

THE PRESENTATION OF POLITICS:

THE PLACE OF PARTY PUBLICITY, BROADCASTING AND  
FILM IN BRITISH POLITICS, 1918-1939.

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## CHAPTER SIX

Broadcasting and Politics: The Whip-Hand, 1929-1931.

"The Government has no desire to interfere with BBC programmes. But it cannot be disinterested regarding the political use made by it of its opportunities. Just as it supplies Jazz rubbish (not even good Jazz) for popular consumption so, if it is not careful with its politics, it will have to supply Jazz politics .... The only way the BBC can protect itself is by planning its political broadcasting in close co-operation with the Parties."

Ramsay MacDonald, 9 August 1930.

"the three party caucuses ... are firmly determined that no-one outside the ranks of strict officialdom shall be allowed to address the listeners. Broadcast politics are under a censorship as severe as anything in Russia."

J.M. Kenworthy, in Modern Wireless,  
April 1931.

Between 1929 and 1931 the BBC struggled for a greater degree of political affairs independence whilst the parties, ever more suspicious, sought further to impose their will upon it. These two contrary forces both saw as one solution an attempt formally to define their relationship, and efforts to do so took up much time and effort in 1930. The crisis and election of 1931, however, destroyed any hope of achieving general agreement and confirmed the Labour Party in its view of the BBC as being anything but the politically impartial body that was claimed. Reith's vision of the BBC's political destiny, dependent as it was not only upon faultless programme intent (if not content), but also upon an unblemished public image, was thus seriously threatened. But if the practical attainment of the ideal suffered setbacks, recognition of that goal and declarations as to its practicability continued unabated.

The Labour victory in May 1929 had little effect upon BBC policy or programmes. Indeed, once MacDonald had made his broadcast upon becoming Prime Minister, the BBC found itself without any political pressure on it at all. The new Labour Government was too busy trying to get to grips with national issues to take the positive interest in broadcasting that its pre-election eagerness had indicated it might. The Conservative Party was carrying out a post mortem in which internal rather than external causes were to be sought as scapegoats. Within the BBC the tensions between Reith, Clarendon and Ethel Snowden were coming to a head in the second half of 1929, and may in part account for the lack of any real progress or initiative from the Corporation over the summer. Between June and September there was remarkably little political affairs broadcasting, apart from Bartlett, Barry and the news bulletins, and for much of August even Bartlett and Barry took a rest. In his first talk after the election Gerald Barry had commented upon the newsreel film of the new Cabinet and upon MacDonald's broadcast:

The new Government seems to be making use of modern inventions to expound and popularise their policy .... Possibly the difficult business of governing a country may become more human and



understandable if the faces and voices of those who do the job are brought into direct and personal contact with the man and woman in the street.<sup>1</sup>

In the first months of the Labour Government, however, there was little evidence of any interest in using the wireless. Only one ministerial talk was broadcast.<sup>2</sup> The BBC itself continued to broadcast speeches from outside functions, but only one such occasion was considered politically controversial, when J.H.Thomas and Winston Churchill<sup>3</sup> both spoke at the Royal Institute of International Affairs. In July H.G.Wells made his first broadcast, an undeniably forthright criticism of the League of Nations, which Vernon Bartlett felt compelled to answer in a broadcast which was hardly impartial.

This lull, however, was not to last. The Listener had suggested that Wells' talk 'may lead to a series of frank surveys of the great problems of the day by the men and women most qualified to deal with them', and the autumn saw the first 'Points of View' symposium, already mentioned.<sup>4</sup> In November the BBC started what was to become one of its longest running series of programmes, 'The Week In Westminster'. At the time this was the most directly political programme being regularly broadcast, consisting as it did of a rotation of MPs from all parties, weekly describing proceedings in parliament. It started experimentally as a morning programme for women given by women MPs, although male MPs were soon brought in also. Occasionally it was broadcast to an afternoon and evening audience. Because it ran so smoothly and received very few complaints<sup>5</sup> its significance in political broadcasting tends to be forgotten.

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1. The Listener, 19 June 1929, 859.
  2. G.M. Gillett on British Overseas Trade, on 24 July 1929.
  3. This was on 8 July 1929.
  4. The Listener, 17 July 1929, 84.
  5. It is not mentioned, for example, in A.Briggs' History of Broadcasting, vol.II.



Yet it was fulfilling precisely the function which Reith saw for political broadcasting, providing balanced statements of political fact and opinion, informing the public on political events and views, yet without passing comment on them and without arousing party anger against the BBC.

Also in September Labour's use of its broadcasting opportunities rose sharply as its representatives at the League of Nations accepted a BBC offer to broadcast weekly. Conservative complaints at this received a prompt reminder that the BBC had offered identical facilities in 1927 and 1928 but that these had been turned down. To compound what the Conservatives saw as a sudden upturn in Labour broadcast propaganda, Philip Snowden broadcast on the Hague Settlement following his return from the negotiations. Although the talk was regarded as ministerial Snowden certainly took the opportunity to emphasise his own role in the settlement. Conservative complaints at the 'Points of View' series and at the increased number of ministerial broadcasts provided the starting point for a host of usually groundless fears. The Morning Post in particular attacked the BBC and in early November the Post Office warned Reith that a Conservative private member's motion on political broadcasting seemed possible.<sup>6</sup> In preparation for this Reith set out a comprehensive memorandum which he also sent to Davidson, listing the various forms of political affairs broadcasting and demonstrating very effectively<sup>7</sup> the BBC's scrupulous determination to be impartial. In the event only a parliamentary question was put, asking whether it was now the BBC's policy<sup>8</sup> to allow unlimited facilities for ministers to broadcast.

The determination of some Conservatives to see bias was only marginally less impressive than their ignorance of the facts.

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6. BBC, PPBG, W.T. Leech (GPO) to Reith, 28 October 1929.
  7. BBC, PPBG, Memorandum on Political Broadcasting<sup>7</sup> by Reith, 30 October 1929.
  8. H.C. Debates, vol.231:col.857, Sir J. Power, 5 November 1929.

Following the first 'Week in Westminster' broadcast given by Labour MP Mary Agnes Hamilton, a Conservative member expressed his 'considerable disquietude' that parliamentary proceedings should 'week by week' be disclosed by a Labour member.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps it was with such prejudice in mind that The Listener commented:

Most people, whilst they support freedom of speech and controversy in theory, dislike very heartily being brought up against it in practice.... On the contrary we unconsciously train ourselves to be prejudiced, because this saves us a lot of mental effort.<sup>10</sup>

Within Conservative Central Office there was certainly a growing conviction of bias. In January 1930 Gower had his attention drawn to a forthcoming series on the meaning of international co-operation; he was informed that of the six speakers two were 'Socialist', two Liberal, one independent (Lord Cecil) and only one Conservative. Gower suggested that an informal word between Baldwin and Clarendon might be more effective than a formal protest.<sup>11</sup> Feeling was already very high, for a letter was drafted (but not sent) from Davidson to Clarendon stating that 'the limit is very nearly reached with regard to the political partisanship of the BBC'. It complained of the following week's talks programme which included Wilson Harris, 'the most partisan Liberal journalist', the Labour President of the Board of Trade, William Graham (on Britain's export trade), Sir Herbert Samuel and Vernon Bartlett, 'about whose grotesque performances I have already had reason to complain'. It ended with an appeal

for fair play and equal opportunity for all points of view, and that you should not be merely a sausage machine for the

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9. H.C. Debates, vol. 232:col. 1323, Mr. J.R. Remer, 26 November 1929.
10. The Listener, 6 November 1929, 608.
11. COO, COO4/1/23, W.J. Willis to Gower, 15 January 1930; Gower to Davidson 16 January 1930.



Socialists with an occasional sausage for the Liberals thrown out.<sup>12</sup>

The BBC announcement of a non-controversial series on the work of the trade unions, arranged in conjunction with the TUC, led Gower to suggest that the Conservative Ashridge Education Committee should demand from the BBC time to give similar non-controversial broadcasts. Rather more sensibly John Buchan, the Committee's chairman, pointed out that there was no real Conservative equivalent to the trade unions. He also put his finger on a perfectly valid problem for the Conservative Party and one which was to recur in the 1950s:

the real trouble is that [the BBC] get far more Radicals and Socialists to give talks than Conservatives. When I have talked to Reith about this, his answer has always been that he is willing to broadcast talks by Conservatives if we will provide people who will interest the public, in the same way as Bernard Shaw, Wells etc. interest it. So you see the situation is rather a difficult one.<sup>13</sup>

Neither Gower nor Davidson was satisfied and in May the latter asked Lawrence Storr, the secretary of the Shadow Cabinet, to investigate whether or not a case could be made proving that the BBC exercised 'a hostile discrimination against the Conservative point of view' in its ordinary talks and commentaries.<sup>14</sup> Storr's report could not have pleased him, for he concluded that there was no proof of conscious political bias. On the other hand he agreed that

many of the popular lectures and addresses broadcast by the BBC

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12. OOO, OOO4/1/23, draft letter for Davidson to Clarendon, 24 January 1930.
  13. OOO, OOO4/1/23, J. Buchan to L. Storr, 4 February 1930. For a similar problem in the 1950s see G. Wyndham Goldie, Facing the Nation, London 1977, 85-91.
  14. OOO, OOO4/1/23, Storr to Davidson, 9 May 1930.



are to some extent coloured with a Socialistic or Radical tinge - I have particularly in mind the weekly or occasional addresses by men like Vernon Bartlett and Wilson Harris; but it is quite possible that these men are selected for the purpose of broadcasting, not on account of their political views, which are incidental, but because of their popularity, knowledge of their subject, and attractiveness as lecturers.<sup>15</sup>

Like Buchan he found a prime cause of the trouble in the Party itself, whose members, he felt, did not have the instinct or desire for personal advertisement that existed amongst Labour supporters. Storr therefore urged that Conservative supporters with a good microphone voice, preferably not MPs, should be encouraged to offer their services to the BBC. Faced with such a depressing conclusion and on the verge of being forced to resign as Party Chairman, Davidson could do nothing.

Reith was confident that in most cases complaint was unjustified. However he was always most anxious, when there was evidence of error, that the parties should be aware that it was not deliberate and that action had been taken. Thus when the late evening news bulletin omitted reference to a major speech of Baldwin's, because it had been given good coverage in the earlier news, he immediately telephoned Sir Geoffrey Fry, Baldwin's Private Secretary, in order to say

he thought it absolutely wrong that the speech should not have been referred to in the second news bulletin, and to tell [Baldwin] that he had himself rebuked the announcer for the omission.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly in February 1931, in response to a Morning Post accusation that a speech by Baldwin had been printed in The Listener next to an

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15. Ibid.

16. OOO, OOO4/1/23, memo by G. Fry, 7 February 1930, see also The Times, 7 February 1930, for letter of complaint at this omission.

advertisement for a book expounding contradictory views, Reith again rang Fry, admitted that the juxtaposition was an unfortunate accident and said that the person responsible might be sacked as a result. Such an excuse did not satisfy Patrick Gower, who told Fry:

though Sir John Reith might not be personally responsible and might not deliberately have given any Socialistic bias to the policy of the BBC, nonetheless there had been a series of "accidents" all of which were in favour of Labour and none of them in favour of Conservative views.<sup>17</sup>

Reith was therefore very conscious of just how touchy the Conservatives were while they were in opposition. Yet this did not prevent the BBC from attempting to deal with such sensitive topics as Empire Free Trade, India and Russia during this period. At the same time it must be said that Reith's inherent respect for the authority of the government of the day undoubtedly did make it more difficult to cover these issues and limited what could be done, as did his anxiety to obtain party acceptance of and agreement to political affairs broadcasting. It was not surprising that the talks production staff, who did not have Reith's responsibilities, should have chafed under a seemingly over cautious Board. Roger Eckersley later described this growing tension within the BBC:

[Talks] Policy was - to a greater extent than in anything else, dictated from above - but it did fall to me to read through carefully any talks which dealt with controversial subjects, to have regular meetings with the Director of Talks, and to speak to Talks Schedules and attempt to know as much about the speakers as possible, at Control Board. I confess this side of the work was most difficult - on top was a Board that believed in moderation - below a band of eager enthusiasts who wished to reform the world and who were highly critical of being checked.<sup>18</sup>

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17. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f186-8, memo by Fry, 28 February 1931. See also the Morning Post, 26 and 27 February 1931, and 2 March 1931.
18. R.H. Eckersley, The BBC and All That, London 1946, 156.



Nevertheless it would be wrong to describe Reith as either innately timid or excessively cautious, even though his Board might sometimes be so. Like most astute tacticians he judged according to circumstance when he should hold back and when he might push forward. If producers were frustrated by evidence of caution, political pressure and protest was greatest when caution was put to one side.

Late in 1929 Lord Beaverbrook requested that he be allowed to talk about his personal brainchild, Empire Free Trade. In view of public interest in the issue the BBC Board decided in January 1930 to agree to this proposal, on the strict understanding that any such talk would not mention party issues or personalities, would be vetted in advance and would be answered by some suitable critic. Beaverbrook accepted these conditions and the BBC sought for a suitable opponent, either a well known economist or a popular critic. Both Keynes and Sir Josiah Stamp were already due to broadcast the previous month, in a discussion on unemployment, and it was felt desirable to avoid a socialist economist lest his opposition to Beaverbrook be construed as anti-Imperial. The BBC was equally anxious not to have a Conservative as this would have narrowed the issue to a party one and turned it potentially into an attack and defence of Baldwin, against whom Beaverbrook was currently conducting his infamous vendetta. Eventually Lloyd George was chosen and, because it was stressed that this was not a party political but an economic issue, it was felt to be neither necessary nor desirable to consult the parties on the matter.<sup>19</sup>

Conservative Central Office was first apprised of the broadcast by a chance conversation between Hilda Matheson and Marjorie Maxse, the Party's Chief Women's Officer. Patrick Gower immediately expressed his surprise at not having been consulted, and Baldwin felt strongly enough about the issue to say that he felt the BBC should invite him to broadcast. Reith's argument that this would make it a party issue and that Labour would then also be eligible to broadcast

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19. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f126, Reith to Fry, 17 February 1930.



was rejected by Gower. The issue, he stated, was simply one between Baldwin, the Conservative Party and Beaverbrook, and concerned no one else. To Davidson Gower was enthusiastic about the 'first rate opportunity .... that was too great to miss' that this would give Baldwin to explain his policy:

I hope that you will be able to persuade Mr. Baldwin to seize this great opportunity ... more especially as the Conservative Party is more vitally concerned than any other.<sup>20</sup>

Reith, however, was not given the opportunity to react to this proposal, as the next day Beaverbrook announced the formation of the United Empire Party. Given that the issue was now undoubtedly party political, the Conservatives immediately changed their tactics and demanded that the whole discussion be cancelled. To enter into debate with Beaverbrook, it was recognised, would be to give his new party credibility and status. When, however, it was pointed out by the BBC that Beaverbrook would gain even more publicity from being cancelled than from broadcasting, Baldwin agreed to a full party discussion, with the three parties each broadcasting within a fortnight of Beaverbrook.<sup>21</sup>

In this rather accidental way a party political series was arranged without reference to either the Government or Labour Party headquarters, and the first that MacDonal heard of it was a letter from Reith to tell him of the arrangements. The Prime Minister was understandably 'amazed' and protested angrily at a series about which he had not been consulted and which was hardly in Labour's interests. He informed Reith that he would regard the scheme as 'a breach of both the understanding and agreement between the Government in Office and the British Broadcasting Corporation'.<sup>22</sup> Reith was aware that

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20. Baldwin papers, Bal.65.f127, Gower to Davidson, 17 February 1930.

21. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f138-141, Fry to Reith, 24 and 28 February 1930.

22. BBC, PPBPPB, C.P. Duff (No.10) to Reith, 4 March 1930.

the series had not been arranged with the degree of consultation that there should have been, and he was also aware of how dangerous it was for the BBC to ignore the vehemently stated opinion of the Prime Minister, for whose authority in any case he had a genuine respect. His reply therefore reflected this regard for MacDonald's wishes and a concern to retain the approval of the main party leaders:

I understand that the Prime Minister feels we should have submitted the letter to him earlier, and I am very sorry indeed that this was not done. I asked in my letter if he approved, and, as I said on the telephone, if he did not, I would recommend cancellation. Shall I do this? I am sure the Prime Minister would look to the Corporation to carry the responsibility for cancellation without associating the Government with it.<sup>23</sup>

Although this certainly seems excessively sycophantic it may be queried whether Reith could safely or sensibly have defied the Prime Minister's wishes. As for the last sentence, Reith had even less desire than MacDonald to have it publicly known that the BBC was so exposed and susceptible to government pressure.

The controversy had provided the impetus for the parties once again to discuss the whole question of political broadcasting, and the BBC Board agreed to let the Beaverbrook discussion drop for the time being, on hearing that inter-party discussions were to take place.<sup>24</sup> It was too hopeful of agreement; a proposal that the party ratio should be tied to the votes cast at the last election was quickly rejected by the Conservatives, and Winston Churchill proposed allocating broadcasts in proportion to the number of MPs of each party in the Commons. As this would have provided the Liberals with only about one speech in ten it was clearly unacceptable to them, and the discussions soon lapsed in stalemate.<sup>25</sup>

23. BBC, PPBPPB, Reith to Duff, 5 March 1930.

24. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f148, Reith to Fry, 13 March 1930.

25. Daily News, 18 March 1930; The Times, 6 June 1930, 10e.



Following this apparent impasse Hilda Matheson abandoned the Beaverbrook discussion as a lost cause; determined nevertheless to have some sort of debate of Free Trade, which she regarded as the major economic issue of the moment, she proposed an economic debate on the subject, avoiding party lines. The Board, however, were more determined to have Beaverbrook than she had anticipated.<sup>26</sup> Having accepted that the early negotiations had not been adequate and having back tracked as a result, Reith was now ready to take a harder line if the parties could not agree amongst themselves. Under increasing pressure from Beaverbrook, he tried to impose deadlines for a decision on the parties, telling the three whips in June that he would like a series on Free Trade to start in July.<sup>27</sup> The ponderous machinery of inter-party discussion was not to be hurried; the matter was referred from whips to leaders and from leaders to whips, and in mid-July the BBC was informed that a new inter-party committee was to be established to consider the question.<sup>28</sup> Reith, however, was tired of delay. He was not prepared to watch the parties procrastinate further and so determined to press ahead regardless. The party rota for this discussion, he informed the whips, would be that which had pertained before the 1929 dissolution, namely two government speakers to one Liberal and one Conservative. Lord Beaverbrook would broadcast first and the discussion series would be concluded with talks by three impartial economic experts, the whole to take place during the autumn.<sup>29</sup>

The parties did not regard this proposal as a statement of fact, but as a suggestion for discussion. They were confident that nothing could or would be done without their approval. Indeed it is clear that leaders of both major parties erroneously believed there was a

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26. BBC, TDD, Matheson to R. Eckersley and Reith, 4 April 1930; note by Reith, 9 April 1930.

27. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f147, Reith to Whips, 25 June 1930.

28. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f152-156, Baldwin to MacDonald, 4 July 1930; MacDonald to Baldwin, 9 July 1930; note by Fry, 18 July 1930.

29. BBC, PPBG, Reith to Whips, 21 July 1930.



formal agreement forbidding political broadcasting without party consent. Tom Kennedy, the Government Chief Whip, informed Reith that no comment could be made on his proposals until after the inter-party conference the following week, which he asked him to attend. Both the Empire Free Trade discussion and political broadcasting generally would be considered.

The difficulties which the Corporation had encountered since 1928 in arranging party political broadcasting, and the production staff's reactions to the programme value of such broadcasts, had by now wrought an interesting change in the BBC's attitude towards them. Never particularly endeared to the party system, by 1930 Reith's political experience had made him positively antipathetic towards it. By contrast the success of impartial, explanatory talks and the ease with which they could be arranged, had made a considerable impression. Already in January Reith had told Churchill that

We are as anxious as anyone to develop the expression of original and provocative points of view, but we believe that in some ways this can be done more<sup>30</sup> effectively outside the confines of stereotyped party rota.

Now these views were crystallised in an unsigned memorandum setting out the BBC's viewpoint in preparation for the inter-party conference. Explanatory talks and non-party symposia were described as being amongst the most popular and important features of BBC programmes and ones which would be developed further. With regard to party broadcasts, however,

the BBC take the view that the public demand for the discussion of current political controversies at the microphone by the political leaders is during normal times a limited one. In view of the wide range of entertainment, information and education with which the BBC now supply their listeners, party political

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30. BBC, CWSC, Reith to Churchill, 20 January 1930.

interests must inevitably compete for space with a large number of equally important interests.<sup>31</sup>

It was recognised that at General Elections, or when some particular national issue which resolved itself on party lines was currently of importance, then party debates were appropriate:

but so complex have political questions today become, that the public is anxious to hear, not only the views of the party leaders, but perhaps even more the views of experts, commercial, financial, economic, legal, international etc., who can speak with the authority of disinterested specialists on the subjects under discussion.<sup>32</sup>

With this in mind the BBC felt that symposia in which party views were stated alongside expert opinions, as in the proposed Empire Free Trade series, were the best way of covering such political issues. Where there were topics that were of a purely party political nature it was suggested that single programme debates on the lines of the De-rating Bill programme would be appropriate. The central point of this memorandum was the proposal that, except at elections and during national emergencies, the initiative for organising symposia and discussions on political issues should be with the Corporation. In an accompanying set of detailed proposals Reith suggested that party controlled political broadcasts should be restricted to two months a year, including May for a series on the budget. Single programme discussions of party political issues would be arranged by the BBC when appropriate, the Corporation deciding the subject but ready to listen to suggestions, and the parties nominating their speakers, subject to microphone suitability. Symposia would be organised

31. BBC, PPBPPB, unsigned memorandum marked in pencil 'draft for D.G. July 31st 1930', c. 31 July 1930. The description does not exclude the possibility that Reith himself wrote this memorandum as it could be a pencilled secretarial reminder to give it to him to take to the meeting.

32. See also BBC, PPBPPB, Matheson to Reith via R. Eckersley, 7 November 1930.



regularly, again the subjects and most speakers being chosen by the BBC, but <sup>33</sup> parties choosing official representatives where appropriate.

Reith had no opportunity of discussing these proposals verbally with the all-party conference before the House rose for the summer, for the meeting arranged for 30 July had to be cancelled at the last minute owing to a division in the Commons. Reith was informed by Kennedy that the parties were therefore 'not in a position to express views' on his Empire Free Trade <sup>34</sup> symposium plans until parliament reassembled at the end of October. This was too much for Reith who, particularly now that the House had risen, was not prepared to accept further delay from the parties. There can be little doubt that he deliberately misunderstood Kennedy's letter and, having sent out invitations to Beaverbrook and other experts to broadcast, replied that

I note what you say with respect to our proposals for the Empire Trade Symposium, so we shall proceed with the arrangements in so far as we can make them. <sup>35</sup>

Beaverbrook and other non-party speakers would broadcast first, giving the parties time to arrange their own representatives.

Kennedy's secretary immediately wrote to Reith that his chief had not contemplated anything further being done until party agreement had been reached. MacDonald, who had taken a personal interest, similarly informed the new BBC chairman, J.H. Whitley, that he was 'simply amazed' and that he regarded this decision as

a very serious breach of the existing agreement as to the use of

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33. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f161-162, memorandum by Reith, 31 July 1930.

34. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f160, Kennedy to Reith, 1 August 1930.

35. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f163, Reith to Kennedy, 6 August 1930.



the British Broadcasting Corporation Wireless, and one to which the Government cannot remain indifferent.<sup>36</sup>

Baldwin likewise agreed that Kennedy's letter had been clearly misinterpreted and endorsed the PM's protest. He called it 'a nasty business' and suggested that the BBC had rushed things through. Geoffrey Fry told the Conservative Chief Whip, Sir Bolton Eyres-Monsell,<sup>37</sup> that the whole issue had flared up at a most inconvenient time.

It was at this point that the parties realised the BBC was acting entirely within its rights and contrary to no agreement. Their reaction to the discovery revealed a determination on both sides, particularly the Conservative, to supervise political broadcasting closely and to allow the BBC little freedom on this issue. Eyres-Monsell was particularly forthright:

Reith has deliberately misread the meaning in view of what had already taken place - Really it is an amazing piece of effrontery for the BBC to dictate to the 3 political parties and I think the PM should stand up to them .... I want to control the BBC - that vast potential weapon for propaganda etc. - until we make sure it is developing on the right lines, and if we allow them to dictate<sup>38</sup> to us on this occasion, they may get out of hand.

Geoffrey Fry suggested to H.G. Vincent, MacDonald's Private Secretary, that the PM might usefully 'threaten the BBC' by drawing Whitley's attention to certain sentences in the letter of March 1928, when the controversy ban had been removed. The letter had called the removal 'an experiment .... for the present' and had stated that 'the

36. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f164, N. Butler to J.H. Whitley, 7 August 1930.
37. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f170-174, Fry to Eyres-Monsell, 9 August 1930.
38. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f175, Eyres-Monsell to Fry, 11 August 1930.

Government hold themselves free to modify their present decision after further experience'.<sup>39</sup> Conservative anger was not, of course, simply because the BBC seemed to be getting out of control. Their particular concern was to stop Beaverbrook from broadcasting if possible, though Fry was careful not to imply this to Vincent.

MacDonald did not need Tory advice, although he was not quite so hostile to the BBC. In a minute sent to Whitley he wrote:

the Government has no desire to interfere with the BBC programmes. But it cannot be disinterested regarding the political use made by it of its opportunities. Just as it supplies Jazz rubbish (not even good Jazz) for popular consumption so, if it is not careful with its politics, it will have to supply Jazz politics .... The only way the BBC can protect itself is by planning its political broadcasting in close co-operation with the Parties. That co-operation has not been<sup>40</sup> sought with any degree of businesslike capacity in this case.

MacDonald knew, however, that there was little he could do but wait until parliament reassembled and then re-open general discussions. Only at the very end of September were the whips able to come together again to discuss the issue. Their conclusion, as passed on to the BBC, was predictably that

broadcast discussions not confined to representatives of the political parties appear to present difficulties which do not arise in connection with arrangements for Party political<sup>41</sup> speeches as such.

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39. Fry's emphasis. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f176-178, Fry to Eyres-Monsell, 14 August 1930.
40. BBC, PPBPPB, minute by MacDonald of 9 August 1930, sent to Whitley on 18 August 1930.
41. BBC, PPBPPB, Kennedy to Gainford, 31 September 1930.



When the all-party conference finally convened in November the parties were unanimous in condemning the Beaverbrook broadcast which was shortly to take place. They protested 'against the recognition of a political party other than were represented in the room', and at long last decided not to appear <sup>42</sup> in the same series as Beaverbrook, lest this give him credibility. A more significant agreement was that the party broadcast ratio should be 9:8:5, and at a succeeding meeting Reith was delighted to have his specific proposals for political broadcasting, first <sup>43</sup> drafted for the abortive meeting in July, accepted completely. A symposium on unemployment, with experts and three party representatives, was agreed to, as was a series of party speeches, possibly on fiscal policy. The BBC's boldness had forced the parties to come to agreement and Reith had some reason to be pleased. It had not, however, caused them to abandon their general intention to keep a tight control on political broadcasting, and here the conclusions of the parties and the BBC at the meeting sharply diverged:

the Parties noted the claim of the BBC to the effect that the Corporation did not regard themselves as bound in every case to secure the agreement of the three political parties as a preliminary to proceeding with a political broadcast. In the view of the Party representatives, however, it was held that if the BBC proceeded in face of failure to secure such an agreement, the question of the proper use of the Corporation's discretionary power might be re-opened and the present arrangement by which the three Parties had agreed to participate in political broadcasting <sup>44</sup> might be brought to an end.

The BBC did, however, undertake, dangerously but not surprisingly,

42. For press comments on the Beaverbrook talk see A. Briggs (1965), Op. Cit., 136-137.

43. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 105, 18 November 1930.

44. BBC, PPBPPB, Agreed aide memoire on meetings of 4 and 18 November 1930.

always to consult with the parties before arranging a broadcast involving party politics.

The BBC and parties had agreed on details but not on the fundamental nature of their relationship. Conservatives and Labour were now united in their determination to exercise as much control as they could over political broadcasting, though already there was confusion as to just how comprehensive that term was and to which programmes the 9:8:5 ratio applied. The BBC by contrast was anxious to be able to broadcast more political affairs programmes and so saw the agreement as a gain. It also wanted greater independence from party pressure and whim, but whether it had actually achieved it was more doubtful. 1931 was to see more political broadcasting than ever before on such controversial subjects as India, Russia, unemployment and disarmament, yet throughout it was to be very clear that the BBC was inhibited by political pressure either from the political parties or from the Government. The agreement of 1930 eased the situation not at all and, by committing the BBC to a written definition of its rights and obligations vis-a-vis political affairs broadcasting, gave the parties a degree of control over its output which they put to good use.

The broadcasting symposium on unemployment went ahead in January and February 1931, virtually without complaint, whilst later in the year Sir William Beveridge gave a series of six talks on the same subject.<sup>45</sup> The parties agreed to hand in their scripts simultaneously so that none would have an advantage, although Reith protested that this would lessen the interest of the talks and, in the event, Baldwin did not do so. The proposed discussion of the budget, however, did not take place as the Chancellor objected that, by incorporating his by now traditional broadcast into this series,

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45. In the discussion series the experts were Professor Henry Clay, J.M. Keynes, D.H. MacGregor, and A. Loveday, whilst Seebohm Rowntree, Herbert Morrison and Stanley Baldwin represented the parties. The experts were not confined to factual statements but could give personal opinions.



the Government would be losing one broadcasting opportunity.<sup>46</sup> Instead the parties agreed to a discussion on 'The effect of tariffs on employment' and accepted<sup>47</sup> this time that simultaneous submission of scripts was unnecessary. The BBC was beginning to find that although technically it could go ahead with broadcasts without party consent, in practice it needed their approval in order to obtain party speakers.

A more serious incident occurred in February. Oswald Mosley and Lord Eustace Percy had been asked to debate on 'Tradition'. When it became clear that the broadcast would be more politically orientated than originally intended the BBC felt obliged by the November agreement to postpone it and consult the parties. As Roger Eckersley rather undiplomatically told Mosley,

the BBC is under obligation to the three Parties not to undertake discussions of a political nature without prior consultation with the representatives of the Parties .... what might be possible at one time could not be done at another without leading the BBC into considerable trouble.<sup>48</sup>

He insisted that it was a matter of courtesy to inform the parties, rather than a request for permission, but this postponement - and in the event cancellation - was as strict an interpretation of the agreement as the parties could have wished for. Mosley was understandably furious and refused to speak 'by permission' of the party whips.<sup>49</sup> Writing of this incident in Modern Wireless J.M. Kenworthy argued that

- 46. BBC, PPBPPB, Kennedy to Reith, 17 March 1931.
- 47. BBC, PPBG, Kennedy to Reith, 2 April 1931. William Graham, Neville Chamberlain, and Lloyd George gave these talks, each twenty minutes long.
- 48. BBC, COM, R. Eckersley to O. Mosley, 10 February 1931.
- 49. BBC, COM, note of telephone call from O. Mosley to R. Eckersley, 10 February 1931.

the suppression of this particular talk was a scandal; and to pretend now that the BBC is independent of political influence after this episode is arrant humbug .... the three party caucuses .... are firmly determined that no-one outside the ranks of strict officialdom shall be allowed to address the listeners. Broadcast politics are under a censorship as severe as anything in Russia.<sup>50</sup>

Leonard Woolf similarly analysed the danger of such referral of programmes to the whips, in the Political Quarterly:

in the first place this establishes a far too wide sphere of influence for the party politicians, for practically every subject is potentially of interest to politicians. Secondly, in practice it gives the party whips a kind of censorship over the choice of subjects and speakers where they seem to impinge upon politics. Nothing could be more fatal to the future of broadcasting .... If the party whips had their will [vital controversies]<sup>51</sup> would never be discussed at all - except by the party hacks.

Woolf's general analysis was fair, but accusations that during the early 1930s the BBC submitted itself to and was muzzled by the whips and the parties were not entirely valid. The objection to the proposed budget discussion came from Snowden, and his successor, Neville Chamberlain, was equally determined not to allow the

50. J.M. Kenworthy, 'Free the BBC', Modern Wireless, April 1931, 360-362.
51. L. Woolf, 'The Future of British Broadcasting', Political Quarterly, April-June 1931, 172-185. His general premise was that 'Every Englishman in public pays lip-service to democracy, but in practice and private too often denies its postulates. One of its postulates is that "the people" should decide things for themselves and that it should not be left to the few to decide what the many want and what should be given to them. This implies that the many should also be given the prerequisites of a rational choice, namely the facts and knowledge, so far as possible, all facts and knowledge, not those which a dictator or oligarchy think safe or innocuous'.



Opposition an opportunity to broadcast criticisms of the budget. This, however, was an attitude that had pertained since 1928 when Churchill had first broadcast, and was not affected in any way by the 1930 agreement. As for the Mosley/Percy debate, there is no evidence of its cancellation being the result of party objection - although there may have been some. That it never took place after its first postponement was more likely due to Mosley's claim that he would thereby be speaking by permission of the whips, and his refusal to do so. Roger Eckersley undoubtedly handled Mosley badly, and it may be doubted whether he need strictly have interpreted the 1930 agreement to include such debates. Nevertheless the BBC certainly did not here accept unprotestingly a cancellation imposed on them by the parties.

Far more influential than the parties, as far as the BBC was concerned, was the government of the day, and the relationship of BBC, parties and government at this time is best illustrated by BBC coverage of the highly controversial issues of India and Russia. The Corporation had been anxious for some time to inform its audience of the increasingly complex Indian situation. Towards the end of 1929 C.A. Siepmann, Hilda Matheson's deputy, had contacted Sir John Simon, whose Royal Commission report was expected shortly, about the idea of an explanatory series.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile Vernon Bartlett dealt with India, following the Viceroy's promise of dominion status, in one of his weekly talks.<sup>53</sup> Simon cautiously approved of the idea of such programmes and subsequently broadcast on the findings of the Commission. Growing unrest in India, however, led the BBC Board to suspend plans for a complete talks series. It was mindful of Simon's opinion that

it would be extraordinarily difficult for any series to be fixed up without embarking on controversial subjects and creating

52. BBC, CJS, C.A. Siepmann to Sir John Simon, 1 November 1929. Siepmann's official title was Director of Adult Education Talks. He succeeded Matheson as Director of Talks in January 1932.

53. 7 November 1929.

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embarrassments of one kind or another.

Reith reassured Simon that because his report was an all-party one it could be considered non-controversial, and that therefore his own broadcast would not necessitate critical replies. Matheson, however, pointed out that the parties did not represent all shades of opinion and that the report was not, therefore, uncontroversial - throughout this period Churchill was constantly demanding to be allowed to broadcast on India.<sup>55</sup>

The BBC was nevertheless determined to go carefully. It was both respectful of expert and government opinion and convinced of the exceptional power and impact of broadcasting in foreign and imperial affairs. When the Indian High Commissioner suggested broadcasting talks by the four main parties at the Indian Round Table Conference, in November 1930, the BBC referred the matter to Wedgwood Benn, the Secretary of State for India, 'in view of the many and delicate problems involved'. The Board in any case did not favour the proposal:

we feel that there would be a danger of misrepresentation - by a sentence detached from its context and circulated in India - and<sup>56</sup> of course anything that is broadcast carries much weight.

It was clearly mindful of the Government's desire to appease Gandhi and draw him to the Conference in order to negotiate. Not surprisingly Wedgwood Benn entirely agreed. He felt that the danger of the BBC being used for propaganda speeches in such circumstances would be extreme. He was already trying to dissuade conference

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54. BBC, PI, Note by Reith on Board decision 30 April 1930; Reith to Sir Claude Hill, 21 June 1930.
55. BBC, CJS, Reith to Simon, 26 May 1930, Matheson to Reith, 26 May 1930.
56. BBC, PI, Gainford to Wedgwood Benn, 6 November 1930.



delegates from making any statements to the press.<sup>57</sup>

By February 1931, however, with the Conference concluded and its report known, the Board felt that the subject might be more safely approached. A series of talks was proposed, four factual on the background, five on present problems and three by representatives of left, right and centre of the different Indian factions. Because Churchill was also demanding air time, however, it was decided to refer the series to the whips for their comments, even though domestic party politics was not involved.<sup>58</sup> The Conservatives made no comment on the proposals. But Wedgwood Benn felt strongly that Churchill should not broadcast, as it might provoke protests from the Indian National Congress.<sup>59</sup> After consulting with the Prime Minister, Chief Whip Tom Kennedy sent a reply to Reith which was in effect a suggestion that the BBC should not, and perhaps could not rightfully, deal with foreign affairs. The argument was to become a familiar one in the future:

the subject of the Indian, as of the Russian series, intimately concerns people of whom it is doubtful whether any considerable proportion can justly appreciate the exact relationship of the British Broadcasting Corporation to His Majesty's Government. It is not improbable that in either series expressions would be used, and opinions advanced, for which neither the Government nor the British Broadcasting Corporation could take responsibility, but which nevertheless would be interpreted, by the people whom they concern, as indicative of an official view promulgated through an official broadcasting service. This possibility at once distinguishes a broadcast debate from controversy conducted in the Press. No Government, and no political party, would wish to labour under the imputation of seeking to evade the discussion

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57. BBC, PI, Wedgwood Benn to Gainford, 11 November 1930.

58. BBC, PI, Reith to Whips, 11 February 1931; BGP, Board minutes, 4 February 1931.

59. Prem 1/145, N. Butler to MacDonald, 13 February 1931.

of any matter of public policy; and I hasten to disavow any such intention. But the suitability of the broadcasting medium for the purposes of controversy on subjects not primarily of purely domestic concern is, for the reasons I have indicated, open to question.<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, Kennedy even questioned whether the BBC was within its rights, under the terms of the letter of March 1928 lifting the ban, in discussing foreign affairs at all.

This was the first time this issue had been raised in such a way, yet the fear of foreign misinterpretation of broadcast statements was genuine enough. Increasingly the BBC was to be caught between political parties who did not wish for uncontrolled broadcasting on domestic politics, and the government of the day and Foreign Office, who were anxious that their jobs should not be made more difficult by foreign affairs broadcasting. Despite Kennedy's disavowal of any intention to gag discussion of foreign affairs, there was, in the reference to the letter of March 1928, an attempt to make use of the Government's particular hold over broadcasting in a way that could not be done with the press. This pressure was to become ever greater throughout the 1930s.

Kennedy's suggestion, however, was more than the Board was prepared to tolerate. Cautious it might be, but silent it would not. It rejected the view that it might be exceeding its rights, but assured Kennedy that the greatest care was being taken to avoid high controversy.<sup>61</sup> The Foreign and India Offices had been consulted and Sir John Simon's advice taken. For the final four talks it was agreed with Sir Findlater Stewart of the India Office (and without any suggestion from Kennedy) that the scripts would be sent to the I.O.<sup>62</sup> for comments and checking of facts before transmission. Reith

60. BBC, PI, Kennedy to Reith, 17 February 1931.

61. BBC, PI, Reith to Kennedy, 26 February 1931.

62. BBC, PI, Siepmann to Carpendale, 21 May 1931. Unfortunately it is not known if any alterations were made as a result.



felt that it was now time to go ahead, and the series proceeded as planned in April and May.

Despite consultation with the whips and despite a major objection from the Government, the BBC had been sufficiently confident of itself to carry through this series which, if it avoided the views of the British parties, did nevertheless explain the nature of the Indian problem and the variety of views in India. This was perfectly good political affairs broadcasting and, to Reith and Matheson, superior to a series of wholly opinionated talks. At the same time it must be said that the more delicate programmes were India Office approved, and the BBC's respect for India Office views was confirmed a few months later when Churchill applied once again to broadcast. Churchill claimed that his request in February

was refused on the grounds that these matters were settled by the Whips of the various parties.<sup>63</sup>

This was a ridiculous charge but one which, appearing as it did in the press, stuck. Churchill's immediate reason for wishing to broadcast, as Reith and Whitley were well aware, was his anger at the recent agreement between Gandhi and the Viceroy, Lord Irwin, that Congress would attend the next session of the Round Table Conference. Fearful of concessions Churchill was anxious to arouse public opinion against what he saw as government weakening. Reith knew also that the India Office were opposed to the publicising of Churchill's views. When Churchill visited Whitley and Reith he urged that

in view of the extreme urgency and gravity of the situation, he would [if in Reith's place] permit the extreme right view to be given, even against the India Office objection.<sup>64</sup>

Reith was not averse to the idea, particularly if balanced by talks

63. BBC, PPBWSC, Churchill to Whitley, 2 July 1931.

64. C. Stuart, Op.Cit., 106, 21 July 1931.

from the left and the Round Table point of view. He felt obliged, however, to consult Wedgwood Benn for his views first, and Benn expressed strong opposition to any such series until after the Round Table Conference had met. Although he could not control expressions of opinion in the press, the Secretary of State for India was determined to do what he could to prevent Churchill or other extremists from disturbing events. Broadcasting was one area where official opposition might produce results, and it did. As Reith later wrote,

the Board decided to accede to the request so emphatically made by the minister responsible for dealing with a particularly delicate and critical situation.<sup>65</sup>

Why was this decision taken? Government opposition to the series was twofold, fearing as it did both public reaction in Britain and disturbances in India. Only the latter was a valid argument for the BBC, however, and Wedgwood Benn made full use of it in his talk with Whitley and Reith. In rejecting the proposed series the Board implicitly accepted the notion that Kennedy had stated in his letter of 17 February - that the exceptional power of broadcasting and the possibility of foreign misunderstanding of the status of the BBC placed the Corporation in a different position from the press, giving it an added responsibility to take care in what it broadcast. The BBC's stance was honourable, but Churchill's protest at thus being prevented from broadcasting, in effect by the Government, also contained a good deal of truth:

I can only regard your renewed refusal as a definite part of the attempt which is being made to lull and chloroform the British people into a fateful decision. Discussion after the Conference has finished is no safeguard. Before each of these Conferences meet we are told "No one will be committed to anything". After they are over "We cannot go back on what has been settled". I

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65. J.C.W. Reith (1949), Op.Cit., 151.



wish to warn the nation before it is too late.<sup>66</sup>

The dilemma revealed here was not to be fully resolved until the BBC entered more fully into the current affairs field. Until then political affairs broadcasting was largely concerned with the passive review of political policies and actions, its influence on public opinion being really relevant only at elections. Only later did it enter the realm of active pressure group politics of the kind that Churchill was demanding. But that it did not so involve itself was very much in line with Reith's vision of broadcasting - impartial, presenting the evidence and seeking the truth, different in form and intent from the press and seeking neither to influence events as they happened, nor to challenge the primacy of parliament as the arena in which political views were stated and national policy made.

