

From the London End

A Squalid Parliament

AS the present Parliament adjourns it is unlikely to meet again before another general election—there is apt to be some speculation as to how far this Parliament differs from other sessions, and whether parliamentary Government in Britain has earned a further dose of public cynicism by the experience of the past five years of Tory power. Mr Bevan in winding the Nyasaland debate described this Parliament as a 'squalid' one. The more august 'Times', which earlier expressed doubts as to the value of commissions of enquiry into colonial matters, was more satisfied. In fact it found that the Government front bench came out of "four and a half years in the firing line ... unbowed and not noticeably bloody". And, as luck would have it, this achievement is attributed to the vacillations in the Opposition. Mr Gaitskell's inexperience and Mr Bevan's loss of fire and punch (indeed the latter is now regarded as the 'pet' of the Commons).

Only a Debate

Your correspondent took the opportunity of listening to the debate on the Devlin Commission Report on Nyasaland. It was virtually the last major issue for the Commons before it rose for the Summer recess, and possibly this explains part of the artificiality of the debate and, what was clearly perceivable throughout the speechmaking, the absence of candour and thrust on the part of the Opposition, and the cynicism of Government spokesmen. Here was the 'Mother' of Parliaments, examining a document (the Commission Report) and a policy which was literally rocking the African Continent and beyond; more significant was the background of the Hola Camp murders in Kenya, against which the report was being discussed; and yet the picture it presented to your correspondent was that a group of people dulled by the very tedium of their speeches—and they seemed pleased that they were being called upon to deliver them—were engrossed in the technique of argument rather than on the substance of the tragedy of Nyasaland and all its immense implications. It had become clear, at least to your correspondent, that this Parliament

of all Parliaments had mastered the art of white-wash, and this irrespective of political party affiliations.

The period since 1955 when the Tories came to power has certainly been dominated by international and colonial affairs. And for the British Parliament one aspect of these affairs was ever present: the employment of force in what the 'Times' calls 'the securing of our interests'. During the 'Egyptian crisis', as one Tory M P mildly put it. Parliament faced its severest test and yet it achieved little to change the policy which motivated that crisis. For there followed the landings in Jordan and the continuance of armed operations in Cyprus. The ultimate withdrawal of forces from Jordan came only when Parliament received an assurance that the conditions for the continuance of Hussein's regime were present while in Cyprus the approach to a solution came almost by accident, i.e. the decision of Turkey and Greece to strive for a rapprochement in their relations.

Party Cohesion Above All

In colonial affairs the inability of Parliament to influence Government policy was in fact more than apparent. Indeed, as the Hola Camp murders clearly showed, the highly reputed doctrine of ministerial responsibility suffered its severest defeat. Here was a clear case where a bad policy had led to what can at most be termed "maladministration" in the Colony of Kenya. When this was exposed, the Colonial Secretary with remarkable arrogance, absolved himself from blame and Parliament was incapable of doing anything about it.

Of course, this expression of Parliament's inability to alter the course of events and policy in any manner is nothing new. It has been put down to the degree of party cohesion which exists in British politics and which recently was the subject of some serious controversy. It appears that Lord Attlee, in the days when he led the Parliamentary Labour Party, evolved the doctrine of party loyalty to the point of making a sharp distinction between an M P's vote in Parliament and what was termed his "judgement, thought and speech".

Thus the way in which an M P voted was not only predetermined by the Party caucus but it could be very different from his judgement and from what he said in public. This by any fairly simple standard amounts to hypocrisy. But, argues Lord Attlee, the M P has the opportunity of attending the caucus "where everyone can speak freely and where differences can be thrashed out". In this way the M P's judgement could be made to correspond with the vote required by the leadership. Apparently a similar technique of securing party loyalty is employed in the Conservative Party. The Tory backbenchers are given an opportunity to listen to the leader in private and to reach agreement on the vote to be cast.

In practice however these caucus meetings amount to little more than organs to convey instructions from the leadership, to threaten expulsion to rebels and, as Michael Foot shows in some illuminating articles recently published in the 'Observer', there have been cases where "underhand methods of pressure have been employed by the Westminster machine to secure support ... in the voting lobbies". Foot further shows from his own experience how the Labour Party caucus was no more than an instrument in the hands of Lord Attlee. The procedure, the agenda, the enforced closure on private debate were all like a giant steamroller trampling down on ineffective M Ps and "this was the method by which it was decided that Labour should support Britain's manufacture of the H-Bomb, whether Labour should banish Tshekedi Khama, whether Labour should approve of the rearmament of West Germany etc."

