

Chess and the House of Commons

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(2003)

We offer some gleanings on what may be regarded, relatively speaking, as the golden period of the House of Commons' connection with chess, i.e. the half-century from the 1880s to the 1930s. The first passage is from *The Scotsman*, 18 April 1888, as quoted on page 78 of the April 1888 *International Chess Magazine* :

'Chess has become one of the institutions of the House of Commons. Since the introduction of the board to the smoking-room many stiff games have been fought every night. Gladstonians challenge Unionists, and Parnellites also come within the chess circle. On Tuesday Mr Bradlaugh and Mr Henniker-Heaton were the centre of a group of interested observers, and still stranger conjunctions have often been seen across the board. The players are now becoming fastidious. Two weeks ago they were delighted to have a moveable board; on Tuesday night they were agitating for a fully-equipped table. A petition in regular parliamentary form has been prepared, and to it one hundred signatures have already been attached. In this document the defects of the existing arrangement are gravely enumerated, and the Chief Commissioner of Works is requested to furnish forthwith all that the players desire.'

The next item, from 'E.A.' (i.e. Edwyn Anthony) in the *Hereford Times*, 18 December 1890, was quoted on pages 491-492 of the December 1890 *BCM* :

'The popularity of the game of chess, since its introduction not so long ago into the smoke-room of the House of Commons, has been a constantly increasing quantity – not, indeed, a very surprising fact. Mr Gladstone has stated more than once that the British House of Commons does more work than any other legislative assembly in the world, and, apart from the intrinsic claims of the pastime most akin to science of any in existence, an absorbing recreation like chess must needs be a great help to relieve the tedium of the weary hours of waiting which every member who does his duty by his constituents must necessarily undergo. Lord Randolph Churchill is, we believe, the best player on the Conservative side but, casting our eyes for the moment on the Liberal benches alone, we find that Caissa ranks among her votaries some of the ablest members of the party. Strongest as a chessplayer stands Mr Newnes, the president of the British Chess Club. Next come the following group among whom there is no considerable difference in the strength: Mr Bradlaugh, Colonel Nolan, Sir Julian Goldsmith, Dr Hunter, and Mr Atherley-Jones. And, in close company therewith, we have the well-known and well-honoured names of Sir Charles Russell and Mr Winterbotham. The Speaker, we presume, is a chessplayer, since he is the president of the Leamington Chess Club. Mr Gladstone is acquainted with the moves, but, so far, history fails to record any game played on the checkered field by the greatest player on the political board of ancient or modern times.'

The April 1893 *BCM* (page 181) quoted from *The Million* :

'The only games which are sanctioned or, more correctly speaking, "winked at" in the House of Commons are chess and backgammon. Chess, as the more stately and scientific of these, commands exclusive attention. Backgammon is, by common consent, voted *bourgeois*, and is tabooed. The chessplayers of distinction, that is to say, those who play upon scientific principles, are Mr George Newnes (who, according to Mr Henniker-Heaton, is the best player in the House), Colonel Nolan, Lord Carmarthen, Mr Bonsor, Mr Bromley Davenport, the Hon. Frank Parker, Mr Bryn Roberts, the Hon. W. Fellowes, and Mr Caleb Wright. As a time-player Mr Henniker-Heaton is the *doyen* of the Parliamentary chessplayers. When Mr Charles Bradlaugh sat under the fane of St Stephen's he and the member for Canterbury pitted themselves together. Bradlaugh was a fine strategist, and the two were about equal. It was the cynical humour, however, of the member for Northampton, to take Mr Henniker-Heaton's bishop, he being a churchman of the most orthodox type, and Mr Bradlaugh not sharing his opponent's affection for the establishment.

How and when chess entered the House of Commons is not accurately known. Formerly it was played in a very furtive way. A former member for Deptford, Mr Evelyn, left a board behind him, which Mr Henniker-Heaton discovered, and promptly challenged Mr Bradlaugh. Members took so much interest in these tournaments that a "pool" of half-crowns was started, and with the fund a dozen sets of chess were purchased. The chess club at the House now numbers representatives of all the nations, and it is their particular pride to be able to boast of having returned all their men at the General Election.'

Now a report from page 137 of the April 1897 *BCM* :

'A parliamentary contest of a highly interesting character took place on 17 March, when seven members of the House of Commons played a match of chess against seven members of the Press Gallery. From the first the MPs led, and finally won in good style by 4½ to 2½.'