The other major foreign issue to be dealt with in 1931 was Russia. Russian affairs had been discussed in their regular series by both Vernon Bartlett and Harold Nicolson, and in March 1930 Reith had asked Matheson to make suggestions for a series on Russia. The Board, however, considered that the time was not suitable, and it held by its decision to 'leave Russia alone at present', despite fears by Matheson that

we are perhaps rendering ourselves liable to a charge of bias and prejudice if we put a kind of ban on all topical talks on Russia.<sup>67</sup>

In early 1931, however, with a new and more determined chairman, the Board approved a series of talks by experts describing modern Russia, to be called 'Russia in the Melting Pot'. Various problems were discovered in its preparation, as many experts were unwilling to speak lest they be refused future entry into Russia. Matheson also

66. BBC, PIWSC, Churchill to Whitley, 8 August 1931.

67. BBC, TR, Matheson to Reith, 4 April 1930, and note on this by Reith for R. Eckersley and H. Matheson, 9 April 1930.

recognised that extreme anti-soviet opinions would have to be avoided in view of an Anglo/Soviet agreement not to engage in 'propaganda' against each other.<sup>68</sup> The Foreign Office and Chatham House were consulted informally, although the Foreign Office was unwilling to vet scripts lest it be then held responsible for the views stated.<sup>69</sup> Finally the whips were informed that the series was to take place,<sup>70</sup> although they were not asked for their comments or advice.

Reith nevertheless expected protests and received them. Kennedy doubted, as with the India series, whether the BBC should be covering foreign affairs at all. Eyres-Monsell, for his part, suggested an additional talk on labour conditions in Russia, to be given by a representative of the Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>71</sup> The series, however, went ahead unchanged, and it was only once it had started that the Conservative Party inevitably began to complain in earnest. Already in February the Morning Post had protested at a broadcast talk on Russia by the communist Maurice Dobb, in the symposium on 'Whither Mankind?'.<sup>72</sup> Now, in July, the new Conservative Party Chairman, Lord Stonehaven, complained to Reith that

the impression is gaining ground in the ranks of our Party that the British Broadcasting Corporation is allowing the wireless to

68. As Reith wrote: 'Extreme opinion for or against the Soviet system could not be included. A talk that would have been satisfactory to a right wing Conservative would have been improper in view of the fact that there is a Soviet Ambassador in the country. On the other hand, the kind of talk that an admirer of Soviet Russia would like to have given would have necessitated a Conservative right wing type of reply'. - BBC, IFA, Reith to Stonehaven, 7 July 1931.
69. Foreign Office papers (hereafter FO), FO395/453, P418/39/150, Reith to Sir Robert Vansittart, 24 February 1931.
70. BBC, TR, Reith to R. Eckersley, 14 February 1931.
71. BBC, PI, Eyres-Monsell to Kennedy (copy to BBC), 13 February 1931.
72. Morning Post, 28 February 1931.



be used for the purpose of giving glowing accounts about conditions in Russia which are propagandist in character and are probably open to criticism from the point of view of reliability of the facts contained in them.<sup>73</sup>

In particular there were objections to a talk by Mr. Stafford Talbot, Director of The British Russian Gazette and Trade Outlook.<sup>74</sup>

Within Conservative Central Office opinions were actually rather mixed, for Oliver Stebbings of the Research Department failed to find bias in any of the talks and considered two of them to be critical of the Soviet system. Others were forced to fall back on the view that the bias was

more a question of the general impression which is conveyed than the actual terminology employed.<sup>75</sup>

It was felt that only the successful aspects of the Soviet Five Year Plan had been mentioned, and that facts critical of the communist system had been omitted.<sup>76</sup> Patrick Gower told Stonehaven:

the series as a whole constitutes propaganda of a very subtle and insidious kind because the general impression left on the mind of the listener is that thanks to the Five Year Plan Russia is in many respects a thriving and prosperous country. All the evils of the Russian regime are completely ignored.<sup>77</sup>

Lord Stonehaven, however, was unusually prepared to see the BBC's viewpoint, and perhaps astute enough to recognise that diplomacy

73. BBC, IFA, Stonehaven to Reith, 3 July 1931.

74. Daily Mail, 30 June 1931 and 1 July 1931.

75. COO, COO4/1/23, P. Cohen to Gower, 11 July 1931.

76. COO, COO4/1/23, C.P. Selby to Gower, 21 July 1931.

77. COO, COO4/1/23, Gower to Stonehaven, 21 July 1931.

might achieve more than direct protest with a character such as Reith. Following a letter and meeting with the latter Stonehaven told him:

I should like to make it absolutely clear that I will take it for granted in future<sup>78</sup> that absolute impartiality is what the BBC seeks to achieve.

He admitted that Central Office, as a partisan organisation, might occasionally feel the BBC had not achieved its objective, but stressed his hope that friendly relations could be maintained by personal contact:

Your letter leads me to hope that I succeeded in conveying to you my conviction of the very important part that the BBC is destined to play in the vital matter of educating the Nation<sup>79</sup> on the most difficult problems which confront it at the moment.

Such friendly overtures brought immediate rewards, for Reith suggested that Gower or another Central Office representative should visit him<sup>80</sup> occasionally to make suggestions and to discuss any complaints.

The agreement between the BBC and the parties was clearly not nearly so restrictive as Churchill and others suggested. Neither of these two series, of course, was on domestic politics, but both were of considerable interest to all the parties, whilst the Indian question was one of the greatest current political controversy. The BBC's decision to cover these topics in the relatively factual and objective way it did, without having politicians speak, may have reflected a desire not to further irritate the parties, but it was

78. BBC, IFA, Stonehaven to Reith, 6 August 1931.

79. Ibid.

80. COO, COO4/1/23, Gower to Reith, 30 July 1931. Reith himself always preferred face to face meetings, as he was always at his best on such occasions.



also a reflection of the Corporation's general theory of political affairs broadcasting. It was in addition the result of its respect for the authority of the government of the day, and of an implicit appreciation that political broadcasting might potentially hinder the job of governing, at least as far as foreign and imperial affairs were concerned. There is nothing to suggest - not even in the cancelled Percy/Mosley debate - that the BBC submitted to purely party or partisan pressure. Even its considerable respect for the government viewpoint was not unquestioning, for the Corporation rejected the suggestion that foreign affairs coverage was outside its purview. Yet it is fair to conclude that the practical interest of parties and government in political broadcasting helped to dissuade the BBC from taking any bolder steps and in maintaining its essentially respectful approach.

The political crisis of 1931 was to be another major event in the life of the BBC and one from which it did not emerge with its honour wholly intact. Throughout 1931 Reith had personally been increasingly disenchanted with the Labour Government. His liking for MacDonal and Baldwin, however, made him very favourably disposed towards the formation of the National Government in August. Whether or not Reith's personal predilections themselves inclined BBC output more towards the Government is impossible to say, but they certainly led to a less than scrupulous attention to balance.<sup>81</sup> But this was hardly surprising. The BBC quite consciously allied itself to the best interests of the state as it perceived them. On this occasion the mass of the establishment, the mass of the electorate and the most eminent politicians of every major party all saw those interests as being represented by the new Government. The BBC also saw this to be the case, as it had in the General Strike, and its actions were influenced accordingly.

Between the formation of the National Government and the

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81. When the crisis broke, and for much of August, Reith was out of the country visiting Germany, Austria and Poland. It is clear that he quite underestimated the seriousness of events in Britain.

announcement of the General Election, talks on the political situation were entirely sympathetic to the Government viewpoint. MacDonald broadcast on the day following its formation and Snowden spoke after his second budget. He broadcast again when Britain went off the Gold Standard and MacDonald made a broadcast to announce the General Election. None of these talks, particularly the last two, were impartial in the way that ministerial broadcasts were supposed to be. MacDonald's last, broadcast from the Covent Garden Opera House, was a straight party speech in which he called for national unity, defended National Government policy and regretted the Labour Party's refusal to unite behind him.<sup>82</sup> Also in September Professor Henry Clay gave a talk on 'The Pound in Danger', which gave implicit support to government actions, as did Sir Josiah Stamp's broadcast immediately before the election campaign commenced. Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland also broadcast on 'The Crisis: How you can help', whilst Vernon Bartlett came closer to home than usual in his weekly talk with some 'Reflections on the Pound', which again broadly accepted the necessity for the Government's policies. An editorial in The Listener typified the BBC's approach to the crisis. It acknowledged that one of the weaknesses of democracy was instability of opinion due to rumour and suspicion in different sections of the community:

distracted Counsels on the one hand, and stampeded herd action on the other, form the Scylla and Charybdis through which the ship of state must steer a midway course to safety in times of crisis.

The calmness and lack of fear with which the country had reacted in this crisis, however, it ascribed to the wireless, to the

"still small voice" which our present day statesmen are learning to use, not to excite passions, but to quiet fears and discipline actions.<sup>83</sup>

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82. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/6/189, MacDonald's speech notes, 7 October 1931. L.M. Weir, whose books, The Tragedy of Ramsay MacDonald, was a cruel attack on his subject, stated that this speech was made from the opera house as a melodramatic self-idolizing gesture - London 1938, 554.

83. The Listener, 30 September 1931, 526.



This calming influence was well demonstrated by Snowden in his budget broadcast:

Friends, I will try to talk to you simply to-night, as man to<sup>84</sup> man, as though we were sitting together round the fireside.

The Listener hailed this 'psychological achievement', this 'consolidating influence' of broadcasting; it welcomed the fact that

in so far as [broadcasting] demonstrates the statesman's highest qualities, his patient explanation of difficulties, and the sympathetic discussion of remedies which must be taken, however unpleasant, it is performing the same kind of service that the doctor gives his patient by visiting his bedside, instead of<sup>85</sup> prescribing from a distance for his malady.

The negotiations for the ratio of General Election broadcasts in 1931 were, if it was possible, even more complex than those in 1929, there being double the number of parties and groupings to satisfy. Hilda Matheson was being hopelessly optimistic when she argued that there were only two main bodies of opinion and that a series of single night discussions would be the best and most interesting way of presenting them.<sup>86</sup> The National Government representatives called Reith to the Commons to try to arrange broadcasts in the absence of any Labour negotiator, although Reith did suggest that Kennedy should be brought in. Despite the unfair situation the BBC's Director General produced a draft scheme which appeared to provide each political grouping with a broadcast and gave Labour, National

84. The Listener, 16 September 1931, as delivered on 11 September 1931. Snowden's biographer, Colin Cross, says of this broadcast: 'He spoke in sad but reassuring tones, his magnificent microphone technique a foretaste of what was to come a month later in the General Election'. - C. Cross, Philip Snowden, London 1966, 309.

85. The Listener, 30 September 1931, 526.

86. BBC, PPBGEB, Matheson to Reith via R. Eckersley, 2 October 1931.

Labour and Conservatives two each. At the same time, however, it allocated the National Government forces six opportunities to the opposition's three (two Labour and one Lloyd George Liberal), with the additional possibility of a broadcast by Mosley's New Party.<sup>87</sup>

Samuel immediately objected that Sir John Simon's Liberal Nationals had been given a broadcast and demanded two opportunities for his own National Liberals. When Arthur Henderson, the new Labour Leader, heard of the proposals he declared them to be quite unacceptable:

he was trying to make out that there ought to be as many speakers against the government as for, and at this rate he wanted for his Opposition as many as all the others together.<sup>88</sup>

MacDonald's secretary, Major Ralph Glyn, who was supposed formally to be arranging the details of the ratio, conceded another Labour broadcast, but Henderson demanded a fourth, on the grounds that the present allocation was 7:3.<sup>89</sup> Both Liberal Nationals and Conservatives then requested a further speech, whilst the Communist, Independent Labour, Scottish and Welsh Nationalist parties asked to broadcast, and Mosley assured Reith that he would have fifty candidates in the field.

Reith had decided that a maximum of twelve periods would be made available for party broadcasts. Faced with such a demand he and Glyn determined to exclude parties with less than forty candidates, although they consciously - and without real justification - excepted Lloyd George from this rule. They also tacitly accepted that National Labour, with only twenty candidates, would have two broadcasts, by Snowden and MacDonald.<sup>90</sup> The result according to Reith was 'equal

87. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 107, 6 October 1931; BBC, PPBGEB, undated rough notes by Reith.

88. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 108, 8 October 1931.

89. BBC, PPBGEB, Reith to Samuel, 8 October 1931.

90. BBC, PPBGEB, Reith to R. Glyn, 12 October 1931.



discontent on all sides'.<sup>91</sup> But this was hardly so. Churchill inevitably protested that there were five socialists (two being Snowden and MacDonald), three Liberals and only one Conservative broadcasting (Baldwin gave both Conservative speeches) and that 'this was carrying the suppression of Conservative Opinion beyond the bounds of reason and fair play'.<sup>92</sup> Yet protest from the Labour ranks was to be far louder, longer lasting and more deeply felt.

The question remains whether Labour complaints of unfair allocation of party broadcasts were justified. The final figures were two Conservative, two National Labour, one National Liberal, one Liberal National, one Liberal (Independent) and three Labour. Reith's initial policy had aimed to give equality to each party, as at the 1929 election, thus giving two broadcasts each to Conservative,<sup>93</sup> Liberal (in all its forms), Labour and National Labour. Samuel had argued that Lloyd George should be given a broadcast as a former Prime Minister and senior statesman, and Reith had agreed, it being understood that Lloyd George's group was Independent and outside the Government, whilst both the Samuel and the Simon groups were within it. Reith's policy therefore closely followed the 1929 precedent, although allowance was made for the Liberal confusion. The BBC was acting properly in claiming to allocate broadcasts to each recognised political party rather than equally to government supporters and opposition, even though there were effectively only two sides in the election. It would have been contrary to precedent if it had allocated broadcasts not according to the number of different parties but according to their presupposed views. Reith might claim, therefore, that he was applying the same criteria as he had in 1929 and that Labour had no justification for complaint on those grounds. On the contrary, Glyn's granting of another Labour broadcast, without consulting Reith, broke with precedent by giving one party,

91. C. Stuart, Op.Cit., 108, 10 October 1931.

92. The Times, 14 October 1931.

93. C. Stuart, Op.Cit., 108, 8 October 1931; BBC, PPBGE, R. Glyn to Churchill, 13 October 1931.

Labour, an advantage.

But although Labour complaints were unjustified in this respect, it is clear that the BBC had not properly applied its own criteria in relation to minor and fringe parties. For these a different criterion was applied, namely the number of candidates, that number being deliberately high in order to exclude as many as possible. Indeed Reith's original figure of fifty was reduced to forty to give Mosley a chance and to ensure that Simon (who fielded forty-one candidates) was eligible to broadcast. Yet, as we have seen, both MacDonald's and Lloyd George's minor parties received broadcasts although they were well below the required size. The BBC gave these two the opportunity to broadcast because their leaders were established figures (one being Prime Minister), whilst Mosley and others who had more candidates were excluded because they were not. The ILP was excluded on the candidacy rule even though it claimed to be a party independent from Labour, was so regarded by Reith and had almost as much right to be considered one as the different National Government parties had to be called separate.<sup>94</sup> If the official Labour Party (who denied ILP independence) had no reason to complain, the opposition parties as a whole most certainly did. To this extent the BBC's policy in respect of party broadcasts was clearly as sympathetic to the National Government as it had been in respect of pre-election speeches and talks.<sup>95</sup>

As in 1929 programmes continued as normal. A series of talks by Leonard Woolf on 'The Modern State', in which he discussed democracy, dictatorship, equality and the need for democratising the educational system of Britain, went ahead without question, as did Bartlett's broadcasts. Also as in 1929 the progress of the election was reported on the news, although speeches at public meetings were not reported as the party leaders were broadcasting nightly. The manifestoes of

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94. BBC, PPBGEB, I.L.P. to Reith, 10 October 1931; Reith to Glyn, 12 October 1931.

95. See the editorial, The Clarion, November 1931.



the different parties were given at length, except for that of the Communist Party, which was disregarded. Again, however, it is clear that in these summaries the National Government parties received more space than the opposition, as Figure 6.1 demonstrates:

Figure 6.1: News coverage of party manifestoes, 1931 General Election.<sup>96</sup>

<u>Manifesto</u>	1st news bulletin (6.00.p.m.)	2nd news bulletin (c.9.40.p.m.)	Length of Coverage (pages)	Total Coverage (pages)
<u>National Govt:</u>				
MacDonald.	*	*	3.00	)
Baldwin.		*	3.75	)
Simon.	*	*	2.00	) 16.50
Samuel.		*	2.75	)
<u>Opposition:</u>				
Labour.	*	*	3.00	)
Lloyd George.	*	*	1.00	)
I.L.P.		*	1.00	) 10.75
T.U.C.		*	1.75	)

One of the most controversial aspects of the BBC's coverage of the election was a statement made after the second news bulletin on the eve of the poll. This emphasised that the poll was secret (many first-time women voters did not realise this) and explained which parties were part of the National Government and which were opposed

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96. The New Party did not issue a manifesto. Length of coverage was not related to length of manifesto - Labour's manifesto, for example, was over twice as long as Baldwin's Conservative one. The BBC may also have been uncertain as to what status should be given to the ILP and TUC manifestoes. - BBC, PPBGEB, unsigned, undated memorandum on election news coverage, 1931.

to it. It also emphasised the importance of voting:

On your action or failure to act may depend your own and your children's future, and the security and prosperity of your country.<sup>97</sup>

This was considered by the Labour Party to be a partisan statement, clearly sympathetic to the National Government, and a virtual repetition of National Government propaganda. The BBC of course denied that the wording was anything but an urging of people to vote. Yet on the day it was given Reith, having approved the statement, wrote in his diary: 'I have no doubt that this will be regarded as tendentious by the Labour Party'.<sup>98</sup> Election results were broadcast as they came in, until 4.00 a.m., and a summary given the next day.<sup>99</sup>

Once again politicians were aware of the importance of the party broadcasts. Patrick Gower told Baldwin that his first had been over the heads of many and argued: 'I do not think that you can make your talk too simple or elementary'.<sup>100</sup> Similarly Clifford Allen, who advised MacDonald on his final speech, felt that 'mood' would be all important:

People are weary of fighting and clamour and abuse. They will rally to you if in this closing speech you reason quietly and movingly.<sup>101</sup>

MacDonald himself was sufficiently worried about Henderson's

97. BBC, NBPB, undated script; quoted in statement by the TUC and NEC General Council, 10 November 1931.

98. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 109, 26 October 1931.

99. BBC, PPBGE, Unsigned, undated memorandum on election news coverage.

100. Baldwin papers, Bal.45/f88-9, Gower to Baldwin 21 October 1931.

101. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/6/130, C. Allen to MacDonald, 20 October 1931.



broadcast the previous evening to spend a good part of his own in directly attacking it.<sup>102</sup> According to Harold Nicolson, however, there was no comparison between the two broadcasts:

Mr. MacDonald himself is a master of broadcasting .... Mr. Henderson, on the other hand, is about as bad a broadcaster as I have ever heard. He lacks that confidential tone which renders the words of Mr. MacDonald so conciliatory, so propitiatory, so entrancing. "What", one says when one listens to Mr. MacDonald, "a nice man!" And in saying so one is abundantly right. He is a nice man. And fortunately for him and the National Party his niceness burrs in his very voice.<sup>103</sup>

By common consent, however, the most powerful broadcast was Philip Snowden's whose skill 'lay in expressing extreme views in a way which made them sound the essence of reasonable moderation'.<sup>104</sup> His description of the policies of his former colleagues as 'Bolshevism run mad' made an enormous impact and was generally considered to have influenced many of his listeners.<sup>105</sup>

The press agreed that the influence of broadcasting had been tremendous. The Week End Review stated that

the efforts of thousands of organised political workers all over the country seemed insignificant in effect compared with a dozen or so broadcast speeches.<sup>106</sup>

Similarly the Manchester Guardian editorialised that

102. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/6/189, notes for broadcast, 24 October 1931.

103. The Spectator, 21 November 1931.

104. C. Cross, Op. Cit., 318.

105. Ibid, See also R. Bassett, Nineteen Thirty-one, London 1958, 321-323.

106. The Week-End Review, 28 November 1931.

it is pretty generally agreed that this election was won at the fireside. The Wireless played a part it never did in any previous election.<sup>107</sup>

Finally, The Listener, having noted that party leaders were giving 'careful thought and study to mastering the technique of effective electioneering at the microphone', concluded:

we may soon expect a complete revolution in the art of guiding the citizen in the exercise of his franchise.<sup>108</sup>

The effect of the 1931 crisis on the development of political affairs broadcasting was to be far more serious than the General Strike. 1931 confirmed in the minds of Labour remnants the view that the BBC was a naturally partisan organisation. It was a major factor in Labour's refusal, or extreme unwillingness for several years, to co-operate further in political broadcasting. Such suspicion and lasting resentment could only damage Reith's vision, so dependent as it was on preserving for the BBC an image of absolute purity. On the Conservative side as well, Lord Stonehaven notwithstanding, there was considerable suspicion of the BBC. Even during the election Reith was having to defend the Corporation from Conservative accusations, whilst Joseph Ball remained convinced that,

a real case could be made out against the BBC by an intelligent examination of the programmes for some time past!<sup>109</sup>

The Labour Government years were therefore one of slow progress. The BBC was far from unflinchingly accommodating of party demands and sought to reject party attempts to control political affairs output. Its own aspirations in this direction, however, were obstructed in

107. The Manchester Guardian, 4 November 1931.

108. The Listener, 21 October 1931, 664. In the same editorial the Conservative use of cinema vans was also cited.

109. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f203, Ball to Fry, 3 November 1931.



practice by party procrastination and pressure and by government influence. The Corporation's essentially respectful and less than bold approach was a necessary consequence of these external factors. But ironically it was also the inevitable product of Reith's hope that broadcasting would assume a central 'integrating' role in democratic government, a hope that had profound consequences for the BBC's 'responsible' attitude in its relations with the government of the day. The dangers of such an attitude were made clear in the crisis of 1931 when the BBC undoubtedly lapsed from the pedestal of political impartiality. That lapse was to have repercussions for years to come.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Broadcasting and Politics: Party Broadcasting 1931 - 1939.

"I think it is unfortunate that there has been a tendency in recent years for the proportion of controversial broadcasts to decrease. I hope nobody has got cold feet!"

Herbert Morrison to Reith, 15 October 1937.

"The Prime Minister must be guarded against a) putting his watch down right under the microphone; and b) using a chair with a bar across the bottom and scraping his feet backwards and forwards while he is talking."

S.J. de Lotbinière (Director of Outside Broadcasts) on Baldwin, 15 April 1937.



Labour's anger at BBC policy during the 1931 crisis was considerable. The Labour Organiser complained of this 'gross misuse of its monopoly' by the BBC, which became 'virtually a Tory platform', whilst an article in the Labour Magazine declared that

Cynical disregard of the principle of British fairplay by the party of the rich was never so clearly displayed as it was in the allotment of broadcasting facilities.

Arthur Henderson recognised that broadcasting had become

perhaps the most effective medium of direct communication for political purposes, for it takes propaganda into the home circle in a more intimate way than does anything else.

An 'emphatic protest' was made by the Labour Party NEC and the TUC General Council,<sup>3</sup> and Beatrice Webb summed up the feelings of much of the Movement when she wrote that 'the BBC has been collared by the defenders of capitalist enterprise'.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast the Conservative Party chairman, Lord Stonehaven,

1. Editorial, The Labour Organiser, December 1931; R.B. Suthers, 'Three Blind Mice - and Ananias', The Labour Magazine, vol. 10 no.7, November 1931, 298-301.
2. Arthur Henderson, 'Labour's Army is Unconquered', The Labour Magazine, vol.10 no. 7, November 1931, 291.
3. Labour Party, National Executive Committee series (NEC), 10 November 1931. Clement Attlee declared in the Commons that, admire the BBC as he did, the election had made him doubt its impartiality. This was part of a major speech about political broadcasting in which he described the BBC as, 'the most important instrument for the moulding of the national character and for the development of national life'. He did not wish to criticise the BBC lest it be driven into a cautious policy of 'safety first'. Instead it should be an open forum for new ideas. - H.C. Debates, vol.260: cols.2312-2313, 11 December 1931.
4. M.I. Cole (ed.), Beatrice Webb's Diaries 1924-1932, London 1956, 297, 4 January 1932.

thanked the BBC for 'enlightening the electors. It certainly is a real safeguard for democracy'.<sup>5</sup> Ignorant of 'The Week in Westminster' he urged Reith to provide such a programme:

it is well worth while making a strong attempt to retain the undoubted influence exercised by the BBC on the electors during the Election by providing them with the kind of information about the doings of the Parliament that they have elected, which they could not find in any organ of the press.<sup>6</sup>

With a National Government packed Commons he could be confident that such coverage would not be to its disadvantage.

The Government was initially less well disposed, however, towards more formal political broadcasts. When in December Reith approached No. 10 about a possible series he was told that such a project was unwelcome. As the Chief Whip's Private Secretary, C.J.Harris, wrote:

It was felt that there were so many sections amongst Government supporters who would claim representation that National Government unity would be endangered.<sup>7</sup>

The Government was concerned to present the country and National Government as united, both nationally and internationally, and Reith, still fully behind MacDonald and Baldwin, was sympathetic:

I quite understood that some embarrassment might be created, and in general I appreciated that in many respects it might be rather undesirable.<sup>8</sup>

5. BBC, PPBGEB, Stonehaven to Reith, 18 November 1931.
6. BBC, PPBPR, Stonehaven to Reith, 30 November 1931.
7. Prem.1/127, C.J. Harris to N. Butler, 3, August, 1932.
8. Prem.1/127, Reith to C.P. Duff, 25 May 1932.



This readiness to accede to MacDonald's wishes, which represented, as Reith would have argued, the national interest, was made even more clear a few months later, when Reith repeated his proposal for such a series. He realised in any case that from a party point of view there was no other line he could take:

As then, so now, we would not wish to embark upon anything which the Prime Minister did not regard with favour. Apart from this I imagined that if he were not favourable the Government Whips would not wish to co-operate with us in the matter,<sup>9</sup> and of course such talks would have to be arranged through them.

There was more, however, to Reith's informal and friendly contact with the Prime Minister than was immediately apparent. By developing such a relationship Reith was attempting to by-pass the Postmaster General, Kingsley Wood, whom he already disliked intensely, and also the party whips, whose effective control demeaned political broadcasting. He knew MacDonald to be well disposed towards him and, with parliament in recess and the Whips' Office virtually closed down, he sent the Prime Minister a proposal very different from anything previously agreed. This was for a series of single evening debates in which two political speakers, chosen by the BBC, debated issues also chosen by the Corporation. Each debate was to be trailed the previous week with an expert talk on the subject by such men as Keynes, Beveridge and Sir Arthur Salter. Subjects were to include tariffs, taxation, unemployment and the Means Test, India, disarmament and agricultural policy, with speakers ranging from Winston Churchill to James Maxton. There were seven Conservatives (two of the right), two Liberals and five Labour (one of the left), but no attempt had been made to have every shade of opinion represented in each debate. As Reith told Duff, MacDonald's Private Secretary:

It is quite impossible to get a meeting of Party Whips

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9. Ibid.

together... if we wait until we have agreement among all the parties there is, on the one hand, what you wish to avoid, namely a National Government splitting up into all its component parts, and even then groups and individuals clamouring for representation as well, and on the other hand something that will be of very little interest to <sup>10</sup>listeners, if, indeed, after much delay, anything happens at all.

It was stressed that the BBC would take full responsibility for the debates; indeed it was clear that Reith had sent the proposals to the PM not for permission, but for information and his unofficial approval. In this way Reith hoped to strengthen the BBC's hand before the inevitable protests of party whips. He recognised, as did MacDonal<sup>d</sup>, that a virtually partyless Prime Minister <sup>11</sup>could take an unusually disinterested attitude to party wrangling.

The BBC, however, had picked its moment badly. Indeed it is difficult to recognise any time during 1932 that might have been propitious. With the increasing likelihood of cabinet resignations the Government was extremely sensitive to any threat to its facade of unity. Moreover MacDonal<sup>d</sup> was in Lossiemouth when Reith's letter arrived at No. 10, and so instructed Neville Butler, the duty private secretary, to send copies to Kingsley Wood and the Chief Whip. MacDonal<sup>d</sup> himself was disposed to let the matter take its course, although not impressed with the proposed speakers, but Kingsley Wood raised objections. Having talked to the PM, he visited the BBC's <sup>12</sup>chairman, J.H. Whitley, in order specifically to discourage him. His stated arguments were exactly those which Reith had foreseen - that each party would be incensed by the proposals and that nothing <sup>13</sup>could be decided until parliament reassembled. Whitley protested

10. Prem.1/127, Reith to C.P. Duff, 27 July 1932.

11. Indeed National Labour was not even represented in any of the proposed debates.

12. Prem.1/127, Memorandum by H.G. Vincent, 5 August 1932.

13. Prem.1/127, Kingsley Wood to MacDonal<sup>d</sup>, 10 August 1932.



at the delay, but there was by this stage little that he could do. Moreover these negotiations were running concurrently with one of the most notorious events in BBC inter-war history, the Hashagen affair, in which the Cabinet empowered Kingsley Wood to threaten to use Clause 4 (3) if the Corporation did not cancel a talk by a former U-boat commander.<sup>14</sup> Whitley believed that Kingsley Wood was in a determined mood, and was unwilling to exacerbate an already delicate situation.<sup>15</sup>

In private Kingsley Wood's objections were closely bound up with a determination to preserve his own powers over the BBC. He had not missed Reith's ulterior motive in approaching the Prime Minister rather than the whips, and it is interesting that this led him to insist upon the independence of the BBC and upon the Government not assuming detailed responsibility for programmes:

It is obvious that if the BBC adopted the practice of submitting their proposals in advance to the Prime Minister or the PMG the responsibility for the decision would rest with the Government of the day and not with the Corporation. If the Prime Minister of the day expressed approval apart from the PMG (even informally) it might affect the exercise of the powers of the PMG referred to in clause 4 (3) of the Licence. It is important that this power should be fully maintained.<sup>16</sup>

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14. See A. Briggs (1979), Op. Cit., 191-4, for details of this incident. See also pp. 537-8 below.
  15. Both Whitley and Reith, however, were outraged by this intervention of Kingsley Wood in the detailed discussion of the BBC's programmes. The BBC had sent its proposals to MacDonald quite informally: 'but for the PMG thereupon to enter in and discuss the programme detail by detail was an entire violation of the BBC's autonomy and was totally inconsistent with their having complete discretion and sole responsibility by their charter in regard to the organisation of their Service'. - Prem 1/127, memorandum by C.P. Duff, 8 September 1932. They were not satisfied until assured that Kingsley Wood had been acting not as PMG but on behalf of the PM, in his absence.
  16. Prem.1/127, Kingsley Wood to MacDonald, 15 August 1932.

For example it could happen that developments in India might make a debate on that issue inadvisable. He felt that government freedom of action to veto such a debate would be limited if it had already given its approval. It was not for the Government, but for the parties, to advise the BBC on the acceptability of its proposals, and he therefore advised that Reith be referred back to the whips.

MacDonald accepted Kingsley Wood's main argument but was not impressed by his conclusion, which offered no answer to a seemingly insoluble problem. Already eight months had passed since Reith had first approached him, and the PMG's recommendation put the position back to where it was in 1930. The PM was conscious that the BBC was stymied by the necessity of obtaining party approval - in practice rather than as the result of the 1930 agreement - for party broadcasting, and that the jealousy of the whips and different party groups made progress impossible. Nearing the end of his political career MacDonald made an innovatory proposal which demonstrated that he still possessed the ability to see around a problem and to rise above the party strait-jacket. He suggested that an all-party committee, not of whips but of men such as John Buchan and Clement Attlee, should be appointed to consider and agree any BBC proposals in regular consultation with Corporation representatives. His general attitude was constructive:

I am coming generally more and more to the view that we should be a little more courageous about politics as a broadcast subject. It is quite impossible for us to carry out successfully responsibilities which really amount to sanctioning, or otherwise, of individual propositions, and that is really what the existing position is. ....Some of us might not care much about some of the things done, but on the whole it is far better<sup>17</sup> to deal with these things in a way which is not too official.

This proposal, which removed approval of party broadcasting from

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17. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/2/12, MacDonald to Kingsley Wood, 18 August 1932.



the whips to a less jealously party level, was 'excellent', as Kingsley Wood admitted. But the inept way in which it was implemented, and its unfortunate timing, were to ensure failure and turn the Parliamentary Advisory Committee (PAC) into a considerable hindrance rather than an aid to political affairs broadcasting. The Labour Party had not been consulted once throughout these negotiations and the Government Chief Whip had only occasionally been informed of developments. The motive for this had been a conscious desire to lift the discussions above mere party wrangling, but it was to have serious consequences. Surprisingly for a man thought of as a cold autocrat, Reith operated best at a personal level in negotiation, winning the respect of those he met and, it must be said, respecting the wishes and feelings of those he knew well more, perhaps, than those of people he did not know personally. That he had not yet met the new Labour leader, George Lansbury, may therefore have been of significance. But in any case he and Whitley had got into the dangerous habit of negotiating with the Prime Minister alone, and it was too easy to continue to do so.

The first spanner in the works, however, was Sir Kingsley Wood's. Having sensibly suggested to MacDonald that - to escape party wrangling - it should be for the BBC to invite representatives to join the PAC, he added:

I have no doubt they<sup>18</sup> would accept the names you might care informally to propose.

MacDonald underlined this sentence and added a comment in the margin: 'essential'. When, therefore, the Prime Minister and Chief Whip, David Margesson, saw Whitley on 14 September they were able to put forward not only the general proposal for an advisory committee, but also specific names, including those of Liberal and Labour representatives.<sup>19</sup> There was no suggestion, of course, that these

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18. Prem.1/127, Kingsley Wood to MacDonald, 23 August 1932.

19. Prem.1/127, C.P. Duff to Kingsley Wood, 14 September 1932.

names were chosen in anything but good faith, but the fact that they were picked without consulting either Liberal or Labour leaders was quite inexcusable.<sup>20</sup> At this meeting the debates proposed back in July were also discussed in detail and some of them agreed. Again that such matters were considered by MacDonald, Margesson and Whitley without any reference to Labour was inevitably to lead to trouble. To add to the fault George Lansbury was not even informed when, acting on this meeting, the BBC invited Arthur Greenwood to broadcast in a debate on the Means Test, and Major James Milner to act as Labour's representative on the PAC.

Lansbury was to come fresh to the whole issue of political broadcasting. Not having been involved in earlier negotiations, and convinced of the great power of wireless, he was prepared to go over old ground yet again. On hearing of Greenwood's invitation to broadcast he persuaded him to reject it, and protested to Whitley that party leaders should always be consulted about speaker and subject in party broadcasts. His argument was interesting in being the first to be based on the dangers of political agenda-setting by the BBC:

the selection of the issue is a matter of vital importance. It would be quite possible to have a programme of discussions dealing with political questions .... without giving the Opposition the opportunity of bringing into relief the particular matters upon which they think the general public should be enlightened.<sup>21</sup>

When series were approved in advance by the Prime Minister there was

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20. In his autobiography Reith stated that the PAC was established 'After consultation with party chairmen and chief whips'. There is no evidence that Labour or Liberal chairmen or whips were consulted at all, and Lansbury's subsequent objections to the PAC make it clear that they were not - J.C.W. Reith (1949), Op.Cit., 172.
21. Lansbury papers, Vol. 10/f277-9, draft letter (as sent) from Lansbury to Whitley, 27 September 1932.



a lot of truth in this.

The day after this letter was sent the Government resignations of Snowden and Samuel over the Ottawa negotiations raised the scale of argument to an altogether higher level. Samuel requested an opportunity to broadcast the reasons for his resignation, and Reith willingly agreed on the understanding that the Government would give a reply.<sup>22</sup> After initial objections to the idea from MacDonald it was arranged that Snowden and Baldwin would broadcast on 30 September and Samuel and Simon on 1 October. Lansbury immediately demanded an Opposition broadcast, arguing that Labour policy on Ottawa was different from that of either the Government or Samuel and Snowden.<sup>23</sup> Whitley rejected his request - the broadcasts were about the resignations, not about the Ottawa Agreement; they followed parliamentary procedure and so were purely a matter between Government and dissentients.<sup>24</sup> Referring to Lansbury's letter on the general question of political broadcasting, Whitley explained that the old system of consultation with whips and leaders had never worked, even when there were only three parties. Now, with many more, it was impossible to carry on as before:

We felt our listeners should hear political talks, and there were demands for such facilities. But, in order that such talks might be arranged, and after, as I have indicated, sad experience of other methods, we decided to take the matter more into our own hands, subject, however, to the advice of a Parliamentary Committee.<sup>25</sup>

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22. BBC, PPBMB, Samuel to Reith, 27 September 1932; Reith to Samuel, 28 September 1932.
23. Lansbury papers, vol. 10/f261, Lansbury to Whitley, 29 September 1932.
24. BBC, PPBG, Whitley to Lansbury, 30 September 1932: 'I think it would have been definitely improper to have introduced other speakers on other issues, or even other speakers on the same issue'.
25. Ibid.

Unfortunately Whitley concluded his letter with an ambiguous sentence in which he suggested that by now the majority of listeners could trust the BBC to be impartial, and that Lansbury should do so also, 'in view of the Corporation's greater knowledge of the suitability of subjects and speakers'. Lansbury completely misread the sense in which this was intended. In any case he denied that there were more than two parties now, the Government and the Opposition:

I am astonished that the BBC should consider that it has a greater knowledge of the suitability of subjects and speakers than the Leaders of Parliamentary Parties. This is an extraordinary claim. It implies that the BBC controlling the greatest publicity service in the country is to judge what ought to be the political issues discussed and is further to select what politicians it pleases to represent organised political opinion .... I cannot share your view that listeners can trust the BBC to hold the balance fairly. Millions of Labour men and women bitterly resent the unfair manner in which at the last General Election and ever since the scales have been weighted against Labour.<sup>26</sup>

At Lansbury's request an emergency debate was held at the Labour Party Annual Conference, which was then meeting, and a resolution carried unanimously protesting against 'the deliberate exclusion' of the Opposition from the resignation broadcasts, and demanding 'just and equitable<sup>27</sup> treatment on all matters of political broadcasting'.

Lansbury was particularly anxious to broadcast on the resignations in order that he might represent them to be the break up of the National Government. When, therefore, the BBC offered him a

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26. BBC, PPBG, Lansbury to Whitley, 2 October 1932.

27. Labour Party Annual Conference Report, Conference minutes 1932, 227. See also Raymond Postgate's scathing comments on this incident in Time and Tide, 8 October 1932, 1087.



place in a debate on Ottawa to take place later in the month, he refused it as unsatisfactory and asked for a meeting with Whitley and Reith.<sup>28</sup> Although tensions were somewhat eased by this meeting, which Attlee also attended, the Labour Party was by now becoming entrenched in matters of principle. Lansbury and Attlee agreed that Greenwood might debate on the Means Test and Stafford Cripps on Ottawa, but at a Labour Party Policy Sub-Committee meeting it was resolved as a general rule that every Government political broadcast should be followed by one from the Opposition. It was also decided to reject the idea of an unofficial advisory committee approving unofficial party broadcasts.<sup>29</sup> The Party was determined to control its own broadcast statements of policy; Cripps agreed to confer with the party Executive as to what he should say in his broadcast, and a small NEC sub-committee was appointed to consider Greenwood's broadcast statement on the Means Test. Lansbury told a National Joint Council meeting that his policy was to ensure that the political views of the Party should only be broadcast by official party representatives.<sup>30</sup>

All the Labour Party's suspicion and resentment of the BBC was by now apparent and Lansbury took the opportunity of these negotiations to complain about news bias. He raised again the issue of the press agencies:

we shall never get a square deal with the other parties simply because the sources from which you get your summaries are under the control of newspaper proprietors who, in the political sense,<sup>31</sup> only exist to support our opponents.

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28. BBC, PPBG, Whitley to Lansbury, 4 October 1932.
29. Labour Party, NEC Policy Committee minutes, 12 October 1932; BBC, PPBG, Lansbury to Whitley, 18 October 1932.
30. Labour Party, National Joint Council minutes (NJC), 25 October 1932; NEC, Minutes, 26 October 1932.
31. Lansbury papers, vol.10/f283, Lansbury to Reith, 20 October 1932.

The TUC had already protested earlier in the year about misrepresentation of the General Strike in the BBC's ten year retrospect (1922 - 1932) programme, and the NJC now felt that arrangements should be made for the Party to monitor all news bulletins.<sup>32</sup> Writing in the Labour Magazine Lansbury complained of biased broadcasting before, during and since the election. He objected not only to the BBC's news sources but also to the news-readers:

The inflection of the announcer's voice, the emphasis of certain words which newspaper men know so well how to use when putting a tendentious statement in their papers, all seem to me to show that those who control the BBC consider it their duty to support whatever Government is in power. I think that this is more obviously so when Governments which are not Labour Governments are in office.<sup>33</sup>

He protested at the idea of the BBC choosing either subjects or speakers for party debates and broadcasts, argued for absolute equality between Government and Labour speakers in everything and urged that Trade Union representatives should broadcast on all industrial disputes. Having expressed his determination that the BBC must be made directly responsible to parliament for its programmes, he produced the one argument that could not be specifically controverted:

we cannot afford to allow one or two officials to decide what the public shall be allowed to hear .... I do not accuse the BBC of direct personal prejudice ... It is their judgement I call in question .... they are not supermen....<sup>34</sup>

32. Labour Party, NJC minutes, 25 October 1932. There is no record of any action having been taken on this decision.
33. The Labour Magazine, November 1931, 293-295.
34. Ibid.



