

■ Tekst 8

## The Commons clocks off

Will Britain be better governed when ministers and MPs “clock off” for the evening, knowing their attendance is no longer needed in the Commons chamber or the division lobbies because the mother of parliaments has closed for the night? Women MPs with young families, ambitious Labour loyalists and lazy backbenchers on both sides of the house may think so. But the guaranteed welcome for this idea in both Downing Street and Whitehall is a warning.

Given half a chance, every government with an overwhelming majority treats parliament like a rubber stamp and Tony Blair’s is no different. Ministers hate having their decisions questioned by MPs, particularly at short notice. Sustained attacks against shaky legislation are even more loathed. The less time there is for the opposition and independent-minded mavericks to make trouble, the easier life becomes.

The support of Robin Cook, currently Labour’s leader of the House, for the latest move to “modernise” Westminster’s arcane practices with a four-day working week of

10am to 5pm will doubtless be approved by newer MPs who see no point in hanging around for hours while a debate drags on or a bill is fiercely contested. The maxim that governments are entitled to get their legislation through, but oppositions also have rights, leaves them cold. If they could, they would reduce every debate to the sort of charade it is in other parliaments, where MPs cannot speak unless the whips say so.

The omens are not good. Senior ministers take their cue from Mr Blair and attend the Commons as little as possible. Michael Martin, the Speaker, shows scant interest in holding ministers to account or encouraging vigorous debate. Eric Forth’s appointment as Mr Cook’s rival on the Tory front bench promises well, but the Tories have a long way to go before they give Labour a hard time in Commons exchanges. While Westminster slumbers, public interest in the political process reaches a new low. There is still time for MPs of principle and courage to refuse the beguiling offer of more time off. But don’t hold your breath on the result.

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- “The Commons clocks off” (kop)
- 1p **30**  Citeer het zinsgedeelte dat aangeeft wat het voorstel hiertoe precies inhoudt.
- “a warning” (line 12)
- 1p **31** ■ What is the writer afraid of?
- A Parliament might become unwilling to work outside office hours.
  - B Parliament might receive the government’s proposals too late to be able to study them.
  - C The government might be tempted to force through its own political preferences even more.
  - D The government might not be able to debate proposals for new legislation extensively enough.
- 1p **32** ■ What does the writer express his concern about in lines 24-37 (“The support ... say so.”)?
- A MPs’ ignorance of parliamentary customs and traditions.
  - B Parliament’s growing inefficiency.
  - C The danger of parliamentary proceedings losing their significance.
  - D The danger of the opposition having their way.
- “promises well” (line 45)
- 1p **33** ■ With regard to what does Eric Forth’s appointment promise well?
- A Chances for the Tories in the next election.
  - B Modernisation of parliamentary practice.
  - C Parliamentary debate.
  - D Support for the government.
- 1p **34** ■ How does the writer of the article answer the question the article starts with?
- A Negatively.
  - B Neutrally.
  - C Positively.