The House of Commons was represented by 'Hon. Horace Plunkett, Mr Parnell, Mr Strauss, Mr Atheley-Jones QC, Mr Cosmo Bonser, Mr Seton-Kerr, Mr McKenna'. The following year (*BCM* , September 1898, page 369) the House of Commons beat the Press Gallery by 12½-9½.

Page 139 of the April 1901 *BCM* had an article by 'M.J.I.' entitled 'The Most Exclusive Chess Club in the World'. An extract follows:

'Readers of the *British Chess Magazine* may be interested in some account of the most exclusive chess club in the world, by which I mean that in connection with the Reporters' Gallery of the House of Commons ...

Chess in the House of Commons Gallery used formerly to be played in the smoking room, but since last autumn, when fresh accommodation was given to the journalists, who were getting rather straitened in their old quarters, a small but comfortable room has been assigned to chess. It is high up in the building, looking out upon Palace Yard through a window fashioned with delicate tracery. Newly and admirably furnished, it does every credit to the First Commissioner. Is he a chessplayer himself? Perhaps.

Altogether about 30 members of the Press Gallery employ themselves to a greater or less extent in shifting about the pieces in hours of leisure. The play is somewhat desultory, for the players naturally never quite know when they will be disengaged, and often in the middle of a game the time will come for a "turn" and one of the combatants has, for half-an-hour or so, to listen to and to record the dreary talk of our legislators. They are of all strengths, too, from the average first-class to the men who have queens *and more* allowed them. One or two play also in London League and similar matches, but for the most part they take their chess, I believe, wholly in the Gallery, where doubtless some of them first learnt the game – perhaps, 30 or 40 years ago, in the case of old stagers. Some little looseness of organization cannot, under the circumstances, be avoided, but there is a regular committee, and handicaps and matches are played throughout each session.'

The next item comes from the *Glasgow Herald* on pages 149-150 of the September 1901 issue of *Checkmate*

and was quoted
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'The House of Commons has at least one distinction – it is the place in the world where the greatest amount of time is wasted by the greatest number of presumably intelligent men. ... It is the smoking room, however, which is the great resort of idle members, and as, with the rare exception of a game of draughts, chess is the only game indulged in, it is no wonder that it is very popular ...

The quality of chess in the House is not of the highest order. In the last Parliament Mr Horace Plunkett was easily first, and indeed he is probably almost, if not quite, a first-class amateur. In the present Parliament the recognized head of the chess circle is Sir George Newnes, who is a fairly strong player, and in the Parliament of 1892-95 played frequently. Although he takes as much interest in the game as ever, and is a very generous patron of it outside, he does not frequently play. Among the other players probably our Scotch member, Mr Bonar Law, is as strong as any of them.'

The *Herald* then gave brief accounts of the expertise, or lack thereof, of various players, including Reginald McKenna, who was described as 'undoubtedly one of the rising men on the Liberal side of the House':

'He can play a very good game of chess when he chooses but, like many others, he enjoys criticizing better even than playing, and very often some of his best friends would wish him anywhere else when he shows them how easily they could have won the game if they had played such and such a move, instead of playing the move that lost it.'

On page 14 of the January 1903 *BCM* in the House:

'D.Y.' gave a more restrained account of chess-playing

'Chess in Parliament has always been as much exaggerated, almost, as the story of Mark Twain's death, thanks to the descriptive writer of the popular magazine, who never minimizes the importance of his subject, lest the editor should return his "copy". The amount of chess enthusiasm among MPs may be gauged from the fact that although there are two cups for inter-parliamentary contests on view in the smoking-room, one has never been played for, and the other only once some years ago, when a match with the American Legislature ended in a draw. The Parliamentary championship only exists in the fertile imagination of the lobbyist, and for the last three years even the match which used to be played with the gentlemen of the Press has been discontinued.

... The fact is Parliamentary chess is at as low an ebb as it can possibly be. The new rules, which give a long interval for dinner in the best part of the evening, and positively encourage members on the most important nights to go home early, and return late for the division, are much against chessplaying at Westminster, even if the inclination existed. And the two or three members interested in the game are rather patrons of chess than players. There is only one, I think, Mr F. Wilson, who is seen in, say, a county team. The others preside at dinners, or distribute prizes, are generous with subscriptions – fulfil in fact a very useful as well as an ornamental, part in chess life – but they cannot give enthusiasm where it does not exist.'

