

## THE STUDY OF PARLIAMENT GROUP 1964-1985

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On Friday 28th June 1985 there was a dinner in the Harcourt Room in the House of Commons at Westminster with ex Prime Minister Rt Hon James Callaghan MP and the present Leader of the House of Commons the Rt Hon John Biffen as guest speakers. It was to mark the twenty-first anniversary of the Study of Parliament Group. In addition to the other guests, the Rt Hon Harold Walker MP and the Rt Hon Baroness Young, forty-nine members or ex-members of the Group were present.

The Study of Parliament group was founded on 2nd October 1964. Ten days earlier Sir Edward Fellowes, the recently retired Clerk of the House of Commons, Michael Ryle, a Senior Clerk in the House of Commons and Dr Bernard Crick of the London School of Economics and author of the recent timely publication "The Reform of Parliament", had drawn up a document which aimed to do two things. First it wanted to alert those interested to the fact that both the main political parties who were then fighting a General Election, were committed to the reform of Parliament. In this connection it stated it would be good if "some group outside the Parties studied the problem as a whole and put forward detailed proposals to the relevant committees of a comprehensive yet immediately practical and politically sensible nature (proposals compatible with the existing radices of ministerial responsibility and Party government)". Secondly, in the longer term: "it would be mutually useful, both for practical and academic reasons, for people in the universities and in the Palace of Westminster interested in the study of the modern Parliament to have the chance to meet each other some known and regular basis, however informal, to study and to stimulate studies of Parliament".

Initially the memorandum went out to three members of the Clerk's Department, two members of the Library of the House of Commons and eight academics. Nearly all turned up to the inaugural meeting held in the London School of Economics on that afternoon of the 2nd October 1964 and many of them remain in active membership twenty-one years later. Subsequent to this meeting, Sir Edward Fellowes, Max (now Lord) Beloff and Bernard Crick made the standard move on these occasions and wrote a letter to the Times (24th October 1964) concluding: "We have no doubt that the whole question of Parliament's role has been ignored for far too long, and that a detailed far-reaching and practical investigation is urgently required".

Members of the Study of Parliament Group are elected and drawn: "from past and present staff of universities and other academic or research institutions and

from past and present officers of the two Houses of Parliament". No Members of Parliament it will be noted, no journalists, no civil servants. Was there a danger that it would quickly become an esoteric dining society? From the beginning I think the answer must be no. First, this was a meeting of two sets of practitioners namely those who taught, thought and wrote about Parliament and indeed politics (the academics) and those who maintain Parliament at work (the officers of both Houses). Secondly, the academics were widely spread through United Kingdom universities—London itself has never been particularly strongly represented—and dinners are held irregularly and certainly no more than once a year.

Thirdly, from the beginning the Group has had a very practical way of working, namely through accepting volunteers to form a Study Group under a convenor with the remit of reporting back to the main body—a method not entirely dissimilar to the establishing of an ad hoc Select Committee in Parliament.

The first job tackled by the Study of Parliament Group was to submit both oral and written evidence to the Procedure Committee, which was published in the Fourth Report from the Select Committee on Procedure 1964-65 HC 303. This hoped to meet the first objective set out in the memorandum above. Further evidence was subsequently submitted to the Procedure Committee on Financial Procedure 1965-66 HC 122, Times of sittings of the House 1966-67 HC 153 and Public Bill Procedure etc 1966-67 HC 539. By this time the Study of Parliament group was accepted as an informed source of evidence on parliamentary procedure though it must be emphasized that all evidence to Select Committees is given by the academic membership never by officers of the House who may of course be required to give evidence in an official capacity. In addition to the giving of evidence, the Study of Parliament Group and its members have been involved in writing and publishing a number of monographs on the Westminster Parliament. In 1970 a successful paperback book called *"The Commons in Transition"* appeared under the Fontana imprint and two further editions of this work appeared under different titles namely *"The Commons in the Seventies"* in 1977 and *"The Commons Today"* in 1981. A longer and more specialised study *"The Member of Parliament and his information"* was published in 1970 by Allen and Unwin, the first major study of this aspect of the functioning of the House of Commons. And in 1974 the same publisher brought out *"The House of Commons Services and Facilities"* which was the first and a most successful attempt to give a survey of the work of the different Departments of the House of Commons. This volume has recently been up-dated in *"The House of Commons: Services and Facilities 1972-1982"*. All these were major pioneering studies. A sharper focus to the work of the Group has been achieved through pamphlets and publications on more special aspects such as *"Westminster to Brussels: the significance for Parliament of Accession to the European Community"*, 1973, published when we joined the European Communities; *"Specialist Committees in the British Parliament"*, 1976 reviewing the significance of some of the so-called "Grossman reforms" a decade after and: *"Westminster and Devolution"*, 1978, a publication responding to the excitement of the possibility of Scottish and Welsh assemblies. This work reflects the Group's ability to grasp and comment on the passing Parliamentary scene. There have been two further major studies both handled by the Clarendon Press. The first was *"The House of Commons in the Twentieth*