The BBC was by now determined to take a strong line. Already a year had passed since the last party broadcasts, those being the General Election series. Far from the delay being due to excessive BBC caution it was the direct consequence of protracted negotiations resulting from the BBC's attempt to break free from party control. That it had to undertake such negotiations was as much a case of practical politics as respect for the parties, for without party approval there would be no party representatives to broadcast in BBC arranged programmes. With Lansbury threatening to change the BBC's constitutional position, it had not yet reached the position where it could disregard party feelings completely by ignoring the refusal of one party to broadcast. In other words it was still at the stage where impartiality meant and had to mean equality of broadcasts (or an agreed ratio) rather than equality of opportunity to broadcast, whether accepted or not.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless Whitley and Reith were determined to deny Lansbury's accusations and assert BBC freedom insofar as they could. The Board restated once again the essential need for political independence:

You have contended that official machinery should be used and that subjects and speakers alike should be nominated by the Parties. It is vital that the Corporation should be freed from any suggestion of interference, either by the Government or the Opposition, in the discharge of its responsibilities and, this being so, the Corporation became convinced that the official procedure advocated by you was unsuitable, and that the ultimate responsibility for determining what subjects can best be dealt with and when and by whom must be taken by the Corporation itself.<sup>36</sup>

It was also stressed that, in the six debates already arranged, the

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35. The effective veto given to both major parties by the need to balance output was only finally removed in 1954. See the author's letter in The Listener, 27 November 1980, 725.

36. BBC, PPBG, BBC to Lansbury, 14 November 1932.

opposition parties received equal representation with the Government, all but one opposition speaker now being Labour. They were therefore receiving preferential treatment out of all proportion to their strength in the Commons.

These were views which the National Joint Council could not accept:

It holds that the choice of subjects by the BBC without prior consultation with the Leaders of the political parties places in the hands of the Corporation the power to determine the electoral issues on which the public are to be invited to make up their minds. Such a power is one which no medium for disseminating news and opinions ought to enjoy.<sup>37</sup>

An NJC broadcasting sub-committee was set up and Milner wrote to Reith that he could not accept his invitation to join the PAC in view of these fundamental disagreements.<sup>38</sup> Only the debates series went ahead, and even here everything was not settled, for at the last minute R.S. Hudson withdrew from the Means Test programme because he felt that as a minister he should not take part. Clearly he was anxious not to lend any authority to such a public questioning of government policy.<sup>39</sup> In addition it was decided not to proceed with the debate on India, the time not being suitable.

Matters had clearly reached a stalemate. By refusing to relinquish control Lansbury had effectively barred greater BBC independence. He had also greatly decreased any value the PAC might have had, and ensured that the issue of agenda-setting would remain highly relevant, for only when political affairs coverage was unlimited would it cease to be so. As the Morning Post declared:

37. BBC, PPBG, NJC to Whitley, 22 November 1932.

38. BBC, PPBPAP, Milner to Reith, 6 December 1932.

39. BBC, PPBG, Reith to Lansbury, 25 November 1932.



There can be no half-way house on this road. The choice is between all the way, and no part of the way.<sup>40</sup>

Yet it was undeniable that there was some point to many of Labour's objections. In the case of the resignation broadcasts there was doubt as to whether the BBC had followed parliamentary procedure as it claimed. Even if it had, it might have been queried whether this was the correct line for an independent news organisation to take. As the NJC argued,

the reconstruction of a Government arising out of differences between Ministers on questions of high policy raises issues of national importance on which the Official Opposition has a legitimate claim to express its views.<sup>41</sup>

Equally there was point in Labour's comments on the BBC's news sources, as well as in its suggestion that ministerial broadcasts gave publicity and extra kudos to the Government by advertising its achievements. Lansbury had also made the pertinent observation that the majority of the BBC's 'experts' - academics, economists, ex-editors of The Times - were eminently safe and 'trustworthy' people. Charles Siepmann, now Director of Talks, admitted to Reith, after a conversation with Stafford Cripps, that 'there is at least an element of justice in his objections on some counts'.<sup>42</sup>

Siepmann was disillusioned by the lack of progress. His

40. Morning Post, 24 February 1933. The Morning Post favoured the latter choice.
41. BBC, PPBG, NJC to Whitley, 22 November 1932. The Manchester Guardian, 3 October 1932, declared in an editorial that, 'the split in the Government has been conceived [by the BBC] purely as an internal matter, a domestic incident in the Government's life; from which it follows that only those are entitled to be heard who were members of the Government and would have wished it to continue unimpaired, if that had been possible. From the Government's angle of vision, that is a natural and not improper view. But is it the proper view for the B.B.C.?'
42. BBC, PPBG, Siepmann to Reith, 23 February 1933.

conclusion was that whilst the BBC should continue to deal with political affairs, more and more speakers should be drawn from outside the Commons so as to avoid party conflict.<sup>43</sup> Labour's conclusions were rather different and in the private member's debate on broadcasting, in February 1933, it proposed an amendment to the motion - which complimented the BBC - calling for a Select Committee to review the Corporation's work. Labour speakers in this debate raised all the issues discussed privately with the BBC, but it was Sir Stafford Cripps who put his finger on the fundamental problem of limited political affairs broadcasting. The mover of the motion, Mr.C.E.G.Emmott, had stated that there should be no limitations on what was broadcast save for that which undermined the State. Cripps cogently pointed out that views differed as to which issues such a restriction might apply. Emmott had approved of Churchill broadcasting on India but rejected a debate on pacifism as seditious. Cripps commented that many people would take an exactly contrary view<sup>44</sup> as to which of these broadcasts was dangerous.

Cripps' speech, however, also revealed one of the underlying and questionable assumptions to Labour's argument about agenda-setting - that politicians had, a-priori, a greater right to define political issues than had the media. Political issues, he argued, should be selected by the House of Commons and not at Broadcasting House:

if matters for debate over the broadcast are selected by the British Broadcasting Corporation there is a danger that they may create issues which, perfectly justly, they may think are the major political issues at the moment,<sup>45</sup> but in regard to which Members of this House would not agree.

This was an attitude which the BBC, with its respect for parliamentary and political authority, undoubtedly recognised and in

43. Ibid.

44. H.C. Debates, vol.274: col.1824, 22 February 1933.

45. Ibid., col. 1829.



large measure accepted, yet which conflicted with its own notion of political and programme independence, to its general confusion.

This, the first full debate on broadcasting since Crawford, demonstrated just how far the BBC had come in ten years. Although a Private Members' debate, it was dominated by front-benchers and senior statesmen. To a man the speakers acknowledged the enormous power of radio and, almost without exception, they concentrated on political affairs broadcasting as the major issue. Kingsley Wood might have been paraphrasing Reith when he asked:

Might not broadcasting meet the real needs of the vast electorate and supply from all points of view and angles that presentment of issues and of policies which will usefully mould public opinion<sup>46</sup> and help us to determine wisely the issues of our time.

Lansbury, for his part, called the BBC's power of agenda-setting 'the greatest power in the world', whilst John Buchan, in an excellent speech, encouraged the widest freedom of broadcast opinion, including communist:

If we do not have controversy, we may be in danger of seeing manufactured throughout the land the terrible product which has been called "the broadcast mind", a mind dominated by a shallow uplift and a thin complacent scepticism; a mind surfeited with half-truths; a mind that is incapable of grappling seriously with any problem.<sup>47</sup>

What Buchan did not consider was the danger that the beneficial<sup>48</sup> effect of controversy might be offset by selective listening.

46. Ibid., cols. 1836 - 1837.

47. Ibid., col. 1845; col. 1850.

48. Churchill similarly gave a powerful speech in which he described political broadcasting as 'one of the greatest issues that Parliament can possibly have to deal with'. He, like

Kingsley Wood's speech was interesting in other respects. Like Emmott he attempted to define the limitations upon political affairs broadcasting, and his conclusions were somewhat broader. Freedom did not mean a licence for subversive doctrines or propaganda against the functions of good government, but a reasonable liberty for the expression of free opinion and thought. Minorities and eminent individuals should have their say, but due regard should always be paid to the international situation. The criterion for a political affairs broadcast should be 'whether it is a timely and useful contribution to the councils of the nation', and to back up this assertion he quoted that day's leader in the Manchester Guardian:

At times the broadcasting authorities may unavoidably have to conclude that the ill-feeling a discussion of some issues might create would outweigh the good that discussion might do.<sup>49</sup>

These were clear counsels of caution for the BBC.

Not the least interesting aspect of the PMG's speech was that, in defending the PAC, he misleadingly - and certainly consciously so - gave the quite false impression that no-one, not even the Prime Minister, had been consulted by the BBC before it appointed the Committee. It was for the BBC to choose who it wished to sit on its committees, he argued.<sup>50</sup> The Labour Party of course disagreed and the Commons debate produced no effective result, despite the universal call for greater controversy. Indeed, when the NJC Sub-Committee on broadcasting reported in June its conclusions were counsels of perfection. Absolute equality should be given to all conflicting schools of thought; the Official Opposition (Labour) should enjoy equality of treatment with the Government in all

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Reith, saw broadcasting as the solution to democratic ills, for 'The world is losing faith in this democracy'.- H.C. Debates, vol.274: cols.1855-1860.

49. H.C. Debates, vol. 274: col. 1836, 22 February 1933.

50. Ibid., col.1841.



broadcasts, including ministerials; this equality of opportunity should be extended to the Trade Union movement, whilst

reasonable provision should be made for responsible working class organisations to initiate broadcast discussion, when, in their view, matters of importance need to be ventilated.<sup>51</sup>

These were proposals which the BBC could not accept. Reith and Whitley rejected the idea that all ministerial broadcasts should give a right of reply; they also knew that the Government would not accept Labour equality in party broadcasts. At a meeting of BBC and NJC representatives Whitley justified BBC practice by referring to the fact that all governments had been treated identically in the broadcasting of ministerial statements, including the budget talk and the PM's speech at the Lord Mayor's banquet. BBC practice rested on its view that the government of the day had a national responsibility apart from any party one. On certain occasions, therefore, the Corporation judged a minister to be speaking as a representative of the nation. This was an argument which the Labour delegation did not recognise, and they also rejected the view that, if all shades of opinion received equal representation in party broadcasts, it would matter<sup>52</sup> that the Government received perhaps only 20 percent. of the time.

Such disagreement appeared insuperable, yet already the Talks Department had been producing proposals of its own for a series of ten single talk political broadcasts by party and non-party representatives, to be called 'The Debate Continues'. The previous debates series had been a failure for the two reasons that

front rank politicians will seldom commit themselves to a debate on the microphone; and that arranged studio debates are nearly always boring and platitudinous.<sup>53</sup>

51. Labour Party, NJC, Memorandum No. 39, June 1933.

52. BBC, PPBG, Notes of meeting of NJC and BBC representatives, 11 July 1933.

53. BBC, PPBPPB, L. Fielden to Siepmann, 20 June 1933.

Fielden proposed this series to be effectively 'a vote of censure' on the Government, but which gave it a reply to every opposition critic, the latter to include such people as Churchill and Lord Cecil. When, however, this was referred to the PAC (which lacked a Labour representative but had a Liberal one) it recommended a ratio of 5:3:1, omitting independent politicians such as Churchill and inclining slightly more favourably to the Government. The single broadcast was one for Samuel's group, which had resigned from the Government but had not crossed the floor of the House. Inevitable complaints were duly received from the Government Chief Whip, Margesson, that this was effectively a ratio of 5:4, and from Labour that it was 6:3. Reith, however, stood by the PAC's proposal, despite Lansbury's continued demand for absolute equality between the Government and Official Opposition, although not now for other political groups.<sup>54</sup>

The Labour Party was torn between standing up for its principles and accepting defeat in order to obtain the broadcast opportunities it desperately desired. But faced with Reith's obduracy the need proved greater than the wish, and under strong protest it nominated Lansbury, Greenwood and Cripps to broadcast on 'The futility of the "National" Government', 'Immediate steps towards reconstruction' and 'The ultimate aims of the Labour Party'.<sup>55</sup> In the Supply Committee debate on the Post Office a few days later Attlee and Lansbury took the opportunity to protest at excessive government broadcasts, and made much suggestive play on Clause 4 of the Licence.<sup>56</sup> In Labour Harold Laski, Lansbury, Greenwood and others all rejected the view that the BBC was discharging its duty towards democracy, whilst at the Annual Party Conference a resolution called for the broadcasting of conference proceedings. Another delegate suggested that the Movement hire air-time on foreign stations to broadcast to

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54. BBC, PPBPPB, Reith to D. Margesson, 30 June 1933; BBC, PPBG, Lansbury to Reith, 10 July 1933.

55. BBC, PPBG, NJC to Reith, 18 July 1933.

56. H.C. Debates, vol. 280: cols. 2262 - 4, 2298 - 2300, 24 July 1933.



Britain.<sup>57</sup> Both these rather wild proposals were rejected by Lansbury, who felt that only further negotiation with the BBC would produce results. Indeed his comparatively moderate tone in debate reflected the Labour leadership's gradual acceptance that something was better than nothing. In an article in the Daily Herald in November Attlee, whilst still claiming equality for the Official Opposition, effectively ditched the claims of minority parties to have equal air-time.<sup>58</sup>

Yet Labour was not the only body to have sacrificed its principles. The BBC had also done so, conceding choice of subject to the parties and, as a result of the PAC recommendation, excluding non-party speakers. Churchill was omitted for the practical reason that it was intended to have a series on India in the New Year and that he would therefore have broadcast twice on the same subject. In the event, however, the Indian series was postponed and Churchill unintentionally kept from broadcasting until early 1935. The BBC had also reluctantly allowed the parties to choose their own broadcasters, although it attempted to suggest to Labour that the NJC nominate six names from which the BBC would choose the three to broadcast.<sup>59</sup> As broadcast, this first truly party political series was a foretaste of things to come. Reith admitted that it was not a success and told the Board that

the political series is unique in not having elicited one single

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57. Labour, October 1933, 44. George Bernard Shaw, perverse as ever, denied that the BBC had any duty to democracy; Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1933, Conference minutes, 146 and 234.
58. Daily Herald, 14 November 1933. In this article he also declared that, 'the duty of the BBC is not to lull to sleep the minds of its listeners, but to excite them to individual judgement, to bring them face to face with realities so as to be fit to play their part in an epoch of rapid change.'
59. Labour Party, NJC, Broadcasting Sub-Committee, 18 July 1933. The N.J.C. rejected this idea.

letter of any kind from listeners.<sup>60</sup>

Lack of audience interest was and had to be a major consideration of the BBC's in arranging party broadcasts. Political broadcasting would only become interesting when the parties relinquished control of the presentation of party policy. While they continued to refuse to do so there was no evidence that the audience wanted more, direct, party politics. The Listener was driven to reply, to American accusations of caution, that the air-space available and the known preference of listeners were the real limitations on broadcast controversy:

If political and other controversy in Great Britain seems mild by foreign standards, the explanation must be sought, not in any supposed bureaucratic tendencies of the broadcasting organisation or Governmental interference, but in the natural reserve and moderation which is characteristic of the British people.<sup>61</sup>

An interesting interpretation of the lack of party broadcasting, and one with which Reith would not have agreed, was put by Richard Crossman in The Spectator:

it is probably still true in England that most people's interests are largely unpolitical. The BBC has rightly recognised this fact. It is not its job to make the public politically minded but to find out what its interests are and foster them .... It is the task of the political parties, not of the BBC to awaken the nation to specifically political problems.<sup>62</sup>

The one lasting success of 1934 was to be the arranging of the

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60. BBC, PI, Reith to A. Dawnay, 28 June 1934; BBC, BGP, Director General's report for Board meeting, 17 January 1934.
61. The Listener, 31 January 1934.
62. R.H.S. Crossman, 'Talks for the ordinary man', The Spectator, 28 June 1935.



first series of party broadcasts on the budget, and here it may be that Lansbury's arguments proved influential. Reith had for many years now been trying to alter the Chancellor's one impartial statement into a series of controversial talks, but had been rejected in turn by Churchill, Snowden and now Neville Chamberlain. Chamberlain fully recognised the value of his single statement, but the BBC was increasingly aware that these talks had acquired 'a certain tendentiousness in presentation'.<sup>63</sup> In 1933, therefore, Reith wrote to Chamberlain and Lansbury proposing the replacement of the impartial broadcast by two controversial talks.<sup>64</sup> Lansbury immediately agreed, but Chamberlain rejected the idea - these were difficult and critical times, not suited to a controversial debate before an audience uninstructed in the complexities of the financial position. The Chancellor would be placed at a great disadvantage to his debating opponent, who did not have the responsibilities of office.<sup>65</sup> Thus Chamberlain effectively vetoed a proposal which the BBC had proposed and to which the Opposition had agreed. Lansbury was understandably annoyed and queried whether it was right that one side could deny access to the microphone to another in this way:

The Chancellor refused to make any statement on the Budget, and we were refused the right to make any statement. I think this is a dog-in-the-manger policy. They will not play themselves and they will not let anybody else play.<sup>66</sup>

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63. BBC, PPBB, Siepmann to PAC members, 27 March 1933. Following the 1932 budget broadcast Neville Chamberlain told his sister Hilda that 'The broadcast seems to have gone very well and I have heard from many quarters, including Snowden who is I think a good judge, that it was just what was wanted. I am very glad as I attach much importance to it and it was constructed at short notice and in great pain'. Chamberlain was suffering from lumbago - Chamberlain papers, NC18/1/779, Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 23 April 1932.
64. BBC, PPBB, Reith to Lansbury and N. Chamberlain, 24 - 25 April 1933.
65. BBC, PPBB, J.D.B. Fergusson to Reith, 27 April 1933.
66. H.C. Debates, vol. 280: col. 2299, 24 July 1933.

There was much truth in this complaint, and when in 1934 the BBC again approached the Treasury it stressed that it was 'essential' that opinions on the budget were broadcast.<sup>67</sup> The Treasury, however, were again completely opposed to the idea, and in a memorandum by J.D.B.Fergusson their objections were fully set out. It was pointed out that an opponent could easily produce imaginary and more popular alternatives to almost any budget, particularly a hard one. The Chancellor's task in persuading parliament to accept it, would become much more difficult if the Opposition had had the opportunity to whip up popular feeling. Once more the comment was made that in any wireless debate a minister was at a disadvantage compared with an opponent unburdened by responsibility.

The most interesting argument, however, was one which was to become a cause celebre after the Second World War - the question of whether it was constitutionally right for a wireless debate on a subject to take place before the issue had been debated and decided on in parliament. It was an argument which essentially denied a legitimate role for public opinion and public pressure between elections:

The whole system of representative institutions under which questions of policy are debated and decided by elected representatives in the House of Commons is jeopardised if it becomes more important to defend a policy directly to the BBC's audience than to justify it to Parliament. It seems indeed to me very doubtful whether it is desirable in the public interest or wise in the interests of good relations between the BBC and Parliament that there should be debates on the wireless on matters which are still under discussion in the form of Resolutions or Bills in Parliament. It means an appeal to virtually the whole electorate over the heads of Parliament on matters still to be decided by Parliament.<sup>68</sup>

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67. BBC, PPBB, Siepmann to Sir Warren Fisher, 26 March 1934.

68. Prem.1/146, undated memorandum signed 'D.F.', c.26 March 1934. J.D.B. Fergusson did not use his first name.



That this argument could be applied to the BBC and not to the press or public platforms was a recognition not only of the greater audience and believed power of broadcasting, but also of the very different relationship of BBC and state compared with that of press and state. Whereas the press was conceived of not merely as a channel for pressure group politics but as several pressure groups in itself, the BBC was not seen in this role at all. Educative and enlightening as it might be for public opinion, its role was to inform, not to incite its audience to immediate action. Although, as we shall see, the BBC did broadcast talks and debates on matters actively before parliament, not even Reith yet saw it as a medium which would play an active role in pressure group politics. Political education was a democratic ideal in itself, and had as its raison d'etre an informed electorate. That on specific issues the BBC might play a more immediate part in actual policy making between elections, through the forming of public opinion, was only vaguely recognised, except by those such as Churchill who wished so to use it.

Indeed the whole concept of public opinion as a major and conscious factor in the production of party policy was relatively recent. For sound, politic reasons Reith would have denied for the BBC a role in pressure group politics, other than as a provider of news. By the 1930s politicians, parliament and the state, having awoken to the fact of broadcasting, had also taken on board received wisdom as to the enormity of its powers and influence. Reith later mentioned a comment about the BBC by a foreign envoy:

I can understand politicians disliking you and being afraid of you. You are too near a possible alternative.<sup>69</sup>

Yet the Corporation did not wish to give this impression, as the Radio Times declared in May 1934:

Amongst the many suspicions that broadcasting has aroused during

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69. J.C.W. Reith (1949), Op. Cit., 309.

its short and startling career, none has been graver than the suspicion that it might attempt to replace Parliament in the exposition of political views and the moulding of political opinion amongst the public; a suspicion for which the history of British broadcasting has given no grounds.<sup>70</sup>

Given the climate of opinion about the power of broadcasting and the psychology of the mass; given party convictions of BBC bias in both directions; given also the unavoidable example of the pressure politics of the popular press; given finally the role for which Reith did see broadcasting, and his determination to produce a medium fundamentally new and different, it would have been counter-productive at that time to have emphasised the BBC's potential as an active influence in current political issues.<sup>71</sup>

Yet, despite Reith's desire not to get involved in pressure politics, it was evident that he could not accept the conclusions of the Treasury memorandum, which had been shown to him with Chamberlain's approval. He hastened to assure the Chancellor that a broadcast budget debate had never been intended. Taking his cue from a compromise proposal by MacDonald, he suggested firstly that a third talk by an independent economist broadly sympathetic to the Government should follow the Opposition's, and finally that a series of three talks by Labour, Samuelite Liberals and Government should follow Chamberlain's expository talk, thereby giving the Government two broadcasts and the final word.<sup>72</sup>

With the intervention and support of the Prime Minister for this

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70. Editorial, Radio Times, 25 May 1934.

71. After the Second World War the infamous '14 day rule' was adopted as a more formal restraint upon the BBC's ability to deal with issues currently before Parliament. See A. Briggs, History of Broadcasting Vol.IV, London 1979, 605-612, 632-633. This was initially a voluntary restriction, but was formalised in 1955. It was removed in 1957.

72. BBC, PPBB, Reith to N. Chamberlain, 9 April 1934.



proposal Chamberlain accepted the idea, perhaps in part because the previous year's argument had resulted in no broadcast of any kind, not even his traditional 'impartial' one.<sup>73</sup> In particular the agreed scheme saved the Chancellor's dignity by separating his talk from the subsequent debate, and ensured that he did not lend his authority to or become compromised in such a discussion. Chamberlain called the arrangement 'very satisfactory' and said that it did not matter at all that others would be debating the budget after his talk.<sup>74</sup> It was clear that the objections had been primarily from the Treasury and that Chamberlain recognised the terms of its Memorandum to be unacceptable to the BBC. As a politician he knew communication to be sometimes more valuable than silence, and he took great pains over his broadcasts as Chancellor.<sup>75</sup> The subsequent budget broadcasts of 1934 were to set the pattern for all until 1939.<sup>76</sup>

The BBC were therefore successful in finally arranging controversial discussions on the budget against Treasury opposition. But on the question of India, although its struggles were equally prolonged, the outcome was more in line with the arguments of Fergusson's memorandum. Coverage of the Indian question since the series of twelve talks in April and June 1931 had been slight and mostly favourable to the Government. The opening speeches of the Round Table Conference sessions in 1930 and 1931 had been broadcast and MacDonald had given a resumé of the results of the first session. In December 1931 Reith admitted to Duff that the BBC had 'rather kept off India for obvious reasons', but suggested either a talk by

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73. BBC, PPBB, Note by A. Dawnay, 12 April 1934; Reith to MacDonald 19 April 1934.

74. BBC, PPBB, Neville Chamberlain to Kingsley Wood, 7 April 1934.

75. Chamberlain papers NC18/1/267, Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 21 April 1934; NC18/1/913, Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 21 April 1935; NC18/1/957, Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 19 April 1936. See also Note A at end of chapter, p.483.

76. The speakers in 1934 were Chamberlain, Attlee, Samuel and J.H. Thomas, the Chancellor speaking for 20 minutes, a supposedly expository talk, and the others for ten minutes each.

MacDonald<sup>77</sup> or a series of talks following the end of the second session. The proposal was referred by No. 10 to the India Office, with predictable results: the Secretary of State for India, Sir Samuel Hoare, was amenable to a single Government broadcast and offered to give it himself, but

As regards an extended programme, the Secretary of State is not very keen about a series of talks by unofficial spokesmen. Controversial and partisan talks would do more harm than good and it is difficult to avoid them. He suggests that if the BBC want to pursue the idea they should put up a programme for our consideration. They might be advised to exclude from this programme, as far as possible, champions of particular points of view and choose well informed but unbiased experts.<sup>78</sup>

In view of Hoare's objections, but anxious to have something, Reith asked him to broadcast an explanatory and impartial survey of developments since the last Round Table Conference session:

it would be a real service to people who cull their ideas on the Indian situation superficially from press comments.<sup>79</sup>

In addition Sir Claude Hill, ex-Indian civil servant,<sup>80</sup> gave a personal view of the current situation.

Following the second adjournment of the Conference, however, the talk Hoare gave was anything but impartial. Siepmann called it 'a very tendentious talk of a rather tub-thumping nature'<sup>81</sup>, whilst Whitley felt constrained to inform Hoare of BBC policy with regard to

77. Prem.1/145, Reith to C.P. Duff, 1 December 1931.

78. Prem.1/145, W.D. Croft to C.P. Duff, 9 December 1931.

79. BBC, PISH, Reith to S. Hoare, 11 January 1932.

80. The Listener, 30 December 1931.

81. BBC, PISH, Siepmann to Reith, 27 January 1932.



ministerial broadcasts and to complain that his 'polemical' statement had caused great trouble for the BBC; its 'useful and urgent purpose' had been 'unfulfilled'.<sup>82</sup> Hoare rather brazenly replied that his talk could not have been partisan as there were not two views on the matter - he had expressed the opinion of the vast majority.<sup>83</sup> Brazen it may have been, but it did at least raise the interesting question of when the 'vast majority' became a unanimous body and when a minority could be ignored.

Despite this disagreement Reith allowed Hoare to broadcast again at the conclusion of the Round Table Conference third session in December, this time without repercussions. Hoare was very appreciative of the opportunity and told Reith that 'there is nothing like a broadcast talk for bringing things home to the people'.<sup>84</sup> The Conference having ended, the BBC now felt able to propose further talks without risk of affecting negotiations. Nevertheless its proposals were strictly sympathetic to the smooth running of Government policy. Reith proposed a series of three factual talks describing the Government White Paper which was being presented in March 1933, together with the constitutional issues it was attempting to resolve. The India Office could not object to such a proposal and even recommended that the talks be given not by a member of government but by an official of the Indian Civil Service, Sir John Thompson. Thompson was, of course, completely in tune with government policy and there was some reason for Attlee's comment that

it is impossible for such talks owing to the selection and arrangement of facts and the emphasis given to them, to be other than tendentious.<sup>85</sup>

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82. BBC, PISH, Whitley to Hoare, 12 February 1932.

83. BBC, PISH, Hoare to Whitley, 18 February 1932.

84. BBC, PISH, Hoare to Reith, 30 December 1932.

85. H.C. Debates, vol.276, col.6, 20 March 1933. See also Churchill's comment that, 'No statement is so tendencious as a one-sided statement of facts. The selection of the facts, the marshalling of the facts, the emphasis placed upon them, are all causes of controversy.' - BBC, PIWSC, Churchill's Private Secretary to Reith, 6 March 1933.

BBC policy was, however, on the face of it, reasonable - a straightforward explanation of government proposals to be followed, at the time of the parliamentary debate on the issue, by a series of controversial talks by representatives of various opinions. But where it fell down was in its implementation. Firstly, instead of having a news summary of the White Paper, the BBC's innate respect for the 'expert' led it to use a speaker sympathetic to the proposals he was describing.<sup>86</sup> There was clearly still a confusion within the Corporation as to the need to differentiate by manner of presentation between Acts which had already become law, and had therefore passed out of the realm of immediate controversy, and White Papers and Bills which had still to come before the House. Secondly it was unfortunate that a considerable period of time was to elapse between the descriptive talks and the controversial series. The reason for this was that the Bill was not due to come before the House until early in 1934, when the Joint Select Committee on India had reported, whilst Reith was conscious of 'the desirability of having the different points of view given closely in advance of the Parliamentary discussions'.<sup>87</sup> According to Whitley the PAC was also unanimously of the opinion that a controversial debate should not occur while the Joint Select Committee was deliberating, although it seems unlikely that its advice was an influence upon the BBC's decision, for this had already been taken.<sup>88</sup>

Thus it was the BBC's role to keep the electorate informed of events as they happened, but not so far in advance as to result in a public opinion feedback to parliamentary or government deliberations. Churchill, who was vehemently demanding the right to broadcast on India at this time, had reason to feel frustrated, but not to suggest either government pressure or deliberate intrigue. Contact between BBC and India Office could not at this time be called pressure,

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86. See p.491 below on the BBC's regard for 'experts'.

87. BBC, PI, Reith to F.W. Phillips (Secretary of GPO), 16 March 1933.

88. BBC, CWSC, Whitley to Churchill, 25 October 1933.



merely advice which accorded with BBC policy and practice. Churchill was wrong when he complained to Reith that BBC policy

partakes of the nature of an intrigue to force a particular line of policy upon the country without the public being able to form a judgement on the merits.<sup>89</sup>

But he was at least partly correct, though not in the conspiratorial sense he intended, when he declared in parliament:

the withholding from the broadcast of Indian matters is not because of any fear of influencing the Indians .... The object is to prevent the formation of British opinion.<sup>90</sup>

Siepmann began planning the controversial series in June 1933. He suggested that the ideal would be a straight fight between the right wing Churchill/Lord Lloyd faction and the Government, but admitted that

for political reasons it may be necessary<sup>91</sup> to provide for the representation of the official Opposition.

He also proposed three speakers from the left, right and centre of Indian opinion. As the proceedings of the Select Committee dragged on, however, it became clear that the Bill would not be presented to parliament before the end of 1934. The BBC's decision to be truly topical, by delaying the series until the time of the Commons debate, thus had the quite unintended effect of excluding any statements on India for over eighteen months. Only from June 1934 could the series be actively planned and by then no Indian delegates were available to

89. BBC, PIWSC, Churchill's Private Secretary to Reith, 6 March 1933.

90. H.C. Debates, vol.274, col. 1859, 22 February 1933.

91. BBC, PPBPAP, Siepmann to Reith, 23 June 1933.

broadcast. The Board, therefore, proposed nine speakers, including two Government, one Labour, one Liberal, Churchill, Lloyd and three non-political 'experts'.<sup>92</sup> These latter were to be Lady Layton, Sir John Thompson (who was now admitted to be in favour of the White Paper) and, to balance him, C.F. Andrews, a speaker with left wing views and opposed to the Government's proposals. This suggested series was then put to the PAC, whose objections and alternative recommendations were ignored, and to Lord Linlithgow, the Select Committee chairman, who was listened to rather more respectfully. At his suggestion Sir George Schuster was added to the list of experts, to talk on economic aspects of the Indian question, and subsequently Reith suggested that Linlithgow himself should start the series with a factual statement of the Select Committee's conclusions.<sup>93</sup>

The Corporation did not view this series strictly as a party political one. It was anxious to include minority and expert viewpoints and thereby reduce the party element, the whole forming a symposium by the different groups, rather than an official party fight with Churchill added. Yet few of the interested bodies were prepared to see it in this way. Churchill declared that there were only two sides - Labour and Liberals wanted to go further towards Indian independence than the Government and were therefore fundamentally sympathetic to its policies. Eight out of the ten speakers, he claimed, were in favour of the White Paper policy. He objected to Thompson being used as a representative of Indian Civil Service opinion; far more eminent was Sir Michael O'Dwyer - who was also a right wing supporter of the India Defence League.<sup>94</sup> Reith rejected his arguments, but agreed to make his talk the antepenultimate one, to be followed only by Labour and Government speakers. Churchill accepted with ill grace: 'there is no use arguing

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92. BBC, PI, Miss Nash to A. Dawnay, 17 July 1934.

93. BBC, PI, Dawnay to Reith, 23 July 1934; Reith to Dawnay, 5 September 1934.

94. BBC, PIWSC, Churchill to Reith, 25 August 1934.



with an autocrat'.<sup>95</sup>

Labour was even less inclined than Churchill to accept the proposals. Lansbury, by considering Churchill, Lloyd and the Liberal representative as Government supporters, saw the ratio as eight to two against Labour. Like Churchill he wondered why Thompson and Schuster had been chosen as experts when there were equally eminent men, experienced in Indian affairs, on the Labour side.<sup>96</sup> This was a point which Reith had been careful to consider, and Andrews had been deliberately chosen to offset Thompson, whilst Lady Layton, representing the women's viewpoint in India, was considered neutral. The balance of experts had, however, been slightly upset by the addition of Schuster, who was so far in favour of the Government's proposals as to advise Baldwin on his final broadcast of the series.<sup>97</sup> Schuster had only been added reluctantly by Reith, and the latter emphasised to the Controller of Programmes, Alan Dawnay, how vital it was that both his and Layton's talks should be impartial.

Lansbury and Attlee were particularly annoyed at the implication in the proposals that the Labour Party was simply one of a number of opinion groups. This was made clear by their strong objection to the term 'Labour Opposition' which had been used in the BBC's letter of invitation.<sup>98</sup> Lansbury protested that his party was 'His Majesty's Opposition' and should therefore be given greater consideration than other groups. Labour speakers should follow the first government speech and immediately precede the last. Attlee told Reith and Whitley that

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95. BBC, PIWSC, Reith to Churchill, 31 August 1934; Churchill to Reith, 14 September 1934.

96. Lansbury papers, vol. 15/f117, unsent draft letter from Lansbury to Reith, undated.

97. Baldwin papers, Bal.202/f19-20a, undated note by Sir George Schuster.

98. Lansbury papers, vol. 15/f115, Reith to C. Edwards (Labour Chief Whip), 16 August 1934.

It was not for them to decide the issues, but for the political people in the country.

He objected to the BBC's attempt itself to state the issues and wrote to Lansbury that the BBC had

set the stage for a struggle between Government and Diehards. We object to being sidestepped like this .... The allocation of places between rival groups within the Capitalist Government does not concern us. They are all our enemies.<sup>99</sup>

Attlee felt that even where the Opposition agreed with government policy, its approach was so fundamentally different that it should have a broadcast - just as in the House of Commons the Official Opposition enjoyed certain rights of reply over other groups. Thus it was not for the BBC to decide whether or not to give the Opposition an opportunity to broadcast, basing its decision on how much Labour disagreed with the Government. Rather it was for the Opposition to decide whether or not it wished to broadcast.

Reith readily conceded the penultimate broadcast to Labour, but stood firm at first on the idea of giving it a second speaker. As Dawnay told Lansbury,

we are approaching the question primarily in the light of presenting to our listeners a fair symposium of public opinion - as opposed to political opinion in the strict sense of seeking a balance based upon the party grouping in Parliament.<sup>100</sup>

This was a view which would not have appealed to any political party and certainly not to Labour, for it diminished its status considerably. It soon became clear, however, that Schuster, Thompson

99. Lansbury papers, vol. 28/f204, Attlee to Lansbury, 4 September 1934.

100. BBC, PI, Dawnay to Lansbury, 12 September 1934.



and the Liberal speaker would be sympathetic to the White Paper proposals, and that Linlithgow would be considered by opponents as yet another Government speaker. With Reith absent in South Africa, Whitley therefore decided to approve a second Labour speaker<sup>101</sup>, having first consulted the Board and the PAC, even though, as Dawnay remarked of the latter,

we do not attach very much weight to the opinions of the members composing it as individuals!<sup>102</sup>

The series on India, having started out as a symposium of views and expert opinion, was increasingly in danger of degenerating into a predominantly party political series, with even the experts taking very pronounced lines.

Nevertheless the BBC had for the most part retained independence of action in its negotiations with Churchill and Labour, altering arrangements only where it considered it reasonable to do so and resisting unreasonable demands. Equally revealing was the course of negotiation with the Government. Correspondence was nominally with the Chief Whip, Margesson, but was immediately passed on to the India Office and No. 10, Downing Street. Initial reactions to the series at No. 10 were not unfavourable; Schuster was considered 'good but not ideal', Sir John Thompson was 'an ally of the Government',<sup>103</sup> whilst even Andrews was felt to be 'pro Gandhi but all right'. The India Office regretted the inclusion of Lloyd and Churchill, hoped that one might be eliminated by negotiation, but admitted that both had a claim to speak.

The nature of negotiations, of the relationship between BBC and Government, were particularly well illustrated by memoranda within Downing Street and between No. 10 and the India Office. Considerable

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101. BBC, PI, Dawnay to Carpendale, 24 September 1934.

102. Ibid.

103. Prem.1/145, N. Butler to H.G. Vincent, 28 August 1934.

attention was paid to the question of who should negotiate with Reith. It was stressed that it should be by a visit rather than correspondence, and by someone who was personally on friendly terms with Reith. There was a clear recognition that informal contact rather than formal pressure would bring the best results. This was made even more evident by the phrases used in reference to negotiation with Reith:

If Sir John Reith were prepared to omit .... But it seems unlikely that he will be willing to do this and it would probably be unwise to press it. .... If Sir John Reith will not accept this .... if Sir John Reith definitely declines to consider ....  
 it would be advisable to enlist Sir John Reith's sympathy...<sup>104</sup>

When C.J. Harris, representing the Chief Whip, learnt that Hoare was planning to contact the Postmaster General and that he was 'at least putting to Sir K. Wood the possibility of his (KW) bringing some pressure to bear on Reith to exclude one or other of the Diehard speakers', he immediately issued an 'emphatic warning':

The PMG has never intervened in the arrangement of political talks by the BBC, and it was precisely to eliminate such intervention by the PMG that the Chief Whip was appointed as the official channel.<sup>105</sup>

The India Office therefore decided that all they could justifiably press for was a rearrangement of the speaking order, so that the first Government speaker came after Lord Lloyd instead of before him.

An informal conversation between Vincent, W.D. Croft of the India

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104. Prem.1/145, unsigned and undated India Office note for interview with Reith, c.29 August 1934.

105. Prem.1/145, N.Butler to H.G.Vincent, 31 August 1934. It is curious that Harris was still representing the Chief Whip in these discussions, as he had by now moved from the Whips' Office, and was P.S. to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury.



Office and Reith, appeared to produce results. Reith himself was amenable to altering the order, but as he was on the point of leaving for South Africa, he left the final decision to Dawnay and Whitley.<sup>106</sup> They, however, felt strongly that the series as a whole should be opened by a statement of the Government's case, and rejected the India Office's request.<sup>107</sup> Hoare was not satisfied, and at first the India Office contemplated a threat:

If the order remains as at present proposed, they would find it difficult to agree to open the series.<sup>108</sup>

After further consultation with No.10 and the Whips' Office, however, Croft drafted a milder letter which, using the proper channels, the Chief Whip sent to Dawnay. He regretted that the right wing speakers might go unanswered until the end of the series:

Would you not agree, for example, that it would be a serious matter from the Government point of view if, as might well happen, the Second Reading on the Government Bill took place in the House of Commons in the weeks immediately following Lord Lloyd's broadcast according to your present plan?<sup>109</sup>

Croft proposed, therefore, that Lloyd should be followed by Sir John Thompson who would answer his arguments, 'though not in any way to be regarded as a Government spokesman'.<sup>110</sup> Knowing that further protests would be likely in view of the imminent addition of a second Labour speaker to the series, Dawnay decided to meet this request, although he was by now dubious of Thompson's status:

106. BBC, PI, Reith to Dawnay, 5 September 1934.

107. BBC, PI, Dawnay to H.G. Vincent, 8 September 1934.

108. Prem.1/145, W.D. Croft to C.J. Harris, 18 September 1934.

109. BBC, PI, D. Margesson to A. Dawnay, 20 September 1934.

110. Ibid.

I find it difficult to agree that Sir John is "not in any way to be regarded as a Government spokesman"! Not an "Official Government spokesman" perhaps - but he must surely be counted as a strong reinforcement to the Government side?<sup>111</sup>

The negotiations had been protracted, but the deliberations of the Joint Select Committee were more protracted still. It rapidly became clear that it would not report before November and that the parliamentary debate would not take place until December. There had been no constitutional objections so far to the prospect of the radio series preceding parliamentary discussion, but now this problem was raised. Government doubts were expressed as to the propriety of a minister addressing the nation before he spoke in the House. Reith also warned Dawnay that party meetings were to take place after the Report's publication and that ministers might not wish to broadcast before they had addressed their parties.<sup>112</sup> The BBC could only submit to this argument - indeed it had no alternative - and Reith agreed to postpone the series until the New Year, with Linlithgow,<sup>113</sup> however, broadcasting immediately the Select Committee reported.

With the series consisting of eleven speeches to be given at weekly intervals, it was becoming far too unwieldy. The BBC therefore decided to compress it by having two programmes each week, the entire series being thereby contained between the first and second reading debates, with the final talk by Baldwin occurring only a few days before the latter. This was timing which pleased Margesson, who told Sir Samuel Hoare that quite fortuitously the order of speakers was good from a Conservative point of view:

It brings Lloyd into action a fortnight before the National Union Conference. ... It brings Thompson in immediately before the Conference, and it does not feature Winston until after the

111. BBC, PI, Dawnay to Margesson, c.25 September 1934.

112. BBC, PI, Reith to Dawnay, 5 September 1934.

113. BBC, PPBPAP, Dawnay to PAC members, 30 October 1934.



Conference. During the week of the Conference two innocuous people (the Rev. C.F. Andrews and a Liberal) will be speaking, which ought not to do any harm.<sup>114</sup>

The series of controversial talks on the Indian question, therefore, finally took place in January 1935, immediately prior to the second reading debate and at the height of the issue's topicality. Although the BBC had postponed it until after the initial parliamentary debate the issue was still under active discussion. During the previous year the Government had enjoyed unanswered factual descriptions of the White Paper and the Select Committee report, although the BBC argued with some reason that these statements were necessary in order to inform people of the basic issues involved. The BBC had certainly modified its original proposals considerably to meet the conflicting demands of Churchill, Labour and Government, and had evidently kept the Government informed throughout, via No. 10, the Whips' Office and the India Office. Reith had himself proved slightly more amenable to government representations than had Whitley and Dawnay, but the BBC had made every attempt to retain its freedom of action, if not always successfully. All negotiations were discussed and ratified by the Board. Interestingly, the BBC had perhaps gained from its policy of informal contact with No. 10, for Neville Butler and H.G. Vincent had proved ready to protect it against possible pressure from the India Office.

