

CLOSER LOOK AT HOUSE STYLE



I AM aware that, in writing this column, I've never really given you a peek inside at the daily rituals of the House of Commons. Let me draw back the curtains so you can look a little closer.

Parliament is a tale of everyday folk. We only get there because other people vote for us. But having done so the system immediately begins to make you feel very special. The staff are unfailingly kind and helpful. People call you 'sir' or 'madam' and open doors for you. Lobbyists send you mountains of brochures soliciting your support. Wealthy organisations send out invitations asking you to wine or dine with them. Yes, it's just like the treatment you get when you're unemployed — people falling over themselves to be helpful, sorting out whatever little problems you face.

One of the not so little problems is the size of the place. There are supposed to be over three miles of internal corridors around 'the

Palace of Westminster'. It's hard to know whether you're lost or in a new one.

What I have found is a lovely little facility in the Members Cloakroom. Often you don't get out of Parliament during the day once you have set foot in the place. It's easy to run out of basic food supplies so I have a nice little ritual of buying bread and orange juice from a delicatessen that opens early by my tube station.

I have been in the habit of leaving my polythene bag of groceries along with my coat in the (private) Members Cloakroom. This was particularly convenient because each MP has their own personalised hanger (like school) with a brand new piece of pink ribbon attached to it. At one time I was really impressed by this thoughtfulness on the part of the Palace authorities — my shopping never got trampled underfoot — but then I discovered that the ribbon was where I was supposed to hang my sword!

I suppose it was obvious really. What does one do with one's sword these days? They are a damn nuisance when pushing one's trolley round the Co-op.

ANYWAY, I'm quite happy leaving my shopping on the ribbon. It's a symbolic gesture — swords into ploughshares, food rather than weapons.

Next I want to show you the building itself. It's full of huge paintings and statues of 'the great and the good' in British history. The thing is, not one of them was poor, none were homeless, none were without rank and privilege.

I actually managed to find a picture that portrayed my family's part in this rich tapestry of British history. I think we were being slaughtered in some great battle or other - but I'm sure it was for a good cause.

The corridors of the Commons are also littered with blokes in black cloaks, or black suits with chains of office.

Sometimes you meet others who wander round in black silk tights and buckled shoes. I'm sure they'd get arrested outside.

But the piece de resistance is the Chamber itself. You have to go in the gallery, but you aren't allowed to take a pen or pencil with you.

In the debates that take place you will also notice other novelties. The first is that MPs keep standing up and sitting down. The idea is to 'catch the Speaker's eye' and get called to speak. It helps if you've been a Minister in the past. This seems to make you luminous, whereas being new makes you barely visible.

Once you get called the fun begins. You can say what you like about people outside Parliament. That seems to be fair game. But even if you think the Minister has been lying through his teeth you can't say so. All members are 'honourable members' and, therefore, cannot lie. Not even the newest member believes it but we're all required to play the charade ... or get thrown out!

WE also have to pretend that there's no one up in the gallery. So no references are allowed to those who might have come great distances to lobby you and to listen to the debates. Often when debates run through the night, I find myself wondering whether those who weren't there yesterday aren't there again today to follow through the pantomime.

No. More often than that I wonder why we're playing around with such silly rituals, when the country desperately needs a modern Parliament, working to sensible rules and coming up with policies which would put four million people back in work and take ten million out of poverty.

But hang on. Paris has EuroDisney and this place could easily be a theme park in its own time. All we need is a few burger bars and a few more silly outfits.

Could this be the start of the recovery?