The House of Commons

By S. SAKLATVALA.

TO be an iconoclast is bad enough generally, but to have the misfortune to be adversely impressed by an institution of great fame is a veritable disaster. However, I am in it. My earliest visions of the House of Commons were created through books at a distance of 6,000 miles from the thing itself. Pitt, Sheridan, Burke, Macaulay, Disraeli and Gladstone were like idols in a temple of worship, and the scene of the Chamber as seen from pictures and illustrations made one believe in its grandeur and superb greatness.

I came to England at the end of 1905, and my first abode for a few months was the National Liberal Club, which was in an Indian's imagination then the home of Liberty, Equality and Justice. I saw at familiar distances the heroes of 1906 who made up the contents of the great House of Commons. Day by day my throbbing anxiety to see them at work in the Mother of Parliaments cooled down, and ultimately I decided not to be in a hurry. Within 12 months I shook myself out of the National Liberal Club and bade good-bye to its politics, too.

Disillusionment.

Then I threw myself into the struggle of life. I mocked at what I knew in my early days as Indian slavery, when through the Labour Movement I saw British slavishness. Parliament seemed to be away and not of one's work in the struggle for emancipation. At every stage of life here I saw the hand of Parliament and Parliamentary law *grinding down* humanity, scoffing at the rights of masses, rewarding and protecting the strong, bullying and robbing the weak, scorning the womanhood of this country as a subject sex, and despising the manhood and womanhood of my country as a subject race. My enthusiasm to see this great Chamber of democratic fights died out altogether, and I left such a visit to some mere chance. Such a chance came in 1917, when I accompanied a friend to the Visitors' Gallery to hear Austen Chamberlain ou India. The first sight of the Chamber appalled me. It had no grandeur; it was not even suit-

ably arranged or furnished for any great business purpose. I said to myself that all the pictures I had seen on the walls of my University and other public libraries had lied, had deceived and misinformed me. The thought came like a flash: "Were my historical books and newspaper records as mendacious as the pictures?" "Were all the pretences put forward for this Mother of Parliaments as the custodian of the peoples' rights, deciding the fates of millions of men and women on a democratic basis, fallacious and deliberate shams to throw dust in the eyes of oppressed peoples?"

Then I saw Austen striking attitudes and assuming airs merely to create impressions which are not natural to life's honest functions. He made big efforts to popularise Empire Preference for the benefit of a few thousand shareholders at the expense of many millions of workers. He announced new duties for the benefit of 286 millowners of Bombay, Ahmedabad, Cawnpore, and Calcutta, to the detriment of half-a-million British textile workers and 240 millions of Indian peasantry. He talked of Indian princes and kings and all the king's horses and all the king's men. Then he spread out a thin veneer of seductive honey and vague and false promises over the gall of subjugation and slavery to seduce and entice away the simple-minded Indian politician in those dark and terrible days of war between British and German rival imperialisms. Of the hunger, poverty, misery, political enslavement, cruel infantile mortality, denial of education and denial of elementary rights of democracy to 300 million human beings, nothing or little was said. I heard Philip Snowden trying to trounce the Conservative Secretary, but really making a hash of international Socialism, and in his turn getting trounced by Sir John D. Rees. I had spent £8 14s. 6d. in the previous week and issued a leaflet to all members of the House asking them to think of the poor underpaid workers and peasants of India, during their debate on "Protection" (!) for India. This appeal evidently did not fit in with the mental framework of parliamentarians and "sob stuff" appeared to me to be the permissible limit of "democratic" discussions.

Enlightenment.

Then came the Russian Revolution, forcing upon all thoughtful politicians the great question: "Are Parliaments capable of securing real and complete emancipation of the workers?" With careful observation I could only conclude that very little effective economic power was vested in Parliament, and that those struggles between the employers and the employed, the exploiters and the

exploited were indeed carefully kept out. At the same time, one could see the great strength and support the parliamentary instrument was to the capitalist owners of land, houses, means of production and distribution and colonial concessions. It became obvious that such an instrument would have to be snatched away from the master class as speedily as possible to be substituted ultimately by a working class institution representative only of honest workers engaged in useful service to society and free from the control of privileged peers or the Crown. Even a Labour majority that consented to submit to the House of Commons and the House of Lords, as they were, would be able to show no good results.