The Government had on this occasion accepted the limits of its influence over the BBC and had resorted to informal contact. Whether that contact had passed the fine boundary between amicable negotiation and the unreasonable use of friendship for the exertion of moral pressure is questionable. In fact the only issue on which Dawnay acceded to a Government request, where he had the option of refusing, was in the placing of Thompson to follow shortly after Lloyd - and even there Lady Layton was placed between them. Perhaps

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114. Prem.1/145, Margesson to Hoare, 22 October 1934.

the BBC's principal error was in acceding to Linlithgow's emphatic proposal that Schuster be added to the series. Yet here also, when it was learnt that the Liberal representative might support the Bill, the Board added a compensating Labour speaker and, through Dawnay's personal negotiation with the Chief Whip, Margesson, staved off a government protest.

Only Churchill continued to object that the ratio was now 9:2 against him.<sup>115</sup> But in linking the series to the India Bill the BBC had effectively refused to involve itself in immediate pressure politics. The issue which it had defined for debate was the Bill and not the general question of whether or not the British should remain in India in their existing form. Dawnay therefore had a clear answer for Churchill:

If the question were a straightforward issue between two clearly defined bodies of opinion, the solution would be comparatively simple .... Unfortunately, however, this is not the case; and the protagonists of every point of view tend, like yourself, to regard all contrary opinions, however mutually divergent, as constituting a solid majority against themselves.<sup>116</sup>

Churchill was learning that the agenda was set according to the questions asked and that the BBC asked the questions of the middle ground, not of the extremist opinion that he was undoubtedly held to represent.<sup>117</sup> Only in his own broadcast could he define the issues as he wished.

The Indian series had shown finally to the BBC that the present unrepresentative PAC was 'quite useless'.<sup>118</sup> Moreover it had been

115. BBC, PIWSC, Churchill to Dawnay, 5 November 1934.

116. BBC, PIWSC, Dawnay to Churchill, 7 November 1934.

117. Yet another latin tag had been provided for the BBC in July 1933 by Sir Ernest Bennett, the Assistant PMG: 'Media tutissimus ibis' - The middle way is the best. - H.C. Debates, vol. 280, col. 2302, 24 July 1933.

118. BBC, PPBPAP, Dawnay to Reith, 19 November 1934.



found almost impossible to arrange meetings at times which were mutually convenient to every member, so that for most of the time advice had to be sought by post. The PAC members were themselves dissatisfied with their role, feeling that their advice was only rarely sought and then ignored. Dawnay therefore suggested to Reith that, in view of the approaching General Election and the current reorganisation of the Corporation's entire advisory committee structure, this question should be tackled. Lansbury now appeared to be more compliant and Reith accordingly proposed that the Speaker of the House of Commons, as a neutral figure, should appoint a PAC with the approval of the party leaders. However he was warned against this proposal by Margesson, who in general appeared to be genuinely solicitous of the BBC's interests. He told Reith that each party would insist on their Chief Whips being on the committee and that they would never agree about anything.<sup>119</sup> The question was set aside, and when John Buchan of the PAC was made Governor-General of Canada, in October 1935, the Committee was brought to a close.<sup>120</sup>

The BBC's experiences in the arrangement of party broadcasts had not inclined it favourably towards them. Nor had they proved, for the most part, to be good programme material. Reith told the Liberal Chief Whip that, 'we do not, as you know, deal very much in specifically political series'.<sup>121</sup> When the Corporation's General Advisory Committee suggested increasing the number of political talks, it was told that

Apart from the difficulty of giving adequate representation to conflicting points of view, it was felt that strong objection would be raised by listeners to the introduction of additional political broadcasts - at any rate by the lesser-known politicians.<sup>122</sup>

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119. C.Stuart, Op. Cit., 120, 21 February 1935.

120. BBC, PPBPAP, Reith to PAC members, 17 October 1935.

121. BBC, PPBAPB, Reith to W. Rea, 4 December 1934.

122. BBC, GAC, Monthly Report, June 1935.

The BBC was still bound by the fact that it had not yet devised methods of discussing direct party politics - party reactions to daily current events, divergencies of opinion within parties, etc. - other than through the use of protracted series of unedited statements by party spokesmen and other politicians. There was clearly an element of truth in Hilda Matheson's comment that

It is .... always a temptation to those who administer a public broadcasting service to err on the side of timidity. It often seems safer at the time to avoid delicate subjects of current controversy; it is always tempting to yield to a personal request<sup>123</sup> or suggestion from a Minister or a public department.

Yet it was quite mistaken for Randolph Churchill to describe the Corporation as 'terrified' of political controversy.<sup>124</sup> There were many other determinants at work than the personal ones of timidity or courage. Not least was the fact that the BBC was not yet geared to react to the immediate events of politics. It was committed to a policy of considered presentation of arguments. Such a policy allowed for planning of series, and planning allowed for consultation in the interest of agreement and harmony. Consultation in turn allowed for the judicious modification of plans, in response to those representations which to the Corporation appeared reasonable. The whole process was far more subtle and less covertly suspicious than crude notions of terror, timidity, censorship or party and government pressure would allow for, as the question of India demonstrates.

The budget series had now become established and took place in 1935 without comment. When Baldwin became Prime Minister in June, however, and was permitted to broadcast, both Labour and Liberals protested that some of his comments were tendentious. Reith followed budget procedure by permitting three fully controversial talks to be

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123. Hilda Matheson, 'Politics and Broadcasting', Political Quarterly, April 1934, 195.

124. Daily Despatch, 1 May 1933.



given, but rejected the notion that the Opposition should always have the right of reply to ministerial statements. Nor could he accept that the BBC had been in error on this occasion:

Since on such occasions manuscripts are not required beforehand, the Corporation cannot decide until after the talk has been given whether or not a right of rejoinder is warranted.<sup>125</sup>

The second government statement was justified, he considered, on the grounds that Baldwin had not known he was to be answered and had been inhibited from full freedom of speech by the 'ministerial' label of his broadcast. This was the first occasion on which the BBC did decide to permit a reply after a ministerial had been given, and was indicative of a desire not to allow unanswered partisan statements by the Government. It was also to be the last such occasion before the row with Anthony Eden over Suez in 1956.<sup>126</sup> Coming as it did during the sittings of the Ullswater Committee on Broadcasting, it was perhaps a bold decision.

The main political broadcasting issue of 1935 was the General Election. Reith was anxious that the procedure intended in 1931 - the BBC granting a set number of periods and leaving it to the parties to agree a ratio - should on this occasion be effective. Accordingly Margesson was told that twelve broadcasts would be made available. The confusion of 1931 had clearly rendered the previous procedure of party equality after the dissolution inoperative, and Margesson stated that he would agree to a ratio of 5 talks to Government parties, 4 to Labour and 3 to opposition Liberals. As before it was suggested that minority parties such as the ILP, Fascists and Communists should be given a shorter broadcast at a less advantageous

125. BBC, BPF, Reith to Lansbury, 27 June 1935.

126. In 1944 the National Farmers Union protested at a ministerial given by R. Hudson, the Minister of Agriculture. The BBC accepted that Hudson's talk had not been impartial and gave a representative of the NFU an opportunity to reply. There is no record of an opposition party right of reply being granted until 1956.

time if they fielded a certain number of candidates, on this occasion  
<sup>127</sup>  
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For once argument was surprisingly limited. Walter Rea, the Liberal Chief Whip, accepted Margesson's proposals, even though it was stipulated that one of the Liberal places should be given to Lloyd George.<sup>128</sup> Inevitably the strongest arguments came from Attlee who, in addition to being the new Labour leader, was also on the Ullswater Committee. The National Council of Labour had told its followers earlier in the year that broadcasting would be 'a potent element' in the General Election, and now Attlee made suggestions that political broadcasts should end three days before the election, that the last Labour and Government speakers should be on the same night, that all manuscripts should be handed in in advance of the series and that all other programmes of a potentially political nature should be cancelled during the campaign.<sup>129</sup> He proposed a ratio of 5:5:2, arguing that 'the Government Party' and Labour were the only two real contestants and should therefore be treated equally.<sup>130</sup> This was a complete reversal from Labour's high-minded statements in 1933 that every party should be given equal treatment. Attlee's argument pragmatically prejudged the election and made the probable result a determinant of the broadcasting arrangements.

The BBC had disclaimed all responsibility for obtaining party agreement. Nevertheless it was sympathetic to Margesson's proposal, which it regarded as remarkably restrained. As Cecil Graves, the new Controller of Programmes, told both Attlee and Rea,

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127. BBC, PPBGEB, C. Graves to Reith, 15 October 1935.

128. BBC, PPBGEB, W. Rea to Reith, 17 October 1935.

129. Labour Party, NEC, NCL to all Labour Party and TU members, February 1935.

130. BBC, PPBGEB, Attlee to Reith, 17 October 1935. It was significant of the importance which Attlee attached to broadcasting that he handled these negotiations himself, as he did also in 1939, instead of leaving them to the Chief Whip.



We were .... from previous experience rather surprised to hear that Captain Margesson had not suggested a greater proportion to the Government.<sup>131</sup>

Indeed, compared with the 1931 allocation of six government to four opposition broadcasts, the reverse ratio of 5:7 did appear reasonable. The Government did, after all, still claim to be a national one of three parties. Yet in relation to the 1924 and 1929 ratios of 1:2 and 2:4 the Government remained at an advantage. The 5:4:3 ratio, which Attlee agreed to under protest, was a recognition that the political situation was still somewhat confused, rather than a result of the practical application of a theoretical model, as in previous elections. It was significant that in arranging for the expected 1939 election Margesson himself proposed a 5:5:2 ratio, accepting Attlee's argument that once parliament had been dissolved there was no government, and that it should not therefore be given preferential treatment.<sup>132</sup> Strangely, on this occasion, Attlee actually demanded less than he had been given in 1935, stating merely that the opposition parties as a whole should have parity with the Government.<sup>133</sup> As with the arrangement of budget broadcasts, the protagonists were becoming more amenable, the issues less fraught, as the procedure became regularised and known. Although beliefs as to the power and importance of broadcasting were as strong as ever, the parties were, quite simply, growing used to broadcasting. Moreover the decline of the Liberals to minority status reduced a possible bone of contention in the question of the overall ratio of opposition to Government broadcasts. To a government which received the first and last broadcasts 5:5:2 appeared not unreasonable, whilst to the major opposition party it was as much as it could expect.

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131. BBC, PPBGEB, C. Graves to W. Rea, 21 October 1935.

132. BBC, PPBGEB, F. Ogilvie (new D.G.) to Control Board, 18 January 1939.

133. BBC, PPBG, record of meeting of Attlee, A. Greenwood, F. Ogilvie and Graves, 1 December 1938.

Although the parties were becoming more amenable regarding political broadcasts, they were less so with regard to the BBC's own programmes. Whereas in 1929, and to a lesser extent in 1931, programmes with political implications had continued during the election, the BBC agreed in 1935 and 1939 to the suggestion that any such should be cancelled. Thus in 1935 an unscripted debate including Harold Laski and Robert Boothby, 'That a Second Chamber is neither necessary or desirable', was cancelled, as were talks on proportional representation, 'A Revaluation of Politics' and 'Keir Hardie' (by Philip Snowden).<sup>134</sup> Following Labour and Liberal agreement, however, Sir Samuel Hoare gave a talk on 'The Situation in Geneva', as a result of the Italo/Abyssinian war, on the strict understanding that

in a broadcast of this nature there can be no question of government propaganda either direct or indirect.<sup>135</sup>

It is also interesting to note that the Corporation had not intended originally to restrict its normal programmes in this way. Gladstone Murray, now Assistant Programme Controller, had merely stressed

the importance of special scrutiny of all talks and news in order to maintain scrupulous fairness in giving news and statements of the political parties.<sup>136</sup>

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134. The third of these was a talk by a medical psychologist on 'The dangers of being human: Changing the World: A Revaluation of Politics'. Commenting on this cancellation S.D.Spicer, the Talks Executive, wrote: 'One obviously cannot allow a Medical Psychologist to say in polite language that all politicians talk through their hats two minutes after Mr. Ramsay MacDonald has finished speaking. This is a particularly obvious case, but it illustrates the kind of thing which may occur if a good look-out is not kept at such time'. - BBC, PPBGE, S.D. Spicer to M. Farquharson, 17 April 1936.

135. BBC, PPBGE, C. Graves to W. Rea and Attlee, 1 November 1935.

136. BBC, PPBGE, Gladstone Murray to J.M. Rose-Troup and J. Coatman 21 October 1935.



Moreover the first half of the potentially highly controversial series 'The Citizen and His Government' was broadcast throughout the election period, with a talk on 'The Communist and Fascist Experiment' only two days before the poll. As in 1931 the manifestoes of the parties were broadcast in the news and were again summarised on the evening before the poll. Although election speeches were not reported, important election news was given. The progress of the campaign, however, was not really covered.

The biggest row of the election was over Samuel's decision to give one of the Liberal broadcasts to Snowden. Snowden had asked Reith for an opportunity to talk 'from a non-party stand point', but this had been rejected.<sup>137</sup> When he heard that Snowden was to broadcast, Margesson was 'furious' and regarded it as a breach of the agreed ratio. Reith, however, refused to intervene: 'I was surprised that Margesson suggested 5:4:3. Now he regrets it'.<sup>138</sup> Other requests for broadcasts came from the ILP, Co-operative, Social Credit, Scottish Nationalist, Welsh Nationalist, Independent Conservative and Communist parties, whilst the BBC's Scottish Regional Director proposed regional broadcasts on Scottish affairs.<sup>139</sup> The ILP seems to have been given a short broadcast at an early hour, although it fielded only 17 candidates. But when no other minority party polled 20 candidates their requests were rejected. Lloyd George, however, had again received somewhat preferential treatment.

The broadcasts themselves were, as ever, of variable quality. Reith considered Snowden's 'awful' and Arthur Greenwood's 'really

137. BBC, PPBGEB, Snowden to Reith, 24 October 1935: 'The great bulk of the electors today are not hide-bound party supporters, and are distrustful of mere party appeals'.

138. C.Stuart, Op. Cit., 122, 25 October 1935.

139. BBC, PPBPPB, M. Dinwiddie to C. Graves, 15 October 1935. This issue was raised again in the 1950s, and was only resolved by allowing regional General Election broadcasts in 1966 - D.E. Butler and A. King, The British General Election of 1966, London 1966, 140.

disgusting ... a prostitution of broadcasting'.<sup>140</sup> The new success at the election was Herbert Morrison, who gave the last Labour speech. This was not altogether surprising, as he was well aware of the importance of the medium, had considered going to a broadcasting school to improve his microphone technique and finally arranged with Mary Agnes Hamilton that the BBC Talks Department should coach him.<sup>141</sup> His broadcast, however, only followed a wrangle in the NEC between those who wanted George Lansbury to broadcast, even though no longer Labour leader, and those who favoured the up and coming Morrison. On the whole Labour's broadcasts were badly co-ordinated and poorly presented. As ever Baldwin produced two of the best performances, giving the first and last Conservative broadcasts. Before his last Gower told him that other speeches in the series

reek of party politics and fail to carry weight on that account .... I have always held the view that the more personal, intimate and friendly these talks can be, the greater the influence they will exercise, and there is nobody who can deliver a talk of this kind better than yourself.<sup>142</sup>

Geoffrey Lloyd similarly told Baldwin of a Labour family in Ladywood who were 'brought right over to our side' by listening to his first broadcast:

I therefore think that your speech tonight may be of absolutely decisive influence in the Campaign, and ..... may be the cause of holding a large number of doubtful seats.<sup>143</sup>

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140. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 123, 1 and 5 November 1935.

141. M.A. Hamilton, Op. Cit., 168. Thomas Jones wrote that Morrison had 'emerged into prominence owing to the excellence of his broadcast speech'. - T. Jones, A Diary With Letters, London 1954, 155-6, Jones to Dr. A. Flexner, 17 November 1935.

142. Baldwin papers, Bal.203/f40, Gower to Baldwin, 2 November 1935.

143. Baldwin papers, Bal.47/f147-149, minute of phone call from G. Lloyd to Baldwin, 8 November 1935.



Baldwin's effect was summed up by a listener who wrote: 'altho' I have never met you I feel I know you quite well'.<sup>144</sup>

Press opinion was almost unanimous about the possible effect of election broadcasts. The Observer considered that 'an astute or an ill-judged broadcast can gain or lose many thousands of votes', whilst the Sunday Referee considered radio to be,

undoubtedly the most important factor in elections today. Its influence is to make the whole country move together.<sup>145</sup>

Harold Laski considered that Labour was 'incomparably inferior' to the Government in both wireless and cinema propaganda and urged that greater attention be paid to it.<sup>146</sup> Only Lord Godfrey Elton, writing in the National Labour News-Letter, placed political broadcasting in the context of a pluralist media and multifarious other political influences:

Nobody knows what effect these broadcast election speeches have on their audiences. Is there a section of the public which listens to each of the series, goes to no meetings and ignores the newspapers, and decides its vote on the balance of the argument? Nobody knows.<sup>147</sup>

The election notwithstanding, the most important event of 1935 for the BBC was the discussion and report of the Ullswater Committee on Broadcasting. The Committee's comments on BBC/party relations were

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144. Baldwin papers, Bal.39/f3-5, J. Adams to Baldwin, 9 November 1935.
145. The Observer, 17 November 1935; The Sunday Referee, 17 November 1935. For other press comments see A. Briggs (1965), Op. Cit., 140-141.
146. H. Laski, 'The General Election 1935', Political Quarterly, vol.7 (1936), 7.
147. Lord Godfrey Elton, 'Politics on the Air', The News-Letter, 9 November 1935.

hardly helpful:

though we are far from implying that all broadcast treatment of political questions should be controlled by the political party organisations, we recommend that on the major political issues of the day there should be close co-operation and consultation between the BBC and the authorised spokesmen of the recognised political parties.<sup>148</sup>

To this the BBC Board somewhat drily replied that such consultation had been 'the invariable practice'.<sup>149</sup> Yet the Corporation regarded the implementation of such recommendations as a certain moral duty, as it had those of Crawford. Moreover it knew that the National Council of Labour had taken the opportunity of Ullswater to reaffirm its views as stated in 1933. The NCL had called for greater political broadcasting 'in the interests of good citizenship', but almost entirely by politicians. It expressed its strong opinion that

if proper provision is made for the leaders of political life to appear before the microphone,<sup>150</sup> there is little need for "unofficial" commentators.

The BBC should choose neither subject nor speakers, but only provide air-time, leaving the agenda to party leaders. Initiatives for broadcasts should come from both government and opposition, and on economic and industrial issues from employers and trade unions. The NCL's only real concession was its acceptance that the Government should have a brief right of reply to all opposition statements following an initial government broadcast.<sup>151</sup>

148. Cmd. 5091 (1936). Report of the Broadcasting Committee, 1935, paragraph 92.

149. BBC,UCRCP, Observations by the Board of Goverors, c. March 1936,11.

150. Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1935, Appendix XII.

151. Ibid. See also H.C. Debates, vol. 311: col. 1028, C.G. Ammon, 29 April 1936.



The BBC could not accept these proposals, but it had to take note of them, as it had those of the Ullswater Report. Its experiences with the parties had steadily turned it against the notion of direct party political talks, but Ullswater and the NCL evidence limited its freedom to develop party affairs broadcasting without the full involvement of the parties, even had it wished to do so. In fact during the succeeding three years the BBC was to demonstrate a particular regard for the primacy of parliament and parliamentary procedures, which encouraged it, even more than before, to act 'correctly'. In part this may have been due to Ullswater's comment that

It is in the Parliamentary contest that the issues before the country should emerge .... broadcasting should look towards Parliament as the focal point of political thought.<sup>152</sup>

But it was also a reflection of the type of person who was now in the senior management of the Corporation. Briggs has mentioned how, following the departure of Matheson, Siepmann and Fielden from the Talks Department, Reith felt it necessary to recruit a number of 'right wing' staff to balance the general trend there. This was confirmed by Reith himself in a conversation with D. Morley-Fletcher of Conservative Central Office in 1937:

It was true, [Reith] said, that nearly 9 in every 10 in the BBC are Left, but the administration today is doing everything in its power to draft in more of the Right to balance.<sup>153</sup>

The appointment of such men as John Coatman to take charge of news, Sir Richard Maconachie as Director of Talks and even Sir Stephen Tallents as Controller of Public Relations, may be seen in this light. This is certainly not to suggest that such men were

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152. Cmd. 5091 (1936) Report of the Broadcasting Committee, 1935, paragraph 90.

153. COO, COO4/1/23, D. Morley-Fletcher to Miss Curlett, 11 May 1937.

consciously politically motivated - this would have been anathema to Reith. Nor were they any the less idealistically inspired than Matheson and Siepmann; Sir Stephen Tallents is widely recognised today as the guardian of the documentary film movement, the notions of which on democratic education paralleled Reith's. Similarly Maconachie was given the post of Director of Talks partly because of a statement of ideals at his interview:

one of the greatest problems for democracy is the time-lag in the transmission of ideas and knowledge from the few to the many.<sup>154</sup> That time-lag broadcasting can shorten.

Yet the background of such men, and of Alan Dawnay and Cecil Graves as successive Controllers of Programmes, was essentially 'of the establishment' - the army, the Indian Civil Service, the Foreign Office.<sup>155</sup> Whilst no less enthusiastic about broadcasting's potential than earlier staff, their previous experience gave them a superior respect for constitutional propriety, a re-emphasis of Reith's already strong regard for the traditional authority of government, parliament and the primacy of democratic institutions, itself a reflection of strong democratic ideals. Whether this is to be regarded as Briggs' 'further retreat into caution', or as a further attempt by Reith to lift the BBC to his intended pedestal of political impartiality and hence to a more perfect integration into the democratic machine, is a moot point.<sup>156</sup> Indeed the two views are compatible; it is merely suggested here that Reith saw it rather in the latter terms.

The BBC remained anxious to avoid direct liaison with the parties. Consequently it saw MacDonald's idea of a Parliamentary Advisory Committee as still the best way of fulfilling Ullswater's recommendations, assuming such a body could be made representative.

154. M.A. Hamilton, Op. Cit., 151.

155. See B. Howorth 'The British Broadcasting Corporation, Nazi Germany and the Foreign Office', Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, Vol.1 No. 1, March 1981, 51-52.

156. A. Briggs (1965), Op. Cit., 149.



To avoid a repetition of Labour's objections to such a committee, but in order also to prevent it being simply a panel of party nominees, it was again decided to ask the Speaker, with the agreement of the party leaders, to appoint its members. Further progress, however, was delayed until the Government's decisions on Ullswater were announced in July 1936. In the event political broadcasting was not mentioned, for the Government was disinclined to take the initiative in altering the present comparatively advantageous state of affairs. Indeed it was significant that, when asked for his views on a PAC, the fair-minded Chief Whip, David Margesson, stated that it was for the BBC to take full responsibility on such matters, the parties merely retaining the right to criticise the results.<sup>157</sup>

The Corporation, however, felt obliged to follow Ullswater's recommendations and so approached the Speaker, Edward Fitzroy. The result was only further delay, for with the House about to rise for the long recess the latter felt he had no authority to take action until it met again in October. The slowness of these negotiations suggests that the Corporation itself was no longer as keen as it had formerly been to develop party broadcasts, for it was decided to wait until its new Charter and Licence came into operation in 1937 before again approaching the Speaker.<sup>158</sup> Fitzroy, however, was even then unwilling to take a decision which he feared might compromise the neutrality of his office. Instead he referred the question to the whips who in turn, and inevitably, asked for more details of the intended composition and function of such a committee.<sup>159</sup> Thus by March 1937 no further progress had been made and the whole question was being passed from one body to another. Each was determined not to take responsibility for a decision which past experience had shown would be unpopular, controversial and quite possibly unworkable. In fact the only party broadcasts at this time were two speeches by the leaders of the principal contending parties in the LOC

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157. BBC, PPBPAC, Tallents to Reith, 22 July 1936.

158. BBC, PPBPAC, Tallents to Sir Ralph Verney, 5 February 1937.

159. BBC, PPBPAC, R. Verney to Tallents, 22 February 1937.

elections.<sup>160</sup>

In understandable frustration the BBC abandoned this fruitless line of approach. Instead the Chairman, now Ronald Norman, wrote directly to the Postmaster General, G.C. Tryon, asking his advice on how to proceed from this stalemate:

I think you will agree that the failure to implement not merely the Ullswater Committee's advice but our own desires, formulated before this Committee met, is no fault of ours. We feel that we have done our best.<sup>161</sup>

Tryon, beyond a brief acknowledgement, was not to reply for almost a year and then only after several reminders.<sup>162</sup> Only when Norman told him in February 1938 that, 'if you reply that you cannot help us we shall do the best we can on our own', did Tryon write to say that, indeed, he had no helpful suggestions to make.<sup>163</sup>

The Government had no particular interest in facilitating these negotiations, although there is no evidence that the delays and hindrances were deliberate. Nor did Reith have the ear of the Prime Minister any longer; he had not cultivated Chamberlain, nor did he feel the same affinity with him that he had with MacDonald and Baldwin. During the latter part of his premiership Baldwin had been too run down and then too involved with the abdication to concern himself with broadcasting, although the latter event did bring him into close contact with Reith. But he was beyond the stage of taking an active interest - so much so that he unthinkingly 'concurred' with

160. BBC, TPBLCC, BBC press announcement, 5 February 1937.

161. BBC, PPBPAC, R.C. Norman to G.C. Tryon, 1 March 1937.

162. Norman's letter was mislaid by the GPO for four months. Then it was too soon before the long recess to consult the Speaker. Tryon promised a reply in the autumn but failed to give one.

163. BBC, PPBG, Norman to Tryon, 7 February 1938; Tryon to Norman, 18 February 1938.



a ridiculous and reactionary resolution by the National Union Publications Sub-Committee, that at General Elections the total number of opposition party broadcasts should not exceed those of the Government.<sup>164</sup> MacDonald also told Reith in 1936 that 'most of the Cabinet cared<sup>165</sup> nothing at all for the serious issues of broadcasting'.

Yet the Labour Party equally seemed content to await the outcome of these negotiations, and only Herbert Morrison complained that

there has been a tendency in recent years for the proportion of controversial broadcasts to decrease. I hope nobody has got cold feet!<sup>166</sup>

In the debate on the Government's proposals for broadcasting, Attlee stressed how essential it was that political broadcasting be 'fully utilised'; but during this time Labour showed itself more concerned with the current fierce press accusations about BBC administrative problems and staff relations.<sup>167</sup> It was left to a Liberal, Megan Lloyd George, to push matters further. In the same debate she made a long and impassioned plea for greater party and political affairs broadcasting, accusing the BBC of being 'scared', proposing that it adopt the press principle "'The Editor does not necessarily agree'" and concluding:

When democracy is being challenged, as it is all over Europe, and when its efficiency compared with autocracies has by no means been established, it is vital that the people of this country should be well informed as to the issues that have to be

164. NUCUA, Report of Executive Committee to Central Council, 23 March 1937.

165. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 211, 6 May 1936.

166. BBC, CHM, H. Morrison to Reith, 15 October 1937.

167. H.C. Debates, vol. 314: col. 974, 6 July 1936.

decided.<sup>168</sup>

Possibly as a result of this speech Megan Lloyd George was invited, in early 1937, to become a member of a General Talks Advisory Committee (TAC) which the BBC was establishing to advise on talks policy. She immediately advocated greater political broadcasting, and the Committee unanimously passed a resolution of hers calling for

discussion before the microphone by whatever method the BBC finds practicable, of live political issues which are actually under consideration.<sup>169</sup>

Whilst the PMG was supposedly considering the matter, however, the Corporation told the TAC that nothing further could be done, so that it was only in March 1938 that this idea was again considered. The Director of Talks, Sir Richard Maconachie, was dubious about its advisability:

it would give MPs an enormous "forum" in which they could continue discussions begun in the House - and so influence public opinion on issues under debate there.<sup>170</sup>

Similarly Sir Stephen Tallents, the Controller of Public Relations, was unwilling to contemplate broadcasts by MPs on issues before the House, as this would

create the appearance of a wireless court either parallel to Parliament or in the relation of a court of appeal to it.<sup>171</sup>

168. Ibid., cols. 936-942.

169. BBC, PPBG, Talks Advisory Committee minutes, 1 July 1937.

170. BBC, PPBG, Maconachie to Graves, 7 March 1938.

171. BBC, PPBG, Tallents to Reith, Graves and Control Board, 15 March 1938.



Megan Lloyd George did not accept these arguments. Live issues needed to be discussed, she felt, because listeners were required to make a decision on them. Besides, such programmes would provide good entertainment. These were both arguments which could not help her case with the BBC. Maconachie saw no need for instant and emotional decision-taking by the electorate, based on partisan argument:

In the case of a Bill before the House it is not our audience who are called upon to form a decision but the members in the House.<sup>172</sup>

The truth was what mattered, not the party interpretations of the evidence, whilst the entertainment value of party argument was certainly not a consideration. If political affairs broadcasting could attract by entertaining, all well and good,

but the essential desideratum is that it should be educative or informative .... If the Corporation loses sight of this principle, I do not think it will ever attain the position of authority and prestige which we earnestly desire for it. It should never be satisfied, in dealing with matters of grave importance, with presenting a Punch and Judy show ....<sup>173</sup>

Maconachie may have had a more establishment background than his predecessors, but he had no greater respect for the party system. This was a view shared also by the Controller of Programmes, Cecil Graves:

the normal function of our talks is to provide material for listeners to form their own views on the basis of full information on all aspects of a subject rather than on the lines of unreasoning Party loyalties. In other words our normal function is probably to teach people to think for themselves

172. BBC, PPBG, Maconachie to Graves; 5 April 1938.

173. Ibid.

about politics.<sup>174</sup>

By February 1938 the Labour Party National Executive was beginning to take an interest again. A meeting with the BBC was requested to discuss General Election broadcasts and Labour's desire to broadcast on the international situation following Eden's resignation as Foreign Secretary.<sup>175</sup> In reply Cecil Graves made what he knew was a thoroughly safe promise:

should we be officially informed that it was the wish of the Government as well as of the Official Opposition that there should be a broadcast discussion upon the present issue we might be prepared to make arrangements for such a broadcast.<sup>176</sup>

In the meantime, he stated, both Government and Opposition views had been very fully reported in the news bulletins. The BBC Board similarly felt that such a discussion would merely repeat the House of Commons debate on the subject, which had been fully reported.<sup>177</sup>

As with Churchill and India, the Labour Party's frustrated wish was a desire to influence public opinion and hence government policy. The BBC, by contrast, wished simply to inform the electorate of decisions taken and opinions held. The emphasis was quite different. This was made clear at a meeting of representatives of the Party and the BBC, where Arthur Greenwood argued that a political talk had far greater impact on the public than any news reports of parliamentary proceedings. Graves, on the other hand, said that political events and arguments were best handled in the news, which gave a clearer picture of what was happening. He felt that with five news bulletins

174. BBC, PPBG, Graves to Reith and Control Board, 30 May 1938.

175. Labour Party, NEC, Publicity, Research and Local Government Sub-Committee, 15 February 1938; NEC, Minutes, 23 February 1938.

176. BBC, PPBG, Graves to J.S. Middleton, 25 February 1938.

177. BBC, PPBG, Reith to Middleton, 9 March 1938.



each evening, covering international affairs very fully, anything more would be superfluous.<sup>178</sup>

Nevertheless the Board was impressed with Labour's argument that it should be given occasional opportunities to broadcast, and impressed also by its reasonable attitude to the difficulties of the BBC's task. Reith told Graves that

the initiative is with us. The Labour Party want more politics.<sup>179</sup>  
Governors want more politics. And I think we all do.

Accordingly Basil Nicolls, the new Controller of Programmes, set out his views for the Control Board and Governors. His first point, and one with which the Governors and his colleagues agreed, was that the principal issue the Opposition wished to discuss, foreign and defence policy, was in the Government's opinion outside the realm of party politics and hence not arguable. Thus on the question of a broadcast on Eden's resignation,

there is not the slightest doubt that the Government (or the Conservative Party, from the Party point of view)<sup>180</sup> would have refused to take part.

Party broadcasts were therefore automatically restricted to domestic issues, and here the BBC's rejection of issues proposed - of an agenda set - by the parties, led it to look entirely to debates in the present parliamentary session for possible subjects, with interesting results. For it was found that

apart from foreign politics and defence issues, [the session] did

178. BBC, PPBG, Minutes of meeting between Labour and BBC Board representatives, 30 March 1938.

179. 27 April 1938. Quoted by A. Briggs (1965), Op. Cit., 657.

180. BBC, BGP, Board Memorandum G71/38, 3 June 1938. See pages 551-611 below for a discussion of foreign affairs broadcasting.

not contain a single bill of any controversial significance.<sup>181</sup>

The Milk Bill was the best the session could offer and it was agreed all round to be a reductio ad absurdum to ask the parties to wage war over milk. The Prison Bill, coming up in the autumn, appeared to be the first opportunity for real political controversy on a domestic issue. In the meantime the Corporation decided to increase the amount of non-party political affairs broadcasting and to approach the whips yet again, in an attempt to effect a satisfactory liaison.<sup>182</sup>

Yet as on previous occasions the BBC's naturally closer links with the government of the day led it into error, for Tallents and Nicolls proceeded to consult Margesson alone before making a general approach. Unfortunately for Labour, Reith's departure from the BBC at this moment caused it to cancel a further meeting which might have reminded Tallents of the need for strict impartiality in negotiation.<sup>183</sup> The consequence was that Margesson was able to quash a proposal for an autumn debate on the King's speech, without reference to the other parties. He also urged that ministers should not be used for such broadcasts, thereby limiting them to backbenchers and so reducing their significance and authority. With both of these suggestions Tallents concurred.<sup>184</sup> As ever the summer recess was the cause of further delay until October, and Maconachie, who had not been involved in the negotiations, was annoyed that through mishandling nothing had been achieved.<sup>185</sup> In the autumn, moreover, with the events of Munich just past, Margesson wrote again to suggest that the times were too critical for party broadcasts. He proposed that they be held over until the New Year, a suggestion that

181. Ibid.

182. BBC, PPBG, Board meeting minutes, 8 June 1938.

183. Labour Party, NEC, Campaign Committee minutes, 7 July 1938.

184. BBC, PPBG, record by Tallents of telephone conversation with Margesson, 20 July 1938.

185. BBC, PPBG, Maconachie to B.E. Nicolls, 2 August 1938.



the BBC could only accept.<sup>186</sup>

Matters looked set for further stalemate, yet from this point on events moved, for such discussions, remarkably quickly. At the first meeting between Attlee and the new Director General, Frederick Ogilvie, the latter emphasised that

we were very anxious to include as much balanced controversy as possible in our programmes, but that it was difficult to do this without agreement amongst Parties themselves.<sup>187</sup>

Attlee continued his previous comparatively reasonable and patient approach and promised immediately to see Margesson with a view to obtaining agreement. Margesson equally showed a most co-operative attitude, agreeing to a monthly single programme debate, the three parties choosing the subject in rotation and, most importantly, the Government accepting a ratio of 1:1:1. His only stipulation was that foreign affairs should be excluded from the debates.<sup>188</sup> It was also agreed that backbenchers only would be used, thereby reducing the possibility of friction being created by these debates. Each programme would consist of three statements, each of fifteen minutes, and it seems to have been decided to discuss either topics of current interest not related to bills before the House, or bills which had recently passed their second reading.<sup>189</sup>

Agreement had finally been reached by allowing the parties freedom to choose subjects and speakers, and it is clear that they would have accepted nothing less. Despite the success of negotiations Ogilvie was sufficiently dubious of the parties' continued good will to suggest to Nicolls and Tallents that the BBC give these debates

186. BBC, PPBG, Margesson to Nicolls, 28 October 1938.

187. BBC, PPBG, record of meeting of Attlee, A. Greenwood, F. Ogilvie and C. Graves, 1 December 1938.

188. BBC, PPBGEB, F. Ogilvie to Control Board, 18 January 1939.

189. BBC, TPBPD, Maconachie to Nicolls, 14 February 1939.

considerable publicity,

in order that it may be less easy for the parties to slide out of the scheme if later it does not happen to suit the political convenience of any one of them.<sup>190</sup>

With a ready understanding of the niceties of euphemism he also recommended that they be advertised as 'free and frank discussion' rather than 'uncensored'.<sup>191</sup>

The first debate, on 27 February 1939, was on old age pensions, between Sir Charles Edwards, H. Graham White and Sir Arnold Wilson, and it fulfilled all Maconachie's worst expectations from a programme point of view. The BBC's listener groups were overwhelmingly hostile: 'very dull', 'dreadfully lamentable and disappointing', 'unutterably boring' and 'political squabble that few want or appreciate'.<sup>192</sup> Yet the difficulty of persuading all parties to debate on more interesting subjects, with more important speakers and in a more impromptu manner, was at that time too great. Nor were the objections to a more adventurous approach entirely on the Government side; when Ogilvie suggested to Attlee that he and Stafford Cripps should broadcast on their differences over the question of a Popular Front, Attlee rejected the idea:

Hitherto political broadcasting has been confined to the discussion of matters at issue between recognised parties. The difficulty of admitting fortuitous collections of individuals had always been recognised as opening the door very wide to all kinds of cranks. I can see no good reason for departing from the existing practice ....<sup>193</sup>

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190. BBC, PPBG, Ogilvie to Nicolls and Tallents, 17 February 1939.

191. Ibid.

192. BBC, PPBG, memorandum by Maconachie, 9 March 1939.

193. BBC, PPBG, Attlee to Ogilvie, 16 March 1939.



Ogilvie, who had already assured Churchill of his intention to extend political broadcasting beyond the parties, protested that the present party debates should not be the sum total of what political broadcasting could and ought to become. The public demanded occasionally to hear a Cripps, Churchill, Lloyd George or Lansbury and the BBC considered this reasonable:

But when any particular suggestion is put forward it happens all too often that, for some reason, one or other of the parties to the discussion declines, - and the BBC is consequently accused of failure to cater adequately for free speech.<sup>194</sup>

In view of the 'fiasco' of the first debate the producer, Vincent Alford, attempted to persuade the speakers of the second, on 'Municipal Trading', to break up their contributions into several more conversational sections, but without success. It was, however, agreed to speak from notes rather than a script, the second and third speakers having advance notice of what the preceding ones would say. The result was a slight improvement, but in general the remaining debates in the series, on 'Unemployment', 'An Emergency Tax on Wealth' and 'Agriculture' were failures. A proposal by Attlee that the speeches should be followed by an impromptu discussion amongst the speakers failed to gain the approval of the Government and Liberal whips, despite the encouragement of the Corporation.<sup>195</sup> The verdict of the Co-operative News critic on these broadcasts was fair:

they do not deserve the name of debate, and they are doing no good to politics.<sup>196</sup>

Nevertheless, as war cut short further development, it is evident that distinct progress towards regular, freer - and more attractive -

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194. BBC, PPBG, Ogilvie to Attlee, 23 March 1939.

195. BBC, TPBPD, Attlee to Nicolls, 4 May 1939; Nicolls to Attlee, 5 May 1939; C. Edwards to Nicolls, 11 May 1939.

196. Co-operative News, 27 May 1939.

party affairs broadcasting was being made. The single programme debate and the Government's waiving of its insistence on a 2:1 ratio helped; and there can be little doubt that before long criticism would have led the parties to accept a less structured format, as Attlee was already suggesting. The freer atmosphere was demonstrated in particular by a special debate arranged in May on the question of Palestine. Malcolm MacDonald had been due to give a ministerial broadcast on the Palestine Report. When Attlee complained, however, that this report was not that of a Royal Commission but was a statement of Government policy, opposed by Labour and Liberals,<sup>197</sup> Ogilvie readily concurred. He immediately contacted MacDonald, cancelling the broadcast and offering him a choice either of a controversial discussion or of a ministerial broadcast after the issue had been through parliament.<sup>198</sup> In his turn MacDonald proved more amenable to persuasion than other ministers in the past and agreed to a debate. In view of the fact that the issue of Palestine was highly topical, that the broadcast took place only five days after it was first proposed and before the parliamentary debate, and that all the speakers were front benchers, the whole event was something of a new and daring experiment. Its success as a programme demonstrated that topicality and experienced broadcasters (MacDonald, Lloyd George, Tom Williams and Sir Thomas Inskip) could make political discussion attractive as well as instructive.

One final indication of a greater boldness of approach was provided by a discussion of political affairs broadcasting by the BBC's General Advisory Committee, in May 1939. On this occasion there was an almost unanimous expression of a desire for greater independence from the parties. Each speaker in turn deprecated the control the whips had over the present series. Lord Lothian, for example, argued that the BBC could indeed be

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197. BBC, PPBMB, record of telephone call from Attlee to Ogilvie, 18 May 1939.

198. BBC, PPBMB, record of telephone call from Ogilvie to M. MacDonald's secretary, 18 May 1939.



a better judge of the tendencies which were important and the personalities who ought to be heard certainly than the Whips, who were influenced by an entirely different set of considerations.<sup>199</sup>

There was a widespread call for the discussion of foreign affairs, and both Nicolls and Ogilvie emphasised that the BBC would happily arrange it if the parties would agree. The general conclusion was that

the BBC should be ready to take a greater measure of responsibility upon itself in the arrangement of broadcast political speeches and debates including the selection of political speakers.<sup>200</sup>

There was no time for these more hopeful signs to develop; the war brought everything to a halt. Nor had there been more than slight indications of progress. Throughout the 1930s the BBC had been frustrated at every turn by party wrangling, by government reticence and, it must be said, by its own essentially 'responsible' and respectful outlook. Prevented by external factors from developing to any extent the presentation of party political affairs, its own inherent antipathy to party politics had made it disinclined to gainsay the parties and make the attempt by itself. Broadcasting balance still meant and could only mean balance of output rather than of opportunity, and the BBC was simply not yet in a position to take a different line. Yet to try to persuade all parties to agree both on an agenda and on an equitable distribution of air-time was an almost impossible task. It was therefore hardly surprising that the Corporation came through only with a question mark over its political independence, and the label 'timid' around its neck.

199. BBC, GAC, memorandum GAC.123, 24 May 1939.

200. BBC, GAC, minutes, 24 May 1939.

Note A.

