; it certainly is one of the most important functions of Parliament.