

A Sense of Crowd and Urgency^{*}

Winston Churchill^{**}

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There are two main characteristics of the House of Commons which will command the approval and the support of reflective and experienced Members. They will, I have no doubt, sound odd to foreign ears. The first is that its shape should be oblong and not semi-circular. Here is a very potent factor in our political life. The semi-circular assembly, which appeals to political theorists, enables every individual or every group to move round the centre, adopting various shades of pink according as the weather changes. I am a convinced supporter of the party system in preference to the group system. I have seen many earnest and ardent Parliaments destroyed by the group system. The party system is much favoured by the oblong form of Chamber. It is easy for an individual to move through those insensible gradations from Left to Right, but the act of crossing the Floor is one which requires serious consideration. I am well informed on this matter, for I have accomplished that difficult process, not only once but twice. Logic is a poor guide compared with custom. Logic, which has created in so many countries semi-circular assemblies with buildings that give to every Member, not only a seat to sit in, but often a desk to write at, with a lid to bang, has proved fatal to Parliamentary Government as we know it here in its home and in the land of its birth.

The second characteristic of a Chamber formed on the lines of the House of Commons is that it should not be big enough to contain all its Members at once without overcrowding, and that there should be no question of every Member having a separate seat reserved for him. The reason for this has long been a puzzle to uninstructed outsiders, and has frequently excited the curiosity and even the criticism of new Members. Yet is not so difficult to understand if you look at it from a practical point of view. If the House is big enough to contain all its Members, nine-tenths of its Debates will be conducted in the depressing atmosphere of an almost empty or half-empty Chamber.

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The essence of good House of Commons speaking is the conversational style, the facility for quick, informal interruptions and interchanges. Harangues from a rostrum would be a bad substitute for the conversational style in which so much of our business is done. But the conversational style requires a fairly small space, and there should be on great occasions a sense of crowd and urgency. There should be a sense of the importance of much that is said, and a sense that great matters are being decided, there and then, by the House.

We attach immense importance to the survival of Parliamentary democracy. In this country this is one of our war aims. We wish to see our Parliament a strong, easy, flexible instrument of free Debate. For this purpose a small Chamber and a sense of intimacy are indispensable. It is notable that the Parliaments of the British Commonwealth have to a very large extent reproduced our Parliamentary institutions in their form as well as in their spirit, even to the Chair in which the Speakers of the different Assemblies sit. We do not seek to impose our ideas on others; we make no invidious criticisms of other nations. All the same we hold none the less tenaciously to them ourselves. The vitality and the authority of the House of Commons, and its hold upon an electorate based upon universal suffrage, depend to no small extent upon its episodes and great moments, even upon its scenes and rows, which, as everyone will agree, are better conducted at close quarters. Destroy that hold which Parliament has upon the public mind and has preserved through all these changing, turbulent times, and the living organism of the House of Commons would be greatly impaired. You may have a machine, but the House of Commons is much more than a machine; it has earned and captured and held through long generations the imagination and respect of the British nation. It is not free from shortcomings; they mark all human institutions. Nevertheless, I submit to what is probably not an unfriendly audience on that subject that our House has proved itself capable of adapting itself to every change which the swift pace of modern life has brought upon us. It has a collective personality which enjoys the regard of the public, and which imposes itself upon the conduct not only of individual Members but of parties. It has a code of its own which everyone knows, and it has means of its own of enforcing those manners and habits which have grown up and have been found to be an essential part of our Parliamentary life.

The House of Commons has lifted our affairs above the mechanical sphere into the human sphere. It thrives on criticism, it is perfectly impervious to newspaper abuse or taunts from any quarter, and it is capable of digesting almost anything or almost any body of gentlemen, whatever be the views with which they arrive. There is no situation to which it cannot address itself with vigour and ingenuity. It is the citadel of British liberty; it is the foundation of our laws; its traditions and its privileges are as lively today as when it broke the arbitrary power of the Crown and substituted that Constitutional Monarchy under which we have enjoyed so many blessings. In this war the House of Commons has proved itself to be a rock upon which an Administration, without losing the confidence of the House, has been able to confront the most terrible emergencies. The House has shown itself able to face the possibility of national destruction with classical composure. It can change Governments, and has changed them by heat of passion. It can sustain Governments in long, adverse, disappointing struggles through many dark, grey months and even years until the sun comes out again. I do not know how else this country can be governed than by the House of Commons playing its part in all its broad freedom in British public life. We have learned — with

these so recently confirmed facts around us and before us — not to alter improvidently the physical structures which have enabled so remarkable an organism to carry on its work of banning dictatorships within this Island, and pursuing and beating into ruins all dictators who have molested us from outside.

