

**THE HOUSE OF
COMMONS:
ILLUSTRATIONS OF ITS
HISTORY AND PRACTICE**

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The House of Commons: Illustrations of Its History and Practice by Reginald F. D. Palgrave

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REGINALD F. D. PALGRAVE

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THE HOUSE OF COMMONS.

HOUSE OF COMMONS.

Illustrations of its History and Practice.

A NEW AND REVISED EDITION.

BY
REGINALD F. D. PALGRAVE,
THE CLERK ASSISTANT OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS.

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H. N. B.

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These Pages are inscribed by

Their humble admirer and faithful Servant,

REGINALD F. D. PALGRAVE.

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PREFACE.

THAT the parliamentary constituencies may fairly appreciate the responsibilities which they impose upon their representatives, and that our households may become better acquainted with the characteristic features of the House of Commons, are the motives which have prompted this publication.

Although neither to carp at, nor to pass compliments upon that assembly, is the writer's intention, yet, if, in any degree, he can enhance that loyalty and reverential association which Parliament can justly claim, there is surely no one who would cavil at such a result. Still, on the one hand, as even the House of Commons is not all perfect, a remarkable departure from its wiser and more ancient ways has been noticed; and a calculation is added, at the end of the book, which shows how a very considerable portion of last session was occupied. And, on the other hand, if the conduct of our legislators is, in any way, liable to misconstruction, the removal of that chance of error has been attempted.

The conditions under which members exert control over public expenditure is, for instance, a subject well worth explanation, as the exact scope of their financial function is, from its very nature, likely to be misunderstood. The mode in which they decide upon the questions brought before them has, also, been subjected to specious, but unfounded objection. And, session after session, another occasion for misapprehension too often arises. Outside spectators do not, and apparently cannot, understand the patience which the House exhibits. If a moment of difficulty or embarrassment arises within its walls, they at once pronounce that tolerant patience to be absurd, and ask, with some heat, why do not the Commons abolish that source of embarrassment by new rules and regulations?

That criticism has, perhaps, received some answer in these pages; it has been shown, whenever occasion served, that if fear be entertained by the House, undoubtedly it is a fear of quitting "the platform of antique precedent," of breaking the ancestral continuity of practice. "As heretofore accustomed" has been, and ever will be, it may be hoped, the abiding practice of Parliament, not to be deserted, save on grave occasion.

The advantages which spring from this habitual method of direction are admitted by all who, through experience or by insight, know the true instincts of

the House of Commons. They perceive—to use the language of a statesman who, among living statesmen, has most conformed his genius to the genius of Parliament,—that “what makes the House of Commons so influential, in contradistinction to the popular assemblies of other countries, is this : that when there is any great question of difficulty, the country feels that we are solving it, not merely by the present thought and existing intelligence of the members of the House, but that we come down to its consideration, fortified by precedent, and bringing to bear upon it the accumulated wisdom of the eminent men, who have preceded us.” (Mr. Disraeli : debate, April 18th, 1864.) And this enunciation of the governing principle which Parliament observes as regards itself, applies to its government over the empire. For what is the basis of parliamentary government, but deference to the general will and habits of the majority, whether expressed in years gone by, or in the present day? And there is no surer mode of enforcing the spirit of deference, than by discipline based on usage, rather than upon law.

Treatment of a large and complex subject, in a popular fashion, necessitates selection, and the excision of much, that might otherwise be looked for; and disappointment may be caused by the writer's silence regarding that well-known something called “obstruction.”