IF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS WERE ABOLISHED.

THE *Nineteenth Century* for December contains an article by Sidney Low bearing the rather sensational title, 'If the House of Commons Were Abolished?' It has become a fad with some of the English magazines to adopt that style of startling titles. The object, doubtless, is to attract attention to the subject matter of the discussion. It often happens, however, that the phrase used as a headline is quite misleading. Certainly that may be said of the title to Mr Low's article. The subject of his discussion is not what would happen if the House of Commons were abolished, but the remarkable changes that have occurred in the political powers of the popular branch of the British Parliament through the development of the Cabinet system of Government in Great Britain.'

Mr Low insists that the popular conception of the powers of the House of Commons and even the theory of those powers, as set forth in the text-books and by writers on the English Constitution, are utterly at variance with the existing facts. Any average person of fair intelligence, he says, would be likely to say that the House of Commons is the real—if not the nominal—sovereign body of the British empire; that it makes the laws, selects the Ministers and exercises plenary control over the Executive in the conduct of imperial and local affairs; that as representatives of the people, the House of Commons is the supreme custodian and steward of the nation's purse. But, according to Mr Low, these powers have to a very great extent actually passed from the House of Commons in the process of political evolution and are now exercised first by the Cabinet, second by the caucus, and then in a lesser degree by the press, by public opinion and by London society.

But to return to Mr Low's analysis of the changes which have occurred in the actual powers in the House of Commons. Theoretically the paramount function of Parliament, the 'conspicuous attribute,' and the one that strikes the popular imagination, is the law-making power. 'But can anyone really affirm,' asks Mr Low, 'that the members of the House of Commons do now make the laws of these realms?' To so assert would argue comprehensive ignorance of the conditions under which public affairs are conducted in Great Britain. Except about six or eight members who sit on the front bench to the right of the Speaker's chair—the Cabinet—the members of the House of Commons are limited in their law-making function to the privilege of criticising, objecting, or suggesting. Legislation in Parliament in all matters of a public nature is conducted, according to Mr Low, entirely by the Cabinet. Proposed Parliamentary measures are debated and discussed in the Commons, but such debate and discussion has and can have no effect, under the Cabinet system, to change or alter measures proposed and sustained by Ministerial Government. Mr Low sustains this view by a quotation from a recent speech by Lord Salisbury: 'There is an enormous change,' said the ex-Premier, 'in the House of Commons, 'and that evolution is going on still. Discussion of a measure is possible in the Cabinet, but for an effective or useful purpose it is rapidly becoming an impossibility in the House of Commons.

Mr Low points out that a member of Parliament under the present system of party government under the domination of the political oligarchy known as the Ministry or Cabinet is no longer in any true sense a legislator; he has in reality no power to make new laws or to prevent them from being made, or to amend old ones. If he is in the Opposition he is powerless of course; if he is a member of the party in power he is not consulted by the Ministers and he knows nothing of the measures to be enacted until he sees them in print. Summing the whole matter up in this connection Mr Low concludes that the House of Commons is not a legislating chamber at all; that it is merely a machine for discussing the legislative projects of Ministers.

In the course of his discussion Mr Low also points out that in the development of party government the relation of the members of Parliament towards their constituents has greatly changed. Formerly the representative exercised a certain degree of independence, but under the modern system he is not permitted to vote against his party under any circumstances whatever; if he does so he is looked upon and treated as a traitor. As a result of this tyranny of party control the theory and practice of parliamentary government has entirely changed in another respect. Formerly a Ministry might be voted out of office. Practically that cannot occur now. A Ministry once in office cannot be ousted. 'The modern practice is that the Cabinet is not turned out of office by Parliament, whatever it does.'

This leads to another striking proposition in the article. The popular notion is that the House of Commons does in fact as well as in theory control the executive power of Great Britain. So far from this being so the Executive controls the House of Commons. Of course, in one sense this is an extravagant and misleading assertion. The power actually inheres in the House of Commons under the British Constitution to change the Executive by a vote of want of confidence, by refusing to grant supplies or by the deliberate defeat of a measure proposed by the Minister. No Cabinet would dare to continue in power with such an adverse vote in the Commons. But what Mr Low says is that the Commons never assume the power to control the Executive under the present oligarchic system. The Ministry remain in office sustained by their party until they choose to dissolve Parliament or until Parliament expires by the limitation of seven years. The Ministry may be overthrown by the electors on an appeal to the country, but they are never overthrown by the House of Commons, where they have gone into office with a working majority.

What has been said in regard to the law-making power of the Commons and of the supposed power of the Commons to control the Executive is applicable to the matter of finances and supplies. The House of Commons, as a body under the present Cabinet system, has practically nothing to say about the budget or the annual supplies. Everything is controlled by the Cabinet. It is impossible for a private member to secure an amendment in the House to any measure proposed by the Ministry relating to what we in America would term the appropriations or internal revenue taxation. Frequently the Ministry is driven to change its policy in regard to the supplies by outside pressure got up in the newspapers, but never by means of votes or speeches in Parliament. This may be, and doubtless is, extravagant, but it serves to emphasize the changes that have occurred in the British Constitution through untoward development of the Cabinet system in connection with party Government.

Perhaps the most striking assertion in the article is the statement that the House of Commons does not, as is popularly supposed, designate or select the Ministers—the body known as the Cabinet. The fact is that the members of the Cabinet are selected by the leader, who is designated not by a vote of the House, but by public opinion, to assume the office of Prime Minister. In the present case of Lord Rosebery, for instance, the Premier is not a member of the Commons and his selection was made without any consultation with the Commons. Mr Low ascribes great influence in this regard to what he terms London society, which has more influence, as he insists, in Cabinet-making, than the lower house of Parliament. Of course the Prime Minister when once selected, has his advisers to aid him.