

# Who goes home for tea?

by Enoch Powell

Quite often, when a major and controversial change occurs, the consequences which turn out to be most important are not foreseen or brought into the debate.

It was so, for example, with the great measures of nationalization in the 1945 parliament. Nobody at the time noticed the inflationary consequences. Nobody pointed out that large quantities of new government paper, which would in due course have to be redeemed or rolled forward, were being created. Nobody drew attention to the now obvious fact that in future the new capital required by those industries would, in default of massive profits, have to be raised on government credit. Yet these turned out to be the most extensive and damaging of the consequences.

Something similar has happened with the reforms inaugurated in the House of Commons this session, following the recommendations of the Williams Committee on procedure in the last parliament. Their centre-piece is a whole range of "subject committees", select committees each assigned to investigate and report on one or more departments, with power to take evidence from ministers, Civil Servants and others. It was in a way the culmination of a long evolution whereby sub-committees of the old Estimates and later Public Expenditure Committees had given themselves an ever widening brief *vis-à-vis* the respective ministries.

There has always been a school of thought, to which Michael Foot and I belonged, which looked askance at multiplication of committees, believing that such a move towards the essentially different American system would detract from the importance of the floor of the House itself and thus in the long run weaken the power of Parliament, which ultimately depends on open debate.

This anxiety should have been, and I think was, increased by a recent development — that of throwing open to the public the sittings of select committees, which, unlike the standing committees on Bills, had previously been almost invariably held in private. An incidental consequence of this change was in effect to destroy the old and important rule that until a committee had reported to the House, no one, Member or not, might disclose or refer to its proceedings or evidence upon pain of the penalties of contempt; and many were the journalists who were called to book for publishing information that had leaked pre-

turely from select committees. Obviously public sitting makes nonsense of this; and the old rule is now got round by deeming committees to have reported to the House at the end of each public sitting.

There turns out, however, to have been a critical factor that nobody thought of or foresaw. Parliamentary reports — for labour and other reasons — now "go to bed" earlier and earlier, so that the term itself has become anachronistic and might well be replaced by the cry, "Home for tea!" Once questions and statements are over, by between 4 and 4.30 pm, and the two opening speeches of the day's debate have run to about 6 pm, it is time for the parliamentary gallery to file its stories, and a scanty harvest the sitting thus far will often have yielded. The debate itself has still four hours or more to run, during which the true mood of the House and the parties will have time to disclose itself. On many evenings there are other items to follow later, which are frequently more piquant and important than the *entrée* of the day. All this, however, is out of time for the newspapers, though sound extracts up to 10 or even 11 o'clock may still find a place on radio.

Into the news vacuum thus created there has suddenly rushed a flood of new material, provided during the daylight hours and requiring much less skill and patience to evaluate and process than a debate on the floor. The reporter who goes along at 10 am is now presented with a plentiful and appetizing bill of fare. In the mornings from 10.30 and in the afternoons at hours which are still manageable there will be sitting a range of six to ten select committees, billed to cross-examine ministers, officials and experts, not on the tedious minutiae of expenditure and administration but on red-hot departmental policy matter connected with current news stories.

Moving from one committee room to another, he — and his editors — will be unlucky indeed if long before the day's deadline they cannot gather prime political material more succulent, varied and plentiful than almost any day spent assiduously in the gallery of the House would have furnished.

It seems we were looking in the wrong direction. The danger turns out not to have been that Members would desert the Chamber so much as those who report them. It is a simple combination of the clock and the printing unions that is beginning to threaten government by debate — otherwise known as parliamentary democracy.

Enoch Powell is Official Ulster Unionist MP for Down, South.

4

PRIME MINISTER

To see  
MS

'ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS'

JUNE 1980

MS