

THE SPEAKER IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA.

BY HENRY GEORGE, JR.

A speaker is one who speaks. Why, then, is it that in our national House of Representatives, and in the similar legislative bodies of our States, the one member who does not speak on any question before the House is the Speaker, usage requiring him, should he wish to speak, to leave the chair, and temporarily abrogate his functions as Speaker?

For an answer to this question we must go back to the body on which the legislatures of all the English-speaking countries have been modelled: the British Parliament, where it is a primary function of the presiding member of the House of Commons to speak for the Commons in addressing the Crown. As early as Edward the Third's time, this spokesman for the House came to be addressed as "Mr. Speaker." To-day, in England, the original significance of the title is clearly to be seen. At the meeting of a new Parliament, Her Majesty, through the lords commissioners, summons the members of the House of Commons to the bar of the Peers, and signifies her pleasure that the Commons choose a Speaker; that is, one who may speak for them in matters on which she may wish to address them. The Commons forthwith return to their chamber, and proceed to the election of such a Speaker. On the following day the Speaker-elect, with the Commons, is summoned to the Peers, and one of the lords commissioners signifies Her Majesty's approbation of the selection, who thereupon becomes Mr. Speaker. Then, speaking in the name of the Commons of the United Kingdom, Mr. Speaker lays claim to their "ancient and undoubted rights and privileges, and especially to freedom from arrest and molestation for their persons and servants; to freedom of speech in debate; to free access to Her Majesty whenever occasion may require it; and that the most favorable construction may be put on all their proceedings." The House of Commons being returned to their chamber, Mr. Speaker reports that the Commons have been in the House of Peers; when Her Majesty was pleased, by her commissioners, to approve of the choice the Commons had made of him to be their Speaker; and that he had in their name, and on their behalf, by humble petition to Her Majesty, laid claim to all their ancient rights and privileges, which Her Majesty had confirmed to them, "in as full and ample a manner as they have heretofore been granted or allowed by Her Majesty or any of her royal predecessors."

Adopting, as we did in the beginning, the forms of legislative procedure that had grown up in the mother country, we adopted with them the title of "Mr. Speaker"; and to the title we have clung, though its original meaning has, gone, since the Speaker with us has no need for functions which the English Speaker still retains. Nor is this the only divergence. Indeed, there is to-day a wide difference in the powers wielded by English and American Speakers.

Aside from his authority to speak for the House in pro forma audiences with the Crown, the English Speaker is simply a presiding officer. He has no power to appoint committees, that being done by the House itself. He has no power to advance or to stifle bills, and can neither promote

nor retard legislation. He is so entirely without such influence that in case of a tie it is usual for him to give the casting voice in such a manner as not to make the decision final, thereby leaving the matter to be decided by the House itself at a subsequent vote. He must take cognizance only of forms, orders, and rules. He cannot, if he would, ignore a new member, but must, under the rules, recognize a member who has not yet spoken in the House, in preference to other members rising at the same time. He must be rigidly just, knowing no party, and on his assumption of the chair must abandon all partisan affiliations. For instance, the present Speaker, Mr. Peel, who was formerly a Liberal member and was elected to the speakership by the last Liberal House, has since, as a matter of course, been re-elected by the Conservatives ; and during the six or seven years of his speaker-ship, embracing the most exciting debates, his rulings have not been questioned half a dozen times. The English Speaker, in short, is simply a presiding officer, but a presiding officer so impartial that much questioning of his decisions would scandalize all England.

The American Speaker, on the other hand, is far more than a presiding officer. He appoints the committees through which all business must pass, and in which any measure he objects to may be blocked. Through the committee on rules he can largely define how the House shall be governed in its procedure, and by the exercise of his discretion he can overlook or refuse to recognize a member whom he does not wish to have speak. His influence reaches to the most trivial matters, and affects the whole business of the House. He is more potent in legislation than the vice-president, not merely by custom and rule, but by law, having through the committees the shaping of the taxation bills, which the Constitution requires shall originate in the House of Representatives. He is, and necessarily must be, a partisan of the most pronounced kind, the recognized leader of the dominant party in the House, chosen under the caucus system by a majority of the majority. His great purpose is to promote the policy of his party. He is impelled to take advantage of every possible circumstance, and construe every possible point in his party's favor. His decisions often excite violent opposition; but this he can put down by the vote of his supporters, who number a majority on the floor. He is, in fact, the governor, almost the master, of the popular and stronger branch of the national legislature — the next man in power to the president, and in some respects more powerful than he.

