The Bureaus of the French Constituent Assembly of 1789

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Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 51, No. 3. (Sep., 1936), pp. 418-437.

Stable URL:
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Political Science Quarterly is currently published by The Academy of Political Science.

THE BUREAUS OF THE FRENCH CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY OF 1789

An Early Experiment in the Group-Conference Method

EVERY revolution brings to the fore men lacking in practical experience in government. For that very reason their attempts at governing, failures though they may be at the time, are often of unsurpassable value as sociological experiments. The French Revolution was exceptionally rich in such bold innovation. Among the experiments made by its untried leaders was one in what is now commonly known as the group-conference method, a mode of procedure in representative assemblies widely discussed and studied during the past twenty years.[1] It took the form of a system of so-called bureaus, first in the Assembly of Representatives of the Third Estate, then in its successor, the Constituent Assembly of 1789.

Tantalizingly little information is to be had on the actual conduct of the discussions in the bureaus. At the time, they attracted little attention. They existed as conference groups for only four months, after which their place was taken by standing committees. The anonymity of the discussions made, no doubt, for greater freedom of expression, but was probably one of the reasons why no minutes were kept; the historian is thereby the loser. There is little reference to the bureaus in the correspondence of the time. The greater questions of liberty and equality, the struggle between the court and the nation, fill the pages of letters and memoirs.

There are, however, in the records of the Assemblies and in the newspaper accounts of their meetings many references to the work of the bureaus. From these sources there can be gleaned a fairly clear picture of their origin and functioning, of the part they played in the life of the Assemblies, of the reasons for their decline and disappearance, and more impor-

[1] For a description of the process, see Harrison Elliott, *Process of Group Thinking*. The underlying philosophy may be found in Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom;* Mary Follett, *Creative Experience* and *The New State;* Hugo Krabbe, *Law in the Modern State*, especially the translator's introduction.

tant still, of the judgment of members of the Assemblies as to their values and defects.[2] It is hoped that the picture of these early conference groups, presented without comment, will not only throw new light on the workings of the first Revolutionary Assemblies, but provide interesting if not valuable lessons for students of the spirit and technique of democracy.

I

In the spring of 1789, as is well known, delegates from the three orders—Clergy, Nobility and Third Estate—came together from all parts of France to devise means of meeting a national crisis. The orders met separately at first, and it was in the Assembly of the Representatives of the Third Estate that the bureaus were first used. The Assembly consisted of about 600 members, unacquainted with each other, without party organization, inexperienced in parliamentary methods, suspicious of the procedure used in such assemblies as they knew.

For the first weeks the meetings were unorganized and no actual business was done. But on May 7 the Third Estate decided, without organizing definitely, to negotiate with the other orders with the object of forming a single assembly. For two days the deputies spoke at random about what to do next, without coming to any conclusions. On May 8 the Dean of the Assembly proposed the adoption of rules of procedure, and one of the deputies, Rewbell, called for a regulation such that " we may collect the votes, to determine legally the opinions of this Assembly." Others put the question on a broader basis and demanded that " some means be sought for establishing order and regularity in such a numerous assembly." Mounier moved to " nominate a person in each *gouvernement,* to act for a week, for the purpose of meeting with the dean to put order into the conferences, to count the votes, to get information on the majority of opinions on all the proposals which might be made for accelerating the union of the Orders in the hall of

[2] Although it is possible that further materials bearing on the bureaus may come to light, the writer believes that the present description will stand substantially unchanged.

the Estates-General, and to take note of all which might be determined provisionally." [3]

Going back to a precedent from the Estates-General of 1614, but avoiding the smaller divisions of that time by provinces as too likely to represent sectional interests, the Assembly decided that after dinner it would meet by *gouvernements* or other large divisions of the country, some groups in the rooms set aside for the work of the members, others in the private apartments of deputies. It was foreseen already, reports one newspaper, that the Assembly, once constituted, "might want, to hasten its action, to divide itself into several bureaus." [4] No action, however, was taken.

By May 25 even Mirabeau, who had previously joined in opposing the adoption of permanent rules, spoke in favor of a set of temporary rules by means of which a remedy could be applied to the disorder and the lengthiness of the discussions. He protested:

> God knows that I do not want to wound the self esteem of anyone, and that I am not upset by our somewhat noisy debates, which, up to now, have been a better sign of our zeal and our firm will to be free than the most passive tranquillity would have been. But liberty presupposes discipline, and since every moment can make necessary acts whose consequences cannot be foreseen nor their importance exaggerated, we must, to acquit ourselves of our duties, and even for our individual safety, adopt a method of debating and of voting which will incontestably give the result of the views and opinions of all.

