



Transparency International Bangladesh
Parliament Watch
8th parliament, 11th -14th session¹

Executive Summary

The Parliament or the national assembly is extremely important in a Parliamentary system of government. In Bangladesh too, there is much interest and enthusiasm about the working of the Parliament or the Parliamentary system of government. Historically, the foundation of the Parliamentary system of politics in the Indian subcontinent was laid in Bengal. The first session of the first Parliament of British Bengal was held on 1st February, 1862. However, in spite of such an old tradition, our Parliamentary system has not yet developed to the desirable level. There may be various reasons behind the lack of development. The entire period of our existence as part of Pakistan was spent in our struggle for a democratic and Parliamentary system of government. Except for about four years, almost the whole of the first two decades of Bangladesh's journey as an independent nation was spent under martial law government, which impeded any progress towards democracy.

The election of the general assembly in 1991 saw the reestablishment of Parliamentary democracy, leading to the natural hope and aspiration of its people that this time a truly parliamentary democratic government would be firmly established in Bangladesh. But even though over a decade has passed since the reestablishment of democracy in this country, our people are yet to see the realization of their hopes and aspirations in the shape of a democratic government in this country. In a recent report of the Center for Policy Dialogue, it was seen that the National Parliament is seen as the most ineffective organization in the country.² Different information derived by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) in its research on Parliament watch also endorses this discouraging picture.³

The answerability of the executive department to the Parliament depends largely on the quality of representativeness of the people. In the Parliament it is the members who determine this aspect of representativeness. If these members cannot play their part successfully in the Parliament as the representative of their party, of their electorate, of the special group or class of people they represent or belong to, or the occupation or trade they represent in the Parliament, the people of the country can never hope for effective answerability from the government.

In order to identify what is necessary for establishing a culture of good governance, and the role of the Parliamentary activities in ascertaining this, *Transparency International Bangladesh* (TIB) has been regularly observing the activities (Parliament Watch) of the 8th National Assembly from its very first session. So far three reports have been published on the activities of the Parliament, from its first to the tenth sessions. This report is based on

¹ The report released on March 1, 2005 through Press Conference.

² Bhorer Kagoj, 23 September 2004

³ TIB, Parliament Watch (2002 & 2003)

observation of four sessions of the 8th national assembly, the 11th, 12th, 13th, and 14th sessions. The general aim of this research is to:

- hold up a complete picture of the activities of the Parliament to the people;
- to know how the government is ensuring its answerability in the Parliament;
- to determine what role the Bangladesh National Parliament taking in ensuring good governance.

Background Information

The 11th session of the 8th national assembly started on 18th January, 2004. There were 43 working days in this session, and apart from the two –day weekly holiday, there was no session held on a total of 42 days during this period. During the 43 days of the session, the basic session was conducted for 124 hours 43 minutes. This means that on average the session was conducted per day for 2 hours 38 minutes. The 12th session, also known as the budget session started on 9th June, (2004). There were 25 working days in this session, and the total working time was 85 hours 07 minutes. This means that each day the session ran for 3 hours 24 minutes on average. The 13th session had only 4 working days, where the total working time spent on these four days on work was 9 hours 1 minute. In actual fact this session was conducted simply to uphold the rules of the Parliament. The 14th session started on 28th October, 2004. There were 11 working days in this session, and the time spent therein was 26 hours 51 minutes. In total, the sessions conducted over the 366 days of 2004 was in actuality of only 83 days, where the total time spent in work was 285 hours 43 minutes.

Questions to the Prime Minister

In the 11th session, there were 10 Wednesdays included among the working days. Of these ten Wednesdays, a question answer session to and from the Prime Minister was conducted on 8 Wednesdays only. Over these 8 days, a total of 48 questions were considered for being asked to the Prime Minister directly, but only 26 questions could be asked directly, while the remaining 22 were placed at the table because of time constraint. Of the 26 questions that were asked directly, 24 were asked by the government party members. Against these 26 questions, 91 supplementary questions were asked. Of these 91, the government party members asked 73 while the members of the opposition party asked 18 questions.