Besides the wide difference in essentials between English and American Speakers, there are differences quite as wide as to externals: as to their dress and official actions; as to the idea of the dignity attaching to their respective offices; as to the style in which each lives; and as to the fortune attending each after the service of his speakership is ended.

The English Speaker, notwithstanding his small power, affects much show and pomp. His entrance into the House to open daily business is with form and state. He enters by the main lobby, heralded by criers warning all bystanders to uncover and be silent. In advance are the high officers of the House in wigs and ancient costume — the clerk, with sword at side; the sergeant, carrying over his shoulder the great golden mace, surmounted by a crown; the legal advisor, and the chaplain. The Speaker comes last, clad in a wig, black satin breeches, and a long black robe, the train of which is carried by a page. Costumed attendants bring up the rear. The procession

enters the House at the main door, and traverses the whole length of the chamber to the chair. Arrived there, the doors having been locked, and no strangers having been observed in any part of the House, the chaplain is requested to read the statutory prayers of the Church of England, after which the doors are opened and the Speaker takes up business.

In contrast to this ancient and imposing ceremony is the simple manner in which the American Speaker, having far greater power, opens the House of Representatives. Wearing no peculiar dress, he enters the House precisely as any other member. At the appointed hour he quietly mounts to the chair, and with one rap of the gavel calls the House to order. He then asks the chaplain to deliver prayer, after which business commences.

There is, however, in our national House of Representatives, one sole survival of the ceremony of the English House of Commons. As the Speaker calls the House to order, the serjeant-at-arms raises a silver emblem — the Roman fasces, carrying, however, an eagle instead of an axe,— and sets it in a marble column at the Speaker's right hand, where it remains while the House is in session, as the English mace lies before the English Shaker. This is the American survival of the English mace; of that "bauble" which Cromwell, in breaking up the Long Parliament by force, contemptuously ordered to be taken away; and the effect that it produces when, at the order of the Speaker, the serjeant-at-arms carries it before him to quell any turbulence in the House, is a striking evidence that old forms are not without potency even in new America. For the effect the silver emblem thus produces, suggests that of a Bambino amid a Sicilian rabble or a sacred icon among Russian peasants.

Notwithstanding the show and pomp of the English Speaker and the modest simplicity of the American Speaker, the former is held in much higher respect than the latter. In the English House, not only would the slightest aspersion on the Speaker's actions or character be instantly and sternly reprov'd, but not even the most hardy would dare transgress the etiquette that forbids any one to pass between the Speaker and a member speaking from one of the lower benches, or between the Speaker and the table, or between the Speaker and the mace, either when it is on the table or in the hands of the serjeant-at-arms. So far is this respect for the dignity of his office carried, that in passing to and from their seats, members make obeisance to the Speaker.

In the American House there is no such deference to the Speaker. The members go in and out of the chamber, or move about it, without the slightest regard to him; and at times, at the rendering of a decision or in debate, when partisan feeling runs high, he is openly and bitterly assailed. He is to the minority on the floor, not the impassive, impartial presiding officer, but the powerful partisan, the leader of the majority; and he is, in consequence, often subjected to what, in the eyes of the English Speaker, would be brutal indignities.

With the view to raising their Speaker beyond personal interest in legislation, the House of Commons gives him a salary of thirty thousand dollars, that is paid, not by annual vote, which might give opportunity for debate, but, like that of the judges of the courts, out of the consolidated fund. He is, moreover, provided with a splendid official residence in the palatial

Parliament buildings; and on his retirement, usually after many years of service, it is thought due to the dignity of the office he has filled, that he should receive a yearly pension of twenty-five or thirty thousand dollars for the remainder of his life.

The Speaker of the House of Representatives receives little more than a fourth of the English Speaker's salary, — eight thousand dollars a year, only three thousand dollars more than other members, — which is paid, as is that of a doorkeeper, by annual vote. He has no official residence, nor is any allowance made for one, nor for any of his expenses. Custom gives him no claim to a re-election, even though his party remain in power; and he necessarily goes out when his party loses its majority. Neither is any provision made for his maintenance after he has laid down the gavel of his speakership. If he have no means of his own, and shall have discharged the duties of his office disinterestedly, shall have been strong to resist bribes and temptations sure to come from the tremendous powers in his hands, he goes out a poor man, with the struggle for daily bread still before him.