Mirabeau evidently expressed a clearly felt need, for by a vote of 436 to 11 a committee was named to prepare temporary rules of procedure.[5]

[3] *Point du Jour*, Paris, 1789-91, 815 nos. in 19 vols., edited by Barère. Vol. I, p. 80, May 9, 1789 (Session of May 8). Also, Francisque Mège, *Gaultier de Biauzat, député du Tiers-État aux États-Généraux de 1789; sa vie et sa correspondance* (Paris, 1890), 2 vols. bound in 1. Vol. I, p. 45, letter of May 8, 1789.

[4] *Journal des États-Généraux*, Paris, 1789–1791, 35 vols., edited by Le Hodey de Saultchevreuil. Vol. I, pp. 16-17, May 8, 1789.

[5] *Point du Jour*, vol. I, p. 154, May 25, 1789. Gaultier de Biauzat (Mège, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 82) gives the figures as 438 to 11.

The committee reported on June 6 the draft of a set of rules. It was at first proposed that the rules be read before the Assembly, "but the examination of them was sent to twenty bureaus formed by dividing the members of each deputation into different committees, composed each of thirty persons, and fixing their meeting places by lot." [6] The next morning was spent in discussion of the project in these bureaus.[7]

The most important part of the proposed rules had to do with the method of making motions, and of voting on them. Twenty groups were to be formed, composed without regard to geographical representation—an effort to break down the old provincial feelings. The groups were to be made up from an alphabetical list of the deputies, the first group to include the first deputy on the list, the thirty-first, etc., the second group the second deputy, the thirty-second, etc. Membership in the groups was to be changed every two weeks—an attempt to prevent the formation of cliques. The whole history of the Revolution as a struggle between the theory of absolute equality and of concentration of power is summed up in this decision. The Assembles did away with the old "ministerial despotism" but could not avoid organization, at first in the bureaus, later in the committees and the parties.

The function of the groups, which were called bureaus, was outlined in detail. Every motion must be presented to the secretariat of the Assembly, signed by its author. The secretariat could either accept or reject it. If accepted, the motion would be read to the Assembly and, if supported by more than four deputies, communicated to the bureaus, which would vote separately and report back the number of votes for acceptance or rejection. When the motion came before the Assembly for a second discussion, each bureau would have a speaker to debate in its name, and no others would be allowed to speak. The names of the persons to speak for and those to speak against the motion must be presented beforehand to the president of the Assembly. Final voting was to take place in the general

[6] *Point du Jour*, vol. I, p. 296, June 6, 1789.

[7] Adrien Duquesnoy, *Journal sur l'assemblée constituante, 3 mai 1789—3 avril 1790* (Paris, 1894), 2 vols. Vol. I, p. 78, June 7, 1789.

Assembly, by rising vote, or by the collection of ballots by tellers.[8]

A lively discussion arose over the proposed bureaus. It was claimed that the nine small rooms available would not suffice for twenty bureaus. This practical difficulty was met by the argument that either fewer bureaus could be formed, or some bureaus could meet in different parts of the main hall. "We have already had", said one deputy, "the example of the Commons assembling in the hall by *gouvernements,* and the noise did not at all disturb this arrangement." Another and more serious objection was that "a person who had confidence in another would be prevented by these artificial divisions from getting the benefit of his advice, since a good suggestion would be lost in a decision by thirty persons." To this the answer was that under the present system not more than fifty speakers in all had taken part in the debates. Besides, it was added, after the question had been discussed in the smaller meetings, everyone would still be free to speak again in the general Assembly. On the other hand, far from depriving the members of the Assembly of the benefit to be derived from a variety of opinions, the bureaus would rather increase it. Often, it was held, a person who remains silent, either from "lack of a voice and lungs strong enough to make himself heard by six hundred persons", or because he had not had experience in speech-making, would offer his views with more "ease of mind" in a meeting of thirty persons.

Malouet, who supported the plan of bureaus, wished, however, to make of them something in the nature of standing committees by giving "to each Bureau a special subject to discuss, to one taxes, to another commerce, to this one justice, to that agriculture, and so on." His suggestion fell so wide of the mark that no one seconded him.[9]

It was finally decided to divide the Assembly into bureaus, and to determine their functions later. Mirabeau expressed the tentative nature of the decision: "However imperfect these

[8] *Journal des États-Généraux*, vol. I, pp. 37-39, June 6, 1789.

