SICKNESS AND POLITICIANS

If the average person was asked why Governments fail, they would probably say because they are defeated at elections or because they are defeated over some major measure in the Parliament, implying that a former supporter of the Government had changed his opinion about that support. These are probably the classic reasons why Governments fail.

But the last week in the Parliament was one that made the Government Whips exceedingly nervous for an entirely different reason. 'Flu, bronchitis, broken noses and glandular fever - which some people reported as mumps, seemed suddenly to attack the Government members and there was a period of 10 minutes when the Government did not have a majority.

If a Government lost its majority for any reason over a really vital measure, the Government could be defeated. It may be interesting therefore to have a look at the various reasons which could bring this about.

About two weeks ago, Gordon Freeth, Minister for the Interior, son of a West Australian Bishop, ex-Service heavyweight boxing champion, also an oarsman of international reputation, and Billy Snedden from the metropolitan area of Melbourne, had a game of squash. It may be said that Billy Snedden didn't have a chance because he is only a barrister and an energetic and virile member of the Liberal Party in Victoria. In any case, he came out of the game of squash with a severely broken nose. He managed to survive to stand with the Government's majority for the remainder of the week but then, early in the following week he had to go into hospital to have a minor operation on his nose and his absence, amongst others, led to the Government being without a majority for a short time.

Jim Killen, a most personable and enthusiastic Liberal from Queensland (you may already have heard of him because he went across to England to try and persuade Great Britain not to join the Common Market, an activity with which I did not agree) has been absent the whole week because of severe 'flu which turned into bronchial pneumonia. Dudley Erwin, Liberal member for Ballarat, who has just become married to an American whom he met when he was abroad at the United Nations last year, had a severe attack of gland trouble and there were various reports that this was mumps. Members of Parliament on both sides of the House who had not previously had mumps became, to some degree, uneasy about this suggestion. This resulted in various proposals being put forward to the Speaker that would make sure that such members remained in quarantine.

Be that as it may, on Tuesday night, the Government thought it had a majority and so Mr. Erwin was not in the Chamber and we lost a snap vote on the adjournment.

The next day, Dudley Erwin was a good deal better but he was rugged up with towels wrapped round his neck while he was sitting in the Chamber. Indirectly, because of him, the Parliament had an early night. The time came for the adjournment about 10.30 in the evening and Eddie Ward and one or two Labour members rose in their places which indicated that they wanted to speak. There is generally an adjournment debate every Wednesday and Thursday after Government business is concluded and during these adjournment debates any member can rise and speak on any
subject that he wishes to. However, just as Eddie Ward was going to rise in his place to beat the Government over the head in his usual fashion, Dudley Erwin went over and sat alongside him on the Labour front bench. Eddie Ward was so frightened of catching mumps - though Dudley Erwin did not have them - he immediately went out of the Chamber and the adjournment debate collapsed.

In addition to this list, Hughie Leslie from the Country Party in West Australia and John England from the Country Party in New South Wales were also sick, and Athol Townley, who had an operation about a month ago, is still not back on deck.

This is a pretty hefty list of casualties, but the Government would still not have lost the division that it did lose if another member, Jeff Bate, had not been busy on the telephone when the bells rang. He was down in his office on the telephone when the division bells went and Jeff, in these circumstances, just didn't hear the bells and so this, perhaps, more than anything else led to the Opposition winning a division last Tuesday night.

However, these misfortunes have not only hit the Liberal and Country Parties. Arthur Calwell is still in hospital. Reg. Pollard has not been present this week because his wife is ill. Rec. Polvor from Gellibrand is seriously ill in Melbourne, I understand, with 'flu or bronchitis, and Mr. Collard, Labour Member for Kalgoorlie, was away on Tuesday until Wednesday afternoon.

This list of casualties hitting several members of Parliament in one week can give you an idea of the variety of causes that could lead to a Government's downfall if the members happened to be away on a vital vote. The vote that the Government did lose was an unimportant one. The Government business for the day had been successfully concluded and the Minister in charge of the House moved that the House adjourn for the day - or night might be more appropriate since it was very late. Our Government Whips thought they had the numbers but, for the various reasons I have mentioned and, in particular, because of the absence of Jeff Bate, which was the one thing the Whips did not know about, we lost the division. This meant that the adjournment debate went on a bit longer than it otherwise might.

When the Government lost this division, as you can imagine, there were some vigorous searches made in the corridors and offices of Parliament House to find where the missing member was. He was found and the Whips threatened to chain him into his seat in the Parliament for the future.

On Wednesday afternoon, having been 12 hours in hospital, Billy Snedden came back to Canberra and again increased the Government's majority. Dudley Erwin's glandular fever seemed to get much better quite quickly and he was able to do without the towels and bandages around his neck, but Hughie Leslie kept to his bed and Jim Killen did not come to Canberra for the whole week. However, because of illness on the Labour side, even with these absentees the Government's majority was quite secure and sound. No more members forgot to hear the bells when they were on the telephone.