

**FOUR YEARS IN  
PARLIAMENT WITH  
HARD LABOUR**

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Four Years in Parliament with Hard Labour by C. W. Radcliffe Cooke

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# FOUR YEARS IN PARLIAMENT

WITH HARD LABOUR.

*Charles Wainwright* BY  
C. W. RADCLIFFE COOKE, M.P.

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## INTRODUCTION.

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IT is not bodily exertion to a certainty, for of this we have not enough, nor much mental effort either, that makes the labours of Members of Parliament hard, but rather the sedentary life we lead and the long and late hours we keep. For the last two years, it is true, we have kept earlier hours in the House of Commons than we used to keep before our new rules were passed, when it was customary to sit until two and three o'clock in the morning. I well remember in the course of my maiden speech, which appropriately enough was on the Woman's Suffrage Bill, hazarding the opinion that at the late hour we had then reached—to wit, 1.30 A.M.—we were in too jaded a condition to give due consideration to a measure which involved a vast constitutional change. The expression of this, as it turned out, naïve sentiment raised a general titter. Eye-glasses flashed and I was gazed at with good-humoured curiosity flavoured with contempt, for was it not



clear on the face of it that I was a new Member, and a simple one to boot! This was in 1886; but even now, when we are supposed to close, so to speak, automatically at midnight, we are as a fact often kept longer in order to take the report of Supply, or consider some other matters that are exempted from the operation of the new rules. Besides, as the Session draws to an end and the time at our disposal becomes measurably less, the rules are frequently suspended and we sit quite as late as ever we sat. As a consequence, Members who attend closely to their duties can never be in bed much before one in the morning, and are often kept up an hour or two later. Members who are on Committees—and when the House is in full swing of business, what with Grand Committees and Select Committees, a large number are so occupied—may have to spend from twelve to fourteen hours daily in continuous attendance within the walls of the Palace of Westminster. True, we rise early on Wednesdays, and do not sit on Saturdays, except towards the end of the Session; but look at the engagement-book of any active Member and you would see how few of these so-called free nights are unappropriated to some function connected with his public position. A great deal of our work, especially that which is

done in the Committees, is highly interesting, and unofficial Members may do as much or as little as they like of it. But take any healthy man and set him to work, mainly by night, in an ill-ventilated, over-heated building at some sedentary pursuit for twelve hours or so at a stretch, and at the end of six months it is reasonable to suppose—even if he have what it has been well said Members of Parliament ought to possess, the strength of a lion and the stomach of an ostrich—that he will not, either physically or mentally, be the man he was at the beginning of that period. These are in brief the conditions of our Parliamentary life, and it is on this account that I term ours hard labour.

The common run of Members, especially those who sit on the Ministerial side of the House, have during their hours of enforced attendance leisure for observation. In Opposition, party discipline is less strict than in office. The leaders of Her Majesty's Opposition—if in these days there can be said to be a body of men answering to that description—often, it is true, deprecate obstruction and announce a desire to further the progress of public business, but they seldom succeed in inspiring their followers with similar accommodating views. It is in Opposition that pushing politicians find the most frequent

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opportunities to distinguish themselves. Young hounds must be blooded, and Opposition Leaders who tried to keep the active spirits of their party too tightly in hand would soon lose control of them altogether. Besides, with office looming in a future however distant, it is essential to test in Opposition the capacity of the new recruits. So, many an aspiring politician can cut a conspicuous figure as an opponent of the Government who, were he a supporter, would be doomed to sit mute and inglorious on a back bench. Such a situation as the last named has, however, as I have said, the merit of favouring observation, especially to one not unused to write for the press. Hence the following pages, in which I have endeavoured to record some impressions derived from a brief experience of life in Parliament and of the political functions at which Members of Parliament are expected to assist.

In concluding these introductory remarks I have to express my acknowledgments to the proprietors of the *Times*, the *National Review*, and *Time*, by whose permission the articles in this little book have been revised and reproduced.

C. W. R. C.