Rendered Null

This may very well explain the ease with which M P's are able to direct their political energies away from issues into rantings about the party opposite. And the persistence with which M P's play 'party politics' rather than politics as such has had a considerable amount to do with the ever more evident public disgust and intolerance shown to politicians. This is shown by the

steady decline in votes cast for both the major parties in a whole series of by-elections over recent years. Indeed the main feature of the 1955 election was the extra million and a half voters who in boredom or bewilderment stayed at home and did not cast their vote. The forthcoming elections are likely to confirm this trend further.

At a deeper level the explanation for the absence of any real political influence emerging from Parliament lies in the nature of Parliament itself. The Commons and the Lords are increasingly exhibiting what is their true content: they are the de-

mocratic facades behind which the vast machinery of Government and law pursues its inexorable course: a course not set by the policy positions of the political parties as such, but by the intangible 'system' as the French so aptly put it. There stands little doubt today that should the M P and his political parties really bend themselves with independence towards making Parliament the source of policy, then Parliament will certainly crumble. For then it would no longer be tolerated by the 'system'. One is strongly reminded of Hillaire Belloc's attack against the Parliament of 1911. He saw

before him the demise of independent judgement, the ease with which fundamental issues were excluded from party politics on the ground of being 'above party', the secret compacts in the front benches all these are of some relevance today and wrote:

"My object ... is to support the tendency everywhere apparent and finding expression, a tendency to expose and ridicule as it deserves, to destroy and supplant the system under which Parliament, the governing institution of the country, has been rendered null."

Book Reviews

First Steps in Community Development

S C Dube

Pilot Project, India by Albert Mayer and associates in collaboration with McKim Marriott and Richard L Park Oxford University Press, 1958. Pp 367. Price Rs 20.

ALTHOUGH the Indian Community Development Programme has attracted world wide attention, its beginnings, growth and development have not been adequately or even carefully recorded. Pilot Project India by Albert Mayer and his associates outlines the fascinating story of the experimental project at Etawah that eventually became the prototype for rural extension work in the country. By no means the only experiment in this field, the pilot project described in this book has nevertheless contributed significantly to the concepts, philosophy, methods, and administrative organization of rural extension work in India. Imaginative and skilful editing of a selection from a large volume of reports, memoranda and personal letters has provided a moving record of the progress of the movement, from a Utopian probability into an impressive reality. In the process Albert Mayer emerges, without any laudatory biographical details, as the key figure of the experiment a man of vision, foresight, understanding and determination.

Late in 1916 Albert Mayer prepared a "Preliminary Outline for Village Planning and Reconstruction" in which he proposed to set up one experimental village development project. With certain modifications, the Pilot Development Project outlined by him was launched in the Etawah district of Uttar Pra-

desh in October 1948. Perhaps the most important feature of the project was its emphasis, almost at every step, on the active participation of village people in rural development activities. To this end a programme rooted in village needs was to be evolved, and an administrative machinery consisting of perceptive and dedicated officials, rather than mercenaries, was to be created. This called for a series of modifications in the traditional bureaucratic organization and methods of work. Some of the daring innovations made by Mayer and his associates worked so well that they were later adopted for the Community Development and National Extension Programme all over India.

The fascinating narrative of Pilot Project, India at once arouses hope and despair. Its optimistic tone leads one to believe that given understanding, sympathy and determination something can be done for the Indian villages; their problems of poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy and health are not impossibly difficult. However, an element of despair is introduced when one observes that the lessons of Etawah have been largely lost on those who have been responsible for extending the rural development programme on a nation-wide scale. The Etawah Project had a band of carefully chosen officials who were properly oriented to the demands of their new assignment. They approached their task

in a spirit of humility and critical self-evaluation. A conscious effort was made to keep the administrative machine and procedures sufficiently elastic. The programme itself was adaptable, there being no special sanctity attached to fixed targets. The planners were conscious of the disadvantages of 'show projects', and their fears regarding the coming in of too many outsiders to see the projects have been expressed on several occasions in the book. On the whole the experiment was viewed as a process of learning; those participating in it were willing to learn both from their successes and failures. In the hurried nation-wide extension of the programme, many observers have found only the skeleton of Etawah Pilot Project without its spirit. Officials have rarely been chosen with discrimination, their orientation has been inadequate, and many of them have not fully accepted either the concepts or the methods of extension work. The administrative machine has largely been wooden and inflexible. Wedded to traditional bureaucratic methods, it lacked the pioneering spirit, humility and will to learn that characterised the working of the Etawah team. A rigid budget-frame and more or less sacrosanct pre-determined targets lead towards emphasis on achievement of physical targets, resulted in the projects ending up, in many instances, as show projects of doubtful utility.