

3-30-1950

Report From Britain, 30 March 1950

James W. (James Wesley) Silver (1907-1988)

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jws_brit

Recommended Citation

Silver (1907-1988), James W. (James Wesley), "Report From Britain, 30 March 1950" (1950). *Reports from Britain, 1949-1950*. 18.
https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jws_brit/18

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the James W. Silver Collection at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reports from Britain, 1949-1950 by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

REPORT FROM BRITAIN

James W. Silver
Chairman, Department of History
University, Mississippi

Aberdeen, Scotland
March 30, 1950

Last week I spent the better part of three days watching the House of Commons in action from the Distinguished Strangers Gallery, - and please, no cracks as to how I got in. On those days, practically every British politico of importance (except Ernest Bevin and Anthony Eden, who were on the sick list) sprang forward to attack or defend some policy close to his constituents' heart.

There was a considerable display of pomp and ceremony, mostly concerned with the Speaker's stately entrance, wig and all, preceded by the sergent-at-arms, the mace bearer, and the clerk of the House, and followed by the train-bearer who held up his skirts. At exactly two-thirty the cry went through the corridors that "the Speaker is in his chair," and business was in order until about eleven that night. That dignified officer sat there, impartial and apparently bored, like an eastern potentate, on a dais covered with a slightly shopworn canopy. Badge messengers in full dress flitted noiselessly about the room with considerable more poise than that exhibited by some of the M. P.'s, who, following time honored custom, nodded or bowed deeply to the Speaker on entering and leaving the chamber.

Parliament buildings have not yet recovered from German air raids, and the House assembles in the meeting hall of the Lords, a galleried room about the shape of a fair-sized basketball court. On either side, facing the Speaker, are five rows of red leather benches, one raised above the other, and at the opposite end is a single bench large enough to seat all the Liberals in the House. When most of the 625 M. P.'s crowd into the chamber, the last third must stand. Looking down the red and green carpeted room toward the Speaker, you see four tables and a huge desk for the clerks, and, to the left, the front bench for the cabinet members, while just across the tables sits the "shadow cabinet" of the Conservatives. Reporters, stenographers, and what general public can squeeze in, sit in the gallery just behind and above the Speaker.

The show starts each day as the cabinet members respond to "questions for oral answer" put to them by the M. P.'s. This intimate, democratic procedure, unknown to Americans, except perhaps in the old town meetings, is a distinguishing feature of British government which really puts

ministers on their mettle. Woe to the man who tries to hedge or avoid the most embarrassing queries of the opposition or even of his own party.

I was lucky enough to sit in on major debates on the budget, national health scheme, transport, and defense. In each case, the minister (Cripps, Bevan, Barnes, Shinwell) read his report and indicated what government action might be expected. Then began the battle of wits as the opposition tried to pick to pieces the government's case which the Labor members as stoutly defended.

Prime Minister Attlee gave the impression of sleeping through most of the debate and, from my vantage point, seemed an incredibly small figure as he reclined on the bench with his feet above his head. When he spoke it was short, to the point, with no histrionics. Both he and Churchill wandered in and out of the chamber during the time that I witnessed the proceedings.

Churchill is actually an inch or so shorter than Attlee, but his bulk makes him more imposing. Occasionally he would interject a sonorous question, but his main effort came in the opposition's answer to the White Paper on defense read by Shinwell. He still bellows forth his pronouncements with an authoritarian air, but his age is apparent and his pontifications simply don't carry the fire of the war days. Still, it is incredible that a man of his seventy-five strenuous years can carry on as he does.

Cripps, immaculately dressed with tie, shirt, and spats of grey, and looking a bit like Woodrow Wilson, was never perturbed by the enemy attack. He dealt with his tormentors as though they were school boys who needed to be shown the light by the master; he is a cold, logical debater with all the assurance of a man who knows he is right.

The big, bad boy of the Labor party is the Minister of Health, Aneurin Bevan, certainly the cleverest, most bitter and caustic, and probably the most feared debater in the House. The air was charged with excitement as he stood not a dozen feet from Churchill and alternately chided, baited, ridiculed, and laughed at the old man. He drew constant cheers from the Labor benches and a sullen resentment from the Conservatives, while all the time Attlee and Cripps sat back with smiles on their faces that you would expect from a proud father beaming on the sterling performance of an only son. Fifty year old Bevan looks a bit like a grown-up cherub, and he sometimes talks as though he had recently had his teeth extracted. But he has no peer

as he goes through all the gyrations of a master stump speaker. He's the man upper class Britishers have a tendency to hate.

The challenge of the Conservatives on the health scheme, which might have led to a vote of censure (this would have meant the fall of the government), resulted in a division. When the time came, each M. P. filed out one of two doors at the end of the room opposite from the Speaker, thus indicating his vote on the move to censure the government. Then they all came back to hear from the Speaker that Attlee's ministry had been upheld, 308 to 289. The system is about as slow and antiquated as a roll call in our House of Representatives.

All in all I had the definite feeling that I was witnessing a government in action more intimate, more democratic, and more directly responsible to public opinion than anything we have in the United States. But the fact remains that both systems work, - which seems to give weight to those famous lines of Pope:

"For forms of government let fools contest;
Whate'er is best administered is best:"