[9] *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 41-43, 50, June 6, 1789. *Point du Jour*, vol. I, pp. 296-297, June 6, 1789.

provisional rules may be, however vicious may be the meetings by Bureaus, in spite of all the changes demanded it has not been possible to do better in a moment when as yet we have only a feeble knowledge of the tactics of political assemblies and feel the urgent need of some discipline." [10]

The number of members of each bureau was set at thirty. When Bailly tried to have the number of bureaus reduced to fit the ten rooms available, Target pointed out that this would mean sixty members to a bureau, and added that sixty could not deliberate much more easily than the six hundred of the whole Assembly. It was further decided that meetings of the bureaus be held every evening.[11]

On June 13 the appointment of the members of the bureaus was approved. Already it could be foreseen from which quarter the attack on the bureaus would come. "The list", reported Duquesnoy, "had been made, but the Bretons, who are never of one mind with the rest, stood up vigorously against the measure, whose execution they wanted to prevent." [12] But in spite of them, it was confirmed. The deputies of the Third Estate then decided to proceed with the verification of credentials, and the bureaus were given the duty of examining them.[13] They met for the purpose the same afternoon and reported that evening and the next day.[14]

II

On June 17, some members of the Clergy and the Nobility having joined the Third Estate, the deputies constituted themselves the Constituent Assembly, and when the others had followed on June 29 a complete reorganization became necessary.

The whole Assembly as now constituted numbered some twelve hundred members. This altogether too unwieldy number was due partly to the prevalent theory of the most direct

[10] *Point du Jour*, vol. I, p. 298, June 7, 1789 (Session of June 6).

[11] *Journal des États-Généraux*, vol. I, p. 50, June 8, 1789.

[12] Duquesnoy, *Journal*, vol. I, p. 80, June 9, 1789.

[13] *Procès-verbal de l'Assemblée Nationale*, Paris, 1789-90, 75 vols. Vol. I, p. 48, June 13, 1789.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 55 *et seq.* Also Mège, *op. cit.*, vol. II, Letter No. XXI, p. 112.

representation possible, and partly to the accident of forming a single assembly out of the three estates which had hitherto met as separate units. One of the first acts of the new Assembly was to set up on July 1 bureaus like those of its predecessor.

The number of bureaus was set at thirty, made up of forty members each; the members were to be appointed by following the printed list of election districts (*baillages*) by alphabetical order, the first on the list, the thirty-first, the sixty-first, etc. entering the first bureau, the second, thirty-second, sixty-second, etc. entering the second bureau, and so on.[15]

It is of interest that a proposal to make up the bureaus of members of the three orders proportionately was rejected. "The method followed", wrote an enthusiastic deputy and journalist, Barère, shortly after, "cannot but produce the best effects. . . . Superficial observers will see, perhaps, in this method of forming the Bureaus only an ordinary manipulation or a mechanical process, but true statesmen will easily perceive the germ of the measures of reconstruction which are to substitute a great nation for provinces separated and foreign to one another, and replace feudal France by France free and enlightened." [16]

As to the functions of the bureaus it was proposed that they "shall have for their only aim to inform themselves and to hold consultations on the matters which may be presented to them, and which shall then be reported to the Constituent Assembly, to be discussed and decided there; that these Bureaus shall be changed and reorganized each month." [17] In other words, their function was to be one of exchange of views, not of final action, which was reserved to the Assembly as a whole. "It is to be noted", reports a newspaper of the time, "that . . ., to avoid the spirit of clique and of bureaucracy, there are to be made neither findings, nor the collection of votes, the Bureaus having for their object only the facilitation of information and the preparation of materials." [18]

[15] *Procès-verbal*, vol. I, pp. 20-21, July 1, 1789.

[16] *Point du Jour*, vol. III, p. 89, July 3, 1789 (Session of July 2).

[17] *Procès-verbal*, vol. I, pp. 20-21, July 1, 1789.

[18] *Point du Jour*, vol. III, p. 87, July 2, 1789 (Session of July 1).

A rule adopted on the next day assigned to the bureaus the additional duty of electing the president and secretaries of the Assembly: "A President shall be elected every two weeks. . . . Votes shall be taken in the thirty Bureaus, which shall always be called for the afternoon." [19] As will be seen later, of all the functions of the bureaus, this of collecting votes was the only one finally left to them.