An impression of Neville Chamberlain's approach to broadcasting can be gained from his letter to his sister Hilda on 21 April 1935 - NC18/1/913 :

I am glad that you heard and approved my broadcast. My P[rivate] S[ecretary] gave me, at my request, a draft - largely consisting of extracts from the [budget] speech. But I felt that for the broadcast something more homely was wanted, and I sat down and wrote it straight off, almost exactly as it was delivered. I am sure that it was because it was my own thought and not someone else's that it made such an impression. I was quite amazed at the effect. Two quite different people, who are regular listeners, were reported to me by friends as having said it was the best speech they had ever heard on the wireless. The press in the lobby who listened to it said the Government ought not in future to let any other Minister do their broadcasting and Stanhope told me it made him feel "quite choky".



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Broadcasting and Politics: General Political and Foreign Affairs  
Broadcasting, 1931 - 1939.

"It is by obtaining the willing co-operation of speakers that the BBC exercises control (the picture, sometimes drawn, of the Director of Talks as an autocrat with blue pencil is wide of the mark!)."

Unsigned memorandum for BBC General Advisory Committee, 17 May 1939.

"what I wanted to tell you has been so censored and altered and cut up by the BBC that I consider it impossible for me to give a talk without it being a travesty of the British working class."

Broadcast statement by William Ferrie, March 1934.

"in each country where the international conception survives and struggles, the Nazi threat cuts across the free development of the wireless: a demand grows either to utilise our own radio for a similar nationalistic purpose, or more often, to curb its educative functions lest in letting common people know the truth, we rouse them to anger or incur the wrath of the Fascist Powers."

Kingsley Martin, Public Opinion Quarterly, 1939.

The BBC was fundamentally committed to democratic education. This commitment, in addition to the aversion of many of its senior staff to the very idea of adversary and hence party politics, plus its repeated frustration in attempting to develop party broadcasting during the 1920s and 1930s, combined to make more general political affairs coverage the most important element of the Corporation's overall political output. Such programmes - talks, debates, discussions, news and parliamentary reports - were ones in which, theoretically at least, it had greater freedom from external influence. Even ministerials were broadcast rather as part of the Corporation's pledge to political education than out of constraint. Yet in practice parties and government paid considerable attention to these forms of broadcasting, and the story of their development is one of both internal and external influences.

It was significant that whilst Labour supporters were most vocal in protesting against party broadcast ratios, excessive numbers of ministerials and news bias, the Conservative Party reacted most strongly to the normal talks and discussion series. Ullswater gave a reason for this which, whilst not completely accurate, was broadly speaking sound:

It must be recognised as inevitable that more prominence is given to the leaders of the political party in power than to the Opposition ... [Ministerial broadcasts] tend naturally to stress the beneficence of Government activities. There is an equally inevitable tendency in the general programmes of the Corporation to devote more time to the expression of new ideas and the advocacy of change, in social and other spheres, than to the defence of orthodoxy and stability, since the reiteration of what exists and is familiar is not so interesting as the exposition of what might be.

The BBC, in attempting to be politically impartial, had therefore not

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1. Cmd. 5091 (1936), Report of the Broadcasting Committee, 1935, paragraph 89.



only to resist pressure from the political parties, but also to avoid giving excessive emphasis to programming traits which automatically militated against impartiality, or rather against a balanced output.

Yet if the loudest protests came from the parties, the most subtle and influential constraints came directly from the Government. This continuous, for the most part seemingly innocuous, pressure can be traced in news, ministerial broadcasting, government departmental notices and ordinary political affairs programmes. For the most part it was not deliberately aimed at restricting the BBC's independence, and certainly not consciously at influencing the audience in positive directions. Rather it was the consequence of a variety of seemingly reasonable considerations mediating a responsible reaction from the broadcasters. In particular it was in the field of foreign affairs broadcasting and programmes with possible international ramifications that the Corporation encountered external pressures which it found impossible to ignore. The BBC's true freedom of action must be considered questionable when the exact relationship between it, the Foreign Office and the government of the day is studied.

Internal factors also played their part in the Corporation's comparative failure to do all that it might to achieve the task of democratic integration and political education as originally envisaged. One such factor was the relatively crude state of programme technique. Particular forms of presentation could be every bit as restrictive as other influences, and only gradually did the methods which are now at the very heart of current affairs broadcasting - the interview, the impromptu discussion, the magazine programme, the professional broadcaster - begin to evolve. All these developments were foreshadowed in the 1930s and experimentation was considerable; but none was fully formed and accepted when war broke out, whilst what was done was not necessarily progress in the originally intended direction.

But inevitably the most important internal factor was the BBC's own attitude to political affairs programming. It will be suggested

below that, keen as it was to utilise broadcasting for political education, certain inconsistencies in its approach to the practical pursuit of this objective rendered the goal virtually unattainable, certainly within the prevailing political and international climate.

Nevertheless it remains clear that the BBC regarded a large proportion of its talks output as politically educative, and in the ideologically charged atmosphere of the 1930s it was certainly possible to consider broadcast series with such titles as 'The Modern State', 'Freedom and Authority in the Modern World', 'War or Peace' and 'The Citizen and His Government' as positive contributions to the debate within, and as to the validity of, the democratic system. Given the Corporation's considerable output in these years it would be neither desirable nor possible to give a comprehensive programme by programme account. Our concern is with inferences and change and we will concentrate only on such programmes as demonstrate these. Yet throughout the period there was a steady, if comparatively limited, output of programmes - of nightly news bulletins, topical talks, discussion series and debates, which, although not directly considering political affairs in party political terms (news excepted), were undoubtedly making a very real contribution to political education both in general ideology and particular knowledge.

#### i) Programme Technique.

Not the least of the BBC's problems was the restrictiveness of its own broadcasting techniques. Mention has been made of how the spoken tradition rather than the journalistic shaped the Corporation's approach. But in addition its dislike of press methods, of sensationalism, half-truth and haste, made it favour an altogether cooler and more studied presentation of facts and issues. Those considerations which were of paramount importance to the newspaper - immediacy, scoops, the instant retailing and comment upon events - were felt to have relevance only to the broadcast news, and then only when the higher criterion of truth was assured. Topicality was a



relative term and the day-to-day development of an issue, which was the very stuff of the press, was eschewed in favour of a far longer term approach. The Corporation addressed itself to informing its listeners of the fundamental issues at stake in any subject. It had no wish to contribute daily to the influencing of public opinion; such moment-by-moment analysis of events was all too often conjectural, based on incomplete and frequently misleading evidence, and in its turn only encouraged further unjustified speculation. The need to feed the public's emotional craving for the latest information was far less important than the need to ensure that such information as was provided was accurate, complete and impartial. Having no desire, either commercial or political, to participate in pressure politics or to impart a particular line to the largest possible audience, and rightly aware of the risk of doing so, Reith considered the loss of immediacy a small price for political integrity.

There were technical reasons also for the cooler approach. Scannell and Cardiff have very pertinently pointed out how serious a hindrance to instant current affairs analysis<sup>2</sup> was the complete absence of an in-house news collecting service. Lacking its own reporters/commentators, the BBC had to rely almost entirely on outside experts to expand the information it transmitted beyond that provided by the news agencies. The use of such experts was usually only possible by pre-arrangement and a considerable foreknowledge of events, for the type of man the BBC used - even regulars such as Bartlett and Barry - was usually at the top of his profession, in a full-time occupation completely unrelated to broadcast punditry. Nor had the role of broadcasting guru yet achieved such kudos as to make it likely that eleventh-hour invitations to broadcast would be instantly accepted.<sup>3</sup> The BBC's one foray into taking a political commentator - Vernon Bartlett - permanently on to its staff was not

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2. P. Scannell and D. Cardiff, 'The Social Foundations of British Broadcasting', in Mass Communications and Society, Open University 1977.
  3. BBC, GAC, GAC.71 (37), April 1937.

to be a success, and after his departure in 1933 it fought shy of repeating the experiment.<sup>4</sup> The Corporation was very conscious of its responsibility neither to editorialise nor to be believed to be editorialising. Its policy of training the voices of its announcers and news-readers into bland, anonymous tones was one reaction to this responsibility, whilst its aversion to employing its own reporters and commentators was another. There was as yet no such animal as the professional broadcaster. Indeed Charles Gardner has suggested that one reason why the BBC's news collection and reporting service developed so slowly was because of concern that staff reporters would have to take direct responsibility for output.<sup>5</sup> Although the BBC took editorial responsibility for what was said by the experts used to provide programme matter, it was nevertheless felt that this responsibility allowed greater latitude for both BBC and speaker than would have been possible had the relationship been a permanent contractual one. It made it less essential - though still very important - that errors or bias be corrected before transmission. Mistakes by an employee might possibly have involved dismissal; transgressions by an outside speaker would result at worst in his not being used again.

The majority of programmes were, of course, scripted, and this again meant that rapid analysis of events was difficult. Hilda Matheson's technical reasons for this have already been mentioned and the General Advisory Council was informed that vetting occurred, 'in the interests of adequacy, accuracy, impartiality, good taste and, incidentally, the avoidance of advertisement or libel'.<sup>6</sup> The memorandum to the GAC from which this comes is a fascinating document, for it set out clearly the BBC's model approach to the coverage of an issue. Paragraphs 14 and 16 are worth quoting in their entirety:

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4. See pp.562-583 below.

5. L. Miall, Richard Dimbleby, London 1966, 13.

6. BBC, GAC, GAC.120 (39), paragraph 15, 17 May 1939.



14) In arranging discussions on current problems the first task of the Talks Department is to ascertain, in consultation with recognised authorities, the different points of view which have to be represented. It next has to select the speakers who are best qualified as regards both knowledge of the subject and broadcasting suitability, to represent them. A discussion in which three or four speakers are to take part requires long preparation and laborious rehearsals for its successful presentation and one of the chief difficulties is to find speakers of the desired calibre who are willing to spend the necessary time and trouble.

16) The general purpose of a talk and its place in the programme is discussed at the outset between the prospective speaker and a representative of the Talks Department. Later a script is submitted and this is examined first by the individual "producer" concerned and then by the Director of Talks himself. Queries and suggestions are then discussed with the speaker and almost invariably by this process agreement is reached. Only very rarely has a speaker, by unwillingness to adopt required modifications, made necessary a cancellation of his engagement. As soon as speakers appreciate the Corporation's aims and its special responsibility they are usually most ready to accept criticisms and suggestions. It is by obtaining the willing co-operation of speakers that the BBC exercises control (the picture sometimes drawn of the Director of Talks as an autocrat with a blue pencil is wide of the mark!).<sup>7</sup>

That many potential speakers were not prepared to spend the amount of time required by the BBC was a real problem.<sup>8</sup> To many eminent politicians and other speakers rehearsal seemed unnecessary, for they had a lifetime's experience of addressing public meetings.

7. Ibid., paragraphs 14 and 16.

8. Conversely on those few occasions when instant comment was required some were not prepared to give a quick and 'unconsidered' statement - BBC, PPBB, Matheson to Reith, 18 February 1927.

Many were also unaccustomed to speaking from a prepared<sup>9</sup> text and found spontaneity difficult in these circumstances. It was therefore difficult to persuade such speakers to rehearse, particularly when it was so difficult for them to gauge the result, there being no feedback from a microphone. Speakers received no instant response or uplift from broadcasting as they did from meetings and many consequently received little personal pleasure from the experience.

Despite these difficulties the BBC laid great stress on the desirability of using the highest authorities for its programmes, either the men who made the news, or the most informed experts. Such a policy, it was felt, gave the greatest guarantee of accuracy and established the BBC's reputation for reliability and truth. Such a policy was also in line with the Corporation's inherent regard for certain forms of institutional respectability and authority - particularly the academic. As far as party politics were concerned, no one had yet really considered the idea of having broadcasters talk about the parties and party policy rather than having the parties talk themselves, and this was not surprising considering party jealousy as to the projection of their own image. Indeed in 1938 Basil Nicolls wrote that for party politics,

the accepted and only acceptable treatment is that of uncensored<sup>10</sup> emotional appeals by Front Benchers.

The suggestion that the parties should each appoint an experienced broadcasting 'champion' to put their point of view on all issues was rejected by Sir Richard Maconachie as a sorry 'mess of potage'.<sup>11</sup>

Hot topicality was made difficult not only by the length of time

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9. Baldwin and Chamberlain, for example, both spoke usually from rough notes alone.
10. BBC, BGP, B. Nicolls to BBC Governors (G.71/38), 3 June 1938.
11. BBC, PPBG, memorandum by Maconachie, 18 May 1938.



it took to prepare a series but also by the time it took to transmit it. The series on India in 1935 was unusual in being compressed by having two talks each week, yet it still took six weeks from beginning to end. The compression and summary of argument, even in single programme debates, would have to await the development of the professional broadcaster and the regular, informal current affairs slot. Until then experts and representatives of different opinion would have to speak for themselves. This either reduced the number of voices and hence opinions it was considered possible to present in a single debate, or resulted in a larger series format. Yet the former was felt to be unrepresentative of the true range of views, whilst the latter effectively reduced the time available for the discussion of a wider spectrum of issues. It also provoked a running debate as to whether programmes should be balanced within themselves, the argument being that a large part of the audience would only hear individual talks, rather than the entire series, and would therefore receive an unbalanced picture.

The crude state of recording and editing technology for much of the period was an additional factor. Blattnerphones were first brought to the BBC in 1931, but the problems of editing steel tape made it a costly and awkward facility. Difficulties in 'mixing', editing, compressing, moulding and generally tightening up programmes after recording, delayed the introduction of such techniques for use in talks and ensured continued reliance upon rehearsal and careful script preparation to achieve some of these ends in live transmission. In any case there was a widespread dislike of recorded programmes within the Corporation, where it was felt that they were not quite honest. The main objection to editing talks and discussions, however, was that the line between editing and editorialising would have been too fine to be acceptable to those being edited. The idea of 'editing' talks programmes was barely considered in the 1930s, but the problems involved were not the least of the reasons why presentational technique evolved so gradually.

This is not to suggest that the BBC was satisfied with its

existing programme formats. Siepmann, for example, found symposia too 'cumbrous' and 'embarrassing' on programme grounds.<sup>12</sup> Lionel Fielden, for his part, told him that arranged studio debates were nearly always boring and platitudinous.<sup>13</sup> Sir Arthur Salter of the GAC similarly complained that written debates rarely gave the impression of reality, whilst Walter Elliot advised Siepmann that

Debates, as we found earlier, need to be written by someone for two actors; and political debates are only bearable in the House of Commons. It's the possibility of a division that makes a debate worth while.<sup>14</sup>

By contrast the Yorkshire Post expressed its preference for single programme debates over talks, as both viewpoints were included in one programme, whilst Popular Wireless was incensed that the 1932 party debates consisted merely of two uninterrupted statements:

Shame!.... No chance of hearing some snappy interjection; no chance of hearing a witty spot of repartee .... not even in the House of Commons, let alone on a debating platform, is there any rigid enforcement of a rule forbidding interruptions.<sup>15</sup>

When talks producer Roger Wilson tried to arrange a debate with a scripted dialogue he discovered that when one speaker altered his argument in order to answer the other, then his opponent altered his

12. BBC, PPBG, Siepmann to Reith, 21 June 1932.
13. BBC, PPBPPB, Fielden to Siepmann, 20 June 1933.
14. BBC, GAC, memorandum by Sir Arthur Salter on 'News and Discussions', May 1935. The Manchester Guardian complained that 'a wireless debate is not satisfactory. It smacks too much of rehearsal. Answers fall too pat; stroke and parry have the lifelessness of an exhibition bout rather than the thrill of a real contest'. - 31 December 1930; BBC, CWE, W. Elliot to Siepmann, 6 April 1932.
15. The Yorkshire Post, 24 February 1933; Popular Wireless, 15 October 1932.



original statement in order to evade the reply.<sup>16</sup> Another producer, Mary Adams, encountered a different problem with speakers who considered the responsibility of broadcasting too seriously:

Speakers do in fact censor themselves before they begin to write for broadcasting, and it is this moral censorship which in fact endangers the freedom of the microphone.<sup>17</sup>

One of the Governors, Lord Bridgeman, pointed out another, curiously modern, danger, when he noticed that already a certain number of known and experienced experts were being used repeatedly:

The public will grow weary of a continuous stage army marching regularly through our studios.<sup>18</sup>

Reith himself was well aware that the novelty of broadcasting would not by itself be sufficient to sustain audience interest in serious talks. As he told an American audience in 1931,

There was a risk of educational ballyhoo as well as commercial ballyhoo - an assertion that this labelled brand of culture was the only culture, as this labelled brand of soap was the only soap. That was not the way to sell goods, material or spiritual, to the radio audience. Ballyhoo, whether pontifical or commercial, violated the first principles of showmanship and presentation.<sup>19</sup>

Ideas as to the best methods of presentation were therefore constantly changing, although experimentation did not always bring the hoped for results. Matheson and Siepmann had attempted a number

16. BBC, TUMT 1936, R. Wilson to W.Eady (Unemployment Assistance Board), 19 May 1936.
17. BBC, TDD, Mary Adams to Rose-Troup, 13 March 1936.
18. BBC, BGP, memorandum by Lord Bridgeman, 11 February 1933.
19. J.C.W. Reith (1949), Op. Cit., 145 - 146.

of unscripted debates, but had come down heavily in favour of scripted and rehearsed programmes. By 1935, however, new talks personnel were becoming frustrated by the restrictiveness of a debate, and new experiments were made in unscripted discussions. Initial debates with four speakers proved too confusing for the listener, however, whilst some debaters found it difficult, unrehearsed, to compress their argument into a few minutes.<sup>20</sup> Mary Adams considered that topics were too cautiously chosen: 'Ideally the speakers should have strong views on lively topical subjects'.<sup>21</sup> Indeed the most topical issue discussed in the first series of unscripted debates was 'flats versus houses', whilst anything party political was completely avoided.

Despite these problems the Programme Committee considered the experiment a success, particularly since goodwill had been gained by the absence of censorship and a good way had been found of dealing with 'controversial' issues.<sup>22</sup> Between 1935 and 1939 an effective debating format was devised in which each speaker was allowed to make a brief uninterrupted statement of his case, followed by an impromptu discussion, rehearsal being greatly reduced.

This technique was pioneered not at Broadcasting House but by the BBC's Midland Region. Indeed some of the most controversial debates of these years took place on the region's 'Midland Parliament'. Started in 1934, certain programmes in the series were broadcast nationally from 1936 onwards. The monthly debates were primarily on industrial topics such as 'Overtime', 'Should employers be licenced?', 'The five day week' and 'What are Fair Wages?', but many of these had political implications. Some were even more directly political, as in 'Land Settlement and Unemployment', 'Family Allowances', 'Paid Holidays', 'Higher Wages and Shorter Hours' and

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20. BBC, GAC, memorandum by Sir Arthur Salter, May 1935; TDD, Gladstone Murray to Graves, 19 November 1935.

21. BBC, TDD, M. Adams to Rose-Troup, 13 March 1936.

22. BBC, TDD, Programme Committee minutes, 21 November 1935.



'Strikes or Conciliation'.<sup>23</sup> The series, which used industrialists, MPs, trade unionists, workers and others, proved extremely popular, and by 1938 an equivalent, broadcast nationally from London, was being considered.<sup>24</sup> It was hoped that such a regular debating arena might tempt the parties to take part.<sup>25</sup> In North Region, similarly, a series called 'Northern Cockpit' allowed both experts and ordinary people to make a number of short statements within the same programme on topical issues of local interest.

The planning of one series of unrehearsed discussions, however, demonstrated well a strong tendency within the BBC to emasculate initially bold proposals. In November 1936 Roger Wilson proposed a weekly discussion, to be called 'Men Talking', between three individuals from the moderate Right to the moderate Left, on one of the week's news items. The subjects could be social, political, economic or artistic.<sup>26</sup> He suggested that so long as a BBC disclaimer was broadcast at the beginning of each programme such topics as intervention in Spain, rearmament and hunger-marchers could be discussed. The speakers should not be the usual experts and university men, and

I would make a point of using, from time to time at any rate, people with strongly marked accents and, in some cases, a weak sense of logic, but considerable emotional intensity.<sup>27</sup>

23. BBC, TMR, Talks-Midland Region File.
24. BBC, BGP, Director General's report to Board, 14 October 1936: 'Interesting evidence of the extent to which "Midland Parliament" has become established as an important broadcasting feature is provided by the decision of the Midland Miners' Federation to circularise their members (some 50,000) with a recommendation that they should listen to the opening meeting of the "Parliament" this autumn'.
25. BBC, PPBG, memorandum for Board by B. Nicolls (G.71/38), 3 June 1938.
26. BBC, TDD, R. Wilson to Mary Adams, 3 November 1936.
27. BBC, TDD, R. Wilson to J.M. Rose-Troup, 13 November 1936.

This proposal, which was intended for the afternoon slot for the unemployed, was particularly interesting for the purpose which lay behind it:

I hope these discussions will reveal the way people feel about subjects rather than a potted scientific analysis of the problem. .... if they are successful, listeners will recognise that the BBC is departing at one point from its general policy of passionless exposition of logical positions.<sup>28</sup>

People would then begin to regard broadcasting as 'more human' than they currently did.

The Director of Talks, J.M. Rose-Troup, gave his blessing to the idea and appeared to approve all its innovations. Yet almost immediately it became obvious that he did not share Wilson's confidence in the efficacy of a disclaimer. He emphasised to him the limits which the BBC's policy of balanced discussion imposed:

It must be made quite clear to [speakers] that they must be careful about generalisations and they must not make attacks on interests not represented in the discussion, or develop their views in such a way as to involve us in the necessity of providing microphone facilities for an official answer to be given. It must be impressed upon them all that they have a very great responsibility, and that we are trusting them not to land us in difficulties.<sup>29</sup>

Once Rose-Troup had discussed the series with Cecil Graves, the Controller of Programmes, further restrictions were imposed. For whereas Wilson had wanted the subjects to be highly topical, by having the speakers choose them on the day of the debate, Graves insisted that he be informed of the subjects even before the speakers

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28. BBC, TDD, R. Wilson to Rose-Troup, 13 November 1936.

29. BBC, TDD, Rose-Troup to R. Wilson, 7 December 1936.



were selected.<sup>30</sup> From having been an extremely topical set of debates the series had turned into one planned long in advance. Although it retained its non-expert and more emotional character and although Graves approved rearmament as a topic, its value as a political affairs vehicle had gone. The only 'political' issues discussed were the inheritance of wealth, whether there should be an aristocracy and university representation in parliament. In the second and third series nothing remotely political was considered, although Wilson proposed foreign affairs, Russia and the Means Test,<sup>31</sup> all issues of great interest to the unemployed.

One of the most interesting points to be drawn from this example is that although Rose-Troup and Graves were prepared to have political issues such as rearmament and Spanish intervention discussed, they considered it only possible if absolute balance was preserved within each programme, so that replies were not necessary. Another debate on the highly political concept of 'Planning', between Harold Macmillan, John Strachey and Arnold Plant, was able to be unscripted only because, 'All three of them understood the necessity of balancing each other's opinions.'<sup>32</sup> The restriction of 'balance', which thus virtually excluded such topics from an unrehearsed and more emotional type of debate, was the inevitable consequence of the limited amount of political affairs programming, and of the absence of a regular, informal programme into which such replies as Rose-Troup feared could be placed without disrupting the advertised programme. The more time given to political affairs broadcasting the less crucially important would balance within a programme or series become; the more flexible the existing format of political affairs programmes, and the more compressed the argument, the less time would be needed to achieve the same end. After the war the magazine programme - 'At Home and Abroad' and on television 'Tonight' and 'Panorama' - would help greatly to reduce these

30. BBC, TDD, Graves to Rose-Troup, 18 December 1936.

31. BBC, TMT, Wilson to Maconachie, 13 February 1937.

32. BBC, TDD, C.V. Salmon to Maconachie, 4 May 1937.

problems. Before 1939 there were only occasional attempts at such a format. Indeed one objection to the whole idea of programmes dealing with topics previously unadvertised in Radio Times was that people would not listen if their interest had not been aroused in advance.<sup>33</sup>

The first such experiment (outside the news and the Variety Department's popular 'In Town Tonight') was a series in the spring of 1935, called 'From the Four Corners'. In this three or four speakers gave brief talks on different subjects within each programme. The topics were not controversial or political, but the series 'suggested new possibilities of technique', and in 1936 there was started a similar series which did deal with political affairs.<sup>34</sup> This was 'Topics in the Air', a weekly half hour programme containing two or three talks. As with subsequent magazine programmes the subjects varied from politics to art and science, so that typical items included the examination system, the Physical Society's annual exhibition, the Egyptian constitution and treaty with Britain, Rhodesia, cinemas, starlings, Spain, Japan, Gainsborough, defence (Liddell Hart), economic conditions, income tax law (Josiah Stamp),<sup>35</sup> Chinese art and the Ribbon Development Act in Hampshire. Interestingly several talks described and included criticism of bills before, or shortly to go before parliament. Thus Liddell Hart, speaking a few days before a Commons debate on defence, approved government attempts to improve co-ordination between the three services, but suggested that more should be done. Josiah Stamp similarly stated that there could be modifications in details of the coming bill on income tax law, whilst speakers on bills relating to tithes, midwifery and the school leaving age, all indicated that

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33. BBC, TSE, Miss Sprott to Rose-Troup, 3 December 1936.  
 34. BBC, BGP, Director General's report, 10 April 1935.  
 35. BBC, TTIA, Talks - 'Topics in the Air' file.



improvements to them were possible.<sup>36</sup> The following year a similar series called 'Week by Week' discussed issues such as 'The Budget: before and after', the right of search at sea and Waziristan. Difficulty was encountered,<sup>37</sup> however, in getting authoritative speakers at short notice, and it would seem that by 1939 the equivalent series, 'Questions in the Air',<sup>38</sup> was not attempting to discuss headline news. Nevertheless it did deal with such issues as conscription, trade agreements and Empire migration.

The state of recording and editing technology was an obvious factor in hindering the development of the magazine programme. Only when fast cutting and editing became easier would the high speed magazine format evolve. Yet crude as it was some producers did experiment with pre-recorded inserts. Thus in a series called 'Its Happening Now', in January 1937, current social experiments such as nursery schooling, health centres, community associations and land settlement schemes were examined through the recorded comments of those actively involved.<sup>39</sup> Similarly producer C.V. Salmon made use of recorded comments in his series on the coal industry in November of the same year. He visualised using up to twenty different voices in a single programme, taken largely from the miners themselves and recorded at the pit. He also recognised the value of recording both for cutting down long-winded statements to a reasonable length and for making tedious official comments interesting:

Official views, as we well know, do not make even tolerable broadcasting .... we are going to escape from this dilemma by introducing the official views as recorded statements in argument or narrative which will be robust enough to support them and lively enough to carry them without tedium.<sup>40</sup>

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36. BBC, 'Topics in the Air' talks scripts, 15 February 1936, 7 March 1936, 4 April 1936, 11 April 1936, 23 May 1936.

37. BBC, GAC, monthly report (GAC.71), April 1937.

38. BBC, TTP, G. Barnes to Siepmann, 13 March 1939.

39. BBC, TSE, Talks - Social Experiments File.

40. BBC, TC, C.V. Salmon to Maconachie, 30 April 1937.

These were tentative beginnings to techniques which would become essential elements of current affairs broadcasting. Yet more important still than the magazine programme or recording and editing, for effective compression and presentation of a subject, was to be the development of the professional broadcaster and the interview technique. Towards the former the BBC had a somewhat ambivalent attitude. As early as October 1928 an article in the Radio Times had pointed out that experts rarely made good broadcasters, and had asked,

Why not divorce the talk-maker from the talking? In other words why not take full advantage of the special aptitudes of experts in pure knowledge and skilled writers, but enlist the specialised artist for fit and proper delivery?<sup>41</sup>

This, however, was an idea which the Talks Department strongly rejected. It was felt that the writer gave greater interest and humanity to the reading of his own talk than would a professional speaker.<sup>42</sup> Emphasis was therefore laid not only on the question of whether a man had anything worth saying, but also on whether he had a good broadcasting manner. Again the belief that the BBC's information should be seen to come from the highest and most reliable authorities, straight from the horse's mouth, was an important consideration, and Basil Nicolls wrote in 1938 that

we have always set our face against the champion method in private talks - i.e. the delivery of bad broadcasters' scripts by the announcers, etc. - and this, in a sense, is one of the fundamental principles of good broadcasting.<sup>43</sup>

There was also initially a certain aversion to the idea of radio personalities who, it was feared, would command too much authority

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41. Radio Times, 26 October 1928.

42. Radio Times, 2 November 1928.

43. BBC, PPBG, Nicolls to Graves, 30 May 1938.



for that fact alone.

When, however, the BBC discovered experts who were also very good broadcasters, it rapidly learnt of the many advantages to be gained from using them repeatedly. In this way Gerald Barry, Vernon Bartlett, Stephen King-Hall and John Hilton became the first generation of regular, though freelance, broadcast talks personalities, used as much for their mastery of the medium as for their considerable knowledge of particular subjects. Thus personality and popularity could actually be used as an aid to serious broadcasting, and it was hoped without a significant loss of integrity, as Hilda Matheson declared:

By developing the personal link which broadcasting so constantly forges between speakers and writers, and by centralising the main business of explaining news in the hands of a few individuals possessing the rare combination of first class knowledge, the right voice and the right personality, criticism has been avoided and a degree of popularity secured for this kind of service which was previously undreamed of.<sup>44</sup>

It was a short step from the BBC using speakers for their existing knowledge to commissioning them to survey a particular topic and make a broadcast report. Thus in 1933 the author and journalist S.P.B. Mais, already an experienced broadcaster on travel and books, was commissioned to visit and talk on voluntary relief schemes for the unemployed. Even more interestingly Howard Marshall, the BBC's news reader and sports commentator, was used in a series on housing and slums, visiting a number of cities and towns in order to study and report<sup>45</sup> on slum conditions and efforts to alleviate the problem. He was used solely because of his professional broadcasting ability, and not because of any foreknowledge of the subject. In these two series Hilda Matheson foresaw tremendous

44. H. Matheson, Broadcasting, London 1933, 93.

45. BBC, TH, Talks - Housing File.

possibilities:

In both instances the speakers were not official experts using official language, still less politicians; but broadcasters capable of surveying the field as a whole and presenting it in this "new way" to the widest possible audience. If such methods are increasingly used, the yawning gulf between expert and citizen may yet be bridged, and the awkward lag in time between perceiving a remedy and making it understood and accepted may be appreciably reduced.<sup>46</sup>

In the series 'Its Happening Now', in 1937, Marshall was again used as 'compère' (Rose-Troup's description), but this time with a difference, for he acted as introducer and link man to the various recorded statements and in particular asked questions, 'in the role of a critical and puzzled outsider'.<sup>47</sup>

The interview developed in parallel with the professional broadcaster. As early as 1924 a 'broadcast interview' between a journalist and the actress Gladys Cooper had been tried out, but had not led to further experimentation. In August 1929, however, Hilda Matheson hit upon the idea of broadcasting conversations between distinguished individuals and a

"plain man" ... who shall ask pertinent questions whenever he or she gets out of his or her depth.<sup>48</sup>

Following this up, a series of talks was arranged on 'Problems of everyday life', between Gerald Barry and selected experts. The technique had two objectives - improved clarity and greater balance - as Siepmann explained:

46. H. Matheson, Op. Cit., 97.

47. BBC, TSE, Rose-Troup to potential participant, 15 December 1936.

48. BBC, TDD, Matheson to R. Eckersley, 20 August 1929.



These discussions should help us to break new ground in approaching controversial subjects in an uncontroversial way. Mr. Gerald Barry will be the tempering influence throughout, adjusting the balance of views and securing that neither prejudice nor extremist opinion holds the field. He will also ensure that all important aspects of the problem are reasonably treated in the case of each discussion.<sup>49</sup>

This device proved valuable and its use was continued. In a series on 'War or Peace' in November 1931 Basil Liddell Hart interviewed three experts on modern sea, land and air warfare, although these talks were pre-scripted. The 'plain' man was rarely plain, as R.A. Rendall explained:

The "ordinary man" is chosen above all for his ability as a broadcaster. He must also know enough about the subject to ask questions (he is often not at all ordinary and may know as much as the expert but also know how to conceal his knowledge, and put himself in the place of the ignorant).<sup>50</sup>

These were qualities required equally by the professional broadcaster and so it was not surprising that men such as Howard Marshall and John Hilton were used in programmes involving personal report and interview.

Despite the success of these methods of presentation their use remained limited, perhaps due to the higher cost of employing an

49. BBC, TDD, Siepmann to Reith. The planned series consisted of nine discussions on 'Are we free?', including: ownership of property (G.B. Shaw or Harold Macmillan), free speech (D. MacCarthy), personal conduct (the Archbishop of York), whether we have a right to work (Walter Elliot, MP), problems of free will (Bertrand Russell), the influence of convention (Lady Cynthia Mosley) and the influence of environment (Lord Brentford).
50. BBC, TDD, R.A. Rendall to Empire Programme Director, c. March - July 1933. Rendall was a producer and secretary of the Central Council for Broadcast Adult Education.

interviewer than of a straight talk. It was not until the arrival of Sir Richard Maconachie as Director of Talks, in 1937, that the 'Interlocutor Technique' began to be regarded as an invaluable aid to the presentation of controversial issues. Seeking to increase the amount of 'balanced controversy' and to allow speakers the greatest possible freedom of speech, Maconachie considered talks series unsatisfactory, involving as they did a week's gap between broadcasts and with no guarantee that every listener would hear the full, balanced series:

The "interlocutor technique" which ensures that opposing views will be heard by anyone who listens even to a single talk is free from these flaws, and seems to me indispensable if "balanced controversy" is to be satisfactorily broadcast.<sup>51</sup>

As envisaged by Maconachie the technique involved a greater degree of critical intervention, of taking issue with the interviewee, than had previously been the case, and he recognised that such programmes might overrun due to the argument, for 'Heat expands men as well as metals'.<sup>52</sup>

The hostile character of the interlocutor was a considerable step forward, particularly as the same person took a critical approach to each speaker in turn. The technique was used in every major talks series of 1938 and 1939 and was regarded as highly successful even by the ever wary Cecil Graves. In one respect, however, this represented a separate line of development from that of the professional broadcaster and 'common man' interviewer, for it was frequently considered that as interlocutor only another expert would have the knowledge required for effective criticism. Typical interlocutors of the period included E.H. Carr, H. Wilson Harris and T.H. Marshall. At the same time there is evidence that the 'common man' interview had also become a regular device, at least in less weighty programmes,

51. BBC, TTP, Maconachie to Graves, 4 March 1938.

52. Ibid.



for George Lansbury was interviewed quite informally about his life, on television's 'Picture Page',<sup>53</sup> whilst the taxi driver Herbert Hodge became a regular and fluent 'plain man' interviewer.<sup>54</sup> Although many of these techniques were still not fully developed by 1939, it is clear that the war interrupted a period of already considerable experimentation and greater boldness.

It was the role of the interviewer to ask questions the ordinary man would like to have asked himself. On one or two occasions attempts were made to enable members of the audience to put the questions. An interesting experiment in 1933 gave three farmers the opportunity to question Walter Elliot, then Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, on the new pig and bacon scheme. The programme was not, however, quite so daring as it seemed, for Elliot was provided with all the questions in advance.<sup>55</sup> Although Siepmann expressed himself in favour of 'further experiments in submitting Ministers to cross-examination' and although Reith agreed, no further progress was made in this direction, probably due to ministerial reservations about the idea.<sup>56</sup> The only other experiment in public participation came from North Region and once again the war caused the suspension of an interesting scheme. In 'Public Enquiry', in the summer of 1939, an audience was given the opportunity to put unrehearsed questions to two opposing speakers, on such issues of local government as the stabilisation of rates and whether the educational system gave value for money. This series, initially broadcast regionally, was due to go out nation-wide when war brought it to a close.

It is perhaps difficult to appreciate the problems, actual or

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53. Lansbury Papers, vol. 17/f15, D.A. Cannell to Lansbury, 23 February 1939.
54. Indeed the 1939 series on the press used interviewing techniques on proprietors and editors which were far from respectful or sycophantic. See for example, Herbert Hodge's interview with Max Aitken, The Listener, 2 March 1939, 466-8.
55. BBC, CWE, W. Elliot to L. Fielden, 9 June 1933.
56. BBC, TH, Siepmann to Reith, 12 July 1933.

perceived, of providing a balanced service of political affairs programmes using only the simple techniques which predominated throughout the period. They were mostly too clumsy, too unwieldy, too time-consuming, to allow the multitudinous and subtle nuances of political argument to be effectively and attractively presented. The chronicling of technique experimentation reveals not how much progress was made - this was strictly limited - but just how crude were the methods normally available. Moreover there was a distinct danger that in developing such techniques as interviews, magazine formats and impromptu discussions the BBC was indeed in danger of sacrificing some of its educative ideals for the sake of a populist presentation. Its educational talks, national lectures and talks by eminent academics and others remained largely 'high brow' and serious contributions whose appeal was strictly limited. Yet in more populist programmes such as 'Men Talking', 'Week by Week' and John Hilton's widely liked series of talks, the informal and personal style of presentation clearly led to a disinclination on the part of the BBC to attempt to deal with serious issues. Producers encountered the problem originally envisaged of how to present serious questions in an attractive manner, and in many series they evaded it either by not eventually dealing with such topics at all, or by retreating to the academic, bland and exceedingly neutral straight talk. This latter tendency was only encouraged by the unwillingness of 'serious' speakers to rehearse and adapt themselves to an attractive broadcasting style.

Yet it would be going too far to conclude that the choice lay between populism without education and education without an audience. The future of current affairs broadcasting would be based upon techniques first evolved in the 1930s. If many programmes went too far in the search for populist appeal and others not far enough, some, such as the talks of Vernon Bartlett, Harold Nicolson, the 'Midland Parliament' series and those employing the interlocutor technique, came closer than most to resolving the dilemma. In such programmes it was discovered that serious issues could be discussed both controversially and with an element of showmanship, yet without



threatening the Corporation's integrity. For of course the preservation of that integrity remained the paramount consideration if broadcasting was to fulfil its role as democratic integrator.

ii) News, Topical Talks and Parliamentary Reporting.

Reith considered both news and parliamentary reporting to be most important elements of the BBC's overall political coverage, and Briggs has amply shown how assiduous he was in seeking to remove the restrictions imposed upon the former by press agency and newspaper interests. From 1930 onwards the Corporation assumed the right to edit fully the news received from the agencies, and with the arrival of John Coatman as Senior News Editor in 1934 and the importation of professional journalists as news editors, the BBC began to establish the reputation for professionalism and accuracy which was to become its hallmark. The rough and ready beginnings to the Corporation's own news collecting service were to provide valuable experience for war-time requirements.<sup>57</sup> From two evening bulletins in 1930 the service had been expanded to five by 1939, and these were complemented by additional news talks. The main bulletins were twenty and for a period thirty minutes in length.

The early news service has been criticised<sup>58</sup> for being unadventurous and for lacking 'the human element'. Such criticism fails to take into account the protracted fight that Reith had with the press, and the need to progress whilst constantly reassuring newspaper interests that broadcasting posed no threat to their livelihood. The 1931 BBC Yearbook emphasised that news bulletins were complementary to the evening press; their necessarily abbreviated form and somewhat flat style was employed in the firm conviction that listeners would obtain any padding they wished from their own papers.<sup>59</sup>

57. J. Dimbleby, Richard Dimbleby, London 1975, 74-79, 84-86.

58. Ibid., 62 - 63.

59. BBC Yearbook, 1931, 242.

Nevertheless there was a certain amount of experimentation in presentation, allied closely to the role of the nightly 'topical' or 'news' talks. These varied in length from five to fifteen minutes and included everything from Vernon Bartlett's talks to sports commentaries, from parliamentary eye-witness reports, ministerial statements and weekly economic surveys, to arts reports and commentaries on ship launchings. It is difficult to gauge what proportion of serious to trivial items there were, and surviving lists tend to suggest that it was the lighter and actuality items which predominated. However, this impression may be partly due to the fact that regular items, such as talks on world, economic and parliamentary affairs, were only occasionally listed.<sup>60</sup>

Bartlett's regular weekly series on foreign affairs will be considered later, but almost equally interesting were the BBC's attempts to develop a similar series on domestic affairs. Gerald Barry's series in 1929 and another by Harold Nicolson in 1930 had proved less of a political commentary than desired, and in November 1931 Reith ordered the Talks Department once again to search for a home Vernon Bartlett to report on parliamentary debates and general domestic affairs.<sup>61</sup> In the event Gerald Barry was again used and, rather remarkably, the Speaker of the Commons granted him a seat in the Foreign Press gallery and access to the Lobby.<sup>62</sup> The success of this series encouraged Barry to propose a broadening of the scope of political talks in topical periods, a suggestion which brought his own regular series to a close. For, as Siepmann, who was

60. The BBC Board was told in October 1932 that recent 5 minute topical talks had been on the Lytton Report, Slatin Pasha, Harold Lloyd, Sir Christopher Wren, the Dnieprostroi Dam, the Reassembly of Parliament, and the Means Test Debate. - BBC, BGP, Director General's report, 31 October 1932.

61. BBC, PPBPR, Reith to Lord Stonehaven, 1 December 1931: 'It requires an unusual combination of qualifications. The man has to speak so as to be understood by the man in the street, and yet have an interesting literary style; he must be quite impartial, but really well up in political affairs; and then there is this matter of the voice'.

62. BBC, OGB, Siepmann to G. Barry, 15 March 1932.



enthusiastic, told him in a letter foretelling future developments:

To provide for the different eventualities and the different ways of covering political events e.g. eye-witness accounts of debates in the House, interviews with prominent men, interpretations of political developments, etc. etc., we shall have to have available a nucleus of helpers .... Politicians themselves will, on occasion, have to be brought to the microphone, and as variety will be the essence of success for these brief accounts it becomes impossible to tie ourselves down to a single fee, to a single person or to a single method.<sup>63</sup>

The following month Reith proposed an administrative amalgamation of topical talks and news, and it would appear that this was carried out, for during 1933 the two became more firmly linked within the general programme.<sup>64</sup> Initially talks followed the bulletin, but gradually experiments were made in inserting them within it and immediately following the news items they were commenting upon or illustrating.<sup>65</sup> An experiment was made in July with a 45 minute radio 'news-reel', combining news and several topical commentaries. This one-off programme was turned into a weekly half-hour broadcast from October until December, when shortage of staff and money brought it to an end.