It was when I had reached the conclusions outlined above, that after a whirlwind campaign in the election of 1922, I found myself ushered into the Assembly at Westminster. My critics who were jesting and jeering, and my friends who were smiling in doubt, confidently looked forward to my almost immediate conversion to the requisite mentality for the Mother of Parliaments. However, I had decided to give the benefit of doubt to the House of Commons, to take it as an assembly where democratic voice, manners, expressions and actions, would be permitted if only one tried and gave them a chance. I came fresh from a constituency where most of the Irish electors were annoyed by the proposed Irish settlement, and, as in duty bound, I attempted to act up to the expectations of my democratic voters. Ridicule, contempt, sneers, showered from all sides, and a look of "cut him out, he is no good to us in this assembly" seemed to be upon the faces of all my colleagues. The heavy frowns were not limited to reactionary capitalists, for MacDonald's and Henderson's frowns were even more severe. From that day to the day of the ban on my American visit last year, and to the days of the Army and Navy Debate this month, I have been realising that to be a successful "democrat" in the British House of Commons one has got to be artificial, artistic and artful.

Sabotage.

One has the right of interpellation, but the rules and regulations that hedge round one's right to put questions, are an absorbing study. If all the intelligent electors framed their questions in their own clear honest language, and commanded their M.P.'s to attempt to put them to the Ministers in the House and to report the results to their electors, there would be some revelations as to the limitations that govern their democratic rights. Then again the Ministers who answer the questions are not pledged

on oath to give the *whole* truth, and any *little* fraction of it is constitutionally to be accepted as all the information that one will receive.

Public petitions may be presented, but only by reading one sentence of it, and then sending it on to a blind alley committee.

One is at liberty to move any resolution or Bill. The only little hitch is that one is not given time on the time-table of the House. One can move a ten-minutes' Bill if one likes, provided it is not of any important, radical or revolutionary character.

By observing a few simple rules as to notice, etc., one can offer amendments. The only obstacle in one's democratic way is that in practice only one amendment is discussed, and that preferentially would be from an acknowledged party leader, and the rest are never reached.

One has complete liberty to take part in and speak at any debate, but time allotted for each delegate is too short to accommodate half the expectant speakers and then again there is no consideration of one's long attendance or persistent offer to speak creating any preferential right. Front benchers can just look in at appointed time, speak and retire, and the back benchers must continue their fruitless struggle hour after hour, on the off-chance of getting an opportunity.

One is at liberty to bring forward all one's arguments. It is necessary to pretend and falsely maintain that one is expressing views and using arguments to *convince* the House and obtain the approval of members by force of reasoning, when all the time one is perfectly conscious of the fact that no member is ready or permitted to vote according to the measure of his belief or disbelief in the arguments used. In an average debate, when an ordinary back-bench member is putting his arguments, if 60 out of 600 members are present, it would be considered a very large attendance. It would mostly be between 20 to 30. Votes are cast by the hundred, but members trot out from various places to vote as they are told, barely 10 per cent. of them having followed the debate at all. If one dares to suggest any regulations to limit the right to vote only to those who follow the entire debate, one would be laughed at as a crank, condemned as a person untrue to the traditions of Parliament and unfit to be a member.

Alternative.

Even if any of your points are carried, there is the probability of their being turned down by the other Chamber if there is the slightest suspicion that the measure will operate against the privi-

leges of vested interest. The question for the working class is whether to wait for the reform of the House of Commons or to get on with the perfecting of their trade union machinery so as to enforce their will on the exploiters. The real fight is outside, not inside, the House of Commons.

"The less dexterity and strength are required in manual labour, *i.e.*, the more modern industry develops, the more is the labour of men displaced by that of women. The differences of age and sex have no longer any social importance for the working class."—Marx and Engels: "The Communist Manifesto."