In the 12th session, there were 6 Wednesdays included among the working days. Of these six Wednesdays, 3 were used for conducting question answer sessions of the Prime Minister. Over these three days, 36 questions had been specified for being put to the Prime Minister, but only 9 questions were asked directly while the remaining 27 questions were placed to the table. Of the 9 questions asked directly, the government party members asked eight. Against these 8 questions, there were a total of 24 supplementary questions asked. Of these 24 questions, 17 were asked by the government party members while the opposition party members asked 7 questions.

In the 13th session, there was only one Wednesday included as a working day. On this day there was a session of question answer to the Prime Minister conducted. In the 14th session, a total of two Wednesdays were included among the working days. In this session of 11 days, a total of 6 questions had been considered to be asked of the Prime Minister. However, only 3 questions were asked directly, while 3 other questions were put to the table for the lack of time. Of the three questions asked directly, 2 were asked by the government party members. Against these three main questions, a total of eight supplementary questions were asked. Of these eight questions, members of the government party asked 6, while the members of the opposition party asked 2 questions. The principal opposition party boycotted the question answer sessions of the Prime Minister during all four sessions.

Questions to the Ministers

Although a total of 2266 questions had been received, addressed to the ministers during the 11th session, only 55.6% of these questions, (1260) questions were taken up for being answered by the ministers. The number of main questions raised during this sessions (apart

from the questions placed to the table) was 224, 65.6% of which was asked by the members of the government party. 990 supplementary questions were asked against these 224 main questions. In this session, each member of the government party took an average of 11.0 seconds to ask each main question, while the members of the main opposition party took an average of 16.3 seconds, and members of other opposition parties took 13.7 seconds. To answer each main question, a minister took an average of 46.1 second. On the other hand, to ask each supplementary question, members of the government party took an average of 47.4 seconds, members of the main opposition party took 72.8 seconds, while members of other opposition parties took 57.0 seconds. To answer each supplementary question, each minister took an average of a little over a minute.

During the 4 working days of the 13th session, direct question answer sessions were held on three days. This means that during 75% of the 4 working days, members had the opportunity to question the ministers directly. Besides the questions presented to the table, there were 14 main questions raised at this session, 78.6% of which were asked by the members of the government party. Members of the main opposition party did not get any chance to ask any of the main questions. Members of the other opposition parties could ask 3 questions. There were 82 supplementary questions raised against the 24 main questions. During the 11 working days of the 14th session, there were 10 days available for (direct) question answer session. This means that members got the chance to ask questions directly to the ministers on 90.9% of the days in this session. Besides the questions presented to the table, there were 55 questions raised during this session, 54.5% of which were asked by the members of the government party. Members of the main opposition party did not get any opportunity to ask any of the main questions.

During the 11th session, 7 of the supplementary questions asked to the ministers were not supplementary. 6 of these questions were from members of the government party while only one was from members of the other opposition parties. During the 12th session, there were 6 such questions, of which 3 were asked by members of the main opposition party and two were from members of the government party. In the 14th session, there were 4 such questions, of which two were from members of the government party while 2 were from the main opposition party.

Questions answer session in the British Parliament

An analysis of the question answer sessions in the national assembly shows that it is never possible to ask more than 5/6 star marked questions in a day. This is sometimes due to the length of time taken by members to ask the questions, and also sometimes for the length of time taken by the ministers to answer the question. Besides these, the time assigned for question answer sessions is not long enough. But the picture we see in the British Parliament is very different. Each day there are 20-25 star marked questions that are raised and answered there. As an example one can see that on the 25th of January, 2005, 22 star marked questions were asked to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. Similarly, on 24th January, 2005, there were 24 star marked questions asked to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

Passed Government Bills

In the 11th session a total of 14 government bills were passed. Of these 14 bills, 5 were new bills. The other nine bills were raised in the assembly as amended bills. The bills passed during this session have been shown in table 5.1. There were other bills raised in the assembly session beside these 14 bills, but those were not passed. Of the bills that were passed, the bill for the constitution (14th amendment) bill 2004 took the longest time (3 hours 13 minutes). On the other hand, the shortest time spent was on the arbitration issue (amendment) bill 2004, which required only 13 minutes. Although there was a total of 16 bills raised in 12 sessions, only 9 government bills were passed. Among these 9 bills there were 4 new bills. The other five bills were raised as amendments. The bills passed in this session are shown in table 5.1. Among the bills passed, the finance bill 2004 took the longest time (1 hr 34 mins). On the other hand the shortest time was taken in passing specification bill 2004 (only 3 minutes). In the 13th session a total of 2 government bills were raised, but neither was passed. In the 14th session a total of 14 bills were raised, but 7 government bills were

passed. Of these 7 bills, 4 were new bills. The remaining 5 were raised in the assembly as amendment bills.