63. BBC, OGB, Siepmann to Barry, 19 September 1932.

64. BBC, TTP, Reith to Siepmann, 17 October 1932.

65. This practice was somewhat akin to the current procedure in which a brief factual statement by the newsreader is followed immediately by an expansion and commentary from a BBC correspondent or editor. The BBC Handbook for 1934, p.82, makes these developments sound very adventurous: 'Short statements and descriptions of the important foreign news of the day, urgent affairs in distant capitals and cities as well as in our own provincial towns, instead of being retailed by the announcer from the London Studio, were coming more frequently, more rapidly, from the actual spot. The BBC's news service was expanding. Special correspondents were springing up at home and abroad'.

1934 saw the division of Home and Empire news services and a consequent expansion of news staff, which Coatman subsequently wrote of as a <sup>66</sup>reaction to political development in Germany and elsewhere. A news library - fundamental to any news service - was also established. The BBC Annual explained that the purpose of this general expansion was

to present a varied cross-section of the world's events, in a form which may be intelligible and interesting to as high a proportion as possible of listeners, bringing the events to the microphone, through electrical recordings or eye-witnesses, helping the public to understand events in themselves and in relation <sup>67</sup>to one another, by means of expository talks by experts.

From 1935 explanatory talks were relegated once again to the end of the bulletin, the amalgamation of the two having proved unpopular, but ministerial statements were on occasion included within the news, being regarded as news themselves. Thus Baldwin, Simon, Hoare, Eden and others spoke on both foreign and domestic affairs. Commentaries from Geneva and speeches by Roosevelt, Mussolini and Pierre Laval were also included. In an interesting final paragraph to its review in the 1936 Annual, the News Department thanked the Foreign Office, the Ministries of Transport, Health and Agriculture, the Department of Overseas Trade and others

for the co-operation which contributes so greatly to the fullness of the picture <sup>68</sup>that the listener obtains of the work and problems of government.

This picture of experimentation in the early and mid-1930s does

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66. J. Coatman, The BBC, Government, and Politics, Public Opinion Quarterly, vol. 15, 1951, 291-2.

67. BBC Annual, 1935, 61.

68. BBC Annual, 1936, 53.



not accord with the impressions of Richard Dimbleby and his colleagues as recorded by Dimbleby's son.<sup>69</sup> Dimbleby arrived at the BBC in 1936 and it must be said that, apart from a gradual expansion and Dimbleby's own on-the-spot reports, further innovations were few before war brought about a complete revolution in the scale of operations. Timidity is a possible reason; lack of interest on the part of Reith is not. But accusations of timidity all too often came either from those who did not bear the responsibility, or with hindsight. Richard Dimbleby and the other young recruits of this period of expansion in news came to the BBC from newspaper journalism and with an essentially pluralistic outlook. The examples Dimbleby used to illustrate his conception of broadcast news were taken from the press and the cinema newsreels, and it is not surprising that Reith and other senior officials felt not only that to go too far in that direction would be politically risky, but that it would also be antithetical to their fundamental aims. As stated in the 1935 Annual,

broadcasting has an opportunity and responsibility which no newspaper can ever have. It is impossible to exaggerate the value to the nation and the world of an unbiased, accurate, and balanced presentation, day by day, of the significant news. That is the ideal which the BBC has before it.<sup>70</sup>

This was an approach which was fully approved by Ullswater:

The present arrangements for the collection and presentation of news appear on the whole satisfactory .... In the presentment of news, simplicity is desirable and the BBC should be as impersonal as possible.<sup>71</sup>

69. J. Dimbleby, Op. Cit., 60-72.
70. BBC Annual, 1935, 61. Charles Siepmann wrote in the Radio Times, in September 1934: 'Inevitably .... progress must be gradual, deliberate and circumspect, for the service of news is potentially the greatest factor in the influence of broadcasting on the modern world'. - Radio Times, 28 September 1934.
71. Cmd. 5091 (1936), Report of the Broadcasting Committee, 1935, paragraphs 81-83.

Whilst it was recognised that questions of presentation were important, they were only legitimate when they did not threaten higher considerations of impartiality and integrity. Where progress in such matters was concerned Reith moved slowly not simply because of a need for political caution, but also for the better attainment of his idealistic objective.

There were, however, significant external pressures. The BBC usually had little difficulty in answering both Labour and Conservative protests of news bias, although this did not prevent continued resentment. Labour continued to complain of the press agencies' monopoly over the provision of broadcast news, although protests from the leadership declined in the late 1930s in line with its increasingly co-operative approach.<sup>72</sup> On the other side Conservative and National Government supporters' objections came to a climax with the Spanish Civil War. Press campaigns and questions in parliament led finally to a meeting of the 1922 Committee at which<sup>73</sup> Reith answered accusations and attempted to quell suspicion. Perhaps the best answer was contained in an unsigned BBC memorandum, which compared the Daily Mail's portrayal of the war as 'Reds' versus 'Anti-Reds', with that of the Daily Worker, which saw it in terms of 'Communist Heroes' and 'Fascist Devils':

Is it altogether surprising that listeners accustomed to the single aspect given by their newspaper, should receive an immediate impression of bias, when they hear two sides of the case broadcast?<sup>74</sup>

From the beginning of the war the BBC itself had strictly followed Foreign Office practice in calling the Madrid Government 'the

72. BBC, PPBG, record of meeting between representatives of BBC and Labour Party, 30 March 1938. For example of a complaint see H.C. Debates, vol. 311:col.1028, C.G. Ammon, 29 April 1936.

73. J.C.W. Reith (1949), Op. Cit., 272-3.

74. BBC, PPBAPB, unsigned memorandum 'The BBC and left wing Bias', c. late February 1937.



Government'. Likewise it had followed the custom of 'every recognised handbook in International Law' in calling Franco's forces 'the insurgents'<sup>75</sup>.

The Corporation could dismiss these crude party attacks without too much difficulty. Yet its fundamental outlook did lay it open to more subtle political influences, even in the news, mostly minor but sometimes rather less so. One example occurred in May 1936 when it was brought to the Cabinet's attention that certain news bulletins had referred to Cabinet meetings, the agenda of which were supposedly secret. Ironically the item under consideration was said to be a report on budget leakages. This news came from the agency tapes and had been widely reported in the press, but the Cabinet immediately requested that the BBC agree never to refer to Cabinet discussions unless approved by No. 10, Downing Street.<sup>76</sup> Although Ronald Norman protested that 'This restriction .... is of course far more severe than any newspaper would accept', the BBC Board agreed to comply, accepting that in such instances the Corporation stood in 'a position of special responsibility'.<sup>77</sup> Similarly during the abdication crisis Reith agreed to Sir Horace Wilson's request that the BBC should 'go slow on Irish Free State news', as it was feared that a republic might be proclaimed.<sup>78</sup>

Another instance related to Sunday news. In March 1937 the BBC's Control Board considered whether Labour speeches made on Sundays should be broadcast, in view of the fact that other parties did not hold Sunday meetings and could not be reported. It decided that such items were newsworthy and so should be put out. Yet when, in March 1938, a delegation from the 1922 Committee complained at unbalanced Sunday news bulletins reporting personal attacks on the Prime

75. Ibid.

76. Cab.24, C.P. 170 (36), M. Hankey to R. Norman, 29 May 1936.

77. Cab.24, C.P. 170 (36), R. Norman to M. Hankey, 11 June 1936.

78. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 192, 10 December 1936.

Minister, Reith agreed with the protest. The BBC had never attempted strictly to balance news items - indeed the Home News Editor, R.T. Clark, estimated that the ratio of Government to Opposition speeches reported was about 5:2.<sup>79</sup> Now, however, it was decided that the BBC

should not lend itself to publicising personal attacks on the Head of the Government at critical times and when there were no other speeches in the news to offset these attacks.<sup>80</sup>

Such decisions might be taken with the national interest in mind, but they could clearly have political implications bearing on the whole question of the proper criteria for news coverage.<sup>81</sup>

In one aspect of news reporting - parliamentary coverage - the BBC's wishes were blocked throughout the 1930s. From the earliest the Corporation had seen it as a duty to report proceedings and to maintain, and even raise, parliament's prestige. Thus in November 1931 the News Editor, J.M. Rose-Troup, told Cecil Graves that

our present policy, by showing as far as possible only the good side of Parliament and concealing its futilities is, I believe, of very great importance, especially at present, when the nation is expecting Parliament to do something.<sup>82</sup>

The Corporation consistently reported proceedings, taking its

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79. BBC, NBPB, Control Board Minutes, March 1938. This estimate was based on one week's bulletins in mid-March.
80. BBC, NAPBSN, Graves to Nicolls, 31 March 1938. Reith's account of this incident omits to mention that the BBC conceded the point at issue, and suggests that it resisted the combined protestations of Chamberlain, the PMG, and the 1922 Committee - J.C.W. Reith (1949), Op. Cit., 307-8.
81. For a similar example, relating to the broadcasting of police messages, see Note A at the end of chapter, p.612.
82. BBC, PPBPR, Rose-Troup to Graves, 26 November 1931.



information primarily from the Reuter's parliamentary correspondent. On major parliamentary occasions it also sent a representative to give an eye-witness account. Yet neither of these methods of reportage proved completely adequate. The BBC had no seat allocated in the press gallery for its eye-witness reporter, and the latter had to sit either in the Foreign Press or the Visitor's gallery, where he was not permitted to take notes. On each occasion that a seat was required application had to be made to the Speaker, and he, in consultation with party leaders, was not always ready to provide one. Eye-witness accounts were also prone to accusations of being less than objective, as Wickham Steed discovered both in budget reporting and on other occasions.<sup>83</sup> The Reuters' correspondent, by contrast, proved to be just too balanced and dry. If good speeches on one side were reported at length then the other side was given equal space, even when its speeches had all been bad. J.C.S. MacGregor, one of the news editors, objected that

we ought not to be under any sort of compulsion to give matter which is not worth its place in the bulletins on its own merits.<sup>84</sup>

He felt that although individual bulletins might not be balanced if only newsworthy speeches were reported, the BBC's impartiality would be maintained over a period of time. The Reuter's correspondent, H. Kingston, admitted of his policy of absolute balance that, 'it has not always been easy to reconcile this with the news interest factor!'.<sup>85</sup> Reith, however, was justly doubtful that the parties would accept individually unbalanced summaries, and merely suggested that the Reuter's report be précised.<sup>86</sup>

83. There were further complaints, for example, at his account of the 'No Confidence' debate of 25 October 1932.
84. BBC, PPBPR, J.C.S. MacGregor to Siepmann, 9 January 1934.
85. BBC, PPBPR, H. Kingston to K. Adams, 21 February 1935.
86. BBC, PPBPR, note by Reith on Dawnay's memorandum to Reith of 29 June 1934.

He nevertheless remained keen to solve these problems by having the BBC's own correspondent in the House, and when Ullswater recommended that full facilities be granted he applied to the Speaker once again for a permanent seat. Fitzroy considered it a matter where the party leaders should be consulted, and although Baldwin was willing, Attlee categorically rejected the idea. In a minority reservation to the Ullswater report he had already made his views clear:

I do not believe that it is possible to find a person who can at the same time give a vivid personal impression [of a debate] and free his mind from political bias.<sup>87</sup>

The BBC might inveigh against 'Attlee's stupid reservation', but there was nothing it could do.<sup>88</sup> When Sir Bryan Fell congratulated Reith on the reports that were broadcast, he could only reply that

we are doing a good deal in putting Parliament back into the news, and it is rather a mystery to us why so many difficulties should be put in our way.<sup>89</sup>

A proposal by Guy Burgess, then a talks producer, that current debates might be restaged from Hansard, using readers in place of politicians, was reluctantly though realistically rejected as too

87. Cmd. 5091 (1936), Report of the Broadcasting Committee, 1935, Reservation to paragraph 91 by C.R. Attlee. See also H.C. Debates, vol. 314:col. 974, 6 July 1936. In the same debate George Lansbury stated: 'I want to challenge the right of the Government and the House to allow the BBC to send men into this place and to give their opinion as to whether what we have said is sheer rubbish ....' - col. 913.

88. BBC, PPBPAC, unsigned memo to Carpendale (probably by Reith), 18 May 1936.

89. BBC, PPBPR, Reith to Sir Bryan Fell, 1 March 1937. Fell, who occasionally advised the BBC on parliamentary affairs, had written that 'the BBC will assist in restoring the prestige of Parliament, for Parliament needs propaganda!' - PPBPR, Fell to Reith, 26 February 1937.



likely to lead to trouble.<sup>90</sup> As with the editing of recorded talks, the BBC would have been accused of editorialising had it attempted to edit Hansard. Although parliamentary reporting was to be raised again with the PMG, Attlee and the Labour Party in 1938, and although it was pointed out that the BBC intended a proper parliamentary reporter rather than a sketch writer, full facilities were not to be granted until after the war. Throughout the 1930s, therefore, the BBC was forced to use the Reuter's report and ad hoc facilities, inadequate though it considered them. Its news and parliamentary reporting could never be wholly free and independent while it was occasionally blocked and interfered with in this way by government and opposition.

iii) Programmes on Domestic Politics, and Ministerial Broadcasts.

Despite these problems, the nightly provision of impartial and reliable news to a wide audience was one of the BBC's greatest contributions to the arena of political communication. Yet we have already seen how in addition it had fought for the right to include discussion, argument and explanation of political issues in its programmes, and how it had reacted to the new challenge between 1928 and 1931. In the larger part of its programming it had, in theory, won the fight to set the agenda of political affairs discussion, freeing itself from any obligation to consult the parties or government. This was the freedom which Postmaster Generals repeatedly emphasised in the House, in answer to demands that the Corporation be brought to task for its sins as perceived by both left and right.

For throughout the 1930s accusations of BBC bias remained a favourite bugbear both of the left and right wing press and of its readership. In the Daily Herald and on the left of the Labour Party<sup>91</sup> protests about bias in ordinary programmes was considerable. The

90. BBC, PPBPR, G. Burgess to Maconachie, 6 December 1937; PPBG, Maconachie to Graves, 7 March 1938.

91. For examples of left wing views see R. East, 'The BBC', The Left Review, vol. 1, 1934, 522-524, and Charles Madge, 'Press Radio and Social Consciousness', in C.D. Lewis (ed.), The Mind in Chains, London 1937, 145-163.

Party's leadership, however, concentrated almost entirely on party broadcasting ratios and news, as seen above, and on the amount of ministerial broadcasting. There was comparatively little complaint at the general talks programme and certainly no evidence that the BBC reacted to what pressure there was.

On the right of the Conservative Party and within much of the right wing press, particularly the Morning Post and Daily Mail, there was equally considerable protest:

the BBC could be described not unjustly as Moscow's principal aid in the arts of disturbing national confidence, shaking public faith, and sapping stability..... as an asset of the national purpose the BBC is about as useful as Gandhi in a cup-tie.<sup>92</sup>

Again these were accusations which the BBC usually ignored or rejected without difficulty. They did, however, find some response within Conservative Central Office, where interest in the medium resulted in attempts both to use it positively and to reduce what was seen as a very real left wing bias. This interest might have posed a more serious threat to BBC freedom of action than that provided by the press.

Although Lord Stonehaven had expressed his confidence in Reith, Gower was less certain. In late 1932 he argued to Baldwin, via the Chairman, that one of the new BBC governors, shortly to be appointed, should be made a specific representative of Conservative interests, in the same way that Mrs. Snowden had been an unofficial one for Labour.<sup>93</sup> Although it is improbable that Lord Bridgeman was chosen with this proposal in mind, Gower immediately reminded him of his party loyalties, and Bridgeman, a BBC governor for only two weeks,

92. Editorial, Era, 20 March 1935.

93. COO, COO 4/1/21, Gower to Stonehaven, 29 November 1932; Baldwin papers, Bal. 65/f210-211, Stonehaven to Baldwin, 6 December 1932. The appointment of Lord Bridgeman was announced on 15 December.



agreed with the feeling that 'the bias has lately been a good deal to the left'.<sup>94</sup> His only suggestions, however, were the same as John Buchan's - to train Conservative supporters in broadcasting and to encourage them to join the BBC staff. It is impossible to tell whether the latter idea was pursued, but there were some moves to implement the former. Reith was invited to speak at Ashridge Conservative College in 1933 and did so, whilst later in the year a weekend course was held there on 'Broadcasting and Public Opinion'.<sup>95</sup> In 1934 Joseph Ball emphasised to Chamberlain the immediate need for

a team of really effective debaters, each trained in "getting across" one or more important subjects to the enormous audiences who listen in.<sup>96</sup>

By 1934 Central Office was keeping watch on the BBC's advance release of its talks programme and attempting to discover the background and politics of each speaker. Gower warned that the series of talks to the unemployed 'could be made an instrument for very effective Socialist propaganda'.<sup>97</sup> He noted that one of the speakers for the series 'Freedom and Authority in the Modern World' was a Labour candidate. His biggest concern, however, was over a series entitled 'Poverty in Plenty', in which various economists considered the economic causes of poverty and slump. Only one out of the ten speakers, in his opinion, was not either a socialist or a Liberal, and when complaints began to come in from party supporters he wrote to the Postmaster General, Sir Kingsley Wood, to express his concern. That he did so indicates how rarely such complaints were actually made, for Kingsley Wood very properly stated that it was not

94. COO, CO04/1/23, Bridgeman to Gower, 14 January 1933.

95. The Listener, 8 November 1933, 693.

96. Chamberlain papers, NC3/21/9, Ball to Chamberlain, 14 April 1934.

97. COO, CO04/1/23, Gower to Kingsley Wood, 29 August 1934.

a matter for him and passed the letter directly to the BBC.<sup>98</sup> The subsequent correspondence, although polite on both sides, showed a determination on the part of the BBC to concede nothing. Stonehaven, for his part, complained that the title 'Poverty in Plenty' was itself 'part of the left wing jargon' and that the talks

have been used very subtly by Left Wing theorists to secure publicity for their views which nothing but the incomparable<sup>99</sup> nation-wide resources of the BBC could afford them.

Reith in turn stated firmly that the title 'simply expresses an economic fact without hidden political intention of any kind'. He argued that the speakers represented a wide spectrum of economic views:

Had it been otherwise the whole object and raison d'etre of these talks - the fair presentment of all sides and opinions in order<sup>100</sup> to promote sensible discussion - would have been thwarted.

The exchange represented a strong resistance by the BBC to party pressure, and there is no reason to suppose that this, the last recorded official Conservative complaint before the war, influenced the Corporation in its policy. Needless to say Patrick Gower was not satisfied with the outcome, and his firm belief in 'the subtle propaganda which is being put out by the BBC' led him to undertake<sup>101</sup> the earliest political exercise in broadcast monitoring. For three months a shorthand writer was employed to listen to every news bulletin and potentially political talk, from 'Talks to the Unemployed', to 'In Town Tonight' and 'For Farmers Only'. There is no record of any action taken as a result of this survey, for its

98. COO, CO04/1/23, Kingsley Wood to Gower, 19 November 1934.

99. COO, CO04/1/23, Stonehaven to Reith, 3 December 1934.

100. COO, CO04/1/23, Reith to Stonehaven, 5 December 1934.

101. COO, CO04/1/23, Gower to Miss Gow, 30 November 1934.



conclusions as to bias were mixed.<sup>102</sup> Gower and Joseph Ball, however, remained convinced of the BBC's left wing tendencies.

Indeed so certain of this was Ball that he told Chamberlain in June 1938 that 'I regard the BBC at present as one of our greatest handicaps'. He argued that if the Government was not to suffer 'grave damage' from the activities of the BBC it would be necessary for it to appoint both a new Chairman and a new Director General,

who can be instructed and trusted to see that we get a square deal .... My information leads me to believe that nothing short of drastic changes in personnel will suffice.<sup>103</sup>

That, two days after receiving this memorandum, the Prime Minister directed Reith to leave the BBC and to go to Imperial Airways was, however, a complete coincidence, for Reith had been warned of the likelihood on 29 May.

Another coincidence deserves to be mentioned, although it would again be quite wrong to consider it as anything but coincidence. In June 1934 Gower asked within Central Office for suitable topics for BBC talks. These, like Clavering's film 'The Soul of a Nation', would subconsciously reinforce the traditional virtues and emphasise the notions of 'Democracy' and 'Government'. A recent analysis by Sir Robert Topping had concluded that voters rarely changed their allegiance once given and that large numbers never bothered to vote. That being so the Party's primary task was perceived as being to revive political consciousness and to turn it to Conservative advantage. An unsigned memorandum suggested broadcasting as the best way of achieving this and of educating the electorate as to

the value of the present system of representative government as compared to the much advocated dictatorial systems of Communism

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102. COO, CO04/1/24, Broadcasting Reports, Jan - March 1935.

103. Chamberlain papers, NC8/21/8, Ball to Chamberlain, 1 June 1938.

104  
or Fascism.

In this document the constant and conscious fear present in the minds not just of right wing Conservatives but of many at the centre, that the very fabric of society was under threat from external and internal political and social forces, was evident as a primary concern:

It is my considered conviction that unless some such effort as this is made to defend Parliamentary Government and to show its achievements, there is grave danger that despotism may arrive by default. To utter Airy [sic] phrases and to capitalise discontent is an easy task for would-be dictators. This endeavour to lead the people astray must be countered by a strong and definite effort on the part of such as believe in constitutionalism.<sup>105</sup>

The author of the memorandum, probably Gower, appeared to think that, if non-renewal of the BBC charter were threatened, Reith could be persuaded to agree to a series of talks on 'Our Government'. This could then be inserted into the programme in October 1935 to March 1936, shortly before any anticipated General Election, and would use history to teach lessons such as that dictatorship was a prime cause of the collapse of the Roman Empire. Debates could also be staged on such topics as the limits of state interference with personal liberty.

As ever Central Office had shown itself alive to new ideas, although there is no indication of what further action was taken. But the proposal was really too far fetched. It was also quite unnecessary, for the BBC needed no external pressure to convince it that it had a duty to 'plug' constitutional democracy. The coincidence in this case was that a series which in large measure did just that, though not at all in the form suggested in Central Office,

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104. COO, CO04/1/21, unsigned memorandum (by Gower?), c. June 1934.

105. Ibid.



was indeed broadcast in the Autumn of 1935. This was 'The Citizen and His Government' and it was to be the cause of considerable argument between Government, Foreign Office and BBC.<sup>106</sup>

In general, therefore, continued press, public and party protest at BBC bias in general talks, as in news, had little obvious effect upon BBC policy. Reith was suitably contemptuous of such ridiculous pin-pricks. Yet the BBC's position was rather like a fortress whose drawbridge had been pulled up only after the enemy had entered. Its apparent rejection of external party pressure in general domestic affairs programmes merely obscured the fact that, as shown in the last chapter, its entire political affairs output had been greatly emasculated both by the refusal of the parties to allow it freely to deal with party politics and by its own, part consequent part natural, aversion to the coverage of politics from the party viewpoint.

This is not to say that party politics were not occasionally dealt with without consulting the parties; we have already seen that Gerald Barry and Harold Nicolson occasionally commented on current legislation, as did speakers in the 'Topics in the Air' series. A number of programmes entitled 'Youth looks ahead', in 1935, included vehement statements on party politics by John Boyd-Carpenter as a young Conservative and Richard Crossman as a young socialist. The discussion between Sir Oswald Mosley and Gerald Barry on events at the notorious B.U.F. meeting at Olympia, in June 1934, may also come into this category.

More frequently, however, a close approach was made to party political issues without actual mention being made of the parties. In 1933 Hugh Dalton and Douglas Jerrold debated the question of whether profits were legitimate, whilst in April 1936 L.J. Edwards and I.M. Horobin asked the contentious question 'Should the Social Services be extended?'. A debate on the Means Test, also in 1936, employed the

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106. See pp.589-596 below. This series was recommended to the BBC by its Adult Education Advisory Committee.

technique of using two anonymous speakers to put the cases for and against. When this programme seemed likely to cause party complaints, Admiral Carpendale, the Deputy Director General, advocated consulting Margesson and Attlee beforehand. Cecil Graves, however, resisted the idea:

I felt that if we adopted the course of consulting Attlee it would immediately make the discussion a purely political one. We might find ourselves in all sorts of difficulties.<sup>107</sup>

In May 1938 a series on transport in Britain included a debate on the advantages and disadvantages of the industry's nationalisation, whilst a discussion entitled 'A Penny on the Rates', in January 1939, considered the proper limits of public spending. The Midland Parliament debates equally touched occasionally on directly party political issues, yet without discussing party positions.<sup>108</sup> A series organised under the Midland Parliament banner in 1938 considered the question 'Private Enterprise or Public Ownership?', in relation to coal, electricity, food, insurance and broadcasting. Speakers included several MPs, representatives of owners, unions and the co-operative movement, and Morgan Phillips, the Labour Party's propaganda officer.

Generally speaking then, the BBC's talks, debates and discussions on political affairs did not directly mention the parties, unless in a factual and sometimes recently historical context. Explanation of issues was emphasised, and where this involved a statement of attitudes they were those of the individuals speaking and of like minded men, rather than specifically of the parties. A good example of this approach was the 'Poverty in Plenty' series, where the BBC's position was that the speakers represented the economic rather than the party political spectrum. Likewise the 1935 series on India was designed not as a party political series, but as one covering the

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107. BBC, TUMT, Graves to Carpendale, 23 April 1936.

108. See pp.495-496 above.



entire range of views on the subject, together with expert statements of fact.

It was only by taking this broader approach that the BBC could hope both to escape party wrangling and to give individuals who were not party spokesmen the opportunity to broadcast on issues which were fundamentally political. Put another way, it was only when it had divorced the issue from the immediate party battle that the BBC would give men like Churchill, Lord Lloyd, Oswald Mosley or Harold Macmillan, the chance to broadcast on subjects of particular interest to them. Thus Macmillan was able to debate on the concept of planning but without applying it, except by implication, to the present position of the parties. Mosley similarly gave a broadcast on the nature of fascism, in the 1933 series on 'The State', but only after the BBC had required him to delete various passages specifically mentioning and advocating the British Union of Fascists.<sup>109</sup> In 1935 he was again to have been given the opportunity to defend the theory of fascism, in 'The Citizen and His Government', without actually applying it either to foreign examples or to his own B.U.F.<sup>110</sup> In the series 'War or Peace', in the Autumn of 1931, the Corporation gave Lords Cecil and Lloyd an opportunity to state their opposing views on the possibility or need for disarmament. A similar series in 1934 allowed highly opinionated men such as Churchill, Beaverbrook, Norman Angell, Austen Chamberlain and G.D.H. Cole to talk on the 'Causes of War'.

It has been said, not least by Churchill himself, that he and similar individuals outside the mainstream of the parties were excluded from broadcasting throughout the 1930s.<sup>111</sup> In that he was not given the opportunity to broadcast on specifically party

109. BBC, PPBBUF, Siepmann to Reith, and Siepmann to O. Mosley, 6 March 1933.

110. This projected talk was eventually cancelled. See pp.589-59 6 below.

111. See, for example, M. Muggeridge, 'Notes by the Way', Time and Tide, 18 July 1953.

political issues, except for India, this was certainly true. But this was a consequence of the BBC's general inability freely to cover party politics, rather than of a particular exclusion. In the general political affairs type of programme, in which the BBC chose the topic, Churchill broadcast as frequently as any politician and more than most. Thus he broadcast twice in 1934, in the series 'Whither Britain' and 'Causes of War'. In early 1935 he gave his talk on India; in 1936 he rejected a BBC request that he broadcast in a series on Scottish, Welsh and English nationalism, excusing himself on the grounds of being too busy. In 1937 he gave a talk in the series 'Responsibilities of Empire', in which Baldwin and Lloyd George also broadcast. He also, in 1938, agreed to speak in a series on the political and strategic importance of the Mediterranean, but himself cancelled a few days before it was due to be given, in October, because of the Munich crisis. In explaining his cancellation, however, he complained to producer Guy Burgess that he had always been

very badly treated in the matter of political broadcasts and that he was always muzzled by the BBC.<sup>112</sup>

The crux of Churchill's complaint, of course, was that he was not given free rein to say whatever he liked and that his opportunities to broadcast were not sufficiently frequent. In fact almost all the series in which he spoke were designed precisely to give the speakers broad latitude in what they said. In 1931 Churchill had turned down the offer to broadcast on 'What I would do with the World'. This was a reformulation of the earlier 'Points of View' symposium and gave ten eminent individuals the chance to state their general outlook in any field. The 'Whither Britain' series was a similar opportunity, and in it Churchill included warnings of both fascist and Japanese aggression and urged stronger defences. In his talk on the causes of

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112. BBC, CWSC, Guy Burgess to Maconachie, 4 October 1938. That it was Churchill who cancelled this talk and not the BBC is made clear by M. Gilbert, Winston Churchill, Vol V, London 1976, 990.



war he urged Britain to make herself the strongest air power in Europe, and this was a warning he repeated in the talk on India. In his characteristic rhetoric he declared:

The storm clouds are gathering over the European scene. Our defences have been neglected. Danger is in the air .... Yes, I say in the air. The mighty discontented nations are reaching out with strong hands to regain what they have lost; nay, to gain a predominance which they have never had.<sup>113</sup>

The responsibilities of Empire, as he saw them in 1937, were to be armed and prepared, for

everywhere it is disputed whether the movement of men and the character of their institutions shall be along the path of freedom under representative and democratic government, or whether it shall relapse into sombre forms of tyranny and despotism.<sup>114</sup>

It would be wrong to infer from this that these talks provided Churchill with the free opportunities he wanted. But they did give him as much as he, as a private individual and even as an eminent statesman, had a right to expect. In October 1933 he had complained to Whitley:

I do feel that I have been denied for three years past those opportunities of giving my guidance to the country through the broadcast to which my public service and experience entitle me.<sup>115</sup>

Earlier, in August 1933, Churchill, Lloyd George and Austen Chamberlain had jointly protested that as senior statesmen detached

113. The Listener, 6 February 1935, 213-5.

114. The Listener, 5 May 1937, 849-50.

115. BBC, CWSC, Churchill to Whitley, 21 October 1933.

from their parties' general policy they should not be excluded from broadcasting on political issues.<sup>116</sup> This was a view with which the BBC fully agreed; the stumbling block was effectively on the question of who should choose the moment and the subject. Over both of these Churchill clearly wanted some control - control which the BBC was certainly not prepared to relinquish.

In its refusal to submit to Churchill's pressure the Corporation had considerable press support. The question was asked why Churchill should expect the special privilege of broadcasting any more than other men. As the Manchester Guardian declared,

The BBC has the difficult task, in questions of this kind, of weighing a number of different things: the importance of the statesman, the character of the minority whom he represents, the nature of the controversy, the possible repercussions of the broadcast. It is surely impossible to contend that the representative of any sort of minority on any sort of question, must, whatever the consequences, be admitted to the microphone.<sup>117</sup>

More strongly still, though without mentioning Churchill, the Yorkshire Post argued that

the mere fact that an opinion is "seriously held" should not be enough to procure for the holder of it an opportunity of using the BBC's vast power of influencing public opinion. There are plenty of cranks and fanatics whose views, though most seriously held, would strike the vast majority of listeners either as intolerably eccentric or grossly offensive.<sup>118</sup>

116. BBC, PPBPPB, Churchill, Lloyd George and Austen Chamberlain to Whitley, 25 August 1933.

117. Manchester Guardian, 20 March 1933.

118. Yorkshire Post, 7 February 1933.



Churchill's right wing stance and unpopular views led many people in the 1930s to put him in just this category.

The central questions were who should determine the amount of political broadcasting and, within those limitations, who should choose the speakers and set the agenda. In the first the BBC was effectively constrained by party bickering, as it was also in the second and third insofar as the parties themselves were concerned: Yet where it could stick to its principles it did so, and the consequence was a resolve not to be pressured in the choice of independent speakers and a certain resoluteness in striving to control the agenda - the balance of its output. In the majority of its programmes the Corporation not unreasonably chose the subject before deciding upon appropriate speakers. Its problem occasionally came in attempting to hold men of independent spirit to the subject upon which they had been contracted to speak. For some at least saw the BBC's choosing of the subject as an attempt to get them to say what it wanted - and of course in general terms they were right in this belief. The important questions were firstly whether the BBC's legitimate agenda-setting ever went beyond that into predetermination of conclusions, and secondly whether the BBC's agenda was set too narrowly and from one particular standpoint.

On two occasions in particular the BBC found itself at odds with speakers over the relative rights of the individual and the Corporation to control what was said. As part of the 'Causes of War' series in 1934 J.B.S. Haldane was asked to give a talk, referring particularly to the scientific and biological causes. When received, however, his manuscript was found virtually to ignore this aspect, which he clearly regarded as of secondary importance, and instead to concentrate on the aggressive consequences of capitalism and the machinations of arms manufacturers. Since these issues were being dealt with in other talks in the series, notably that of G.D.H. Cole, the BBC asked Haldane to rewrite his contribution. Haldane refused and the talk was replaced with one by R.M.Kyrle.<sup>119</sup>

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119. BBC, TCW, Talks - 'The Causes of War' file; CJBH, Contributors - J.B.S. Haldane File.

By cancelling Haldane's talk the BBC not only emphasised the need for overall balance in its treatment of an issue, but also asserted its right to determine where that balance lay - in other words to choose the subject for each talk. In one respect its viewpoint was eminently reasonable, for it was indeed better placed than its speakers to take an overall view of the treatment of a subject and to see what, in its opinion, were the appropriate issues for discussion. But the problem came when one of its speakers considered the subject for which he had been contracted to be an irrelevancy. Should not the BBC have chosen a number of eminent men and allowed them to give their own independent opinions on the true causes of war? This was certainly what effectively happened in the case of Churchill and Beaverbrook, who both gave talks in the same series. As a letter to Time and Tide, signed by some seventy Cambridge fellows and university staff, declared,

the public should have the right to hear the broadcast opinion of such an eminent man [as Haldane] on so vital an issue, whether the treatment of the subject conform with the preconceived ideas of the BBC or no.<sup>120</sup>

The second example had occurred earlier in the same year when William Ferrie, a communist official of the National Union of Vehicle Workers, had been asked to give a talk in the series 'The National Character'. In particular he was asked to describe the adjustment in character which had resulted from changing industrial conditions.<sup>121</sup> The BBC could have been under no illusions that his talk would be mild and approving. In any case it saw it as a worker's view in contrast to that of Sir Herbert Austin, the leading motor manufacturer, who was to broadcast the week before Ferrie. Austin painted a rosy picture in which he described how the worker's character, confidence and general state of mind had been inestimably improved by improved living and working conditions. Perhaps not

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120. Time and Tide, 17 November 1934.

121. BBC, CWF, Mary Adams to W. Ferrie, 8 November 1933.



surprisingly, therefore, the manuscript which Ferrie handed in to producer Mary Adams turned out to be a forceful attack on Austin's assumptions, on modern industry, capitalism and existing society, concluding with the declaration that 'the Moscow road' was the only right road for British workers. The word 'character' did not appear once, and only by implication could it have been deduced that Ferrie did not consider changing industrial conditions to have done anything to help the national character.

According to Ferrie, writing subsequently, Mary Adams proceeded to alter the talk 'beyond recognition' - in fact to rewrite it completely and to insist that it be given in exactly that form. He claimed that he protested vigorously against this:

Particularly was I incensed at their demand that I should put across that the slogan "Workers of the World Unite!" is not a revolutionary slogan.<sup>122</sup>

R.A.Rendall's interpretation of what happened was rather different; certain passages he felt to be 'manifestly irrelevant' to the question of national character. The talk was also too literary in style and did not speak well:

The "censorship" amounted to this - that Mr. Ferrie was asked to remove or to alter certain passages which were purely propagandist and not concerned with the subject.<sup>123</sup>

At the same time his statement that Ferrie was asked if he wished to 're-~~alter~~' anything suggests that alteration on the script occurred before he was consulted. Rendall emphasised, however, that Ferrie was given full opportunity to propose alterations and did not do so.

122. W. Ferrie, The Banned Broadcast of William Ferrie, Workers' Bookshop Ltd. 1934, 2.

123. BBC, CWF, Secretary of Central Council for Broadcast Adult Education (R.A.Rendall) to Midland Regional Director, 15 March 1934.

Whatever the circumstances and whatever the actual amount of BBC alteration, Ferrie came to the microphone only to declare that

what I wanted to tell you has been so censored and altered and cut up by the BBC that I consider it impossible for me to give a talk without it being a travesty of the British working class.<sup>124</sup>

He promised to give the talk to the press and was then cut off. The Corporation naturally rejected the charge and received support for its stance from The Times, which declared:

an understanding expressed or implied between the BBC and the speaker that the microphone shall be used responsibly for the purpose for which it has been placed at his disposal is obviously vital to any kind of broadcasting.<sup>125</sup>

The Manchester Guardian equally defended the BBC's

right to sub-edit manuscripts, provided that it dispenses equal justice to the important and the humble speaker.<sup>126</sup>

There can be no doubt that Ferrie had grossly exceeded his brief; it is at least possible that he would have been permitted to give the talk, in his own way, if only it had been tied a bit more obviously to the contracted subject, rather than being overtly polemical. The important questions, however, were firstly whether the BBC had been right in itself proposing alterations - particularly if, as Ferrie claimed, these included alterations of sense as well as of style; and secondly whether in choosing the subject of 'National Character', it had not set an eminently middle class agenda, and one which was wholly irrelevant to the daily concerns of the working class. Mary

124. The Times, 6 March 1934.

125. The Times, 7 March 1934, 15c.

126. Manchester Guardian, 7 March, 1934, 8c.



Adams was sympathetic to the expression of working class views, but it is certainly doubtful if she recognised the subtle ways in which her proposed alterations might have been seen, by a man of Ferrie's outlook and background, as changing the talk's entire character. In such circumstances the Manchester Guardian's comment about equal justice to the important and the humble did not apply. If Ferrie had been eminent, alterations to the 'irrelevant' paragraphs of his talk would certainly still have been made - J.B.S. Haldane, Harold Macmillan and Josiah Wedgwood all had alterations proposed by the BBC, where statements were considered irrelevant or undesirable in context. But in the case of such men major re-writings by the BBC, to ensure readability, would not have resulted in a markedly different outlook being conveyed through the style itself. This could only happen when a middle class producer altered and rewrote parts of a working class man's script. By altering the style and bringing the talk closer to the contracted subject Mary Adams had, in Ferrie's opinion, been doubly guilty of casting him and his talk in a predetermined mould. Adams did certainly provide him with the opportunity to re-alter the script, 'to make it fit in with his own way of saying things', but it is evident either that Ferrie did not appreciate this or, more likely, that by that stage he had already decided upon his eventual course of action.<sup>127</sup>

The incident served to demonstrate an undoubted and unavoidable constraint upon the BBC's 'impartial' handling of political affairs - namely its middle and upper class outlook. This was a fact which numerous writers, including Asa Briggs and Arthur Marwick, have commented upon, and it does not require further elucidation.<sup>128</sup> The New Statesman was only slightly over-stating the case when it argued that

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127. BBC, CWF, R.A.Rendall to Midland Regional Director, 15 March 1934.

128. A. Briggs (1965), Op. Cit., 40-42; A. Marwick, Class, Glasgow 1981, 157-166. J. Curran and J. Seaton, Power Without Responsibility, Glasgow 1981, 152-154.

The BBC is heavily class-biassed, from the composition of its Board of Governors through its staff down to the censorship of its talks and the tone of its entertainments. It is bourgeois, both politically and culturally, in the worst sense of that much abused word. From the point of view of democracy, that is a fatal defect.<sup>129</sup>

Producers such as Mary Adams, Norman Luker, C.V. Salmon, Felix Greene and Lionel Fielden were, of course, aware that their audience was predominantly of a very different social and intellectual background, but efforts to bridge the gap all too often resulted in an appearance of talking down to, or of patronising, the working class.<sup>130</sup> Occasionally the BBC could reveal an appalling and quite unconscious lack of awareness as to the sensitivities of others of a different background. Thus Alan Dawnay could not understand why Herbert Morrison and the Daily Herald should object when they learnt that an anonymous and impartial talk, explaining the importance of people voting in the forthcoming 1934 Municipal Elections, was to be given by a Conservative candidate. It was typical of the BBC that the speaker should be of a certain eminently reputable type, guaranteed because of his character to give an impartial talk. Suspicion of such a procedure was quite incomprehensible to it.<sup>131</sup>

But the fundamental point about the BBC's assumptions was that the very notions of democratic education and citizenship which it held so dear were themselves eminently 'bourgeois' concepts. In Arthur Marwick's beautiful phrase, the BBC was a 'propagator of basic assumptions', assumptions about democracy, the nature and value systems of British society, which a particular section of that

129. New Statesman, 31 March 1934.

130. A. Marwick (1981), Op. Cit., 162-4.

131. The Daily Herald very pertinently asked 'why in the world, if all that was intended was that an anonymous voice should urge that to use his vote is the duty of a good citizen, should the BBC select a Tory candidate in the crisis of his own election fight, for the job?' - Daily Herald, 29 October 1934.



society - of which the BBC was part and from which it took its ideas - felt needed propagating.<sup>132</sup> 'Democracy', 'freedom', 'national character', honour, decency, integrity, - such seemingly unambiguous and unexceptionable concepts could in fact be interpreted and evaluated from many different standpoints, and not necessarily from that which the BBC assumed. Yet during the inter-war period the BBC saw itself consciously as having a duty to defend democracy and certain related ideals, as well as to attempt to perfect them. In its reverencing of monarchy, church, empire, parliament and the British character and tradition, the BBC was adopting the particular value system not necessarily of the nation but of a particular, if large and cross-class, section of it. When the BBC was accused of left wing bias in 1935, Charles Siepmann, hardly the most orthodox Director of Talks, pointed quite unconcernedly to

the amount of unobtrusive work going on all the time in series of a constructive character, all of which tend to consolidate accepted institutions and traditions.<sup>133</sup>

He gave as examples talks on the Empire, religious talks and services, many of the morning programmes for women,

and the scores of series and talks such as those recently on "Ancient Britain out of Doors", on "The Village Church", etc. etc.

132. A. Marwick (1981), Op. Cit., 157.

133. BBC, PPBAPB, Siepmann to Gladstone Murray, 29 April 1935. Gladstone Murray equally wrote: 'It is indeed a pity that those who lose sight of the wood of British oak because their attention is riveted on an occasional piece of what they take for Russian timber cannot see, for a few brief salutary moments, what might be in the programmes if it was true that those who drew them up favoured subversion and degeneration and the dissolving of standards and the remodelling of the life of Britain according to the paper plans of intellectuals with no roots in the country.' - PPBAPB, Gladstone Murray to O.Pulvermacher, 30 April 1935.