Almost immediately occasion arose to make use of the original function of the bureaus, that of discussing matters referred to them. On the morning of July 3 the claims of the deputies of Santo Domingo for admission to the Constituent Assembly were referred to the bureaus to be discussed that afternoon and reported back on the next morning for vote in the general Assembly. The minutes of the Assembly do not show whether the reports were made by bureaus or not. Apparently the question was debated in the Assembly by individuals speaking for themselves only.[20] One newspaper reports, however, that "the discussion which took place Friday in the Bureaus resulted yesterday morning in several remarks by MM. . . ." (there follows a list of names).[21]

On July 4 there was brought before the Assembly a question of great importance, the proposal of the Committee on Food Supplies (*comité des subsistances*) regarding the free circulation of grains and other emergency measures. "There can be no doubt as to the views of the Constituent Assembly on this point", reported the *Point du Jour,* "but they are not yet sufficiently clarified. It has seemed best to refer the question to the Bureaus, for discussion on the various means proposed by the Committee." [22] The instructions given the bureaus were "to deliberate in conference form." [23] The whole of that Saturday evening and a large part of the following Monday morning were devoted to these discussions in the bureaus. Late Monday morning the debate in the Assembly was opened with

[19] *Procès-verbal,* vol. I, pp. 20-21, July 1, 1789.

[20] *Ibid.,* vol. I, pp. 1-2, July 3, 1789; p. 4, July 4, 1789.

[21] *Point du Jour,* vol. III, p. 106, July 5, 1789 (Session of July 4).

[22] *Ibid.,* vol. II, p. 110, July 5, 1789 (Session of July 4).

[23] *Procès-verbal,* vol. I, pp. 5-6, July 4, 1789.

reports by speakers "who made known the considerations presented in the various Bureaus."[24] Six bureaus thus reported, but either the method was too artificial, or these six reports had covered the field, for the discussion then became general and led to a vote without hearing from the other groups.[25]

Several of the reports merely gave in summary the points of view expressed in the bureaus regarding the motion prepared by the committee. Others presented complete new resolutions worked out in their discussions.[26] Duquesnoy, an apostle of action, was frankly disgusted by these "miserable reports". It looked, he wrote, "as if we were going to have to debate on thirty different propositions."[27] Camus, a great stickler for rules, remarked in regard to these resolutions "that they are contrary to the regulations, that in this form all discussion in the Constituent Assembly has been prevented, that in place of listening to and getting light from the opinions of all the members of the Assembly, one is reduced to hearing and to considering only the opinions of the Bureaus, that, finally, this new régime is contrary to the rules of procedure and divides the Assembly into thirty deliberating confederations."[28] The President replied "that the proposed resolutions are to be looked upon as motions only, and that no one is deprived of the right of speaking." However, either on account of Camus' criticism or because speakers felt themselves artificially limited, this seems to have been one of the last occasions on which the speeches were made chiefly in the name of the bureaus. In a few cases the bureaus did make joint reports, but in general they became opportunities for the exchange of views, after which each deputy spoke for himself.

When it came to the great work of drafting the Constitution, the Assembly considered carefully the rôle of the bureaus. A committeee had been appointed for drawing up a plan of procedure; on July 9 Mounier read its report. So clearly did he

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 3, July 6, 1789.

[25] *Point du Jour*, vol. III, p. 125, July 8, 1789 (Session of July 7).

[26] *Journal des États-Généraux*, vol. I, pp. 365-371, July 6, 1789.

[27] Duquesnoy, *Journal*, vol. I, p. 165, July 6, 1789.

[28] *Journal des États-Généraux*, vol. I, pp. 372-373, July 6, 1789.

express the philosophy of the bureaus, and a method of integrating their work with that of the Assembly as a whole, that he is worth quoting at some length:

> At this point the Committee must present its views on the direction of the labors of the Assembly relative to the Constitution. This subject is too important for us to fail to unite all the enlightenment possible. It would be infinitely dangerous to confide to a committee the task of drafting a plan for the Constitution, and to have it judged then in a few sessions; the fate of twenty-five millions of men must not thus be put to the risk of too hurried consideration. It would be more in accord with prudence to have all the articles of the Constitution discussed in all the Bureaus at once, to appoint a committee of correspondence which would meet at certain hours to compare the opinions which would appear to prevail in the various Bureaus, and which would try, by this means, to prepare a certain uniformity of principles. . . . But, in order that no one may think us inactive while we are pressing forward the most important matters, and in order to facilitate for all the members of the Assembly the means of enlightening one another, three general sessions would be held each week, in which would be discussed in public the subjects already discussed in the Bureaus. By this procedure we would combine several advantages, that of conforming to principles, and that of profiting from the enlightenment of those who are waiting for new instructions before voting in the Assembly.[29]

