

Impressions of Parliament

(From a Parliamentary Correspondent)

DEPUTY Muller for Unterwalden holds the floor; and pandemonium reigned.' So, if memory serves right, Finer described the old Reichstag and went on to say that it applied to many other parliaments. Pandemonium does certainly prevail in the present Indian Parliament on occasions. It is curious that tempers were unruffled in the old Legislative Assembly in which the Muslim League had a position of importance (this scribe has seen the late Liaquat All Khan moving about with genial bonhomie and mixing with Congress members) but that a wide gulf should yet prevent the main Red Opposition from the other sides of the House.

This cannot be wholly because Messrs Gopalan and Co. do not swear by May's Parliamentary Practice (now in its venerable fifteenth edition). This House as a whole is not wedded to May or to procedure in the British House of Commons—already, there have been complaints to the effect that the Business Committee is usurping the functions which should devolve only on the Chair, and it has been decided that the quaint English custom of referring to members by their constituencies need not be sacred in view of the size of the House of the People. The Communist MPs are not the only sinners who refuse to take their May (simplified by Campion) seriously; and yet their popularity does not suffer for this reason.

Why then has this bloc proved to be utterly disappointing? No simple explanation seems to be possible, and many, perhaps, may be required. One reason is that the Communists lack debating ability. They also give the appearance of being unable to study or prepare their cases. They have a tendency to spoil what they say by over-statement, and since they have been noticeably unable to make a few categorical statements which will lay for ever Pie ghost of a suspicion (at present, it is nothing more) that their party line is being made up elsewhere, there is little willingness to listen to them, except for the purpose of reporting what they say. On the whole, parliamentary activity is a passing phase in the party programme. They refuse, therefore, to take it seriously. But then Parliament will reciprocate the com-

pliment—already, Mr Velayudhan has come to his own conclusions for himself.

Only two members from these benches have made a mark and they are Hiren Mukherjee and Harin Chattopadhyaya. The hold which the former has on the House is due to the soothing flow of even English prose which he is able to command and which is welcome in a House which can still succumb to this influence. Harin Chattopadhyaya is the self-appointed poetaster of the House. I think he should watch this weakness and overcome his temptation—for in impromptu versification, the danger is that the lines will not scan, the argument will be beneath notice, and even if the speaker says anything worthwhile in the rest of the speech, it is liable to be overlooked. One other danger is that Shri Harin Chattopadhyaya tempts the Finance Minister to retaliate in kind. Doggerel provokes limericks. This rather ruins what is invariably a good speech on behalf of the Treasury benches, for Shri Deshmukh's linguistic attainments are too varied and considerable not to tempt him on these occasions.

The honours of debate in the House are generally even as between the Treasury Bench and the National Democratic Party. On a sentimental occasion, on foreign policy and on Kashmir, Panditji is still far and away the most effective speaker in the House. In an easy going, post-prandial manner, Shri Ghintaman Deshmukh is nearly always capable of capturing and holding the attention of the House. But here perhaps, now that Gopalswami Aiyngar has transferred himself to the other House, it stops. Dr Katju has given the impression of being voluble, vehement, and lawyer-like. Mr T. T. Krishnamachari speaks with a high-pitched voice and indulges too often when he lacks argument, in the quogue—the unpopular pastime of saying 'you also did likewise'. Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri has destroyed much of the good impression which he made with a short and sweetly reasonable Railway Budget speech by an irritating insistence on Hindi, which has made him *persona non grata* with the South Indian members. Mr Giri's performance is

moderate, although, one may, perhaps, wish that he would not carry much farther than is necessary the habit of identifying himself with the Trade Union movement—which tends to dot his speeches with too many I's.

One of the surprises of this House is the way in which the National Democratic Party, which started as a dubious and uncertain alliance of the disgruntled elements, communalists masquerading under other names and elements of the Right, is forging itself into a respectable and respected Parliamentary Opposition. People tend to attribute this success to Dr Mukherjee's oratorical ability but, of course, no such simple explanation can be true. This party may have its differences with the Government. But it consists of good democrats. What is equally important, it consists of people who are willing to learn, and anxious to make an impression. They and not the Communists, fulfil in this House the role of friendly criticism of the established Government. This effect is occasionally spoiled because of the heckling attitude of its leader Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. This attitude, however, seems to have been begotten by intolerance on the part of the Treasury Bench and recently, it has been significant that Panditji has been concerned that where such genuine criticism is offered, a sledge-hammer style of oratory, such as Dr Katju is apt to indulge in, should not be the Government's answer.

On one point, Dr Mukherjee's lead in this House is to be welcomed. He seems to be in a mood to encourage junior members of promise. Dr Krishnaswami from the South who has the parliamentary talent needed (it is unfortunately spoiled by a broad Madrassi accent, but this can be ignored till it is set right) is an example. I have heard complaints to the effect that the Congress Parliamentary Party, in spite of its benevolent and genial Secretary-General, does not encourage untried speakers as a rule. One may hope that this complaint is not true; or that if it is, the Secretary-General will prevail on the party leader to change the tradition, for with all its defects the new House of the People promises yet to become the most level-headed and stable legislature in the East, perhaps, outside Britain, if only it can be given the opportunity.

