

Removing Desks from the Hall of the House

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~~Mr Miles made the following Report; The Special Committee to whom was referred the Resolution of the House of {December} 23rd directing them “to consider and report upon the expediency of removing the present desks from the Hall and making such a rearrangement of the seats of members as will bring them to-gether into a smaller space as to ensure greater facility of hearing and more orderly debate,” beg leave to report, That they have given the matter due consideration and have come unanimously to the conclusion that the removal of the desks and bringing members to-gether into a more compact area is not only expedient and desirable but would, if effected, be in itself a most important step towards many legislative reforms. So far as the desks are concerned your Committee feel, so of them from their own personal experience, that they have become a nuisance. The chief argument for retaining them is the strongest ~~argument~~ reason for their abolition—viz the convenient facility which they afford members for writing letters and franking documents. It would certainly seem as if the very first duty of a Representative in Congress was not simply to attend bodily in his place but to listen to, understand and, when occasion requires it, participate in the discussions and proceedings of the body of which he is a member. This is a truth so selfevident that its enunciation is almost superfluous. But we ask ~~any~~ any honourable member candidly to say whether he has found it practicable, in his own experience, while ~~absorbed~~ absorbed in writing letters at his desk to attend to what is going on in the House? If it be urged that there are times when even the most conscientious member may feel that he is not called upon to listen ~~to what is~~ attentively—as during the reading of prosy, manuscript speeches or the ~~bellowing~~ bellowing forth ~~delivery~~ delivery of ad captandum “Buncombe” ones—really not addressed to the House nor intended to influence its actions—still we may reply that the very resource of the desks upon which so many fall back, as a refuge against dullness or empty sound—contributes to perpetuate the infliction upon the country of evils from which we manage partially to protect ourselves. There can be little doubt that if there were no desks in the Hall a very decided improvement would take place in the Character of Congressional speeches. No one whose misfortune it may have been to be compelled for any purpose to wade through the interminable columns of the Daily Globe can doubt that this is “a consummation devoutly to be wished” But it is not merely because the desks withdraw the attention of members from the business legitimately before them—~~that~~ which it is their sworn and paid duty to attend to—that their removal is desirable.~~

The space occupied by the present arrangement of ~~seats~~ seats ~~chairs and desks~~ chairs and desks is so large that is always difficult and sometimes impossible for those at a distance from the Clerk or from the member speaking hear distinctly. This arises not from any acoustic defect in the Hall but simply from its immense size. The result is that Resolutions have to be reported or remarks repeated so often that not only much valuable time is lose but a degree of

noise and confusion ensues very unfavourable to calm and deliberate discussion. It may not be inappropriate in this connexion to remark that the English House of Commons numbering 654 members holds its sessions in a Hall very much smaller than our own which has to accommodate but 236 members. Neither Lords nor Commons however in England have desks and the arrangement of their seats in consequence is so compact as to bring them into a comparatively concentrated area.

Your Committee have conferred freely with {Captain} Meigs, the able and accomplished Superintendent of the Capitol Extension, who very kindly at their instance prepared a diagram of the floor of the House to assist them in the examination. He also ~~and~~ ~~went through with them various measurements, both on the drawing and in the Hall itself, with a view to ascertain into how much smaller space members might be comfortably and conveniently seated.~~ As the result of these experiments we are authorized to say that {Captain} Meigs considers it perfectly practicable to make such an arrangement of seats as will bring members near enough to-gether to see & hear each other distinctly. This is surely a great desideratum and ought in itself to reconcile members to the loss of the purely selfish enjoyment of their desks. When honourable gentlemen can make themselves heard without screaming themselves hoarse, and hope to catch the Speaker's eye and obtain the floor without scrambling for it with the noise and vociferation of schools boys scrambling for an apple—when the distinct reading of a resolution or report once or twice from the Clerk's desk will put the entire House in possession of it—we may then expect to have quiet, decorous and orderly debate—real, legitimate discussions of the subject matter pending before us, instead of interminable harangues “de quolibet ente,” addressed in point of fact to distant constituencies and not even intended for the ear of the House.

To meet the objection which may be urged against the removal of the desks that they are necessary at times for the purpose of writing resolutions or supporting books of reference etc we would say that in the rearrangement of the Hall, on the plan contemplated, ample facilities would be afforded for these purposes. A table placed in the open space in from the Speaker's seat would be in itself be sufficient for both these objects and would be a convenient spot from which to read extracts from authorities cited in debate. ~~quotations~~ Large tables might also be placed in the corners of the Hall and supplied with writing materials. Besides, with our present convenient retiring rooms, so immediately adjacent and opening upon our own private lobby, then would be abundant opportunity for writing afforded those who might at any particular time not consider their presence necessary in the House. It would require but a few seconds—certainly not half a minute—to summon a member from either these rooms in case of a vote or the coming up of any matter in which he might feel an interest.

In conclusion your Committee have to say that they verily believe that small and comparatively insignificant as the reform which they advocate may now seem ~~they~~ ~~yet~~ should the House adopt it the advantages which will flow from it will very soon be so numerous and apparent as not only to impress Congress but the country at large. It will then be a matter of surprise to all that a plan so simple, natural and obvious should not have been sooner adopted.

Your Committee recommend the passage of the following Resolution.

Resolved that the Superintendent of the Capitol Extension be directed after the adjournment of the present session of Congress to remove the desks from the Hall of the House and to make such a rearrangement of the seats of members as will bring them together into the smallest convenient space.

{William} Porcher Miles

{John} Letcher

{George} H. Pendleton

{Israel} Washburn Jr.

{Edward} Joy Morris

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Report No. 178

desks & seats of Members

{February} 15, 1859

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Mr. Miles from the Select Committee in regard to a removal of the desks, & rearrangement of the seats, of Members, proposes to submit the following Report.