Objection to and Amendments of Passing Bills

It was seen from the TIB's observation of the assembly that in case of the bills that are being passed in the assembly, objections, amendments or a scrutiny of public opinion about the issues was done in very few cases only. Whatever little objection or amendment does come, mainly come from members of the opposition. These objections raised by the opposition parties are quickly quashed by voice votes. As a result, in 2004, no amendment of the opposition parties was recorded to any of the bills passed.

Amendment to Bills Passed in the British Parliament

In the British Parliament, a lot of objections are raised to the passing of government bills. There are also a lot of amendments made on the basis of to these objections. If one considers the bills that were raised during 2002-2003 in the House of Commons, it can be seen that a total of 5661 amendments were raised, and 1708 amendments were made and recorded. The government itself was defeated when it tried to oppose the amendment in 45 cases.

Unscheduled Discussion

In the 11th session of the 8th national assembly, a total of 7 hours 52 minutes 59 seconds were spent in point of order and discussion of unscheduled issues, which accounts for 6.3% of the total work time during the 11th session. During the 12th session, a total of 10 hours 08 minutes were spent on this, which accounts for 11.9% of the total work time in this session. In the 13th session, the time spent in discussing unscheduled issues was 23 minutes, which accounts for 4.2% of the total time spent working in this session. On the other hand, during the 14th session, the total time spent on discussion of unscheduled issues was 2 hours 36 minutes, which accounts for 9.4% of the total time spent on this session. The total time spent on the 4 sessions of 2004 was 245 hours 43 minutes 44 seconds of which 8.5% of the time was spent on points of order or discussion on unscheduled subjects.

From the 11th to 14th sessions of the 8th National Assembly, the members of each particular party indulged in loud vocal appreciation of their own party leaders a total of 626 times. The highest number of such eulogizing was done by members of the government party, which constituted 65% of the total occasions of eulogizing. The highest number of occasions of such party appreciation took place in the 11th session during the discussion of the presidential speech. Apart from this, in the discussion of the budget session during the 12th session a significantly high number of instances of 130 times of party eulogizing took place. From the 11th to the 14th session of the 8th national assembly, members criticized the opposition leader and engaged in own party praise 503 times. The highest number of criticism was done by the members of the government party, which accounted for 67.1% of the total number of incidents. During the 11th to 14th sessions of the 8th national assembly, the members engaged in irrelevant discussions 436 times. Again, it is the members of the government who engaged in such discussion the highest number of times, which accounted for 65.4% of the total. Such discussion of unrelated issues occurred the most during discussions of the budget.

Adjournment Motion

In the 11th session of the 8th general assembly, a total of 77 adjourned proposals were collected. During the 12th, 13th, and 14th sessions a total of 131, 167, and 121 of such notices were collected respectively. There are several instances in the history of Bangladesh national Assembly where proposals have been adjourned and then have been raised for discussion on them. But those were all done before the reintroduction of the system of Parliamentary constitution in 1991. After the Liberation of Bangladesh, there were frequent discussions on adjourned proposals. Even though the importance of adjourned proposals has increased in importance, the fact that they have never been discussed after the reintroduction of the Parliamentary system of government seems to show that their weightage and importance has declined.

Meetings of Parliamentary Standing Committees on Different Ministries

In rule 248 of the working rules it has been said "... each standing committee will meet at least once a month...". From its inception to the 13th session, which means up to 16th September, 2004 committees that have had more than 10 meetings in total are only 4 in number. Among them, the standing committee for the Ministry of Law has had a total of 31 meetings. On the other hand, Ministries that have had five meetings of standing committees are also 4 in number. If one calculates the meetings held in 2004 up to the third session only, then the committees that have had more than 10 meetings in total numbers as only 1 (Law Ministry). Ministries that have had no meetings at all during the period of January to August of 2004 are 8 in number, while Ministries that have had only 1 meeting are 6 in number. Only 1 ministry could hold a meeting every month. This only goes to show that the committees are not being able to hold meetings according to the rules laid down.

