

BROADCASTING THE BRITISH PARLIAMENT

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AMONG many strange facets presented by the current war, one of the strangest is that the present abnormal conditions have brought to the forefront a question which, by all ordinary standards, ought to have emerged during the 1920's. Although British broadcasting has been a Government monopoly since 1926, only the exigencies of a world conflict have secured close consideration of the idea of broadcasting actual parliamentary proceedings from the House of Commons in London.

Even now, the surface of this suggestion has been little more than scratched. When Mr. Churchill on January 20th put before the House of Commons a proposal that certain speeches of his might be mechanically recorded for future broadcasting, his motive was concerned with personal convenience rather than with the principle of broadcasting parliamentary affairs in general. His object was mainly to relieve himself of the strain of repeating his speeches over the air at a later time. The House was asked to sanction—but refused to permit—such an innovation, and several reasons against the idea were put forward.

Nevertheless, parliamentary broadcasts on a much wider scale may have to be considered at no very distant date. There are portents (particularly overseas) that the application of radio to democratic government cannot be much longer ignored. Indeed, there is nothing really novel in the idea! New Zealand adopted it a full five years ago, and every session of the New Zealand Parliament can now be heard in progress by radio listeners "Down Under."

If we admit (as surely we must) that the essence of democratic government is government *of* the people *for* the people *by* the people, then the broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings assumes great importance. Radio offers a means (the only means) whereby every voter may obtain a direct, active insight into the running of the State. In the ideal democratic State, public co-operation would extend to the attendance in parliament of every individual, when laws affecting the community were being made or revised. Obviously, however, the intro-

duction of such a privilege to its fullest extent is utterly impracticable in Great Britain—though we do acknowledge the principle, the Strangers' Gallery in the House of Commons being open to anybody sufficiently interested to attend.

Radio, however, provides a practical alternative to that ideal. Whereas only a minute proportion of the forty-odd million inhabitants of the British Isles could at any one time be crowded into the House, every one of that large population would have the opportunity to take an active interest by listening, were the proceedings broadcast.

The proposal to establish an Empire Parliament, (that is, a Parliament additional to the one established by each component country, and concerned with purely Empire affairs, in contrast to internal administration), made in some circles recently, lends further emphasis to the benefits of parliamentary broadcasts. In connection with such a Parliament, world-wide radio dissemination of the sessions would probably be essential to the successful working of the scheme.

What of the drawbacks? One was voiced by Mr. Hoare-Belisha in answer to Mr. Churchill's suggestion. The Hon. Member for Devonport declared that unbiassed radio representation of all parties and all points of view would require very careful consideration. He wanted a committee to be appointed, in order to ensure fair radio treatment, if the Premier's request were met.

This point can be quickly disposed of. How has New Zealand overcome the difficulty? Simply by broadcasting parliamentary sessions *in their entirety*. Every moment the New Zealand House is sitting, it is on the air. Every member's speech is broadcast without reserve.

Thus, no valid cause for individual political feuds or party strife exists in connection with the broadcasts. The most powerful radio transmitter in the country—2YA Wellington, six times the strength of any other New Zealand station—is reserved for parliamentary broadcasts every moment the House is in session.

A more reasonable criticism of this epoch-making idea is that the spoken word can be mis-heard, and that detrimental results might arise from such mis-hearing, whether it were caused by faulty transmission, by faulty reception, or by poor diction on the part of the member concerned. Against this it may be urged that the spoken word can, by correct inflection, be made to convey its true meaning more readily than the printed

word—which is the alternative method of conveying M.P.'s utterances to constituents and to voters in general.

As to faulty radio transmission and reception, perfection has just about been obtained in this line during the last few years. It is also easy to arrange safeguards against the misuse of radio by any misguided member who may attempt to employ it in an unparliamentary or otherwise unorthodox way.

The Speaker of the New Zealand House is provided with a switch, enabling him instantly to cut off the broadcasts if he considers it necessary to do so. He is also provided with a separate microphone, by means of which he can cut into the radio speeches with explanations or comments, should the need arise.

The same precautions guard against the divulging of State secrets. An idea of the reliance which can be placed upon these safeguards is obtainable from the fact that the New Zealand parliamentary broadcasts have continued since the outbreak of the war.

Centuries-old tradition is undoubtedly the greatest obstacle to introducing radio into Westminster proceedings. There are those who still regard radio as essentially and primarily a medium of entertainment, and who therefore look askance at any proposal to bring microphones into the House of Commons. The dignity of the setting (they say) would thereby be impaired. Admittedly, the New Zealand Parliament, with less than 100 years' history behind it, is far less hidebound to historic custom than is its London counterpart.

The process of introducing radio into the Commons could best be achieved by first installing microphones, not for radio purposes, but for the convenience of members alone. The acoustics of the House destroyed by Nazi bombs were never fully satisfactory, and it has been suggested that when the building is reconstructed it might be wired for loudspeakers.

One or two other countries have already adopted such aids, and the idea is spreading. Russia has laid the foundation of a mammoth Palace of the Soviets, in Moscow, a building in which every representative's seat is to be wired for telephonic purposes.

Once microphones were installed in the British House of Commons, if only for internal use, much of the traditional objection to broadcasting politicians' utterances would doubtless begin to disappear. Radio transmissions of the proceedings could confidently be expected to follow as a matter of course, once the barrier of "outraged propriety" were broken down.

In reality, radio is nowadays such a common feature of everyday life that it cannot conceivably be consistently ignored by any up-to-date Parliament. It is not unlikely that, were Government proceedings made available to the ears of every voter, a step would have been taken towards the removal of the oft-deplored election apathy. The New Zealand broadcasts have created that effect "Down Under."

Next logical step would be television of the House in session. When every household can see (as well as hear) its governing institution in action, democratic government will have reached new heights. But the first step is radio dissemination of the spoken word, the broadcasting of debates and other speeches without visual accompaniment.