

*Our Delhi Letter***Standing Committees**

FOR purposes of political action, every legislature is in the position of M. de Villefort in *Count of Monte Cristo* who was completely paralysed except for his eyes—it can say 'ye.' or 'say 'no' but it cannot itself take action. So says Lawrence Lowell, a great authority on the British Constitution.

How fittingly does this description apply in the case of Standing Committees of the Indian legislature? Evidently with even greater force, and the Prime Minister believes that if the Committees say 'yes,' they are superfluous, while if they say 'no' they have no right to be heard, for the Cabinet knows, or should know its business and is responsible only to the larger body, namely, the legislature.

A joint statement by the leaders of the Opposition parties issued last Sunday, protesting against the abolition of Standing Committees has, therefore, failed to impress the Government. There is another side to this current dispute, however. It is that the institution has an educative value. Here, it is relevant to consider how often the Committees meet, what insight into the administration they provide

and whether there are not other ways of educating the legislators.

The most famous of these Standing Committees whose future has been in question is the Standing Finance Committee. It is true to say that it was started by Sir Malcolm Hailey with promises which were never completely fulfilled. From 1922 to 1946 it lived a miserable existence until Sir Archibald Rowlands made up his mind in 1946 to make it a more vigorous and responsible body. Some changes were made in 1946. One cannot say that they were completely successful. In the nature of things, they could not be, for the Standing Finance Committee could not substitute itself for the Government. The parallel body on the Railway side, namely, the Railway Standing Finance Committee, constituted in terms of the Convention Resolution of 1924 has had a more respected existence. It has met more often and has considered more papers, because more papers were circulated by it. But in the ultimate result, it has been equally undistinguished. No member of Parliament has been able to devote the time and sustained energy which is required in

order to change the course of the administration. It was honest of Government to have realised this and to have put an end to a farce, for the Standing Committees, while leading to no useful result, caused vexatious delays and inconvenience, including interference of the legislature with the business of the executive—in the bad sense of that term.

These arguments should make sense. The reason why the Opposition remains unconvinced is, apart from the fact that it is its duty to oppose, that some members have the feeling that this is a clever manoeuvre to leave them out of the general scheme of things. To put it crudely, there is the suspicion that the Communists are being kept out. It is necessary to consider how far this suspicion is (a) correct and (b) justified?

It has been explained on behalf of the Government that the changes which were made recently were considered even in 1947, long before the Communists had arrived on the scene. As for justification, Government probably thinks that interference of any kind from Committees, which obscure the straight, direct and total responsibility of the Cabinet to the House is bad—and if it is interference by the Communists, who are determined obviously so to interfere, it would be particularly bad. The presence of Communists and other Opposition members, in short, only lends point to the arguments advanced on behalf of the Treasury Bench. Who could blame the Prime Minister in these circumstances? Certainly, we wouldn't.

The whole debate is after all rather unnecessary, even from the point of view of the Opposition, if one thinks over it calmly. The question of the retention or abolition of the Standing Committees might be of some importance, if the Opposition were gagged or restrained, and if the Committees offered a forum which they could hardly afford not to retain. It would be naive to pretend that this is the case. If the Opposition, or, indeed, any one has anything to say which is at all useful, certainly this light cannot for any long time continue to be hidden under a bushel. The country is democratic enough for this to be true and in judging last week's debate in Parliament on fascism and dictatorship (the hottest and the most unruly in this session) it may be useful to remember that.

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