As Alan Dawnay told the Ullswater Committee,

if anything, the scale comes down a little bit on the side of emphasising the virtues of stability rather than of holding out the glamorous prospects of change.<sup>134</sup>

With such basic assumptions it was not surprising that the BBC should hold the Government and Civil Service departments in a degree of respect. Nor was it surprising that, despite its concern for independence, it should allow them, as with news, a certain influence over its domestic affairs programmes. Nevertheless it was anxious to maintain its independence, and the relationship in practice was one of part resistance, part deference, to government influence.

The constitutional relationship, of course, would have allowed control if necessary. Indeed some BBC staff felt that the Corporation should have been more ready to insist on the use of Clause 4 of the Licence rather than submit to, and even anticipate, government wishes. There were, however, arguments against this. On the side of the BBC was Reith's concern for its outward integrity. On the side of the Government was the appreciation by the early 1930s that it would invoke public anathema and political scandal of the highest order to interfere with the BBC's freedom in such a way. Reith realised that this was so; on the one occasion in the early 1930s when such an action was threatened, the Hashagen incident, he was convinced that the Government was bluffing. This opinion was confirmed many years later by Sir Kingsley Wood, who admitted that he would never have used his veto.<sup>135</sup>

Yet his belief that the Government would find it highly invidious

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134. BBC, UCVEX, Evidence of A.Dawnay, 19 July 1935. For an interesting and fair summary of the practical effect of this approach on the programmes for one year, 1935, see T.Stannage (1980), Op. Cit., 184-189.

135. A. Briggs (1965), Op. Cit., 130.



to utilise Clause 4 (3) did not incline Reith to pay less attention to government opinion. He was, of course, aware that in the long term government dissatisfaction with the BBC could well have drastic consequences for his creation and his ideal. Indeed before the publication of the Government's white paper on broadcasting in 1936 this was of immediate concern. But quite apart from such pragmatic considerations Reith held that the Corporation had a certain duty not just to forebear from doing anything which might hinder government policy, but actively to give aid in its implementation, where such a policy did not too greatly conflict with political balance and BBC independence.

The Corporation was naturally aware of the risk in holding such a policy, and this made it wary of government initiated proposals for, or opposition to, domestic affairs programmes. The only known instance of government initiated opposition - the only such occasion on which the Government succeeded in its objective - was the rather ridiculous Hashagen affair.<sup>136</sup> Of government proposals for talks, however, there are a few more examples. Thus in 1937 the Ministry of Health suggested that mention be made of its campaign for better rural housing, not only in the news and farming programme, but also in ordinary talks on country rambles:

it would be nice if Gypsy Petulengro - who must have a large public - could notice a cottage or two ("Before and After") in the course of his wanderings.<sup>137</sup>

The Corporation considered that the campaign was sufficiently newsworthy for the farming programme and news, but not surprisingly rejected the third suggestion:

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136. For details of the Hashagen affair see A. Briggs (1979), Op. Cit., 191-194. For government opposition to programmes with international implications, however, see pages 562-611 below.

137. BBC, CMH, A.N. Rucker to L. Wellington, 18 January 1937. Petulengro gave regular talks on the countryside.

I am sure we do not want to urge general speakers to indulge in veiled propoganda.<sup>138</sup>

The issue was not uncontroversial, for the unions objected vigorously to any suggestion that farm labourers' houses were generally good. The Ministry of Health Publicity Officer's eagerness to publicise the Ministry's health policy similarly obliged Maconachie

to remind him that the Corporation reserved its independence of treatment of the subject, and must maintain its policy of not over emphasising one particular view.<sup>139</sup>

Again in October 1938 Sir Richard Maconachie was called to the Cabinet Office, where he was told by the Cabinet Secretary and Sir Ernest Gowers that

they considered it would be in the public interest if a discussion could be staged on the subject of National Service which would help to clear the public mind of the vague and woolly ideas prevalent on this subject, on which clear thinking was urgently necessary.<sup>140</sup>

On this occasion Maconachie readily agreed to the proposal, particularly since there was no suggestion that the BBC should accept specific speakers. The debate took place the following month between L.S. Amery and Lord Snell.

In the final year before the war government departments showed an increasing interest in the use of broadcasting, an interest not wholly welcome to the Corporation. By June 1939 Basil Nicolls was finding that many departments treated the BBC as though Clause 4 (2)

138. BBC, CMH, L. Wellington to Maconachie, 26 January 1937.

139. BBC, CMH, record of meeting between Maconachie, J. Coatman and A.N. Rucker, 10 February 1937.

140. BBC, TTP, memorandum by Maconachie, 11 October 1938.



of the Licence, requiring the BBC to broadcast official notices, gave them the right to demand anything. Indeed the Lord Privy Seal's press officer told R.T. Clark several times 'in a hectoring tone ... that it is the BBC's job to do what they are told'.<sup>141</sup> The same department persistently tried to persuade the BBC to allow the Prime Minister to broadcast during a religious service on 2 July 1939.

This situation was clearly intolerable for the Corporation and, although required by Licence to take note of official requirements, the Director General, Ogilvie, stressed that his objective was 'the minimum of government interference'. More than that, he suggested to his staff a practical method of evasion:

The remedy .... is, I suggest, stalling:- that SNE [Senior News Editor] should say that he cannot possibly agree to this or that (improper) request without consulting C(P): C(P) without consulting DDG, and so on.<sup>142</sup>

Where the initiative came from the Government or government departments, therefore, the BBC did its best, though not always successfully, to guard its position. But when the Corporation itself initiated the contact, the very fact of its approach indicated recognition that the Government had a right to be consulted on matters which affected it. Such a policy of consultation was followed both to obtain factual information and as a matter of courtesy, to ensure that the work of government would not be seriously hindered by the Corporation's actions. Yet it clearly made the latter's position that much more difficult. It was a dangerous practice, resulting both from its commitment to aid the task of government and from an over-confidence in its ability to recognise and repel undue influence. Indeed in the early 1930s some government departments proved less anxious to be consulted than the BBC was to consult them, their fear being that prior consultation would be taken at large to signify

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141. BBC, TGDRBB, Nicolls to Ogilvie, 29 June 1939.

142. BBC, TGDRBB, Ogilvie to Graves, 5 July 1939.

agreement with and responsibility for whatever was said. Similarly the Home Office, which generally proved most co-operative in advising on straight talks in its particular field, refused to allow its own spokesmen to take part in or even advise on potentially awkward and embarrassing broadcast discussions. As Sir Russell Scott, the Permanent Under-Secretary, told Siepmann,

on the whole it would be better for the Home Office, so far as discussions and summing up are concerned, to be, as it were, clean outside the ring, and that being so, we should prefer not to be consulted beforehand in regard to them.<sup>143</sup>

The vast majority of such consultations - and they occurred almost whenever a planned talks series impinged on an area of concern to a government department - were entirely innocuous, largely because the subjects proposed for talks were themselves factual and uncontroversial. Very occasionally, however, departmental responses to BBC enquiries went beyond factual information. The crucial question was where reasonable government request ended and undue influence began. Siepmann told Reith in 1933 that, as regards political affairs coverage,

we are always likely to have the government of the day, and even more so the Civil Service, against us, on grounds of expediency and the "public interest".<sup>144</sup>

His warning showed a recognition both that closeness was still considered a virtue within much of the Civil Service and that, given the opportunity, any government would seek in a delicate situation to influence, wheresoever it could, the information provided to the public. Most of the time it had no such opportunity; just occasionally it did.

143. BBC, TTPPP, Sir Russell Scott to BBC, 16 February 1934.

144. BBC, PPBG, Siepmann to Reith, 23 February 1933.



In April 1937, for example, the Ministry of Labour proved less than keen when the BBC proposed to allow representatives on both sides of the London bus dispute to broadcast. A stoppage had not yet occurred, and Malcolm Brereton for the Corporation explained that

if a settlement was in view we did not wish to fan the flame, and it was only in the event of a strike being actually in progress that we wished to give both sides an opportunity of showing the public that they had a sufficient case to justify a situation in which the public was without its transport.<sup>145</sup>

Yet despite this reasonable approach the Ministry

was convinced that it would do more harm than good even to make offers to Lord Ashfield (or Mr. Pick) on one side and Mr. Bevin on the other to broadcast on the subject of the impending bus strike.<sup>146</sup>

In view of this advice Maconachie and Graves decided to abandon the proposal.

1937 also saw the twenty-first anniversary of the nationalisation of the Carlisle brewing industry, an early experiment in public ownership which had proved remarkably successful. The Corporation considered a talk on the subject and consulted the Home Office. The answer was not one that a civil servant should have given. Nor did it impress producer Norman Luker, who told Maconachie that the H.O. would be 'most relieved to hear that the idea of such a programme had been dropped':

The reason for this is .... that it is most embarrassing for a Conservative Government to have publicity shining on what is definitely a Socialist experiment ... The real opposition is a

145. BBC, TTP, C.S.M. Brereton to Maconachie, 29 April 1937.

146. BBC, TTP, memorandum by Maconachie, 30 April 1937.

political one.<sup>147</sup>

In the event, although no talk was broadcast, the decision seems to have been taken on the grounds of pure newsworthiness and not because of Home Office wishes. One comment, however, by A.P. Ryan, the Assistant Controller of Public Relations, was interesting. He argued that if the Carlisle experiment was dealt with, it should be by a talk rather than a debate:

A debate, stirring up the whole question at a time when it is not an issue of practical politics, does seem to be gratuitously asking for trouble.<sup>148</sup>

These examples were typical of the level at which such liaison and influence occurred. Thus in February 1938 Guy Burgess was told that because of a general lack of agreement between Britain and the Dominions on emigration policy, the time was 'particularly unripe' for a programme on the subject.<sup>149</sup> When Australia House was contacted about a possible talk on new plans for emigration, it advised the Corporation that the moment was inopportune owing to the recent arrival in Britain of three Australian ministers to discuss this subject with the Government.<sup>150</sup> On both occasions the BBC acted upon the advice - by not acting. In such ways liaison resulted, to use Lord Burnham's phrase, in 'not censorship, an influence'. Individual instances were generally insignificant; taken as a whole the effect could be considerable.

The relationship which existed between the Home Office and the BBC in particular provided a good example of the basically sympathetic attitude on each side, and of the practical consequences.

147. BBC, TTP, N. Luker to Maconachie, 4 August 1937.

148. BBC, TTP, A.P. Ryan to Maconachie, 9 September 1937.

149. BBC, TTP, G. Burgess to Maconachie, 18 February 1938.

150. BBC, TTP, M.H. Whale to G. Barnes, 29 April 1938.



Siepmann found it a natural step in November 1932, when planning a series on crime, to contact the Home Office, request its assistance and assure it that

Our whole purpose is to assist the Home Office by securing through our educational efforts a sane and moderate public opinion in face of the sensational headlines to which they are treated in the press.<sup>151</sup>

The following year he told Sir Russell Scott of the frequent contacts between their two staffs and requested a personal meeting:

We are, as you know, very anxious to work closely with you and to miss no opportunity of service that it is possible for us to render.<sup>152</sup>

Following this meeting the Talks Department began to prepare a series on delinquency and the prison system, which, the Home Office was informed, was intended

to counteract the irresponsible and misleading publicity attaching to certain aspects of the work of the Prison Commission, and to inform listeners of the enlightened practice and the general policy of our prison administration.<sup>153</sup>

This letter was again a request for Home Office co-operation, both in giving the intended speaker, a Mrs. Le Mesurier, access to prisons and in informally checking her manuscripts in order to ensure that they were 'a true and accurate account of the administration'. Sir Russell Scott was only too happy to scrutinise scripts,

151. BBC, TTPPP, Siepmann to H.R.Scott (Prison Commission, Home Office), 8 November 1932.

152. BBC, TTPPP, Siepmann to Sir Russell Scott, 28 August 1933.

153. BBC, TTPPP, Siepmann to Sir Russell Scott, 17 January 1934.

with the object of correcting any inaccuracy and of eliminating any statement which might be detrimental to the public interest.<sup>154</sup>

Moreover he proposed an alternative expert as principal speaker, namely the Conservative MP Sir Vivian Henderson, and Siepmann readily agreed to his giving a number of talks in the series. The BBC did, however, resist Scott's suggestion that three intended discussions - on the causes and prevention of crime, and on the death penalty - should not be included. Siepmann and Dawnay considered these to be essential and attractive elements of the series; they were prepared to accede to Scott's wishes on the question of Henderson in order to have their own way on the discussions. Such on occasions could be the BBC mentality which saw this very close liaison as responsible co-operation, and compromise as necessary to preserve reasonable independence.

Ministerial broadcasts also formed an integral part of the BBC's political coverage, and one in which the Corporation was particularly vulnerable to influence. Most ministerials were unexceptionable, as a list for one year, 1934, suggests:

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154. BBC, TTPPP, Sir Russell Scott to Siepmann, 23 January 1934.



Table 8.1: Ministerial Broadcasts during 1934.<sup>155</sup>

14 February	Walter Elliot	The Marketing Schemes in Action.
27 March	Oliver Stanley	Road Safety Campaign.*
17 April	Neville Chamberlain	The Budget.
21 May	Anthony Eden	The Disarmament Conference
6 June	Sir Kingsley Wood	Changes in the Post Office Service.
10 July	Leslie Hore-Belisha	Pedestrian Crossings.
12 July	Sir Edward Hilton Young	The Drought.
2 August	Leslie Hore-Belisha	Road Accidents.
23 August	Leslie Hore-Belisha	Silent Zones.
24 August	Walter Elliot	Cattle Emergency Provisions Act.
10 September	Anthony Eden	Opening of the Fifteenth Ordinary Session of the League.
25 September	Sir Kingsley Wood	Telephone Week.
27 September	Walter Elliot	Milk for School Children.
3 October	Leslie Hore-Belisha	The New Pedestrian Crossing Places.
10 December	Sir Godfrey Collins	Milk Marketing Board in Scotland.
19 December	Sir John Simon	The Naval Conversations.
20 December	Lord Londonderry	Empire Air Services.

\* This was followed by three controversial statements by Clement Attlee, Sir Herbert Samuel and J.H.Thomas.

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155. H.C. Debates, vol. 297:col.1552, 11 February 1935.

Although George Lansbury was at this stage still demanding a right of reply for every Government broadcast, protests were rarely made, and the Labour leadership came gradually to accept that most ministerials were relatively innocuous in content.

Not all were, however. Just occasionally the Corporation broadcast talks which were either not strictly justifiable or not wholly impartial. Thirteen days before Sir Edward Hilton Young's Housing Bill had its second reading, in January 1935, he was given the opportunity to broadcast on its aims and provisions. His talk was hardly impartial and the issue itself was certainly not uncontroversial. The Bill was fiercely debated in the Commons, with the Opposition rejecting it as wholly inadequate and misguided.<sup>156</sup>

An even more interesting example of a dubious ministerial - interesting because of what it shows about Reith's attitude - had occurred only two weeks previously. In mid-December 1934 MacDonald told Reith that the Cabinet wanted him (MacDonald) to broadcast a New Year's message:

He said the National Government was misrepresented so much in the newspapers that the Cabinet thought that they had better tell the public their point of view over the wireless.<sup>157</sup>

Reith was very much opposed to the suggestion and emphasised that it would only be permissible if the talk was a wholly uncontroversial New Year's greeting. At the same time he was unwilling to annoy the PM too much:

It is an awkward position. I am quite ready to take a strong line with anybody on certain occasions, but to oppose the government in a matter like this is of doubtful expediency.<sup>158</sup>

156. The Listener, 23 January 1935, 159; H.C. Debates, vol. 297:cols. 359-487, and 543-633, 30-31 January 1935.

157. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 119, 11-12 December 1934.

158. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 119, 14 December 1934.



The renewal of the BBC's charter was already very much in Reith's mind.<sup>159</sup> When MacDonald continued to express a desire to give the talk, though agreeing to make it uncontroversial, Reith told him that his wishes settled the matter. But the resultant broadcast was little more than a National Government apologia,<sup>160</sup> even though Reith considered it 'not at all bad'.

Such instances were rare. But the BBC also recognised that all ministerial appearances, no matter how innocuous, did give a certain amount of publicity both to the Government and to the individual concerned, and Siepmann concluded that it would be better if such talks were not given by ministers.<sup>161</sup> When Sir Edward Hilton Young 'offered' to broadcast on house building progress in 1933 Fielden warned that his comments

will not exactly be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So far as I can gather, feeling generally among those who are keen on slum clearance is that no progress whatever is being made ....<sup>162</sup>

Siepmann and Reith agreed that the most that should be offered was an opportunity for Hilton Young to be questioned by three critics, as had Walter Elliot the previous month.<sup>163</sup> Cecil Graves similarly warned in 1937 that

we have to watch and see that [ministerials are] not overdone, otherwise we might find ourselves in the position of having the Opposition trying to make out that the Government was being given

159. J.C.W. Reith (1949), Op. Cit., 210.

160. The Listener, 9 January 1935, 45; C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 119, 5 January 1935.

161. BBC, PPBG, Siepmann to Reith, 23 February 1933.

162. BBC, TH, Fielden to Siepmann, 11 July 1933.

163. BBC, TH, Siepmann to Reith, 12 July 1933.

too big a showing.<sup>164</sup>

In December 1938 Ogilvie told Sir John Anderson, the Lord Privy Seal, that any broadcast by him on defence policy would have to be balanced by an Opposition reply.<sup>165</sup>

Yet ministers were by now coming to appreciate the advantages of ministerials, and this fact, coupled with the BBC's traditional liking for broadcasts 'from the horse's mouth', combined to prevent any decrease in their number. Opposition complaints that ministerial appearances gave the Government undue publicity, even when the subject was non-controversial, were revived.<sup>166</sup> The question arose as to what level of ministerials was acceptable, and the Corporation, which had been too reliant upon its own fundamental impartiality, began to realise in the last few months before war that in the gathering crisis it had allowed the situation to become unbalanced. The same was true of its broadcasting of speeches by ministers from outside functions, many of which had a political content. Chamberlain's speeches in particular had been broadcast, and Herbert Morrison felt obliged in early 1939 to complain that

the BBC has a very distinct tendency to broadcast ministers on a large number of occasions without any corresponding consideration for members of political parties opposed to the Government.<sup>167</sup>

He pointed out that the previous week two of Chamberlain's speeches had been broadcast and one of Sir John Anderson's, whilst his own at the same function as Anderson had been omitted. Maurice Farquharson, the BBC's Director of Home Intelligence, had to admit of this and

164. BBC, PPBMB, Graves to Director of Programme Administration, 11 May 1937.

165. Note of meeting between Ogilvie and Sir John Anderson, 7 December 1938 - quoted by A. Briggs (1965), Op. Cit., 655.

166. BBC, PPBG, Nicolls to Maconachie, 16 December 1938.

167. BBC, PPBMB, H. Morrison to Ogilvie, 27 January 1939.



many similar letters that

I have found it a difficult charge to answer and A.C.(P) has also not yet decided on the line of reply to be used.<sup>168</sup>

When Emmanuel Shinwell asked about the extent of broadcasts by government speakers since 1936, the Director of Outside Broadcasts, S.J. de Lotbinière, told Farquharson:

The list is very far from providing any good answer to the innuendo contained in Mr. Shinwell's question, and it looks as though we have been going from bad to worse.<sup>169</sup>

The BBC's explanation that few such occasions were political, and that institutional dinners more often had government than opposition members as speakers, was hardly adequate. In answer to another parliamentary question the Assistant PMG revealed that between 31 January 1938 and 31 January 1939 ministers had broadcast on 42 occasions, government supporters in the House on 48 occasions and members of the opposition parties on only 33. These figures included non-political talks and the regular 'Week in Westminster' broadcasts. Excluding the latter, as the Assistant PMG was careful not to do, would have made the figures considerably worse, at about 42 ministers, 38 government MPs and only 13 members of the opposition, even though most of the remainder were unexceptionable ministerials and other talks.<sup>170</sup> If the BBC had earlier been careful not to allow ministerials and other broadcasting facilities for the Government to get out of hand, it found it increasingly difficult to do so as war approached.<sup>171</sup>

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168. BBC, PPBMB, M. Farquharson to B. Nicolls, 30 January 1939. The Assistant Controller of Programmes was Lindsay Wellington.

169. BBC, PPBPPB, S. J. de Lotbinière to M. Farquharson, 2 February 1939.

170. H.C. Debates, vol. 343:col.2065, 17 February 1939.

171. After the war the extent of ministerial broadcasting was again

Yet it was precisely during such crises that the BBC aligned itself most firmly with the national interest. The increase in ministerials and other government notices in the months before and after Munich was not due to any relaxation of the policy of impartiality; rather it was the result of a genuine and reasonable view that, in the dissemination of information and appeals on A.R.P., gas masks and other defence measures, the BBC could play a unique role. The Corporation responded in this way to the growing emergency because in such circumstances the Government did indeed have special responsibilities which transcended considerations of party balance. The series of party debates in 1939 was intended specifically to give Opposition spokesmen air-time for criticism, as a counter to government predominance. Where it proved wholly inadequate was in its inability to consider the foreign situation. The area where the BBC's relationship with the Government was most interesting was with regard to foreign affairs, and it is to this that we must lastly turn.

iv) Foreign Affairs Broadcasting and Programmes with International Ramifications, 1927 - 1939.

The BBC's motto 'Nation shall speak Peace unto Nation' reflected its profound concern for promoting an internationalist spirit both amongst its listeners and, through public expressions of international amity, between states themselves. If the BBC's first brief was for constitutional democracy its second was for international understanding and world peace. When Whitley told the Cabinet that the Hashagen talk had been 'planned as a definite contribution towards the elimination of submarine warfare', he did not have any concern that the BBC was here taking a very definite editorial line.<sup>172</sup> Several of the staff were connected with the

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to become a problem. Not until ministers and departments began to accept the BBC's argument that government information could be more readily transmitted and accepted through the ordinary news bulletin did the practice, and its attendant dangers, decline.

172. Cab.24, C.P. 271 (32), Whitley to M. Hankey, 28 July 1932.



League of Nations Union, whilst the BBC's full coverage of the sessions of the League itself, even to the extent of having a correspondent in Geneva and giving the British delegation full opportunities to broadcast, represented a strong identification with its aims and work. Above all the Corporation saw peace as depending to a large extent upon the elimination of national ignorance about other nations and international events. It therefore accepted as one of its duties the task of informing its audience of the intricacies of foreign affairs, as well as presenting numerous programmes and series on aspects of life in foreign countries. It provided opportunities for foreign nationals to describe both their own countries and their sense of international goodwill, and it promoted the learning of foreign languages.

In its commitment to replacing ignorance with information the BBC appeared to have an unexpected ally. This was the Foreign Office itself, or more particularly the News Department of the Foreign Office. Before the First World War this would not have been so; diplomacy and foreign affairs were a mystery to most people and the Foreign Office was desirous that it should remain so, lest misguided public opinion hinder its delicate work.<sup>173</sup> The war, however, changed the FO's outlook. The News Department, established in 1914, was initially and primarily aimed outwards, its function being to publicise the British case abroad, particularly through the foreign press. This concern was to be reflected throughout the inter-war period in its approach to the British press and, as we shall see, to the BBC, for it was recognised that the domestic media were a valuable source of information on British policy for foreign observers. At the same time it was felt that the war and the establishment of the League of Nations, together with the extension of the electorate and increased education, had raised general public interest in foreign affairs and made it no longer possible to exclude

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173. For these details of the pre-First World War Foreign Office and the establishment of the News Department, I have relied upon P. Taylor, The Projection of Britain, PhD. thesis, Leeds 1978, 65-67, et passim.

domestic public opinion as a factor in policy. For these reasons the Foreign Office News Department concerned itself not only with publicity abroad but also with the presentation of foreign policy to the British populace.

Various factors combined to determine how it undertook this task. Cutbacks after the war ensured that the Department's activities were reduced from active propagandising to a more passive informational role, providing news on foreign policy to the press and correcting misstatements and misconceptions.<sup>174</sup> But in any case this was the role which the creators of the peace-time News Department defined for themselves. They recognised that they had to work with a free press whose editorial line could not be controlled. The most that could be done was to provide regular and accurate news and intelligent comment in an effort to disarm ill-informed press criticism.<sup>175</sup> With this in mind the successive heads of the department, Arthur Willert and Rex Leeper, sought to create a friendly and informal atmosphere in which mutual trust and confidence formed the basis of liaison with the press.<sup>176</sup> Willert and Leeper themselves met the foreign editors of major newspapers regularly, in order to discuss privately the international situation. In this way they hoped to encourage a friendly response and to gain the sympathy - if not the support - of these important opinion-makers.

Such a policy, however, was not always successful, particularly with the popular press and at a time when an editorial line depended as much on proprietorial whim as on factual evidence. Rex Leeper was repeatedly frustrated in his aim:

the muddled-headedness and inconsistency of English public opinion as expressed in the newspapers causes difficulties to our own Government and accentuates differences in Europe. If

174. Ibid., 3.

175. Ibid., 98.

176. Ibid., 108.



newspapers would really maintain close and serious contact with the Foreign Office, they would not always agree with official policy, but they would at any rate have a much clearer picture as to what it was they disagreed with. Their criticisms might then be better informed and more useful.<sup>177</sup>

Yet his conclusions as to the best method of dealing with the problem remained unchanged. Patience, he hoped, would have its reward:

We can only hope to induce the Press to exercise restraint in foreign affairs by taking these irresponsible persons into our confidence. A free Press is an enormous asset to the country provided that freedom does not degenerate into irresponsible license.<sup>178</sup>

The views of the Foreign Office News Department and of the BBC were therefore remarkably compatible, their joint aim being to inform the public in a responsible manner about the intricacies of foreign affairs. The danger-point for BBC independence was to come precisely in that identity of outlook, combined with the FO's primary concern for foreign opinion rather than domestic.

Contact between the FO and BBC was initiated by the latter which, whilst still a Company, began the practice of phoning to check unconfirmed Reuter's reports for the news bulletin. In 1927 this liaison was put on a proper footing when it was arranged that a BBC representative could ring or call in at the FO in the same way as the foreign editors of major newspapers. The arrangement was a completely friendly one, and Arthur Willert wrote to E.C. Henty that

We are, I think, in agreement that it will be to the advantage of both parties that ..... relations should be as close and as

177. R.A. Leeper to Sir Robert Vansittart, 12 October 1932. Quoted by P. Taylor, Op. Cit., 115.

178. Memorandum by Leeper, 2 January 1938. Quoted by P. Taylor, Op. Cit., 119.

constant as the relations existing between the News Department of the Foreign Office and the leading British newspapers and news agencies.<sup>179</sup>

Indeed the Foreign Office was as concerned for its own independence as the BBC:

We shall be very glad to do whatever we properly can to supplement your knowledge, and to check your facts, provided, of course, that it is understood that in doing so we assume no responsibility for anything which the British Broadcasting Corporation may say, except when we hand you an official<sup>180</sup> communique.

When, in 1928, Vernon Bartlett suggested that William Ridsdale of the FO News Department should take over his 'Way of the World' series while he was on holiday, Willert vetoed the idea on the grounds that

we have always been careful to lay it down to the BBC that we can take no<sup>181</sup> responsibility for their utterances on foreign affairs.

Willert's concern was to prevent the FO becoming involved in an organisation over which, ultimately, it had no control. The danger of the BBC being seen abroad as a government mouthpiece was therefore quickly recognised by the Foreign Office, which was as anxious as the BBC to stop this idea gaining currency. Apart from this apprehension it was gratified by the increased liaison, particularly when during the 1927 Naval Conference,

By means of the BBC an accurate statement of the British case was repeatedly given to a great many people who never read a decent

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179. FO 395/422, P446/364/150, A. Willert to E.C. Henty, 1 November 1927.

180. Ibid.

181. FO 395/432, P1104/1104/150, Minute by Willert, c. 15 July 1928.



newspaper and even to many who do not read a newspaper at all.<sup>182</sup>

The arrangements for covering the 1930 London Naval Conference were equally a complete success, with the opening speeches and other items being broadcast and, later in the year, Ramsay MacDonald himself talking on the ratification of the Naval treaty.<sup>183</sup>

The BBC did indeed behave 'responsibly', consulting the News Department on dubious items of news and accepting its responsibility not to make the FO's job more difficult. It took as its natural rule

a general policy of avoiding provocative or undesirable references to foreign governments and people, and the handling of such subjects only by speakers of acknowledged authority and responsibility.<sup>184</sup>

In Vernon Bartlett it found, as it thought, the ideal foreign affairs broadcaster. His scripts were not submitted to the FO and the latter did not consider such a step either necessary or desirable. Indeed it was the BBC rather than the FO which in 1931 sought even greater liaison, as the arrangements for the series 'Russia in the Melting Pot' demonstrate.

'Russia in the Melting Pot' was the first talks series to be broadcast on a specific and contentious foreign subject. Hilda Matheson saw it as an essentially factual and, if possible, uncontroversial analysis of Soviet Russia given by men and women who were experts in the field. She therefore had no apprehension about consulting Rex Leeper 'unofficially' as to the best subjects and speakers to ensure a balanced set of programmes.<sup>185</sup> Reith similarly

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182. FO 395/422, P446/364/150, Minute by A. Yencken, 16 August 1927.

183. FO 395/440, P266/1/150, 1930 London Naval Conference arrangements file.

184. BBC, PPEG, Unsigned memorandum, 22 July 1930.

185. BBC, TR, Matheson to R. Eckersley, 7 February 1931.

contacted Sir Robert Vansittart, the Permanent Under-Secretary, and Sir Launcelot Oliphant, the Assistant Under Secretary, in order to suggest

some arrangement between us so that you may be in touch with what we propose doing in general regarding foreign affairs, and so that we may have proper advice?<sup>186</sup>

It was unfortunately not clear from this what advice Reith had in mind, although his request on the Russian series went no further than had Matheson's. Oliphant, however, certainly seemed to think that an element of script checking would also be involved, for he told Reith that the most that could be done was the reading of 'doubtful passages'.<sup>187</sup> Again it is unclear whether this suggestion, to which Reith agreed, implied anything more than the checking of factual information.

But whatever Reith had in mind, his proposal found little favour in the FO, where it was certainly interpreted as more than may have been intended. The internal debate on the subject allowed for an interesting enunciation of Foreign Office attitudes. Rex Leeper distinguished between the checking of factual news items and of opinionated talks. Clearly the FO could not accept any responsibility for opinions expressed by speakers, in the same way that it did not for opinions expressed in newspaper articles. A newspaper was considered entirely responsible for any item it printed. But for the first time Leeper posed the crucial question as to whether the BBC was analogous to a newspaper and whether, therefore, it should be treated in the same way:

It is not entirely independent like a newspaper, as the Government have a right to intervene and foreign governments are aware of this .... All I can suggest, if we are to attempt [a

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186. FO 395/453, P418/39/150, Reith to Vansittart, 24 February 1931.

187. Ibid.



liaison] is that our functions should be of a negative character, viz. that we should discourage anything of a controversial character and advise the omission of any passage which we considered likely to cause controversy in the press. In practice that would mean that we should confine ourselves to the omission of anything that might cause offence to a foreign Government, or the correction of an obvious mis-statement of fact.<sup>188</sup>

Willert, Oliphant and Vansittart agreed with this suggestion, although the latter felt that such negative liaison should be 'an exception in case of need and not a practice'.<sup>189</sup> Hugh Dalton, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, was unwilling even to go this far, and pointed out that

It would be awkward to have to admit in Parliament that we have exercised even a negative censorship over the manuscripts of proposed talks.<sup>190</sup>

The Foreign Office was therefore strongly opposed to closer liaison on foreign affairs talks, and Vansittart in his reply to Reith merely advised him

to review with particular care the proofs of any lectures submitted to you on these delicate questions in order to avoid as far as possible controversial matter in any talks which may take place, or any reference which might affect our relations with any foreign country.<sup>191</sup>

Although the Labour Secretary of State, Arthur Henderson, had agreed to the concept of negative liaison, Vansittart intimated no more than

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188. FO 395/453, P418/39/150, Minute by Leeper, 26 February 1931.

189. FO 395/453, P418/39/150, Undated minute by Vansittart for Secretary of State, c. 5 March 1931.

190. FO 395/453, P418/39/150, Minute by H. Dalton, 4 March 1931.

191. FO 395/453, P418/39/150, Vansittart to Reith, 13 March 1931.

that in 'occasional cases of exceptional difficulty' the FO might be prepared to give further advice.

At the same time the Foreign Office expressed its strong approval of Vernon Bartlett's talks. Leeper considered that he had presented his subject 'with great skill and discretion'.<sup>192</sup> Hugh Dalton similarly shared Leeper's favourable opinion of Bartlett and felt that the BBC should be encouraged to continue using him. Vansittart was therefore fulsome in his praise when writing to Reith:

I should like to take this opportunity of expressing my appreciation of the ability and fairmindedness with which [Mr. Bartlett] has treated the many questions on which he has spoken. So long as talks on foreign affairs are entrusted to him, I think you will agree that neither will you have need of our advice, nor<sup>193</sup> is any press or parliamentary criticism likely to occur.

The FO's confidence in Bartlett was not because he was a cautious speaker, for he was not, but because he was accurate and experienced. Although he never visited the News Department for information while broadcasting, he considered this unnecessary, being himself director of the Information Section of the League of Nations Secretariat in London. More particularly he had since 1922 been a member of a small weekly lunch club which consisted, apart from himself and one other, entirely of Foreign Office officials, including William Ridsdale of the News Department.<sup>194</sup> The Foreign Office valued Bartlett because he knew what he was talking about.

The Foreign Office was therefore confident that Bartlett and the

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192. FO 395/453. P418/39/150, Minute by Leeper, 26 February 1931.

193. FO 395/453, P418/39/150, Vansittart to Reith, 13 March 1931.

194. Letters from V. Bartlett to the author, 2 and 26 August 1977. Bartlett comments: 'I venture to think that, from 1922 onwards I had more contacts with the F.O. than any other journalist except, possibly "Trilby" Ewer of the Daily Herald'. William Ridsdale was later to become head of the News Department.



BBC represented a popular yet accurate and responsible medium for the explanation of foreign affairs, and one which needed minimum liaison.<sup>195</sup> This attitude was to be maintained as far as possible for the next two years. Nevertheless a number of events in 1933 were automatically to bring the two bodies closer together and cause the FO to take a greater interest in what was broadcast.

On New Year's Eve 1932/3 the BBC transmitted relays of how other European countries were welcoming in the New Year. These relays were linked by a script which warned, in an extremely superficial manner, that Europe was still an armed and arming continent and that peace was not assured. Following a relay from Germany was a passage on Poland:

You have just shared the experience of entering the New Year with Germany, and in particular with the people of Königsberg who are separated from the main body of their countrymen by the Polish Corridor. Passing along this through a country of fields and forests and lakes fought over by Teutons and Slavs for centuries let us now enter Poland, about a third of whose National Income is still allotted to the Ministry of War.

Following church bells and a radio broadcast from Poland the programme returned to Germany,

whose expenditure upon forces of defence is relatively negligible owing to the limitation by the Treaty of Versailles of her army and navy to 115,000 men, no air service, heavy guns, tanks nor submarines.<sup>196</sup>

195. In any case Vansittart knew Reith and his general approach, for they had met not infrequently when Vansittart was the Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary, from 1928 to 1930.

196. FO 395/476, P56/24/150, Script of broadcast of 31 December 1932, with modifications, sent by Reith to Foreign Office, 5 January 1933.

The programme as originally written by producer Archie Harding, and to a lesser extent as toned down by his superiors, was anti-Versailles and anti-armaments rather than anti-Poland, but it inevitably showed a degree of sympathy for Germany.<sup>197</sup>

The Polish Ambassador immediately protested to the Foreign Office and gave his complaint to the press. The FO judged that it was right to intervene in this instance as international relations were involved, and Reith was asked to provide details. This he did, rejecting the idea, in view of the general character of the programme and the factual nature of the particular comments, that there were legitimate grounds for complaint.<sup>198</sup> The Foreign Office, however, felt differently. Leeper commented that 'it looks as if the BBC had made a bad gaffe', whilst Vansittart told the Polish Ambassador that in his opinion 'the BBC broadcaster had been tactless and foolish'.<sup>199</sup> It was clear that not all officials had been hitherto satisfied with the BBC and its aloofness, for W. Greenway of the FO's Northern Department described the incident as

typical of the BBC's "superior" mentality, and I think it may be possible to rap them severely over the knuckles for it. There is too much of the "Manchester Guardian" attitude among the all-wise young gentlemen of Broadcasting House; and Sir John Reith is insufferably omnipotent.<sup>200</sup>

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197. For example the first German relay was from Hamburg, not Konigsberg, and although a large part of eastern Germany was receiving it only Konigsberg was specifically mentioned, in order to point out that it was separated from Germany (in the original script 'The Fatherland'), by the Polish Corridor. Austria was similarly treated sympathetically. The original script by Archie Harding had been toned down slightly by the Foreign Director, C.F. Atkinson, and the Production Director, Val Gielgud.

198. FO 395/476, P55/24/150, Memorandum by Reith, 4 January 1933.

199. FO 395/476, P55/24/150, Minute by Leeper for Vansittart, 5 January 1933; Minute by Vansittart, 5 January 1933.

200. FO 395/476, P24/24/150, Minute by W. Greenway, 6 January 1933.



Despite this 'omnipotence' the PMG was confident that Reith would behave responsibly and apologise, and the FO accordingly asked him to put pressure on the Director General to do just that.<sup>201</sup> It was suggested that any apology should contain the comment that it had been given at the BBC's own initiative, thereby forestalling press comments of government control of broadcasting. This Reith reluctantly agreed to do and the incident was closed with a visit by him to the Polish Ambassador, an assurance that the offending remarks had been 'entirely inadvertent' and a comment that 'internal administrative action'<sup>202</sup> had already been taken on the matter. The FO had acted quickly and successfully to prevent international complications, and was now to become increasingly conscious of the potential effect abroad of BBC programmes.

Reaction was therefore mixed when Vernon Bartlett wrote, in January 1933, to ask the FO's assistance in arranging microphone interviews with European leaders such as Mussolini and Mustapha Kemal. Bartlett was now on a two year contract with the BBC as a full-time member of staff, responsible not only for broadcasting on foreign affairs but also for liaising with other European broadcasting organisations. As a result he was more involved in travelling around Europe, and hoped to put this wandering to good use. He was conscious, however, that it would be difficult to draft questions which would evince interesting rather than merely platitudinous answers, although this was what he hoped to achieve.<sup>203</sup>

In line with its open policy the FO News Department liked the idea. Leeper recommended it with the comment that 'We have every

201. FO 395/476, P71/24/150, Undated draft letter, Leeper to F.W. Phillips.

202. FO 395/476, P129/24/150, Reith to Kingsley Wood, 10 January 1933. For details of the 'internal administrative action' see Note B at the end of chapter, p.613.

203. FO 395/487, P186/186/150, Bartlett to Leeper, 17 January 1933.

confidence in Mr. Bartlett'.<sup>204</sup> Departments which dealt with specific countries, however, were far less happy. Greenway of the Northern Department considered that an interview with any Soviet leader would be 'eminently undesirable. The BBC have already given the Soviet Govt. too much propoganda'.<sup>205</sup> Alan Walker, also of the Northern Department, similarly disliked the whole scheme, which he considered would damage international goodwill and simply give the interviewees the chance to say something offensive. He particularly deplored the idea of a Russian broadcast:

We have trade relations with the USSR, but let us at least abstain from going to the Soviet Government hat in hand, begging them to accept our official support in misleading our public opinion to a still greater extent than they have hitherto succeeded in doing.<sup>206</sup>

For the Central Department Orme Sargent was particularly sceptical:

Before affording any facilities in either Berlin, Rome, Belgrade, or Athens, I should like to go through the questionnaire with full right to use a blue pencil - I may as well say straight away that my amendments would most certainly result in both questions and answers being reduced to a string of innocuous and therefore entirely uninteresting platitudes.<sup>207</sup>

Such sentiments convinced Vansittart that Bartlett should be dissuaded from continuing with the proposal. Accordingly the BBC's foreign affairs commentator was approached by Leeper, who knew him, and agreed to accede to FO wishes. Instead he asked for help in obtaining non-broadcast interviews with the various European leaders

204. FO 395/487, P186/186/150, Minute by Leeper, 20 January 1933.

205. FO 395/487, P186/186/150, Minute by W. Greenway, 23 January 1933.

206. FO 395/487, P186/186/150, Minute by A. Walker, 23 January 1933.

207. FO 395/487, P186/186/150, Minute by Orme Sargent, 28 January 1933.



in order to prepare studies for his next series of talks, to be called 'Strong Men of Europe'. He emphasised that

I shall, of course, take great care, if I do ask for permission to quote them ipsissima verba, to select statements which would be pacifying rather than provocative.<sup>208</sup>

Although reaction was this time more sympathetic, Orme Sargent continued to display the traditional FO reticence, grumbling that

I still don't like much the idea of a semi-official interview with Mussolini in his present temper ..... Must the BBC do this kind of stunt? It is only asking for trouble at the present time when everyone's nerves are on edge.<sup>209</sup>

Bartlett had by this time left the country and Leeper therefore visited Siepmann, not to oppose the talk, but to emphasise the need for care.

When Bartlett, in the course of his travels, arrived in Turkey the Eastern Department was particularly chary of helping him to obtain an interview with Mustapha Kemal. Diplomatic relations were extremely delicate, and it was decided only to give assistance if Bartlett agreed to submit his script to the FO before delivery.<sup>210</sup> Siepmann and Bartlett readily accepted this condition in return for assistance, and the former wrote to express his appreciation of 'the friendly relations with the Foreign Office which make this kind of contact possible'.<sup>211</sup>

Yet Bartlett was certainly no Foreign Office stooge and could

208. FO 395/487, P429/186/150, Bartlett to Leeper, 15 February 1933.

209. FO 395/487, P429/186/150, Minute by Sargent, 20 February 1933.

210. FO 395/487, P976/186/150, Minute by E.O. Coote, 21 April 1933.

211. BBC, FOC, Siepmann to C.F.A. Warner, 21 April 1933.

occasionally be remarkably critical in his broadcasts, many of which undoubtedly contained clear statements of personal opinion.<sup>212</sup> He later described how his aim had been 'to express mildly revolutionary ideas in words which would win the approval of reactionary listeners'.<sup>213</sup> Nevertheless he did possess a strong sense of his responsibility not only to present a true picture, but also not to become himself a damaging factor in international relations. As he told A.K. Helm of the Eastern Department,

The trouble of course is that the British Public would merely switch off if I tried to pretend that everything in Turkey is perfect, and yet even friendly criticism is resented in Ankara.<sup>214</sup>

The script which he sent to the Foreign Office in July, whilst not uncritical, was therefore hardly the one which would have been written if Foreign Office pressure and his own sense of responsibility had not intervened.