If one analyses the observations made of the meetings of committees in 2004 (up to 16 September) one can see that most committees could not make much contribution towards the work of investigating or looking into the corruption or irregularities in the workings of the ministry under their jurisdiction.

Absence of Members due to Party Decision

In the 11th to the 14th sessions of 2004, the principle opposition party, Awami League was absent on 47 working days out of a total of 83 working days. Members of the Jatiyo Party (Ershad) were absent on 6 days out of the total of 83 working days because of their party decision to abstain from attending the session.

Overall Attendance of Members in the Parliament

If one analyses the attendance of members at the 11th to 14th sessions of 2004 (for whatever extent of time they do attend the sessions), one can see that on an average, 5% of the members do not attend the Parliament at all. Members who attend an average of 76-100% of the days are more in number from among the main opposition party. About 45% of the members of the government party are generally present at different sessions of the Parliament for (51-75) % of the working days.

Time wasted for Quorum

During the 11th session of the 8th national assembly, a total of 30 hours 51 minutes were wasted out of the 4 working days for the lack of quorum. This means that on an average, a little more than 43 minutes were wasted every day. During the 12th session a total of 19 hours 15 minutes were wasted out of the 25 working days. This means that each day a total of 46.2 minutes were wasted on average. During the 13th session 01 hour 33 minutes were wasted out of the 4 working days for the lack of quorum. This means that the extent of time wasted each day was 23.25 minutes. Then again, in the 14th session the time wasted for not having quorum at the session was a total of 4 hours 02 minutes, or an average of 22 minutes per day.

Financial Loss for lack of Quorum

To run the House while the Parliament convenes it costs Tk 15,000⁴ per minute. At this rate, the money wasted for the lack of quorum during the 11th session was Tk 2 crore 77lakh 65 thousand. The money wasted in this way during the 12th session was tk 1 crore 73 lakh 25 thousand, and during the 13th session the money wasted at this rate amounted to Tk 13 lakh 95 thousand,. During the 14th and last session the amount of money wasted for lack of quorum was Tk36 lakh 30 thousand. From the table 11.3 it can be seen that the total money wasted from the 11th to the 14th session for the lack of quorum was tk 5 crore 1 lakh 15 thousand, or \$ 0.83 million (US) (1 dollar = tk 61). This money that has been wasted:

⁴ Prothom Alo, 14 July 2001

- the amount for the micro development expenditure of the anti-corruption commission during the year 2004-2005 has been determined at Tk 5 crore ⁵. The money wasted for the lack of quorum in the Parliamentary session was almost the same amount as this allocation.
- The money allocated for the micro development of the national assembly in the budget for the year 2004-2005 was tk 43,77,88,000⁶. The money wasted for the lack of quorum in the Parliamentary sessions was almost one eighth of this allocation.

Cost of Party Praise, Criticism of the Opposition Party and Irrelevant Discussions

A member can utter a maximum of 160 words in the national assembly per minute. This means that the cost of each word uttered is Tk 100⁷. During the eighth National Assembly of 2004, party praise, criticism of the opposition party, and irrelevant discussions were done 1565 times. To speak so many times, if the speaker used only one word each time, it cost tk 1 lakh 56 thousand 500 at the rate deduced above.

Cost of Adjourned Assembly Sessions

According to the regulations, a member will receive a daily allowance starting three days before the session starts, to three days after the session ends, at the rate of tk 200 per day, plus tk 50 for travel. They get the same allowance even when the session is adjourned.

