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THE PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

INTERIM REPORT

FROM THE

SELECT COMMITTEE

ON

IRREGULAR CONDUCT AND INTERFERENCE;

together with

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

I N T E R I M R E P O R T .

The Select Committee appointed to enquire into and report upon the improper removal from the Chamber of Mr. Speaker's copy of May's "Parliamentary Practice," with Mr. Speaker's notes in connection therewith, and the abstraction of such notes and the interference with the Keys of certain doors in the Chamber and precincts, have the honor to report as follows:-

1. Your Committee have held 6 meetings and examined 24 witnesses. These included Mr. Speaker and other Members of the House of Representatives, the Serjeant-at-Arms, the whole of his staff on duty, the detective who was authorised by Mr. Speaker directly the irregularities took place to make investigation, and several others whom your Committee considered, in the course of their enquiry, were likely to throw any light on the matters referred for report.

2. Your Committee find that the removal of the Speaker's copy of May's Parliamentary Practice, with his notes in connection therewith, took place on Friday, 22nd May, during the interval in which His Excellency the Governor-General was being entertained in the Queen's Hall; and the evidence has shown that it can be narrowed down to a still shorter period between 3 o'clock and 3.15 in the afternoon, during which the Speaker had to make a further adjournment of the House of Representatives on account of the luncheon not being concluded.

3. Your Committee considered that, after Mr. Higgs' admission in the House of Representatives that he was the person who had interfered with the Mace, they were relieved of the inquiry in that regard. But as the removal of the Mace from the Table was intimately

associated

associated with the loss of the Speaker's book and notes, in point of time, in having taken place in the same short period of a quarter of an hour, between 3 o'clock and 3.15, your Committee considered themselves called upon to obtain further particulars as to who was present in the Chamber when the Mace was actually removed. Your Committee find that Mr. Webster and Mr. Higgs were the only other occupants of the Chamber when the Speaker left it on the further adjournment at 3 o'clock. Mr. Webster volunteered the admission that he had co-operated with Mr. Higgs in interfering with the Mace but absolutely denied having any knowledge of the lost book or the Speaker's notes.

4. Your Committee find that the book itself was discovered by one of the attendants on the same evening about 9.30 on the main floor in a receptacle where coal and wood were stored; and the only information your Committee could obtain in regard to the paper slips with the Speaker's notes upon them was the fact that one was found by Mr. James Page upon the Opposition side of the House, on the floor near the table and another paper slip of the same shape and character, without any notes upon it, was found on the same side of the House, a short distance farther down towards the main entrance.

5. Your Committee examined a number of officials in regard to the placing of a coal scuttle opposite the closed door of a room usually occupied by the Chairman of Committees, but on that occasion occupied by Sir John Forrest and others for sleeping purposes, during the all-night sitting. In regard to this act your Committee were unable to obtain information which would show for what purpose it was done.

6. Several witnesses were examined in regard to the interference with the doors leading to the House of Representatives' Chamber. It was shown that the outer door in the Speaker's corridor through which Members usually pass on their way from the lift and the Library and which is almost always open was found

closed

closed. The door was locked and would have proved an effectual bar but for the fact that the upper and lower bolts were drawn and so enabled the door, though locked, to be forced open which was done by Mr. Finlayson and Mr. Fenton when Mr. Webster shook it and indicated his desire to get through. The key of the door was afterwards found on the floor near the door.

7. Your Committee find that the two inner doors through one of which the Speaker usually passes on entering the House were also tampered with. The keys of both doors were removed so that in the event of a division it would have been impossible to lock them. One of these keys was afterwards found in a soiled towel basket in the main lavatory, and the other was found hanging in the key hole of another door. Your Committee are unable to discover how, why, or by whom these keys were removed.

8. Your Committee have endeavoured to obtain evidence in regard to the removal of the Speaker's book and notes, and had already entered upon that portion of the enquiry, but finding that they could not complete the enquiry in the short time before the close of the Parliament, tender this report as an interim one, leaving it to the House of Representatives, if it thinks fit, to take the necessary steps in the next Parliament to appoint a Select Committee to finish the investigation.



Chairman.

Committee Room,

25th June, 1914.