

Committees and Librarianship

by F.W. RATCLIFFE

“Cry cry what shall I cry?

The first thing to do is to form the Committees.

The consultative councils, the standing committees,
select committees and sub-committees.

One secretary will do for several committees.” T. S. Eliot¹⁾

The use of Committees is regularly regarded as one of the great British contributions to Government. We are far advanced in democratic institutions and committees are one of the hallmarks of these institutions. In the words of Anthony Sampson: “Committees are the inescapable penalty of democracy.”² General literature about them seems to be curiously limited: indeed, it may be thought that their functions are so abundantly clear that no-one considers it worth their while to discuss them. Perhaps it may in fact be, as a Professor of Government jokingly remarked, that ‘once you know how committees work, you keep it to yourself.’ Nevertheless, the absence of an entry for committees in general encyclopaedias comprises an unexpected omission, although special Government Committees are indexed. To find the same omission in some of the specialised encyclopaedias such as Psychology, Management and the like, comes as both a surprise and a disappointment.

The literature which does debate them is rarely concerned with committees as such but with committees in relation to Government, Politics, or Business. Such an excellent book as Wheare’s *Government by Committee*³ concerns itself inevitably entirely with the role played by the Committee in the British Constitution. The publication by Urwick, *Committees in Organisation*,⁴ a pioneer work of its kind, is aimed primarily at British management. The entry in Gould and Kolb’s *Dictionary of the Social Sciences*,⁵ amounts to a purely structural analysis of committees, again at Government or similar administrative level. That is not to say these works contain nothing of value to this study: they are not however of immediate relevance to it.

One reason for the apparent dearth of literature lies in the word itself: *Committee*: it reflects a respectable formal concept with which most of

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