His Majesty's Government are most anxious, and are indeed resolved, to ask the House to adhere firmly in principle to the structure and characteristics of the House of Commons we have known, and I do not doubt that that is the wish of the great majority of the Members in this the second longest Parliament of our history. If challenged, we must take issue upon that by the customary Parliamentary method of debate followed by a Division. The question of Divisions again relates very directly to the structure of the House of Commons. We must look forward to periods when Divisions will be much more frequent than they are now. Many of us have seen twenty or thirty in a single Parliamentary Sitting, and in the lobbies of the Chamber which Hitler shattered we had facilities and conveniences far exceeding those which we are able to enjoy in this lordly abode. I am, therefore, proposing in the name of His Majesty's Government that we decide to rebuild the House of Commons on its old foundations, which are intact, and in principle within its old dimensions, and that we utilise so far as possible its shattered walls. That is also the most cheap and expeditious method we could pursue to provide ourselves with a habitation.

I now come to some of the more practical issues which are involved. It is said that we should wait until the end of the war, and I think perhaps that was the point my hon. Friend opposite wished to put. Certainly we must do nothing which appreciably detracts from the war effort, but what we have to do in the first instance is to make up our minds and have a plan and have the preliminary work and survey effectively done, so that at the end of the war, if not earlier, we can start without delay and build ourselves a House again. All this will be a matter for the Committee, which will certainly have more than fifteen Members of the House, representative of the different parties and different points of view. I am, however, not entirely convinced that it may not be found possible to make definite progress with this work even during the course of the war. The First Commissioner of Works has submitted a scheme which would enable the old House of Commons to be reconstructed, with certain desirable improvements and modernisations, accommodation for the Press, the Ladies' Gallery and other prominent features. This scheme would take only 18 months, but it would be prudent — and those concerned with building houses would, I think, feel that it would be prudent — to count on double that period, because everything must be fitted in with war needs, and also because it is the habit of architects and builders to be more sanguine when putting forward their plans than is subsequently found to be justified by the actual facts. The last House of Commons, the one which was set up after the fire in 1834, was promised in six years and actually took 27 years, and so, when I speak of rebuilding the House of Commons in 18 months, it is, of course, without panelling or carving, which can be added as the years pass by. It is simply a Chamber for us to dwell in and conduct our Business as we require to do. The timber must be set aside now if it is to be properly seasoned. The Clipsham Quarry, from which the stone was produced for the maintenance and replacement of the Houses of Parliament is temporarily closed. It would have to be reopened. We must then consider very carefully the strain upon our labour resources. The First Commissioner informs me that for the first six months after the plan has been started, after the word 'Go' has been given, only 46 quarrymen and demolition men

would be required, of whom half would be over 40 years of age and the other half over 50 years of age. In the second six months 185 men would be required over 40 and an equal number over 50. But of those over 50 years of age 60 would be masons, whose trade has so little work at the present time. In the third six months — and we shall be getting on by then — we shall require 170 men, not additional, over 40 and an equal number over 50. All the 170 over 50 would come from the building trade; the 170 over 40 and under 50 would come from the engineering trade. This last is a much more serious consideration. But there is no need for us, even when the whole scheme is approved and the work has begun, to commit ourselves to the rate of reconstruction. We can fit it in as a stand-by job. It might well be that in a year's time, when we require men from the engineering trade, our affairs might be in such a posture that we shall be looking for jobs rather than men.

However, the House is not asked to commit itself to any decisions of this kind. On the contrary, the Committee has first of all to make its decisions of principle, and then the execution of those decisions must be a matter for the Government to carry out as and when the public interest requires, and strictly within the limits of the war effort. All the same, I must tell you, Mr. Speaker, that it would be a real danger if at the end of the war we found ourselves separated by a long period from the possibility of obtaining a restored and suitable House of Commons Chamber. We are building warships that will not be finished for many years ahead, and various works of construction are going forward for war purposes. But I am bound to say that I rank the House of Commons — the most powerful Assembly in the whole world — at least as important as a fortification or a battleship, even in time of war. Politics may be very fierce and violent in the after-war days. We may have all the changes in personnel following upon a General Election. We shall certainly have an immense press of Business and, very likely, of stormy controversy. We must have a good, well-tryed and convenient place in which to do our work. The House owes it to itself, it owes it to the nation, to make sure that there is no gap, no awkward, injurious hiatus in the continuity of our Parliamentary life. I am to-day only expressing the views of the Government, but if the House sets up the Committee and in a few months' time the Committee gives us their Report, we shall be able to take decisions together on the whole matter, and not be caught at a disadvantage in what must inevitably be a time of particular stress and crisis at the end of the war, from a Parliamentary point of view. Therefore, I ask that the Committee should be set up, and I feel sure that it will be able to make a good plan of action, leaving the necessary latitude to the Government as to the time when this action can be taken and the speed at which it can be carried into effect, having regard to the prime exigencies of the war. We owe a great debt to the House of Lords for having placed at our disposal this spacious, splendid hall. We have already expressed in formal Resolution our thanks to them. We do not wish to outstay our welcome. We have been greatly inconvenienced by our sojourn on these red benches and under this gilded, ornamented, statue-bedecked roof. I express my gratitude, and my appreciation of what we have received and enjoyed, but

Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.