The next quotation is by P.H. Williams and comes from page 323 of the August 1917 *Chess Amateur* :

'*Liverpool Post and Mercury* London correspondent notes that chess has become an innovation "on the Terrace" of the House of Commons, and the other day an exciting and well-played game was witnessed there between two MPs, who carried a board and pieces from the smoking-room, and played in the open on the Terrace. As is well known, chess and draughts are the only games permissible in the precincts of the House, but it seems to be a novelty to have chess on the Terrace. It shows the supreme contempt with which our legislators regard the "overhead" exhibition of Teutonic "kultur".'

Shortly after the Great War, the Commons lost much of its chess presence. Page 44 of the February 1919 *BCM* cited an MP as writing in the *Daily Dispatch* , 'The General Election has swept away most of the habitués of the chess-room in the House of Commons', although he added that 'the three greatest players, Mr Bonar Law, Sir Watson Rutherford and Captain Barnett, will be found there'.

The same page of the *BCM* mentioned William Clough of the Bradford Chess Club, the former MP for Skipton. Later that year he was to win a 24-move game against Capablanca in a simultaneous exhibition. We gave the score on page 56 of the 5/1919 *New in Chess* , taken from page 5 of the *Yorkshire Observer* of 8 October 1919.

Capablanca's display (refereed by Amos Burn) in Committee Room No. 14 at the House of Commons on 2 December 1919 is well known. Page 9 of the January 1920 *BCM* reported:

'Señor J.R. Capablanca had the honour paid him of being the first chess master to be invited to give a simultaneous performance within the precincts of the House of Commons. The arrangements were carried out by Major R.W. Barnett, MP, who got together a team of 33 past and present members of the House and five of the Press Association.'

After listing the 38 opponents, the *BCM* remarked:

'There was a continued stream of visitors from other parts of the House, including Mr Bonar Law, and that he was unable to take a board himself was universally regretted. Mr Austen Chamberlain was also an onlooker for part of the time ...'

The resultant exchanges on the floor of the House are too familiar to be repeated here. See, for instance, page 157 of *The Unknown Capablanca* by D. Brandreth and D. Hooper (London, 1975).

On page 101 of the January 1920 *Chess Amateur* commented on the Cuban's display:

P.H. Williams

'One of Señor Capablanca's great efforts was his contest at the House of Commons in the midst of a strenuous sitting of that august community. Following the prevailing fashion, a well-known ping-pong expert is willing to play a match against all-comers in the Lion House at the Zoological Gardens; a friendly match at spellikins is arranged to take place in the booking office at the Piccadilly Tube Station for the benefit of people returning home from the theatre; a well-known bridge player offers to play 14 dummies simultaneously with a special pack of cards numbering 728, including 182 of each suit. This will take place in the vestibule of the Holborn Stadium during the next boxing boom; a well-known financier will give an exhibition match of "Beggar-my-neighbour" on the floor of the Stock Exchange against all-comers, undertaking to ruin all his opponents, less Tax, in four hours.'

It may be recalled that a game on 29 December 1919 between Capablanca and three Members of Parliament, including Bonar Law, was given on pages 59-61 of *Chess and its Stars* by B. Harley (Leeds, 1936) and pages 113-114 of *The Unknown Capablanca*. Neither book suggested that the game was played in the House of Commons, but this conclusion was wrongly drawn by R. Caparrós in the two editions of his book of Capablanca's games. He also gave the score out of chronological sequence, placing it among the 2 December games despite correctly dating it 29 December.

None of the above-mentioned books named Bonar Law's allies, but their identities have been on public record for 80 years. Page 447 of the December 1923 *BCM* quoted Major R.W. Barnett from the *Morning Post* :

'On 29 December 1919 the three best players in the House of Commons, Mr Bonar Law, Sir Watson Rutherford and myself, played at my house in consultation against Señor Capablanca. The late J.H. White, of "Griffith and White" fame, carried the moves from one room to another, and some of the shrewdest strokes in the game were suggested by Mr Bonar Law.'

The April 1923 *Chess Amateur*
the *Times Weekly*

(page 198) carried a report from

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'The election of the new House of Commons made the reconstruction of the House of Commons Chess Circle necessary, and this was carried out at a meeting in Committee Room No. 7. Major Barnett presided, and in reviewing the activities of the Circle last year laid special emphasis on the way every section of the House contributed to the fund for the first prize in the London International Congress ...'