By "conforming to principles" Mounier meant the holding of debates in public, "under the eyes of the Nation" as the phrase was. "Those who are waiting for new instructions" were the deputies who had limited mandates and could not act until they received wider authority from their constituents. The committee's proposal thus outlined by Mounier underwent sharp criticism on the part of those who felt that a small committee or even a single individual would be able to do more efficiently the work of drafting a Constitution. A few days later Mounier was again forced to take the floor. "Shall there be established", he asked, "a Committee on the Constitution? But the other members will be inactive, we will get

[29] *Procès-verbal*, vol. I, pp. 11-12, July 9, 1789.

no benefit from their ideas. It would be easier to treat each article in the different Bureaus, whose opinions would be reported to a committee of correspondence, which would put them together for judgment by the Assembly." [30]

The final decision was for a Committee on the Constitution to be made up of eight members elected by ballot in proportion to the number of deputies of the three orders. The committee would present a draft of the Constitution, which would be discussed in the bureaus, and then debated in the general Assembly for final vote there.[31]

From time to time attempts were made to railroad decrees through the Assembly without reference to the bureaus. After the fall of the Bastille, and the spread of disturbances throughout the country, a proclamation was proposed by Lally-Tollendal authorizing the municipalities to organize militia for the restoration of order. To the deputies of the extreme left it appeared a dangerous step, but a more conservative group called for immediate and drastic action. "It is true", said their spokesman, Dupont de Nemours, "that wisdom requires careful consideration." "But", he added, "this is not an occasion for indulging in deep meditation, for referring to the Bureaus the examination of a matter which is not susceptible of such an examination. You are not divided in your views; I conjure you by all that you have of virtue, of courage, and of patriotism, let us decide at once." Fermond immediately moved "that the proposal be referred to the Bureaus to be discussed there after due reflection." "In public affairs", warned another speaker, "one must always be on guard against the charm of eloquence, and eloquence never exercises a more powerful sway than when it is equalled by the zeal and the purity of intentions of the speaker." [32] The motion was referred to the bureaus.

[30] *Point du Jour*, vol. III, p. 162, July 15, 1789 (Session of July 14).

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 163.

[32] *Archives parlementaires, première série, 1787-1799*, edited by Mavidal and Laurent (Paris, 1879, 1875-1913), 82 vols. in 83. Vol. VIII, pp. 252-255, July 20, 1789. For the reports of the bureaus, and the final fate of the motion see *Point du Jour*, vol. III, p. 278, July 25, 1789 (Session of July 23).

Occasionally, again, discussion in the bureaus was sufficient to kill an unpopular measure without further debate. A motion for setting up a committee to administer Paris and at the same time prepare a municipal constitution was brought up on July 24 and at once referred to the bureaus, which were given two hours to discuss it. The minutes of the Assembly show its fate upon its return: "The motion which had been referred this morning to the examination of the Bureaus having been discussed by them, the President asked if the author would like to support it by new arguments and offered him the floor. No one having presented himself, it was unanimously resolved to pass on to the order of the day." [33]

The bureaus did not always restrict their discussions to questions referred to them. When they reported back after the two-hour session just described, one bureau, the twenty-first, instead of reporting on the business given it, called for a general report by the Committee on the Constitution to be presented within three days, and for immediate reference to the bureaus of at least a part of the committee's findings.[34] Similarly, during the morning sessions of July 30, in spite of the fact that the subject assigned for discussion was the Declaration of Rights, the reporter for one bureau, Duport, raised the question of the need of organizing the provincial Estates without waiting for the Constitution to be finished.[35]

On July 28 an attempt was made to include in the work of the bureaus that of committees of investigation. During the discussion on the establishment of a committee on police and administration to investigate charges of treason, Guillaume opposed such a committee as not needed. Instead, he proposed to refer to each bureau, for report in turn, a certain number of accusations. His proposal found no support, but objection was not to the use of the bureaus, but to legislative interference in administration. "Legislators", said Dupont de Nemours, "should occupy themselves with law-making only,

[33] *Procès-verbal*, vol. II, pp. 11-12, July 24, 1789.

[34] *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 12, July 24, 1789.