The 11th session started on the 18th of January and ended on 17th May, 2004. If one adds six days to the days it started and concluded (3+3) the total number of days stands at 132. There were 43 working days in this session. Even if one considers that there are two days' weekend (although the government weekend is of one day only), the total number of days for the 43 days of session stands at 67 days. But as the session had been adjourned, the members had to be paid for an extra 65 days as well. Thus, an excess of tk 39 lakh had to be paid to the 300 members as daily allowance. In this way, for the 65 excess days each members had to be paid tk 50 per day, so the 300 members had to be paid an excess of tk 9 lakh 75 thousand for transport for this duration. In the same way, the money spent for paying the overtime bills of the officers and staff at different levels of the Parliament was tk 1 lakh 29 thousand 710. The excess money spent for adjournment during this session was tk 50 lakh 4 thousand 710. Since the Parliament was not adjourned during the 12th and 13th sessions, money was not wasted on such purposes during these sessions. But during the 14th session- which started on 28th October and ended on 02nd December- the total number of days paid for, including weekends and an extra 6 days in a session of 11 working days, amounted to 23 days. As the session was adjourned, the people concerned had to be paid an allowance or overtime for 17 days, which expenditure amounted to an extra tk 24 lakh 25 thousand 50. This means that due to reasons of adjournment during the two sessions, an extra tk 74 lakh 29 thousand 760 had to be spent.

The Subject matter of the Issues Raised in the Assembly

From the statistics received it can be seen that one fifth (22.1%) of the questions to the Prime Minister, questions to the Ministers, and the issues that have been raised in relation to human importance (rule 71) are related to issues of the development or reform of infrastructure. Alleviation of poverty (17.3%), trade and commerce (15.4%, education (12.8%) and health (12.7%) etc are the subjects that received importance while eradication of terrorism and corruption received very little importance. Women and children's rights, and agriculture which is the driving force of the nation did not occupy much of the discussion (table 15.1).

An analysis of the 30 bills that were passed during the 4 sessions shows that bills related to the decentralization of the local government (13.3%) and the reform of justice and court

⁵ Ministry of Finance, Government of the Republic of Bangladesh, Supplementary Financial Statement 2004 -05

⁶ Ministry of Finance, Government of the Republic of Bangladesh, Annual Financial Statement 2004 -05

⁷ Prothom Alo, 14th July 2001

(13.3%) have been passed comparatively in greater number. The number of bills passed relating to the resolution of arbitration and disputes (10.0%), organizational reform (10.0%), and finance and commerce (10.0%) are also worth mentioning. However, bills passed relating to eradication of corruption (3.3%) and women and children's rights(3.3%) were very low in number.

Unscheduled discussion that took place in the National Assembly centred on Points of Order, were mostly about the political situation. Principally, the main Opposition Party raised issues of the political situation in the country, the frequent attacks on their party members, the oppression and lawsuits that were brought against them, etc., and would start discussion on these issues. Besides the political issues, the adjourned proposals that they had not been allowed to discuss were also periodically raised for such unscheduled discussions by the Opposition party.

The number of female members including the technocrat Ministers is a total of 7. The number of male members including the technocrat Ministers is 279. This means that for 42.4 male members there is one female member. During the question answer discussion sessions it is seen that 76.3 male members are participating against one female member. For Rule 71 this ratio stands at 87.5: 1, in the case of promulgation of laws it is 100: 0, in the budget discussions it is 78:1, in the discussions of the Presidential address it is 72.4: 1 while in unscheduled discussions it is 87.4: 1.

Comparison with Parliaments of other Countries

The role of the leader of the Parliament is very important for making the assembly work effectively and successfully. Although the leader of the party with the largest number of seats is seen as the leader of the Parliament, he/she has to be aware of his responsibilities to safeguard of the members of the government as well as the opposition parties. The leader has to advise all members and has to create harmony between the work of all members. The leader has to take the initiative in all ceremonial functions, and when the Parliament is in any complex situation, the leader has to give the best possible advice to all⁸ The leader of the Parliament acts as the principal figure in the introduction of any governmental work program or in conducting the Parliament according to governmental plans. The leader has to decide the date of sessions, for devising a session-based agenda, to give the final decision on the ultimate form of any government bills raised during the sessions, give advice to the Speaker on the rules and system of conducting the Parliamentary sessions, and the Parliamentary leader has to play a very important role in various other tasks.