*Century*", 1979, which is a collection of well researched essays by academics and officers of parliament and a major contribution to Parliamentary studies. The second is "*The New Select Committees: A Study of the 1979 Reforms*" which is due to be published in September 1985. It is an examination of the work of the new Departmental Select Committees of the House of Commons and the longer standing Select Committee on the European Committees of the House of Lords—with considerable statistical apparatus attached. In all these and other publications not mentioned, the contribution of Officers of the House has been significant.

In 1973 a different situation arose when the Commission on the Constitution was set up. Norman (now Lord) Crowther-Hunt was a member of the Commission and also of the Group and a series of papers were prepared for submission which included the following subjects:

1. English Regional Committees in Parliament;
2. Welsh Committees in the House of Commons;
3. Mechanism of Scottish Government;
4. Scrutiny by the House of Commons of Government Policy and Administration;
5. Possible Adaptations of the House of Lords.

These were all to appear as the Commission's *Research Paper 5: Aspects of Parliamentary Reform*, 1973. In some ways they were preparatory for the Group's later pamphlet *Westminster and Devolution*.

So much for the Group's work which has appeared as the printed word. Equally important has been the informal exchanges at occasional meetings organised at Westminster between members of the Group and Members of Parliament and when occasionally members of the Executive Committee have discussed matters with Ministers. The Executive Committee for instance dined with Richard Crossman, then Leader of the House of Commons, on 5 January 1967 (see Crossman Diaries Vol. 2, p. 187) and subsequently with Lord Shackleton, Leader of the House of Lords, 2nd January 1969 and Fed (now Lord) Peart, Leader of the House of Commons, on 7th March 1969. Without any minutes being taken it is difficult to measure the importance of these social occasions but they did reflect a spirit of ministerial enquiry about Parliament as an institution. Other meetings with Members at Westminster have been in the evenings, though less frequently in recent years. The competing demands on their time make it difficult for Members to attend.

The main focus of the Group's year however has been its annual weekends. The first two of these were held in a modest hotel in Brighton, the third in Richmond, Surrey and since 1970 at Exeter College, Oxford, in early January each year. The college background seems to offer the Officers a nostalgic background, the academics a workaday one. These weekends run from Friday evening to late Sunday morning and typically might include a Friday evening presentation by a Group member, Saturday morning the Annual General Meeting, Saturday afternoon a talk often by a Member, Saturday after dinner speaker nearly always a member of one of the Houses of Parliament and Sunday morning often an "out-

sider" who might be a political journalist or sometimes a civil servant. Other informal meetings during the week-end often last deep into the night.

The list of after dinner guest speakers over the years has been very varied including, among others, Quintin (now Lord Hailsham) Hogg, William (now Lord) Whitelaw, Richard Crossman, Shirley Williams, Enoch Powell, Michael Foot, Harold (now Lord) Wilson, Lord Carrington, Tony Benn, and William Rodgers. It is to be hoped that as the result of the subsequent question and answer session some knowledge has rubbed off on both audience and speaker.

The second main occasion has been a summer dinner held irregularly but always in London. Initially held at the Athenaeum, the Group has become more adventurous over the years, finding its way to the Garrick for a number of years and more recently the Oxford and Cambridge Club. On these occasions the guest speaker has not necessarily been a Member as Sir John Hunt, Brian Walden and Barbara Castle have all been invited to air their views.