[35] *Journal des États-Généraux*, vol. II, p. 271, July 30, 1789.

and should refuse to consider matters which they cannot affect by laws of general application." [36]

As was said at the beginning of this study, there is in the correspondence of the time little reference to the bureaus. There are, however, in the recently published intimate letters of the Marquis de Ferrières a few brief references to the work of these groups. A provincial noble, deputy to the Constituent Assembly, of a retiring disposition but not at all lacking in common sense, one who took no definite stand in the violent quarrels of the Revolution but tried to maintain a middle position, the Marquis de Ferrières found a place for himself in the bureaus. A July letter of his is of interest as an evaluation of the bureaus from one point of view. "A large part of the Nobility", he writes shortly after the three orders had joined to form the Constituent Assembly, "finds it difficult to unite heart and soul with the gentlemen of the Commons. As for me, I feel at home here, especially in the Bureaus, where I am at ease. I talk when I want to, without tiring myself out, and am listened to with much respect." [37] A few days later, after the fall of the Bastille, he writes to his sister:

> All is going well in the Assembly; the Orders are of one mind. The Commons have both judgment and intelligence; there are a few heads filled with exaltation, but where doesn't one find them? I am in the same Bureau with the Chevalier de Boufflers; he is kind-hearted, dependable, and clear-thinking. The members of the Commons have a good deal of respect for us, especially in the Bureaus. I speak there as much as I wish, and get a good hearing. As to the general Assembly, I don't open my mouth there, and I have my reasons.

Rather maliciously he adds, "Everybody is there; there are women who don't miss a meeting, who stay there five or six hours on end. I might say with Tacitus, 'They have neither husbands, nor children.'" [38]

[36] *Archives parlementaires*, vol. VIII, pp. 292-293, July 28, 1789.

[37] Marquis de Ferrières, *Correspondance inédite, (1789, 1790, 1791)*, pub. and ed. by Henri Carré (Colin, Paris, 1932). To Mme. de Ferrières, July 10, 1789, p. 84.

[38] *Ibid.*, To Mme. de Medel, July 24, 1789, p. 97.

A letter from the Marquis to his wife on the same day carries a similar report, though it includes a hint as to the lessening importance of the bureaus in the life of the Assembly:

> Rabreuil [his political correspondent at home] wants me to try to get myself into the newspapers. I? Oh, no! I am trying to get myself unknown. There are others enough who know how to draw public attention. In the unhappy circumstances in which we are, the respectable man, who loves the good, must tremble for fear his best intentions may produce an opposite result. I do not speak at all in the general Assembly, and in that I am like eleven hundred and ninety who don't say a word, some because they have nothing to say, others because they don't want to. In the Bureaus I express my opinions, I am listened to there; there one can do some good. But the Bureaus do nothing except discuss, so that they do not amount to much.[39]

Still, he is proud to have a place where he can get a hearing. There is a note of quiet satisfaction in a letter to his wife dated July 29: "Write to my father, and give him the news about me, for I am overwhelmed with things to do, now that we are working on the Constitution, being, as I am, the one in my Bureau who is most listened to, and with the duty of editing the articles." [40]

On July 29 a set of permanent rules of procedure was adopted by the Assembly, embodying the experience of its two months of existence. The bureaus, apparently, were still considered as having justified themselves, for important functions were given to them.[41] They retained practically unchanged their duties in connection with the election of the president and secretaries of the Assembly, and of members of committees. Their chief function, however, was that of considering motions. "A question relative to the Constitution or to legislation" was to be brought before the Assembly three times. It must first be read and motivated by its author, then seconded by two members and admitted to general debate. "The ques-

[39] *Ibid.*, To Mme. de Ferrières, July 24, 1789.

[40] *Ibid.*, To Mme. de Ferrières, July 29, 1789.

[41] *Procès-verbal*, vol. II, July 29, 1789.

tion shall then be examined", read the rule, "whether it shall be rejected or referred for discussion in the Bureaus; in the latter case, the day shall be set on which the question, after having been discussed in the Bureaus, shall be reported in the general Assembly for final consideration there" and decision by majority vote. The bureaus were to be reorganized each month by a complicated mathematical method "in such a way that the same delegates will no longer be together." The general Assembly would meet two mornings a week, the bureaus every evening.[42] A meeting of the general Assembly could also be called upon the request of five bureaus.

The first important question brought up for discussion under the new rules was the Declaration of Rights. On July 29 the President of the Assembly announced that bureau meetings would be held that evening and the next morning for the discussion of a number of drafts which had been placed in the hands of the deputies. After these meetings had been held, reports on the drafts were brought back to the Assembly. The result would seem to have been disappointing. "It would appear", says the *Journal des États-Généraux,* "that these separate assemblies are not fulfilling the function expected of them. In several Bureaus the discussion on the Declaration of Rights ended with very few observations. In others all the different drafts presented up to now were rejected."[43]

Out of these discussions there came, however, new drafts drawn up by the bureaus themselves. Significantly, the draft finally adopted by the Assembly for consideration in general session was that prepared by the sixth bureau. One member of the bureau at least was surprised at the honor given his group. In his astonishment at the simple means by which this result had been achieved, there is a note that is strangely famil-

[42] The rule as given in the *Procès-verbal* and the *Archives parlementaires* states that "the general Assembly shall meet every morning except Sunday." This is not the original rule, but is the rule as revised on August 1, for on that day it was decided that the geenral Assembly should not meet weekly, "as fixed in the rules just passed", but should meet daily except Sunday. As will be seen later, a discussion of great interest took place on this question of the relative importance of the general Assembly and of the bureaus.

