

Weekly Notes

Truant MPs and their Mentors

ABSENTEE MP's may occasionally be a headache to party whips when the voting is close and party members have to be mobilised in full force. But otherwise, absence of members from parliament or their indifference to its proceedings even when present is no more than a subject of light banter to others. Such lapses on the part of legislators as being absent when important business is being transacted by the House or dozing in their seats instead of attending to the debate, these are tolerated good-humoredly. After all, one has to make concessions for human frailties. One must escape from boredom once in a while and monotony of debates is not a punishment that the voters sought to inflict on their favourite candidate when they gave him the vote. When august legislators steal away from debates to enjoy a cup of tea, or a chat with friends or even to doze off in peaces there is no doubt an element of the comic in it, but nothing so serious as to call for severe condemnation.

Not all legislators, however, are prepared to dismiss these lapses lightly and certainly not Shri M Ananthasayanam Ayyangar, the Deputy Speaker of the Lok Sabha. What is mildly amusing for the spectator in the gallery is serious remissness in the eyes of the Deputy Speaker: so very high is his conception of a law-maker's duties and responsibilities. Addressing the Laski Institute of Political Science at Ahmedabad, Shri Ayyangar described absenteeism among MP's as a "mockery of democracy". But even if *such* absenteeism betrays indifference to parliamentary affairs, surely it does not cause "considerable" or any inconvenience to the proper functioning of the machinery of law-making? Quite the contrary, in fact. For modern parliamentary system functions at its smoothest when the members leave it to function by itself and help it to do so just by registering their approval or disapproval but doing nothing more. Electrical recording of votes has simplified their part in the proceedings; the less they participate in debates, the smoother it is for the machine to function.

It will be difficult to establish

that lack of interest taken by members hampers the working of parliament unless MPs go to the extent of keeping away in a body and numbers of them fail to turn up to register their votes. True, members absenting themselves may *appear* to show a certain disregard for the electorate. But are not appearances deceptive sometimes? What could the individual member do to safeguard the interests of his constituency? Sober reflection might suggest the wisdom of keeping away rather than being present and doing nothing, or merely obstructing.

Shri Ayyangar demanded that such truant legislators should resign their seats, because it would be too expensive to allow voters to recall their erring representatives and also somewhat impracticable. A political columnist joins issue with him. "Such absenteeism", he writes, "should not be overlooked any longer. The voters should not allow themselves to be ignored, or stultified in this fashion. They should follow Shri Ayyangar's suggestion that they form voters' associations, keep an eye on their representatives and call them to account whenever they play truant or err in other ways. Public opinion must assert itself on this question and absenteeism should no longer be made a subject for banter, but exposed as what it really is a threat to democracy. If indifference on the part of legislators is accompanied by indifference on the part of voters too, there will be no force left to prevent democracy from sliding down the slippery path. . . ."

These comments suggest as inadequate an appreciation of the use of rubber stamps in running a big organisation as of the functions of the private member in Parliament.

Rural Credit Second Round

BECAUSE the Rural Credit Enquiry Committee had recommended the nationalisation of the Imperial Bank a subject which has been on the tapis all these years and the utmost secrecy had naturally to be maintained about this recommendation and the decision of the Government on it, the stages through which a report

of this type usually passes had to be reversed. So the decision for the nationalisation of the Imperial Bank and the constitution of a State Bank to take it over came first and it is only now that the report itself is being placed before the Standing Advisory Committee for Agricultural Credit. By and by, the report will pass through the other stages such as its presentation with the observations of the Advisory Committee to the Board of Directors of the Reserve Bank, and finally, with a chit from the Reserve Bank, the report will be presented to the Government for whatever action the latter may choose to take on its other recommendations. Extraordinarily little interest has been taken in these other recommendations, considering the drastic changes the Committee proposes in the organisation of agricultural credit. It is the nationalisation of the Imperial Bank which hits the headlines though, however revolutionary the measure may sound, it is really not much of a change, so far as the organisation and the functions of this bank are concerned.

Fully admitting the case, which the Committee makes out, for a colossal expansion of rural credit, it still remains an open question whether the State Bank that will take over the Imperial Bank is the propelling institution through which the desired transformation can be or should be effected, or whether it would not be better not only to keep the functions of supply of commercial and agricultural credit separate but also to have separate institutions for the purpose. There remains also the question of the initiative of the Reserve Bank in the matter, and the reactions of the co-operators to the proposed change. From the ashes of the old Imperial Bank may rise, phoenix-like, the State Bank of India, but can a similar metamorphosis be expected in co-operative credit also? As discussion proceeds and ideas crystallise, it would be surprising if the co-operators do not gird up their loins and offer a united front of resistance against the measure of initiative that, the Committee recommends, should be taken by the Reserve Bank. Exciting developments may well be in the offing.