In Bangladesh, whoever is the Prime Minister is also the Leader of the Parliament. The same person is also the government chief, and also the leader of the 'Parliamentary party' that is also the party in power with majority seats. How one person can conduct so many duties at a time is a questions that can be appropriately asked here. As all the power is invested and centered in the hands of one particular person, the members of the national assembly cannot speak independently about the country or its citizens, and their welfare: they have to look constantly towards their all-powerful leader for guidance in everything.

To emerge from such a situation, the responsibilities of the Prime Minister and that of the Leader of the Assembly should be given to two different people. In Britain and Canada, a senior member of the Parliament is seen to be performing the responsibilities of the Leader of the House. When the Leader of the House carries out the responsibilities invested in person as the leader of the House, that person can be more scrupulously attentive to the responsibilities of the position.

In 2004, the National Assembly session was conducted over 83 days. The working days in Britain over the same period was 198. In India, the Parliament started its session after the election, from the middle of the year and ran three sessions up to December, where there

⁸ Jalal Firoze (2003), Parliament ki bhabey kaaj korey, Bangladesher Obhiggota, (How the Parliament Works, The Bangladeshi Experience), New Age Publications, Dhaka

were 47 working days. For half a year, the same period, the days worked by the Parliaments in Canada and Australia were 56 and 58 respectively.

An analysis of the various working days of the National Assembly of Bangladesh shows that during the 11th session, each working day ran for only 2.9 hours, each working day during the 12th session ran for 3.4 hours, during the 13th session each day ran for 2.3 hours, and the 14th session ran for 2.4 hours. An analysis of the last session of the British Parliament shows that each day the work was conducted for 7 hours. On 25th January, 2005 the British Parliamentary session started at 11.30 and ended at 7.00 in the evening. This Parliament started on 24th January 2005, at 2.30p.m., and ended at 10.30.

In 2004, of the 83 working days of the Bangladesh National Assembly, the main opposition party participated only on 36 days. In Britain, Canada, Australia and Indian Parliament there is no instance of the opposition party boycotting the Parliament sessions.

In Bangladesh, of the 83 working days of the Parliament in 2004, it could sit in time on only three days. On the other hand, in Britain, Canada, Australia and India there is never such a thing happening as a quorum problem. In these countries the Parliament's session timings are intimated to the members well ahead of time, and also posted on the website simultaneously. The work of the Parliament starts every day at the right time.

In Bangladesh, a large part of the session time is wasted in discussions of unscheduled issues. Under the name of Point of Order, such discussions can continue for hours at a time. However, after the discussion is over, the speaker very often comments that these issues could not be passed as points of order. Within the 47 working days of Indian Parliament in 2004, only three points of order were raised and all three were passed. In Britain, Canada, and Australia there were no unscheduled discussions during 2004.

Recommendations

1. Suggestions for addressing the quorum-crisis

The problem of quorum has attained alarming proportions nowadays. The House is opened at a specific time before the work of the session is to start. But the work cannot start on time unless sixty members arrive. So while the government money is being wasted on one hand, people too are losing their feelings of 'respect' for the honoured Parliament and the Parliamentary members they have elected in the democracy. In order to resolve this problem the following recommendations may be considered.

- a. Legal:** Appropriate legal measures need to be considered. There has to be some relationship between the allowances paid to the Parliamentary members, and their attending the sessions. New law needs to be promulgated requiring that members who do not attend a minimum number of days in a particular session are would not be entitled allowances.
- b. Negative and/or positive incentives:** Members who attend regularly, or more than a certain number (percentage) of days could be recognized in some way, while appropriate measures should apply to those failing to attend less than a given percentage of the working time. For instance, list of members with best and worst record of attendance could be made public.
- c. Prime Minister/Leader of the Parliament's Regular Attendance:** It has been observed that on the day that the Prime Minister is present in the Parliament, the level of attendance, particularly of the ruling party members is higher than on other days. If the Prime Minister attends the sessions regularly, the problem of quorum can be expected to reduce to some extent.
- d. Setting up of a Parliamentary Committee:** A committee can be set up to look into the issue of the attendance of the Parliamentary members. For instance, members willing to abstain from attending have to notify the said committee through letters explaining reasons for their absence. The

committee will take the suitable steps necessary about the absence. It may be mentioned that such a committee exists in India.

