

## The Change in the House



# Is "Liberal Reform" All to the Good?

THE WORD combination "liberal reform" is the political equivalent of "spice and everything nice," the things little girls were supposed to be made of before women's lib insisted upon a change of ingredients. It is generally assumed that nothing but good can come of anything done in the name of liberal reform. So there has been nothing but applause—in public, at least—for liberal procedure reforms instituted by the House of Representatives at the start of its current session.

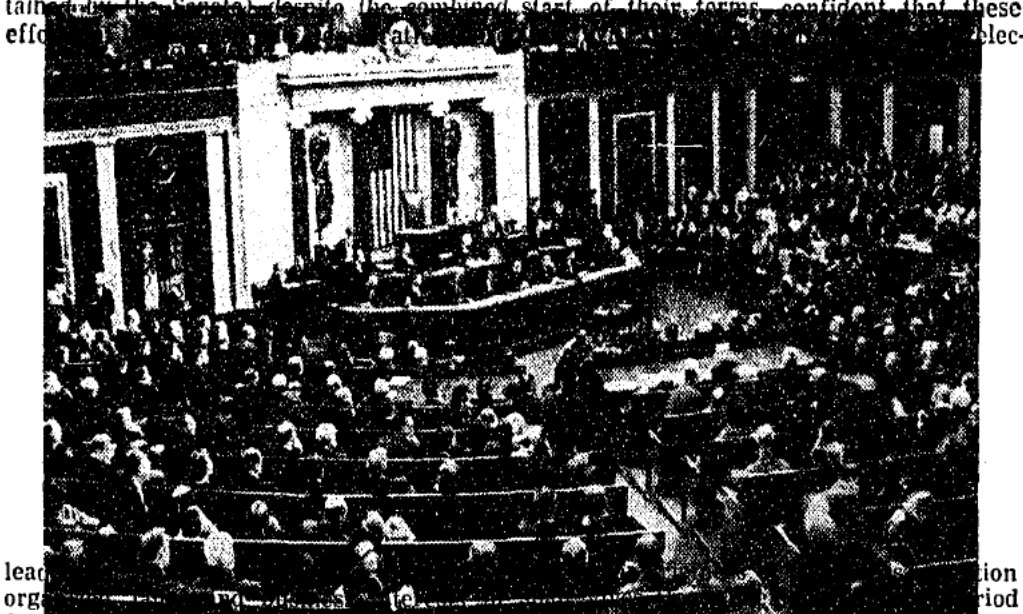
The applause grew in volume when the most important of these reforms—abolition of semi-secret voting on amendments to pending bills—was correctly credited with defeat in the House of a proposal to continue subsidizing the supersonic transport. For 10 years the House had been approving installments of federal investment in the SST until the total had reached \$864 million. A further investment of \$134 million was now considered.

The vote was 217 to 203 against (later sustained by the Senate) despite the combined effort

time." This is necessary to our self-image. A difference between recurring suspicion and constant conviction. Issues in these times have become so complicated that many of them are fully understood only by experts and by officials and legislators with staffs of experts at their disposal. The rest of us are sometimes forced to accept their decisions on faith or to oppose them on a hunch that they are wrong.

The House vote on the SST, the first significant test of change in teller-vote procedure, presages a far more fundamental alteration in the character of the House than some of the reformers anticipated. It will tend to make the House like the Senate, but three times more so, because House members must stand for re-election every two rather than every six years, as senators must.

In the Senate every important vote is recorded. There is no shield between the senator and his constituency. Yet senators occasionally dare cast conscience-dictated votes, even if unpopular, especially toward the start of their terms, confident that these elec-



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favor of the funding required to complete two prototypes. This meant that all but four members of the House voted—an almost unprecedented example of devotion to duty on the part of legislators with no industry directly or indirectly concerned in their districts.

WHY DID the House break a 10-year habit and brave the displeasure of those who said the plane's development was necessary to protect thousands of jobs and millions of tax dollars already invested? Why did it defy the presumably all-powerful military-industrial complex and listen instead to the ecologists and those who demand changes in national priorities? Because under its new rules a direct vote on the SST, technically only an amendment to a pending bill, had to be recorded. Under the old rules it would have been a teller vote, members for and against being counted but not publicly identified unless they were spotted by nosy reporters. Under the new rules voters' names were recorded as they passed down the teller lines.

Since it requires only 20 members to force the new procedure of "tellers with clerk," votes on all important amendments will henceforth be recorded. This means that the folks back home will always know how their representatives have voted not just on bills as finally amended but on amendments, which often tell the story of a congressman's record more accurately.

SO MEMBERS of the House must now be "more responsive to the popular will" than they have been in the past. They cannot hide as they once could in the underbrush of defensive rules. The House will thus be "a more democratic body." These combinations of words are almost as mellifluous as "liberal reform." All this is presumed to be as good as it sounds. But is it? Not necessarily. Not unless the voters to whom representatives are responsible are well enough informed to make wise choices. Not if representatives are always prevented from relying on their own judgment. Not if the consequences are government by opinion poll. Not if only the accomplished demagogue can hope to win a place in the House and keep it.

E. B. White has defined democracy as a "recurring suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half of the

of grace. Recently the House, even though the founding fathers intended it to be more responsive to popular will than the Senate, has been less so. It has been the more conservative branch, the balance wheel, more responsible than responsive. This is because its rules sheltered its members from the hot-and-cold blowing winds of popular pressures. The founding fathers themselves were similarly sheltered. James Madison is authority for the conclusion that the Constitution could never have been written had its authors' deliberations been public. In the more recent past it is doubtful whether civil rights legislation now on the books could have passed the House had votes on amendments been public. The majorities necessary to pass amendments were sometimes contrived only because cooperative opponents were persuaded to make themselves scarce when teller votes were taken. On some occasions, to be sure, secrecy has been the refuge of scoundrels.

THE SST vote, the merits of the issue aside, was an eye-opener. It served notice on the leaders of both parties in Congress and on the President that exercise of leadership will be more difficult in the future, perhaps impossible. Pulling and hauling between the executive branch, Republican controlled, and the legislative branch, Democratic controlled in both the House and Senate, already has the legislative process in near-stalemate. Only a high degree of cooperation across party lines and at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue can resolve differences over revenue sharing, welfare reorganization, foreign policy and other issues. But if the leaders can't lead, near-stalemate will become total stalemate. Indeed, this seems likely.

Reform of House rules, much as some change was needed, universal as the demand for it was, will not be an unmixed blessing. The reformers, in their zeal to make the House more responsive to the public may only have made it less responsive to the real needs of the time. These needs are emergent. Some of them will not wait until the public opinion pollsters discover what 51 per cent of the people want so that 51 per cent of the national legislators can act. Liberal reform, like sugar and spice, may taste good in the eating but produce stomach aches in the digesting.