[43] *Journal des États-Généraux*, vol. II, p. 270, July 30, 1789.

iar to anyone having to do with group processes. His bureau, he remarked, had felt that it was merely laying out a blank canvas.[44] "If this Bureau were still in existence", he is reported as having said, "it would be very much surprised to see the preference given this Declaration."[45]

The importance given to the bureaus by assigning them morning hours led a deputy to demand, on July 30, "that general Assemblies be held every day, and that meetings by Bureaus take place in the evenings." Another speaker supported him vigorously. "Agitation in favor of the nation's interests", he exclaimed, "must be made in the midst of public opinion, with all the provinces together, not in secret places and not with a feeble part of the nation." Members of the committee which had drawn up the rules of procedure defended the bureaus and insisted on their original plan of only two Assemblies a week.[46] A member of the Left, Bouche, objected that the meetings by bureaus had their inconveniences as well as advantages. "In small meetings", he said, "opinions are weakened by reciprocal differences; in large assemblies, on the contrary, hearts are strengthened, electrified. Names, ranks, distinctions amount to nothing; everyone in the general Assemblies will regard himself as a portion of the sovereign of which he is the representative."[47]

The editor of the *Journal des États-Généraux* comments from the point of view of a believer in action; his report is worth giving in full:

> To convince oneself of the usefulness of the Bureaus it is only necessary to recall the motive of their founding. In the first place it was not to make any definite decisions, it was to converse, to discuss on an intimate basis, and this secret discussion does not prevent general discussion in the Assembly. Their purpose, then, is to hold the Assembly in inactivity, to prevent its progress for five days in the week.

[44] *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 10, Aug. 20, 1789. Gaultier de Biauzat (Mège, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 248, Letter No. LXVI, Aug. 20, 1789) names Anson as the deputy in question.

[45] *Point du Jour*, vol. IV, p. 177, Aug. 21, 1789 (Session of Aug. 20).

[46] *Journal des États-Généraux*, vol. II, p. 278, July 30, 1789.

[47] *Archives parlementaires*, vol. VIII, p. 307, July 30, 1789.

> But are these conversations so useful? Why, in this case, have several deputies preferred to remain in their studies to prepare important matters for the general Assemblies?
>
> Can we not even say that they are dangerous, as M. Bara has suggested? These committees are the place where the military aristocrats, the clergy, officials of the judiciary develop their ideas artfully; they would have kept silence in an Assembly of twelve hundred persons. They speak boldly before thirty, half of whom encourage them. The good patriots in their midst find themselves isolated; the obligation of some politeness, the habit of an old respect regain their power in proportion as one draws near to a bishop or a noble. . . .[48]

The result was that on July 31 the rules were amended to require meetings daily except Sunday, general Assemblies in the morning, bureaus in the evening. The advocates of the steam-roller were gaining over those who believed in the values of group discussion.

On August 3 an important debate took place "on the form of discussions and public deliberations." In the course of the debate the interesting idea was brought up by Foucault, one of the most irreconcilable nobles, of establishing communications between the bureaus. Its effect, of course, would have been to lessen the importance of the general Assembly meetings, and to make of the bureaus more powerful organs. The suggestion found no support.[49]

Another suggestion made at this time was that debate in the Assembly be limited to five minutes per speaker and to ten speakers per motion. To this the Bishop of Langres objected:

> Already the discussions in the Bureaus have been much restricted by the suppression of the (morning) Bureau meetings. If the discussion so much needed to prepare the Constitution of the State is further limited to ten speakers or to a few minutes, freedom of expression would be attacked and nearly destroyed. . . . How indeed can the twelve hundred representatives charged with discussing and judging be reduced to ten

[48] *Journal des États-Généraux*, vol. II, p. 278, July 30, 1789.

[49] *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 329, Aug. 3, 1789.

> opinions or speeches, if it is true that reason is prepared and judgment ripened by the collision of thoughts? [50]

Limitation of debate was rejected.