2. Participation of the Opposition Party

Members of the government party as well as those of the opposition party have all been elected through the votes of the people. Just as the members elected through the people's vote have the right to rule the country, so do the members elected into the opposition party through the people's votes have the responsibility to identify and point out the weaknesses of the government's action, and oppose it with constructive criticism. Actually, it is the responsibility of the opposition party to keep a look out on how far the people's expectations are being fulfilled, being reflected in the government's work, and to inform the people and the government about this. However, this criticism by the opposition will be done in a restrained, refined and positive manner. Barker has commented on this as, '... opposition cannot be utterly negative, entirely critical or totally obstructive since in democracy, the function it performs is fundamentally positive'⁹ In the Parliamentary form of government, the leader of the opposition is considered as the leader of the shadow government. Inside and outside the Parliament, their work will be worthy of being noticed, indicating clearly the outlines of the manner in which they will conduct their affairs if they go to the helm of government. The Leader of the Opposition will give directions for the proper, speedy and efficient conducting of the activities and duties of the Parliament, through discussions with the Leader of the Parliament and the Chief Whip when necessary. The opposition leader will frequently meet other leaders of the Parliament to exchange views in order to develop a basis for an understanding between the government and the opposition. The opposition's principle responsibility is to force the government to be transparent and accountable in its activities. In the Parliamentary system of government, the opposition has to be able to take every necessary step to make the government clear and accountable in all its actions. If the opposition forces the government party to answer questions, respond to notices and participate in all discussions about the government work and activities, the government will be forced to discuss the issues and dispel all secrecy, bringing in clarity and accountability to a great extent. 'The task of the Opposition in Parliament is to minimize the secrecy in Government.'¹⁰

A special characteristic of the opposition party in Bangladesh is: an excessive level of walkouts and boycotting of the Parliament. The boycotting of the Parliament by the main Opposition party of the 5th Assembly, the Awami League, the main Opposition Party of the 7th Assembly, the BNP, and the main Opposition Party of the 8th Assembly, again Awami League, have done it so protractedly and for so long that it is greatly obstructing the development of our Parliamentary culture. Their frequent excuse of 'not being allowed to speak in the Parliament' or that 'the opposition party is being bypassed' form the only bases for their boycott, which is not only holding back the development of our Parliamentary form of government but is also raising serious questions in people's minds as to whether the Parliamentary form of government is likely to last much longer in this country. The following recommendations may be considered in order to overcome this situation.

a. Acceptance of the Proposals and Questions of the Opposition Party: A practice should be established of the acceptance of different notices given by the Opposition Party about discussion of adjourned proposals, proposal for general discussion, of the discussion on topics seen as important for the people's welfare that are urgent. If necessary, the rules of business may be amended for accommodating these.

b. The Opposition Day: The Parliament generally works on five days a week basis. According to rules, one day out of the week is supposed to be earmarked for non-government members of the assembly, but in actual fact this is never followed

⁹ Al Masud Hasanuzzaman (1998), Role of Opposition in Bangladesh Politics, UPL, Dhaka

¹⁰ Griffith and Ryle, opt.cited, p 338

through. A rule may be introduced so that one out of every 15 days can be set aside for the Opposition Party members. All the issues raised by the Opposition will be discussed on this day, and the Opposition Parties too will be encouraged to join and attend the sessions of the Parliament.

c. Parliamentary Responsibility: The opposition parties must be able to demonstrate that they are fully committed to their responsibility as legislators and attending the sessions of the Parliament is a key evidence of this commitment.

3. Recommendations about the Committees

The Committees are the heart and lifeblood of the Parliament. If the committees can work well, the Parliamentary system in the country will become powerful. To do this one could consider the following recommendations.