The Study of Parliament Group is run in a very straightforward manner. It has as president, since 1972, Sir Norman Chester, a Chairman, Vice Chairman, Academic Secretary, Parliamentary Secretary and Treasurer, who normally have no more than three years in office and a very modest budget. Funds are sought for any large research project, but after initial modest grants from the Nuffield Foundation to get it launched, the Group's small expenditure has been met from its small subscriptions and the royalties of its publications. It has never sought to publish its proceedings at weekends which similar organisations subsequently started both in the Commonwealth and in Europe sometimes do and has never issued a newsletter or other publicity sheet. It has not been highly introspective about its role and when the matter was considered briefly in 1966, it decided that it was "an informal learned society" before passing quickly to the next item on the agenda.

The core of its organisation remains the annual general meeting. This is when Study Groups through their convenor report back on their work and any proposals they may have for publication or giving evidence. It is also when these Study Groups may be wound up and when new ones are set up after a call for volunteers from those interested in the proposed subject of study. At any one time there may be four or five such Study Groups. At the time of writing, unusually there are as many as six. These include:

1. Party Organisation: a long term review of the patterns of party organisation especially within the House of Commons.
2. Debate in the House: an examination of Members' use of debate in the Chamber.
3. Pressure Groups: the mechanics of the growing use of lobbying of Parliament.
4. Consequences for Parliament of 10 years' membership of the EEC.
5. Legislative Procedure: with reference to Standing Committees with particular regard to the allocation of time therein.
6. Developments in the House of Lords.

The Clerks provide an early warning system when a procedure Committee is likely to be set up which might call for or anyway welcome evidence from the

Group. This happened in connection with item 5 above. The Group therefore is informed, small scale and its work unblazoned. Despite such modesty what has it achieved?

First those who take part learn a great deal from each other. From the point of view of working in Parliament it is of interest to hear the institution where one works being the subject of searching yet not hostile study. Its meetings make it possible for staff at Westminster to step back and reflect on the changing environment and purpose of their work especially during years which have seen such considerable changes. For academics it is a rare chance to test their theories of an institution against its practice and, if they are fortunate, have their footnotes checked for accuracy! Secondly the Group has proved to be an impartial source of information for Select Committees looking at the working of Parliament while essentially being sympathetic to the importance of the institution which it studies. Thirdly it has produced the nucleus of a small library on the contemporary House of Commons. Fourthly it has exchanged views with a wide range of Members in a relaxed yet forthright way, including many Leaders of the House during the last twenty years. There are areas of course which it has not yet tackled successfully. The House of Lords and its role has evaded proper examination, it has had little to say about the changing character of the membership of the House of Commons over the last two decades and the implications, for the legislature, of the communications revolution we are living through has yet to be grasped and examined. But twenty-on years is a short time in the life of a society, even "an informal learned society", and doubtless a new generation both of Parliamentary Officers and academics will want to examine and offer Parliament and others evidence on the way they see the implications for Westminster of future change. A relaxed, informal yet effective method of undertaking such work has been established.

## APPENDIX

### Evidence given to House of Commons Select Committees by the Study of Parliament Group 1964-1985

#### PROCEDURE COMMITTEES

Fourth Report from the Select committee on Procedure	1964-65 HC 303 Oral pp. 51-68. Written pp. 131-142
Report from the Select Committee on Procedure: Financial Procedure	1965-66 HC 122 Written Extracts pp. 74-75
First Report from the Select Committee on Procedure: The Times of Sittings of the House	1966-67 HC 153 Oral pp. 50-65. Written pp. 48-50
Sixth Report from the Select Committee on Procedure: Public Bill Procedure etc.	1966-67 HC 539 Written pp. 88-89
Second Special Report from the Select Committee on Procedure: Parliamentary Scrutiny of Taxation	1969-70 HC 302 Written pp. 181-188
Second Report from the Select Committee on Procedure: Process of Legislation	1970-71 HC 538 Written pp. 304-309
First Report from the Select Committee on Procedure	1977-78 HC 588-III Written pp. 1-20
Select Committee on Procedure: Public Bill Procedure	1984-85 HC 49-iv Oral pp. 79-93 Written pp. 72-78

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#### OTHER SELECT COMMITTEES

Report from the Select Committee on Parliamentary Privilege	1967-68 HC 34 Written pp. 187-195
Select Committee on Assistance to Private Members: Minutes of Evidence and Appendices	1974-75 HC 375 Written pp. 112-118
Eighth Report from the Select Committee on House of Commons (Services): Services for the Public	1967-77 HC 509 Written pp. 88-94

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