On the famous night of August 4, in a delirious outburst of patriotic exaltation, real or affected, the deputies of the Clergy and the Nobility made a gift to the nation of many of their feudal privileges. To enact into law this feudal revolution, the Assembly plunged into a mass of constitutional legislation that filled morning and evening sessions and left very little time for the meetings of the bureaus. From August 19 to September 12 only seven motions appear to have been submitted to them for discussion, and from then on none at all during the rest of the Assembly's existence. The bureaus were not, however, dissolved. Until the Assembly dispersed on Sept. 30, 1791 they continued to exercise their function as units for the election of officers and committee members. It is more than probable that on such occasions they also held informal and unreported discussions. The regulations concerning the reference to them of proposed legislation were not repealed but simply fell into disuse. On December 1, 1789 Beauharnais proposed converting the bureaus into standing committees, to which would be assigned the functions of the committees already existing. "The motion", reports the *Journal des États-Généraux*, "had no success. It seems that the Assembly wishes to allow the Bureaus to continue to exist." [51]

One reason for the decline of the bureaus was no doubt the growth of the standing committees. By the night of August 4 eight standing committees had already been appointed. On August 12 three more were named, and on August 29 another. Eight more were set up before the end of the year, and fifteen during 1790.[52] The Constituent Assembly also found itself overburdened with administrative affairs. In the words of Mme. de Stäel, it passed in a little over two years more decrees

[50] *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 330, Aug. 3, 1789.

[51] *Ibid.*, vol. VI, p. 235, Dec. 1, 1789.

[52] J. Guiffrey, "Les comités des assemblées révolutionnaires", in *Révue historique*, vol. I, pp. 438-483.

than the English Parliament in fifty. For the leisurely processes of group discussion there was simply no time.

But the chief reason for the disappearance of bureau discussion was that suggested in the debates on procedure. Party government had sprung up, the majority wanted action, and disliked the non-partisan deliberations in the loosely organized groups. From the very beginning of the Estates-General, a closely knit clique made up around the Lameths, Duport and Barnave had been formed. During the early days of the Constituent Assembly the radical deputies from Brittany met regularly to agree upon measures. When the Assembly moved to Paris early in October, all the other liberal deputies met with them in what came to be known as the Jacobin Club. About the same time as the Jacobin Club was formed, "several members of the Assembly, who . . . were able to judge the advantages to be secured from a uniting of deputies to obtain preponderance in the Assembly, decided to use the same means to increase the influence of their party." The result was the Club of '89, led by Sieyès, Mirabeau and Lafayette.[53] Party leadership and the steam-roller made an end of discussion.

III

The Assembly that followed the Constituent Assembly was that known as the Legislative. It was the first to operate under the new Constitution. On June 21, 1791 the old Constituent Assembly had passed a law, which became part of the Constitution, defining the legislative procedure for the following Assemblies. Bureaus were provided, but only for the purpose of verification of the credentials of delegates.[54] Rules of procedure for the consideration of motions were given in detail, but the bureaus had no place in the scheme.[55]

In the Legislative Assembly, which met October 1, 1791, bureaus were accordingly set up for certifying to the election

[53] Theodore Lameth, *Mémoires*, publiés avec introduction et notes par E. Welvert (Paris, 1913), pp. 88, 112, 114.

[54] *Collection générale des lois*, Paris, 1792-95, 18 vols. in 23. Vol. IV, pp. 1186-1187, Arts. XXX–XXXII.

[55] *Ibid.*, vol. IV, pp. 1191 *et seq.*, Arts. LVI *et seq.*

of members, and were also used for the election of the president and secretaries. Apparently they also held some preliminary discussions, for on October 11 a deputy remarked that the articles of a draft of rules of procedure "have been debated for two weeks in the committees."[56] At this time the only committees were the election bureaus. In the definite set of rules of procedure adopted soon after, the function of the bureaus was limited to the election of officers of the Assembly and of members of its committees. During the discussion of the articles concerning the procedure on motions, the old article was read which gave to the Assembly the right to decide if the motion was to be referred to the bureaus, or discussed at once in the Assembly. A single deputy arose to support this article on the ground that "it prepares many minds." The article was dropped upon the remark that the Constitution provided a fixed procedure with no mention of bureaus.[57]

It is easy to find at least one reason why the bureaus were not revived. The rules used by the Constituent Assembly had contained no provision for definite committees; the new rules of the Legislative included a list of 23 standing committees.[58]

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[56] *Archives parlementaires*, vol. XXXIV, p. 167, Oct. 11, 1791.

[57] *Ibid.*, vol. XXXIV, p. 189, Oct. 12, 1791.

[58] *Ibid.*, vol. XXXIV, pp. 275 *et seq.*, Oct. 18, 1791.