- a. **Time of Setting up Committees:** Although rule 246 of Rules of Business of the Bangladesh National Assembly says 'The Permanent Committees relating to each Ministry will be set up as soon as possible after a new Parliament is set up', the reality is very different. If one analyses the time taken for setting up the committees for each of the assemblies ever since our Independence, one can see that only during the 4th National Assembly was it possible to set up the committees at the proper time. Since the committees are the driving force of the Parliament, we feel that the old pattern should be abolished and a new rule must be set up holding that all the Parliamentary committees must be set up during the very first session of each new Assembly.
- b. **Power of the Committees.** The Parliamentary Committees have extensive power to promulgate laws, establish good governance, investigate irregularities of the relevant ministries, and over financial matters. The committees can prepare reports about issues and recommend steps for their implementation. However, they do not have any power to put their plans into action. There needs to be some directions about what the committees are do if their plans are not implemented.
- c. **President of the Committee:** The laws do not contain any explanation about who the President of the committee should be. The practice in the past had been for the Minister of the concerned ministry to be made the president. Since the 7th National Assembly, the minister has not been the president of the committee but some other parliamentary member has been made the president. However, it has never been the practice to appoint members of the Opposition to such posts. But such a practice is in vogue in many countries of the world including India. We feel that the president of 50% of the committees can be made from among the members of the government party while the other 50% can be appointed proportionately from all the other parties. If necessary, a law can be promulgated for this purpose.
- d. **Infrastructure:** According to the rules the Parliamentary secretariat is supposed to organize the sub-committee's secretariat, and invest an officer with the responsibilities of the secretary of the committee. But if the committees are to become more skilful and effective, develop further, they require additional manpower, computers, financial allocation in the budget etc.
- e. **Number of Meetings:** Regulation no 248 of the work procedure says" ... each standing committee will meet at least once a month..." . From the information received for this research, although there are some committees that have met morethan once a month, there are others who have not met at all over several months. Then there are committees that are meeting after every 2/3 months. This situation has to be resolved, and it must be ensured that each committee meets at least twice a month. The law may be amended for such purpose.
- f. **Opinion of Specialists:** The committees in Britain and Canada even now ask for concerned expert's opinion in relation to issues at work. We do not have such a practice in our country. The committees can consider the prospect of asking for such advice on national issues.

4. Management of the Parliament

To make the Parliament generally effective we feel that the following steps should be taken.

- a. **Increase Role of the Backbenchers:** Members who do not give any leadership in the Parliament are called backbenchers. These people spend a lot of money, toil, and sometimes even shed blood to be elected to the Parliament, and after all that if they are not given a chance to participate in discussions in the Assembly, or are not given an opportunity to be part of the activities of the Parliament, their becoming members becomes meaningless. This is why the role of backbenchers must be extended, rules must be set up allowing them to take part in various activities of the government.
- b. **Appointment of a Deputy Leader:** A deputy leader requires to be appointed immediately.
- c. **Non-government Members Day:** An analysis of the 83 working days of 2004 shows that although it has been set down that every Thursday of the working days should be set aside and conducted as a day for the non government members, in reality that has never been the case: other work is conducted on these days. This reduces the scope for non- government members and backbenchers to participate in the parliament's activities. Since Thursdays had been earmarked as the day for non- government members, it should be observed as such and not used for other purposes.
- d. **Increase Working Days and Time:** The observation has shown that the work of the Parliament runs for fewer days and less time than it does in other countries. It does not allow sufficient time for the discussion of the proposals and the questions given by the members, or placed at the table. So work time and working days should be increased in order to resolve this problem.
- e. **Increase time for question/ answers:** The question answer session is the best means for ensuring the answerability of the government to the Parliament. A large number of questions are submitted, and cannot be answered or put to the table only due to the time constraint. So, the time for this activity of the Parliament should be increased. The duration of the time set aside for the Prime Minister's question answers should be increased from half hour to one hour.
- f. **Reduce wastage:** The enormous financial wastage due to lack of quorum, for adjournment of the sessions, and irrelevant discussions are neither anticipated nor acceptable to the people of the country from an esteemed institution like the Parliament. This needs to be stopped.

Epilogue

The Parliament is a powerful institution in a modern democratic government. Political scientists think that no parliament can work totally successfully in any country of the world. Even the parliament of Britain that has such a long tradition, is faced with various challenges from time to time. The Parliaments of India, Canada and Australia have had numerous successes but they are not without their problems. Although we have a history of 150 years, the history of the journey of our Parliamentary government after the Independence is not a very long one. Neither are the problems that we are having in our National Assembly too difficult to resolve. We feel that if there is good political will, the problems stated above can be solved effectively and the efficiency of the national Parliament can be increased manifold.