

BOOK REVIEWS

Informed Sources

The Growth of Parliamentary Scrutiny by Committee. Edited by Alfred Morris. With essays by seven other MPs of the 1966-70 Parliament. (The Commonwealth and International Library of Science, Technology, Engineering and Liberal Studies.) Pp. xi+141. (Pergamon: Oxford and New York, November 1970.) 50s, \$8 boards; 35s, \$5.50 paper.

THE Chamber of the House of Commons is, to some, a focal point for political debate—the place where informed politicians engage in the cut and thrust of argument about the vital issues of the day. But to those of a less romantic disposition, it is a centre of bickering and mutual backbiting by Members of Parliament frequently ignorant of the full information behind the decisions they take. This picture usually goes hand-in-hand with the idea that Parliament is no longer the centre of power in Britain because the important issues are decided in the Cabinet office or even behind the locked doors of Whitehall committee rooms.

That is what the book is all about. It is a collection of essays by members of the previous Parliament on the merits and pitfalls in the expansion of the select committee system during the past five years. It is, in effect, a symposium on the power of the legislature to check the actions and policies of the executive. But it is rather a one-sided publication—six of the seven contributors have been members or even chairmen of select committees, and only John Mendelson is there on the side of the romantics to put the viewpoint that the select committees may undermine the power of the legislature to take important decisions.

The burden of Mr Mendelson's eloquent argument is that an extension of the select committee system will be a step on the road to consensus politics. He deplors the idea that some issues can be taken "out of politics" and decided in the more congenial atmosphere of committee rooms. He argues that a select committee on, for example, defence matters would inevitably lead to first and second class MPs in defence debates and that this situation would make something of a farce of parliamentary procedure. Like many of his friends, Mr Mendelson rightly views with some alarm any drift in Britain towards a system of government by committee, and he uses the example of the United States to point out the pitfalls in such a development.

But this argument to some extent begs the question of how Members of Parlia-

ment can avail themselves of the information necessary to make political decisions. Mr Mendelson's suggestion that every MP should have a research officer, for example, really does not go far enough—there would still be a need for the sort of deep probings that only a formal committee of the House of Commons is capable of undertaking. It is, in fact, a severe indictment of the British Parliamentary system that members are still labouring under the sort of difficulties which were arising at the end of the last century—a research officer and a personal office are the least that could be done to ensure that members of Parliament can carry out their Parliamentary duties efficiently.

The difficulties which Members of Parliament may find in appreciating the full consequences of decisions taken in the field of science and technology epitomize the nineteenth century atmosphere which still exists in Westminster, and the essay by Mr Arthur Palmer, the capable and respected chairman of the Select Committee on Science and Technology in the previous Parliament, hammers this point home. This particular select committee has already done much to make members of Parliament and the general public aware of some of the consequences of government policies on science and technology; the intention outlined in the recent Green Paper on Select Committees to retain the Select Committee on Science and Technology is therefore to be applauded.

Sceptics of the select committee system often point out that the demands made on members' time cannot support an expansion of the system without detracting from the work of the standing committees of the House of Commons, but Mr Palmer has an answer. He suggests that many of the non-controversial bills relating to science and technology could be referred to the Select Committee instead of to standing committees. This is an attractive proposition in many ways, but it is unlikely to appeal to the sceptics who would argue that there are few parliamentary issues that are entirely noncontroversial; to refer bills to select committees would be giving way to consensus politics.

Whatever the outcome of the debate about the extension of the select committee system initiated in 1966 by Mr Crossman and Mr Peart, it seems likely that several select committees are here to stay. Until the romantics can provide strong evidence to refute the suggestion that the Chamber of the House of Commons is nothing more than the stage for debates the outcome of which can be

predicted well in advance, this situation is desirable.

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Ethnic Diversity

Problems in Human Biology: A Study of Brazilian Populations. By F. M. Salzano and N. Freire-Maia. Pp. 200. (Wayne State University: Detroit, March 1970.) \$8.95.

FOR the first half of this century human genetics was a rather restricted discipline; in the second half it is rapidly assuming the central position in the spectrum of studies which comprise "human biology". Not only is its subject matter of central interest in the wider discipline, but many of the statistical techniques which are now rejuvenating human biology have their origin in human genetics.

Drawing extensively from demography, anthropology and history, as well as from their own subject, two Brazilian geneticists present in this book a survey of the Brazilian population. It is a model exposition, readable, concise and up-to-date. Those contemplating similar studies on other populations would do well to use this book as a guide.

The inhabitants of Brazil currently constitute perhaps the most interesting of all human populations by virtue of their numbers, their rapid rate of growth, the great ethnic diversity of their ancestors coupled with the degree of interracial crossing, and the continued presence of primitive Indian groups. In the compass of two hundred pages the authors examine this heterogeneous population from many points of view, exposing not only the facts of migration and marriage, fertility and gene frequency, but also their devotion to the people they are studying. It is a warm and sympathetic book of interest to far more than Latin-American specialists. The authors' attitude to racial intolerance is an object lesson to those students of human society who would have us believe that moral equality is based upon biological similarity, for Dr Salzano's and Dr Freire-Maia's book is essentially concerned with biological heterogeneity, and until we learn to understand and respect each other's differences as well as each other's similarities, prejudice will not be stilled.

The present edition is a good translation from the Portuguese; the only word which I found mysterious was *epopee*, which the authors use for the great Portuguese maritime expansion, but which, according to the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, is an epic poem.

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