From *The Times*

(London), 26 November 1925:

'The House of Commons Chess Circle played one of their few matches against outside teams

in Committee Room No. 16 yesterday afternoon, with the Athenaeum Club for their opponents. The result was a win for the Circle by 5½ games to 2½, and that total would have been increased if Sir John Simon had not by inadvertence thrown away a position where the win was within his grasp.'

Another such match took place on 2 March 1933, when an eight-man team from Cambridge University visited the House of Commons and won +6 -0 =2. Sir John Simon lost again, and we gave the game in our [feature article](#) on him. The full result appeared on page 172 of the April 1933 *BCM*.

Page 2 of the January 1926 *BCM* reported:

'Most of the chessplaying members of the House of Commons were present at the dinner given by the Chess Circle to Señor Capablanca on 15 December. The Earl of Plymouth, a keen player, presided ...'

The final passage in the present selection concerns a case, possibly unique, of chess being played in the Commons Chamber itself. In 1931 (July issue, page 306) the *BCM* quoted from 'the paragraphist in the *Evening Standard*':

'I was glad to observe last night that two Labour members, Mr Benson and Mr Denman, were determined not to be debarred by red tape from having a little quiet fun. Under the very eye of the Speaker they started playing chess. Now chess as a game is the only pastime permitted in the Palace of Westminster. This is the first time, however, that I have seen it played upon the floor of the House. They employed a travelling chess-board of the kind in which little celluloid wedges are inserted into slips. It was a brave show.'

(2947)

C.N. 2947 above quoted a reference to a drawn match between the House of Commons and the 'American Legislature'. It was played by cable in 1897, and the most detailed account we have seen is the article 'When Parliament challenged Congress' by W.C. Kendal on pages 368-370 of the September 1961 *CHESS*. 'The rules provided that five boards were to be set up in the House of Commons and five in the House of Representatives. At each of the five boards there was placed opposite each player a representative ("living dummy") of his opponent.'

At least to modern eyes, the event lacked star names, the US players being Richmond Pearson (North Carolina), T.S. Plowman (Alabama), Robert N. Bodine (Missouri), Levin I. Handy (Delaware) and John F. Shafroth (Colorado), while Great Britain was represented by Horace C. Plunkett, Arthur Strauss, F.W. Wilson, L.A. Atherley-Jones and John H. Parnell.

(2952)

Chris Randall of the House of Commons Information Office in London has sent us an article from pages 189-190 of *Lords and Commons* of 25 March 1899 entitled 'Chess in Parliament – A Chat with Mr Henniker-Heaton M.P.' Below are some of the parliamentarian's disclosures about the origins of chess in the House:

'As to chess, somewhere about 1885 I discovered a solitary and decidedly ancient board in the Smoke-room of the House of Commons. It is alleged that there were legislators in the bygone days of the misty past who affected the game, just as it is alleged that a rubber of whist was often played in the rooms of a certain popular Serjeant-at-Arms, whither Members, who were carefully "selected", brought their own whisky. As far as I can ascertain, however, there is only one survivor of those very exclusive whist parties.

But to return to that time-worn chess-board, from the discovery of which the present flourishing condition and position of the game has been evolved. It was, so I am credibly informed, left behind by a former Member for Deptford. Be this as it may, it was really wonderful how soon we attracted enthusiastic devotees about that antiquated and battered board. The crush of spectators became so great that we resolved to start a 5s. subscription. The idea was immediately successful. We – that is the Chess Committee – increased our stock of boards and sets of men to eight or ten forthwith.'

(2958)

One full game and three positions (none of them particularly colourful) from the transatlantic cable match were presented in the detailed report on pages 1-6 of the *American Chess Magazine*, June 1897.

(2999)

Addition on 23 September 2007:

From the *Chess Amateur*, July 1929, page 219:

'As a result of the election, the House of Commons has lost some of its best-known and strongest chessplayers, although it may have gained others. The biggest loss is Maj. Sir Richard Barnett, who did not stand for re-election. Mr J.W.W. Hopkins also retired, and has since received a baronetcy. Amongst the "casualties" were Lieut.-Col. Moore-Brabazon and Captain J. Griffyth-Fairfax, who lost their seats; and among those returned were Sir John Simon, Dr Graham Little, and Lieuts.-Cols. Sir P. Richardson and Assheton-Pownall. But each Parliament has its own good chess-circle, in spite of the inevitable changes in its personnel. Major Sir R. Barnett was the strongest chessplayer in the last Parliament, but such men, although lost by Parliament, are by no means lost to chess – rather the reverse, as a rule.'

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