The Eastern Department nevertheless considered it desirable to tone the talk down, so that Turkey appeared in a more favourable light. Most amendments were simple corrections of fact, but in two instances rather more was involved. Bartlett had described Mustapha Kemal as one of the three greatest men to have arisen since the war, but added ominously that, 'Like all dictators he fears rivals'. Helm

212. See, for example, his talks in The Listener, 3 July 1929, 7 August 1929, 7 October 1931 and 27 July 1933. As Reith acknowledged to Hilda Matheson, when planning a talks series on disarmament in June 1931, 'Vernon Bartlett, although excellent, is not impartial either.' - BBC, TD, Reith to Matheson, 26 June 1931.

213. Vernon Bartlett, This is My Life, London 1937, 187. He was not always successful in this aim. Conservative Central Office certainly considered him to be biased, and one listener complained to the FO that Bartlett missed no opportunity of 'belittling our allies and boosting the Soviet.' - FO 395/484, P96/96/150, H. Rowthorn to Sir John Simon.

214. FO 395/487, P1670/186/150, Bartlett to A.K. Helm, 10 July 1933.



crossed this out and wrote 'omit' in the margin. Elsewhere Bartlett described the horrors of Ankara slums, including a half-decayed horse's leg he had found in the street. He commented that the Turks were so proud of their improvements to Ankara, 'that one is not supposed to see or say much about this old town'. This was changed by Helm to the slightly more friendly observation that the Turks took little interest in the old town. J.C. Sterndale Bennett of the Eastern Department wanted to delete the entire reference to the slums - 'negative liaison' indeed - but Helm recognised Bartlett's point that he could not be too laudatory.<sup>215</sup> Bartlett subsequently gave the talk as amended. Later in the year, when he broadcast on the tenth anniversary celebrations of the Turkish Republic, Bartlett automatically sent an advance copy to Helm, with a request to check any inaccuracies, 'or points which it would be unpolitic to make?'<sup>216</sup>

The story of Vernon Bartlett's projected and broadcast talks in the first nine months of 1933 demonstrates clearly how the Foreign Office, in its primary concern for international relations, had quite automatically begun to exert a degree of pressure upon the BBC to which the latter, and its responsible foreign affairs broadcaster, undoubtedly responded. It is worth considering the various factors which led to this response and which consequently had an influence upon the otherwise liberal domestic presentation of foreign issues. A major factor, of course, was the extreme regard in which both the Foreign Office and its handling of foreign affairs was traditionally held, and which the BBC quite naturally adopted. Despite increased public interest, international diplomacy was still widely considered to be an area in which the normal democratic freedoms could not be allowed entirely free rein. The BBC accepted the view that, because of the complexity and importance of its task, the Foreign Office had

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215. FO 395/487, P1670/186/150, Undated draft talk.

216. FO 395/487, P2658/186/150, Bartlett to A.K. Helm. On this occasion Helm's only significant alteration was to tone down a comment that Kemal was not perhaps as original an innovator as he was normally thought to be.

a right to expect a particular sense of responsibility from the citizens for whose best interests it was working.

This attitude was reinforced by its rooted belief in the peculiar power and hence responsibility of broadcasting itself. Moreover in Reith's vision the BBC and the Foreign Office had a dual identity of aims. The first of these was quite simply the strengthening and confirmation of the democratic state. The second was the encouragement of international goodwill, arising from broadcasting's international cross-border character. The feeling that broadcasting really could overcome not just territorial boundaries but also national prejudices was remarkably strong and very much to the fore in the BBC's determination of broadcasting policy. Siepmann told Leeper that a primary aim of Bartlett's European interviews and broadcasts had been to promote international amity.<sup>217</sup> Bartlett himself later wrote that

in my own opinion I never broadcast one talk which was not designed to do its little best to build up a better system of international relations than war.<sup>218</sup>

Yet it is clear that such a policy could and did conflict to some extent with the aim of presenting foreign affairs in an entirely impartial and free manner. We have already seen that the BBC was conscious of the need to avoid excessively provocative or undesirable references to other countries, and it was inevitable that its own international aims should only reinforce this tendency. Foreign affairs broadcasters including Bartlett certainly did not shun criticism where they considered it necessary; but they did tend either to balance or to present it in a form which was reasonably palatable to the government concerned. Alan Dawnay described both the policy followed and its drawbacks. Standard practice, he wrote, was to explain and interpret rather than to praise or condemn:

217. FO 395/487, P1726/186/150, Siepmann to Leeper, 18 July 1933.

218. V. Bartlett, Op. Cit., 186.



Particularly we have scrupulously abstained from anything in the nature of direct condemnation of the domestic actions of a foreign government. As a result, references by our speakers to foreign internal affairs may appear to be somewhat colourless; and the policy of carefully impartial presentation of facts implies a moderation in criticism which may at times give rise to the impression that those facts are being presented in an unduly favourable light.<sup>219</sup>

The final and most problematical factor mediating the BBC's 'responsible' reaction to Foreign Office pressure was the extent to which it tacitly accepted that foreign governments did indeed see the BBC as an official body under the control of the state. As Vernon Bartlett wrote subsequently,

No foreign Government is easily going to understand how a state concern like the BBC nevertheless retains a very great degree of autonomy. It will never believe that the Foreign Office is not expressing its views through the lips of the speaker on foreign affairs.<sup>220</sup>

Reject though it might the idea that this was a widely held view, the BBC could not deny that in many countries it was believed to be so. Nor could it ignore the fact that the repeated propaganda of American commercially owned companies, who had a vested interest in implying that as a public body the BBC exercised 'censorship' and was a 'government owned company', would have its effect upon those who did not know better.<sup>221</sup> It even had to accept that those who did know better might unscrupulously act as though they did not.<sup>222</sup>

219. BBC, IFA, Dawnay to Reith, 16 October 1933.

220. V. Bartlett, Op. Cit., 177-178.

221. FO 395/477, P612/26/150, NBC broadcast introduction to Cambridge v. Yale debate, 11 February 1933.

222. Indeed so blatantly trumped-up were some of the British charges of bias brought against the BBC, particularly by the right wing

The Corporation could only acknowledge that this was a factor which, if it was to behave responsibly, had to be borne in mind. Yet once it had done so it became difficult, even impossible, to prevent the notion working to an extent for its own self-fulfilment. For it is clear that the BBC's sense of responsibility did indeed bring it closer to the Foreign Office and hence made it more susceptible to FO influence. Similarly the resultant readiness of the FO to assist Bartlett in obtaining interviews with such men as Hitler and Mussolini merely contributed to the latter's view of the BBC as a semi-official department. Thus not only were the BBC's domestic and international aims not wholly compatible, but its sense of responsibility also proved hostile to its absolute independence.

Two further incidents in the first half of 1933 illustrate developing attitudes and relationships. A BBC news bulletin in April, reporting the Moscow trial of two British citizens on charges of espionage, was the cause of press comment. It was suggested that a portion of the official Foreign Office report of the trial was deliberately omitted because it implied that the accused had been tortured into a confession.<sup>223</sup> Subsequently Professor Arnold Toynbee's broadcast talk on the trial was criticised for hinting at the accused's possible guilt.<sup>224</sup> In reply to a Foreign Office query Siepmann and J.C. MacGregor explained that because the FO communiqué referred to had been received late, and had already been fully covered by the press,<sup>225</sup> it was considered to be stale news and so was merely summarised. Alan Walker of the Foreign Office Northern Department considered this excuse to be 'hardly convincing'. He felt that

The BBC usually contrive to give the impression that it is "pink"

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press, that it would have been impossible for the BBC not to have believed that the accusers really knew better.

223. Daily Telegraph, 17 April 1933.

224. Letter to the Editor, Daily Telegraph, 24 April 1933.

225. FO 395/474, P969/10/150, Minute by W. Ridsdale, 25 April 1933.



- probably because it is.<sup>226</sup>

Even Rex Leeper considered the explanation 'pretty feeble' and Toynbee's remarks 'rather cheap', and accordingly he wrote to Siepmann to ask that in future any Foreign Office communiqué broadcast should be given in full.<sup>227</sup> On this occasion, however, the BBC considered both complaint and request to be unjustified and Siepmann replied to this effect.<sup>228</sup> The exchange had been friendly, but although the outcome was an assertion by the BBC of its independence, the effect was to strengthen the FO view of the Corporation as a complicating factor in international relations.

The second incident was also an entirely friendly interchange, this time between Reith and Maurice Hankey of the Cabinet Office. In May Reith sent Hankey details of the BBC's intended coverage of the forthcoming international economic conference in London. One proposal was to arrange for a weekly interpretive and explanatory analysis of the conference discussions by a rota of economists,

since bare information without comment must be found by the great majority of listeners indigestible and consequently useless.<sup>229</sup>

Having forwarded this information to the Foreign Office, Hankey was warned that there was some risk in the proposal. Economists, after all, held varying ideas, many of an unorthodox character:

There may be moments in the Conference when it will be very undesirable to have some subjects mentioned at all, especially

226. FO 395/474, P969/10/150, Minute by A. Walker. See also B. Howarth, 'The British Broadcasting Corporation, Nazi Germany and the Foreign Office, 1933-1936', The Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, vol. 1, March 1981, 50.

227. FO 395/474, P969/10/150, Minute by Leeper, 27 April 1933; FO 395/474, P1342/10/150, Leeper to Siepmann, 17 May 1933.

228. FO 395/474, P1342/10/150, Siepmann to Leeper, 23 May 1933.

229. FO 371/17328, W5679/5477/50, Reith to M. Hankey, 18 May 1933.

from a controversial point of view.<sup>230</sup>

That such subjects could and would be freely aired in the press was not considered. In any case that was no reason for not attempting to persuade the BBC to abandon the idea. Hankey rang Reith for this purpose, but found persuasion unnecessary. The Corporation had already dropped the idea in favour of a nightly report on the events of each day by an observer from the Daily Telegraph - a good example of the BBC's natural tendency to tone down certain potentially dangerous proposals. In view of this information Hankey immediately contacted George Steward, the Press and Public Relations Officer at No. 10 and the Treasury (and formerly of the Foreign Office News Department), to inform him about the Telegraph's observer:

I am sure we can rely on you to keep him straight. There may be  
<sup>231</sup>  
 times when he may have to be warned off certain topics.

Once again the needs of international diplomacy had aroused government interest in limiting the BBC's absolute freedom.

The climactic event of 1933, in the BBC/Foreign Office relationship, came in October in a talk by Vernon Bartlett. As a staff member of the League of Nations Secretariat Bartlett had had both an efficient team to keep him fully informed and an indefinable sense of independence. Now on the BBC's payroll, however, he had neither. He had difficulty in obtaining his own office in Broadcasting House or even the services of one secretary. Moreover, as he later admitted,

Once I had been foolish enough to get on to the BBC staff, things became much more difficult, since it was more difficult to get away with the statement that I was not talking on behalf of the

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230. FO 371/17328, W6273/5477/50, Hankey to G.F. Steward, 26 May 1933.

231. Ibid.



organisation, but was expressing my own opinions.<sup>232</sup>

Although accepting that in some ways he was given a freedom to express his views which would have been allowed by no newspaper, 'at the same time I never escaped from the feeling that I should be dropped like a hot brick if I got the BBC into any trouble'.<sup>233</sup>

Talks producer Mary Somerville later recollected finding Bartlett,

clutching his few remaining hairs in despair in a small office here, completely littered with Press cuttings, in which he seemed to be lost. He took, I think, the easy way out - of exploiting his personal views.<sup>234</sup>

Recent accounts of Bartlett's controversial broadcast of 14 October 1933, when Germany left the League of Nations Disarmament Conference, have not perhaps taken sufficient account of such factors and of earlier developments.<sup>235</sup> Placed in context it can be seen that this talk was not an initial cause of the BBC's 'responsible' (or cautious) foreign affairs policy, nor of FO pressure. Rather it was the consequence of and reaction against increasing difficulties in honest reporting, encroaching if indirect influence by the Foreign Office, and the impossible contradictions contained within BBC policy. Not least it was the result of Bartlett's legitimate view that honest foreign affairs analysis required the statement of home truths, no matter how unwelcome. On certain issues he felt unable to compromise his beliefs.

News of Germany's abandonment of the Disarmament Conference and

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232. V. Bartlett to the author, 2 August 1977.

233. V. Bartlett, Op. Cit., 178.

234. BBC, TFA, Mary Somerville to Maconachie, 22 December 1939.

235. Asa Briggs (1979), Op. Cit., 194-197; B. Howarth, Op. Cit., 47-48.

the League was broadcast at 9.00 p.m. on 14 October 1933.<sup>236</sup> The bulletin also included an extract from a speech by Sir John Simon, the Foreign Secretary, and a recording of Hitler's speech in Berlin that evening. This was followed by Bartlett who gave a rather emotional talk pleading for understanding of the German viewpoint and suggesting that in this deadlock it was Britain and her allies who were at fault. Such a commentary could only lead to trouble:

I beg you to try to drop your prejudices, and to face up to the facts. We all know that Germany has a pretty good case for feeling that the ex-Allies have not kept the pledge they gave under the Peace Treaty to disarm. We in Great Britain knew that before Hitler came to power, and it still remains a fact if Hitler's subsequent behaviour towards the Jews has turned our sympathies away from Germany. Two wrongs don't make a right.<sup>237</sup> If he behaves unjustly there is no excuse for us to do so.

The circumstances in which the talk was commissioned are slightly obscure. Lionel Fielden later said that he had telephoned Bartlett earlier in the day to ask him to give it. Bartlett, however, claimed that Reith himself had rung.<sup>238</sup> Reith stated in his autobiography that he knew nothing of the talk beforehand, but would probably have approved it had he known.<sup>239</sup> It must be said, however, that Reith's

236. According to Briggs this incident occurred in the 6.00 p.m. bulletin. In fact it was at 9.00 p.m. and, interestingly, occurred in the first of the short-lived series of Saturday radio news reels.

237. Broadcast of 14 October 1933, The Listener 18 October 1933. The original manuscript no longer survives. In that the Listener article was taken from it, it is presumably more accurate than the Daily Herald extracts of 16 October 1933.

238. 'I explained how my belief that the timid policy of our own government was greatly responsible for Germany's action would make it impossible for me to speak about it with the necessary detachment. The Director-General said that he would nevertheless like me to broadcast a short talk under my own name at the end of the news bulletin. I knew that, as the saying goes, my number was up.' - V. Bartlett, Op. Cit., 188.

239. J.C.W. Reith (1949), Op. Cit., 178.



version of events was not always accurate and that almost invariably alterations or omissions resulted in a more favourable personal picture than was really warranted. In this instance it is almost certain that Reith both knew of the talk and anticipated problems, as four days after it had been given he informed the Prime Minister's Private Secretary

that he told one of his officials to vet Bartlett's manuscript in the ordinary way and to ring him, Reith, up if he was in doubt about it. The man concerned apparently passed the manuscript without question.<sup>240</sup>

Fielden did more than pass the manuscript; he urged Bartlett to make it stronger. He felt that the talk was a clear expression of personal opinion and should be given as such.<sup>241</sup>

Press reaction went to the two extremes of adulation and condemnation, although public response to the broadcast was overwhelmingly favourable.<sup>242</sup> Perhaps most interesting was a quite incidental remark by the Daily Telegraph :

This is not what one expects from the mouthpiece of what is virtually a sub-department of State in commenting on the speech and policy of the Foreign Secretary.<sup>243</sup>

240. Prem. 1/127, J.A. Barlow to Ramsay MacDonald, 18 October 1933.

241. V. Bartlett to author, 2 August 1977.

242. See B. Howorth, Op. Cit., 47-48.

243. Daily Telegraph, 17 October 1933. Sydney Moseley, normally a critic of any form of censorship, wrote in 1935 that 'The country must be protected, not only from wilful propaganda, but also from dangerously indiscreet speeches by nervous, overwrought amateur diplomats who "let themselves go" on the spur of the moment ... If there must be any partisan policy or propaganda on the air at all, then, in Heaven's name, let it be British policy and our own Government's propaganda! Let the microphone on such occasions echo the voice of the Government in power. There is nothing undemocratic in that, since the people elects its own Government'. - S.A. Moseley, Broadcasting in My Time, London 1935, 232-3.

A primary cause for complaint was that such a talk was given so soon after Simon's own speech justifying allied policy and condemning Germany's withdrawal. Reith was sufficiently nervous of government reaction to ring No. 10 immediately after the broadcast in order to defend it, although he found no-one there.<sup>244</sup> Bartlett himself wrote to Leeper rejecting the Telegraph's accusations, but admitting that the talk had been indiscreet.<sup>245</sup>

The incident was discussed at departmental, ministerial and Prime Ministerial level. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that it had had considerable international ramifications. The British Embassy in Berlin informed the Foreign Office that the German press was making great play of this admittal that the ex-allies were at fault.<sup>246</sup> According to Bartlett the talk was actually reported to Hitler himself to demonstrate that his action had been justified by its result in splitting opinion.<sup>247</sup> The French Ambassador reported a hostile French reaction, and the situation was complicated still further by the interpretation placed upon the broadcast by Le Temps :

M. Vernon Bartlett, après avoir évidemment pris contact avec les cercles ministériels, exprime aux abonnés de la radio ses angoisses officielles.<sup>248</sup>

To Rex Leeper the conclusion was plain:

The BBC cannot be regarded as an independent institution and

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244. Prem. 1/127, J.A. Barlow to MacDonald, 18 October 1933. This incident is again omitted from the account in Reith's autobiography.

245. FO 395/484, P2484/96/150, undated letter from Bartlett to Leeper.

246. FO 395/484, P2484/96/150, Telegram from Sir Eric Phipps to F.O., 17 October 1933.

247. V. Bartlett, Op. Cit., 190-191.

248. Le Temps, 17 October 1933.



views broadcast by the Corporation either anonymously or by a salaried member of the staff like Mr. Bartlett are inevitably associated with HMG both here and in foreign countries.<sup>249</sup>

He felt that in future individuals like Bartlett should be obliged to consult the Foreign Office in advance and to accept its ruling on what they might and might not say. Orme Sargent equally believed that the FO should obtain

a more satisfactory control over the activities of the BBC in the field of foreign affairs than they do at present.<sup>250</sup>

Sir George Mounsey suggested in addition that in its news bulletins the BBC should return to the practice of reading exactly the words of the agency tapes, in order to avoid any editorialisation. Because the matter was being dealt with at a higher level, however, no immediate action was taken, although Leeper did berate Bartlett for not consulting him in advance, when the latter next called at the News Department.<sup>251</sup>

The higher level was a letter and phone call to the BBC from the Prime Minister himself. MacDonald described Bartlett's talk as 'absurd in its ignorance' and continued:

I know your difficulties, especially in dealing with political news and observations, but surely at a very critical moment like this, when a false statement or an observation which completely misjudges the situation may upset international negotiations and the handling of the Government, the British Broadcasting Corporation should be particularly careful and should ask for some advice before it puts its foot into it .....<sup>252</sup>

249. FO 395/484, P2484/96/150, Minute by Leeper, 18 October 1933.

250. FO 395/484, P2484/96/150, Minute by Sargent, 18 October 1933.

251. FO 395/484, P3016/96/150, Leeper to Vansittart, 5 December 1933.

252. BBC, IFA, MacDonald to Whitley, 16 October 1933.

On the telephone the PM told Reith that the BBC was turning his hair grey.<sup>253</sup> Reith was determined to defend the BBC against this attack and the reply he sent was a firm rebuttal. It was also less than honest, for it implied that Reith's phone call to No. 10 had preceded Bartlett's talk, which it had not, and that the broadcast itself had been no more than an appeal for calm and reason, although it had. He concluded that the BBC had always been very conscious of its peculiar position,

but I know from what you yourself have said that you would not expect our actions on such occasions to be completely determined by the Government.<sup>254</sup>

At MacDonald's request Reith and Whitley visited No. 10, where the PM asked if Simon might broadcast an answer to German allegations - a talk completely unrelated to Bartlett's. Reith, having defended the BBC's honour, agreed to this.

For the time being this was the extent of contact between Government and BBC, although the Daily Herald attempted to suggest that a rather more serious interference with the Corporation had taken place. Within the BBC internal action consisted firstly of the immediate arrangement of a series of three talks, on disarmament and the German withdrawal, on consecutive nights. George Lansbury spoke for Labour, Viscount Cecil for the League of Nations Union viewpoint and Lord Lloyd from an isolationist stance. Simon's requested broadcast, however, took the place of one it had been intended to offer to the Government. The collapse of the Disarmament Conference justified this series without Bartlett's talk, to which no-one referred. In addition Alan Dawnay immediately reported to Reith on

253. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 114, 16 October 1933. This telephone call probably occurred on the 17th, with Reith writing up his diary subsequently, as he is known to have done. The chronology does not otherwise fit.

254. BBC, IFA, Whitley to MacDonald (drafted by Reith), 17 October 1933.



previous talks about German and Austrian affairs, although interestingly this research had been requested some days before Bartlett's broadcast. He was able to state that neither Bartlett nor the BBC had acted as apologists for Nazism. In a talk on 27 July, for example, Bartlett had declared:

I loathe all the bitterness and bullying that have been so conspicuous in Germany and I would do anything to prevent the same folly in my own country.<sup>255</sup>

Another broadcaster, S.K. Ratcliffe, had been equally vehement, condemning the repressive policies of Nazism as 'indefensible':

Most of those who resisted are in prison or in concentration camps; and one unhappy community - the Jews - is suffering the extremity of persecution - in accord, as Hitler's book shows,<sup>256</sup> with a basic tenet of the Nazi movement.

Dawney did, however, admit that criticism had been relatively moderate, in line with BBC policy. Bartlett himself was neither carpeted nor suspended, broadcasting the following week as normal and then being sent off to Paris, Rome and Berlin in order to report on public attitudes in these capitals to disarmament and the recent events.

Yet although the immediate furor had died down this was very far from the end of the matter, which served, if not to change attitudes within BBC and government, then certainly to strengthen them and point the problems inherent in their relationship. What followed was a recognition on both sides of the limits of their respective powers and rights. The Government and Foreign Office continued to deplore what had happened, but realised that formal interference with the BBC was out of the question. For its part the BBC, having initially made

255. BBC, IFA, Dawney to Reith, 16 October 1933.

256. Ibid.

the point of asserting its independence, resumed its co-operative approach in a strengthened form.

At the beginning of November the matter was discussed in Cabinet. In his memorandum on the subject Sir John Simon asked

whether it should be in the power of the BBC to create a panic whenever one of their officials is so overcome with deep and sincere emotion that he has not time to reflect whether the broadcasting of his sentiments will injure or improve International relations ..... what he says tends to be regarded, at any rate abroad, as having something more than official permission, and the latitude of comment in which he may indulge is at times of great assistance to other countries, who are delighted to put us in the wrong.<sup>257</sup>

Yet at the same time he recommended that no immediate action be taken in view of the likely press and parliamentary outcry if government were seen to be censoring or tampering with the BBC. Moreover Kingsley Wood opposed any threat to the constitutional independence of the BBC - and to the PMG's sole responsibility for broadcasting.<sup>258</sup>

The Cabinet agreed with Simon's recommendation. It probably knew, in any case, that informal discussions on improved BBC/Government liaison were already taking place between Reith and the Prime Minister's Office. A few days previously Reith had seen J.A. Barlow, MacDonald's Principal Private Secretary, in order to ask whether the BBC could be kept more closely informed and given access to unpublished information, so that it should know what line to take in future. Barlow had said he was sure that Reith would wish to avoid

257. Cab.24, C.P. 252 (33), Memorandum by Sir John Simon, 1 November 1933.

258. FO 395/484, P3016/96/150, Leeper to Vansittart, 5 December 1933.



any arrangement which might give colour to a belief that the BBC were inspired by the Government and that he had to consider carefully before he pressed for such an arrangement to be established.<sup>259</sup>

Reith, however, was confident that he could maintain independence within such a liaison:

He is anxious both to avoid appearing to speak as a Government organ - a suspicion which may easily arise because of the constitutional and financial relations between the Government and the BBC - and to avoid doing harm by allowing inopportune or ill-informed broadcasts.<sup>260</sup>

One rung down the ladder, negotiations between Leeper and Dawnay equally showed the BBC's desire to be co-operative. Dawnay admitted that Bartlett's broadcast had been 'a serious blunder'.<sup>261</sup> Leeper left him in no doubt that this was also the FO view and passed on a firm request from Simon that in future the Foreign Office should receive copies of all talks on foreign affairs. It was clear that this referred to talks once they had been given, and Dawnay agreed to the proposal.

The reaffirmed spirit of mutual co-operation was demonstrated in early November over the Panter Case. Noel Panter was a British journalist who had been arrested in Germany in October on suspicion of espionage. Upon his release Siepmann contacted Leeper to say that the BBC intended to interview him, since the press would be doing so, but wanted the FO's advice in case it was considered inadvisable. He

259. Prem. 1/127, Memorandum by J.A. Barlow, 27 October 1933.

260. Prem. 1/127, Unsigned memorandum (probably by Barlow) to MacDonald, 31 October 1933.

261. FO 395/484, P3016/96/150, Leeper to Vansittart, 5 December 1933.

emphasised that Panter would not be allowed to talk on how he had been treated in prison, nor on the circumstances of his imprisonment, but only on conditions in Germany as observed by him. The Foreign Office was anxious to play down the incident and not irritate the German Government. Nevertheless, in view of Siepmann's assurances and of the extreme undesirability of interfering with the BBC unless absolutely necessary, it was decided not to object to the interview.<sup>262</sup>

The most obvious outcome of the Bartlett affair was that it hastened the end of the latter's position as the BBC's regular foreign affairs commentator. It must be asked to what extent this was a case of BBC pusillanimity and yielding to pressure, as has subsequently been implied. The incident certainly shook the BBC's confidence in Bartlett as a reliable commentator. Although Reith had defended the talk against MacDonald he had undoubtedly been impressed by the argument that Bartlett had spoken without the full facts before him. The complete collapse of Bartlett's stock at the Foreign Office can also not have escaped him. Leeper's view of Bartlett was that previously he had handled a difficult job well but had, since joining the BBC, 'let his emotions get the better of his judgement'.<sup>263</sup> Vansittart's conclusions were even more damning; he considered Bartlett to be

a superficial, emotional and indiscreet man, who .... has fallen almost exclusively under German influence .... He should certainly receive no facilities or information to assist his Nazi propaganda.<sup>264</sup>

The row over the 14 October talk convinced Reith of two things -

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- 262. FO 395/484, P2588/96/150, file on proposed broadcast by Mr. Panter.
- 263. FO 395/484, P3016/96/150, Leeper to Vansittart, 5 December 1933.
- 264. FO 395/484, P3016/96/150, Minute by Vansittart, 17 December 1933.



firstly that it was unwise to give one man a virtual monopoly of foreign affairs commentary, and secondly that the short-term experiment of taking Bartlett on to the BBC staff had not been the hoped for success. No longer did he have the League of Nations team to keep him fully informed; no longer did he have the League of Nations tag to his name to keep him respectable to the Foreign Office and others as a foreign affairs commentator. The fact that he was a staff member of the BBC, which was so careful and so closely watched to prevent editorialisation, made the whole operation of foreign affairs broadcasting much more difficult. Bartlett was not sacked, but Reith did encourage him to look for an outside job, so that he could become one of a panel of occasional foreign affairs broadcasters.<sup>265</sup> Bartlett himself approved of the idea - he had not enjoyed his time on the BBC staff and nor did he consider it right for himself to have so much potential power.

At the end of 1933 Bartlett left the BBC for the News Chronicle, having deliberately chosen a paper whose political stance would not be considered too extreme to allow him to continue broadcasting. He continued to give a weekly talk until the end of March 1934, when the BBC Board terminated his regular contract.<sup>266</sup> This in itself had been expected and agreed. What had not was that the BBC should then drop him entirely as a foreign affairs broadcaster for several years. Bartlett later described this action as cowardly. Yet there can be no doubt that he had become an extremely controversial figure. In February a Commons debate on the subject took place, in which Brigadier-General Spears accused Bartlett of anti-Austrian bias in another talk and described the BBC as a Nazi agency.<sup>267</sup> Other parliamentary questions hostile to Bartlett were asked, and articles praising and condemning him appeared in the press. On meeting J.A. Barlow Reith learnt that Simon had had the BBC on the Cabinet agenda ever since the original broadcast, whilst MacDonald mentioned

265. V. Bartlett to author, 2 August 1977.

266. A. Briggs (1979), Op. Cit., 197.

267. H.C. Debates, vol. 285:cols. 1025-31, 6 February 1934.

Bartlett to Reith when they next dined together.<sup>268</sup> Reith may well have been impressed by the extent of criticism and unhappy about the trouble in which Bartlett had involved the BBC. But he was also increasingly disinclined to use Bartlett simply because the latter had become such a controversial figure. Whether justly or not Bartlett's reputation as a wholly impartial commentator had been severely damaged. He was now widely identified with a cause (though certainly not Nazism), and a section of the audience would never have the faith in his impartiality that Reith considered absolutely essential if the BBC's reputation for integrity was to remain intact. Bartlett's downfall was to an extent because in Reith's eyes his fame had become notoriety.

1933 had been a year in which, for a variety of reasons, relations between the BBC and the Foreign Office had become closer. The row at the end of the year only confirmed the FO in its conviction that the BBC was regarded abroad as an official mouthpiece, and that it could no longer be trusted to broadcast without guidance. The BBC's attitude was basically unchanged - a readiness to be accommodating, combined with a determination to continue its foreign affairs news and commentaries. Negotiations at the beginning of 1934 seemed to augur well for good relations. Siepmann wrote to the FO of 'the standing arrangement by which we inform you in advance of any programme proposals affecting foreign affairs', whilst it was agreed that Dawnay should keep in touch with the Foreign Office News Department as though he were a newspaper editor.<sup>269</sup> Reith himself met Vansittart and arranged to visit him monthly, in order to get background information on the FO line and to prevent relations again becoming strained.<sup>270</sup> Yet once again the Foreign Office was to find this three tier liaison not wholly

268. C. Stuart, Op Cit., 116, 26 January and 2 February 1934.

269. BBC, FOC, Siepmann to F.O., 25 January 1934; FO 395/515, P1119/196/150, Minute by Leeper, 20 February 1934.

270. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 117-118, 14 February 1934, 28 March 1934, 30 April 1934.



adequate in practice, perhaps because it did not initially extend downwards far enough. The day-to-day contact with the Foreign Office which the BBC News Department had maintained in the late 1920s and early 1930s, for example, seems to have temporarily petered out by 1934, perhaps a victim of the considerable internal reorganisation then taking place in that part of the BBC's organisation. A couple of inaccurate news items taken from agency tapes induced Leeper to complain that the BBC appeared reluctant to use the FO News Department to check news agency stories.<sup>271</sup> Before a formal complaint could be made, however, the BBC News Editor resumed the previous practice of checking dubious stories, and Vansittart merely suggested to Dawnay that this contact be put on a basis of almost daily personal intercourse.<sup>272</sup>

Within the Foreign Office Vansittart and Leeper were soon to become the strongest opponents of appeasement policy. Already their grave concern at Germany's true intentions was evident.<sup>273</sup> This personal commitment made Vansittart's reaction to the BBC's 'objective' - and hence softening - policy in foreign affairs commentary particularly vehement, as was to become clear at the time

271. FO 395/515, P1439/196/150, Minute by Leeper, 3 May 1934.
272. FO 395/515, P1531/196/150, draft letter, Vansittart to Dawnay, c. 10 May 1934. According to Brian Howorth this file shows that 'as a direct result of complaints ... Colonel Dawnay accepted direct contact between the News Departments of the two organisations.' - B. Howorth, *Op. Cit.*, 49. In fact it is clear that direct contact resumed before complaint was made, and had a long history before 1934. This incident is interesting not least because of the main cause of complaint - a news item whose inaccuracies presented the German case more favourably than the F.O. considered deserved. It merely strengthened Vansittart's view of the BBC as pro-German.
273. In November 1933 Leeper had written: 'To hear Mr. Bartlett talk one would think that ... the German professions of peace are perfectly sincere. He entirely ignores the grave fears that many of us feel about Germany's real intentions, fears that are based on the kind of home propaganda which accompanies and is directly contrary to the spirit of the foreign propaganda of peace.' - FO 395/484, P3016/96/150, Minute by Leeper, 14 November 1933.



of Hitler's purge of the S.A.. Following Bartlett's departure the BBC had decided, purely as a temporary expedient, to take broadcasts from abroad by special correspondents. This idea had first been suggested in 1930 and again in 1933, but was not even now regarded with any favour. Not the least reason for disliking the idea was the extreme restraint which any commentator had to use, broadcasting as he was from the relevant country and through its broadcasting facilities.<sup>274</sup> Within a month of commencement Dawnay and Siepmann had decided to abandon this method and to revert to broadcasts from London, using a number of foreign affairs experts.<sup>275</sup>

Following the Hitler purge at the end of June, however, it was decided that an eye-witness report would be of particular value and interest. Accordingly Richard Crossman, currently in Germany, was asked to broadcast. Crossman was himself violently anti-Nazi, but, knowing that neither Germans nor the BBC would permit a condemnatory talk - and probably in some fear for his personal safety - he turned in a broadcast which was the very model of objectivity, without any praise or blame attached. The Foreign Office immediately received letters of complaint from listeners, and Simon heard a rumour that the talk was one of exultant approval for everything Hitler had done.<sup>276</sup> When he read it Orme Sargent admitted that it was indeed objective, and blamed the eye-witness system for making such objectivity necessary.<sup>277</sup> Vansittart, however, was far more vehement in his criticism. Such a mild talk on such 'revolting butchery' could only be interpreted in Britain as condonation. Ironically, in view of the BBC's general lack of concern for topicality, he considered it a 'fundamental vice' of the Corporation that it should

274. V. Bartlett, Op. Cit., 185-187.

275. BBC, LETFA, Siepmann to L. Fielden, 24 April 1934.

276. FO 395/515, P2201/196/150, Minute by Simon, 5 July 1934.

277. FO 395/515, P2201/196/150, Minute by Orme Sargent, 5 July 1934.



fly at the microphone about everything under the sun & without a moment's reflexion .... I have no sympathy whatever with this go-getter, sensation-mongering Hearstliness, man-on-the-spot and red-hot stuff, especially when it leads to such inevitable errors. I submit that it is not the function of the BBC, and that if they persist in it their activities will have to be revised.<sup>278</sup>

Significantly he felt that if on such matters the BBC could not be outspokenly condemnatory, then it should be silent.

Yet, despite this incident, liaison between the BBC and Foreign Office was generally satisfactory to both sides in 1934 and most of 1935. Consultation was regular and advice frequently acted upon, yet without the BBC feeling that the FO was abusing the relationship. Thus in May and June 1934 the BBC broadcast talks by foreign representatives, on current attitudes in their respective countries to the Treaty of Versailles. Despite its inherently controversial nature the FO did not raise objections to the series, about which Siepmann had notified them, but took a sympathetic attitude in order to encourage continued co-operation. The most controversial talk was inevitably the German one, given by Baron von Rheinbaden, and Siepmann accordingly sent a copy to Orme Sargent in advance, to check for any inaccuracies. This Sargent did, and Siepmann agreed to try to persuade Rheinbaden to correct a number of mis-statements. In addition he agreed to Sargent's proposal that there should be a talk on the British viewpoint, which would otherwise not have been given in the series, and this took the place of a final controversial discussion on the whole issue.<sup>279</sup>

Again, in March 1935, the Foreign Office suggested that a projected talk on the Assyrian question should be, not cancelled, but briefly postponed until after the expected publication of a report on

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278. FO 395/515, P2201/196/150, Minute by Vansittart, 5 July 1934.

279. FO 395/515, P1687/196/150, Siepmann to Sargent, 4 June 1934.

the matter. Dawnay readily agreed to this comparatively moderate request.<sup>280</sup> The following month a discussion was arranged between Jochen Benemann and Richard Crossman on youth and labour movements in Germany, and the FO was again sent an advance script. Although Orme Sargent criticised it as 'lop-sided' and as allowing Benemann to put forward 'specious arguments to disguise the militarism of the Nazi regime', his general approach was helpful, and he did not suggest its cancellation.<sup>281</sup> The talk went ahead, although at the last minute Vyvyan Adams replaced Crossman.

This comparatively harmonious liaison was the result of a number of factors. It was the result of the Foreign Office News Department's belief that positive co-operation and accurate news was preferable to negative obstruction. It may have been in part the result of closer links between Reith and Vansittart. According to one recent analysis it was also a consequence of the BBC's 'cautious selectivity of speakers', of 'the "right people"', to talk on foreign affairs.<sup>282</sup> To an extent this was so, but if Sir Evelyn Wrench, Sir Frederick Whyte and Sir Arthur Humbold broadcast, then so did Richard Crossman and F.A. Voigt. The BBC chose its speakers not necessarily because they were safe - though certainly it looked for people who knew that it did not want polemicism - but because they were extremely knowledgeable in specific fields. The two principal broadcasters on foreign affairs in 1935, alternating fortnightly, were Sir Frederick Whyte and F.A. Voigt. Whyte was engaged to broadcast on events in America and the Far East, upon which he was undoubtedly a highly reputable authority. F.A. Voigt, for his part, was chosen specifically because of his outstanding reputation as a forceful and critical commentator on German affairs. His was certainly no cautious appointment.<sup>283</sup> At the same time Voigt had contacts at the FO to

280. BBC, FOC, Note by Dawnay, 5 March 1935.

281. BBC, MPBRBG, Orme Sargent to BBC, 5 April 1935.

282. B. Howorth, Op. Cit., 52.

283. B. Howorth, Op. Cit., 53.



match Bartlett's, whilst his critical commentary was very much in line with the approach of Vansittart and Leeper to the German situation.<sup>284</sup> The BBC found him a good replacement for Bartlett, and he remained the most frequently used commentator on foreign affairs from 1935 until 1939.<sup>285</sup>

Relations between the BBC and the Foreign Office were therefore good and close, and when Rex Leeper gave evidence to the Ullswater Committee, in May 1935, he declared that in the opinion of the Foreign Office

the officials of the BBC show a high sense of responsibility and impartiality in dealing with these questions which are very delicate and controversial; that they do their best to avoid causing embarrassment to our own Government, while offering the public as good a service as possible. They try to give both sides as far as possible, and also they do their best to avoid giving offence to any foreign Government, and we find that the kind of liaison that we have works very well.<sup>286</sup>

In August Orme Sargent noted that he was 'in close and continual

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284. Brian Howorth mentions that Voigt's appointment was 'welcomed by some British officials as being a step towards informing the public "how serious the European situation is"'. To an interesting extent, therefore Voigt's appointment was a reflection of the stance of Vansittart and the Foreign Office News Department.
285. Brian Howorth (Op. Cit., 54) is mistaken to imply that Voigt did not broadcast after October 1935. He spoke roughly monthly in 1936 and 1937, and at least six times in 1938. This was certainly more than any other commentator, and demonstrates the BBC's considerable regard for him at a time when it had turned to the policy of using a wide variety of speakers. Nor is it correct to suggest that the BBC did not like using journalists as commentators. Another occasional broadcaster, for example, was J.C.S. Sprigge, city editor of the Manchester Guardian, and its former foreign correspondent - the position Voigt now held.
286. BBC, UCVEG, Evidence of R.A.Leeper, 29 May 1935. This evidence was given before the row over 'The Citizen and His Government' series, not after as Howorth suggests - B. Howorth, Op. Cit., 50.

touch' with Alan Dawnay.<sup>287</sup>

Seen in this context the row over 'The Citizen and His Government' series in late 1935 was perhaps something of a surprise. Yet it is noticeable that discussions were conducted in a remarkably friendly and unemotional atmosphere considering the issues of principle involved. The confrontation was the consequence of both pragmatic considerations and questions of principle, and the Foreign Office drew upon its long experience of firm diplomacy to achieve its aim. It recognised that in asking the BBC to cancel programmes, and ones which were not actually on foreign affairs, it was on dangerous ground. But that it was the BBC which eventually gave way was symptomatic of where the balance in their relationship lay.

Although the incident has been described by Asa Briggs, <sup>some</sup><sub>288</sub> further points need to be brought out and a reappraisal made. This series of twelve talks was designed to compare the place of the individual citizen within a number of different constitutional systems, including the communist and fascist. Given the BBC's commitment it was hardly surprising that of the first seven explanatory talks six were on democratic government, one only on 'The Communist and Fascist Experiment'. Moreover the first four were given by a Conservative MP, Captain Harold Balfour, and the following three, including the one on communism and fascism, by Agnes Headlam Morley, lecturer on politics at Oxford and herself shortly to be a Conservative candidate. The concluding five were to be more controversial, with Oswald Mosley and the Communist leader Harry Pollitt giving 'a critical examination of existing machinery and the exposition of plans for altering it', whilst three representatives of the Liberal, Labour and Conservative parties would conclude with a defence of constitutional democracy.<sup>289</sup> Party politics was to be excluded, and it was emphasised to the three final speakers that

287. FO 371/19467, N4463/998/38, Minute by Sargent, 30 August 1935.

288. A. Briggs (1979), Op. Cit., 198-201.

289. BBC, TCHG, R. Wilson to A. Dawnay, 17 July 1935.



there should be 'strong and relatively united criticism<sup>290</sup> of the revolutionary points of view' by the defenders of democracy.

The Foreign Office was informed of the scheme in early July and initially raised no objection. Only at the end of August did the increasing likelihood of a formal protest from the British to the Soviet Government over growing communist propaganda, cause the FO to look again at this series. J.L. Dodds of the Northern Department argued that it would be difficult to uphold such a protest, since

the Russian Government can retort that we don't really mind<sup>291</sup> Communism if we allow it to be preached on the BBC.

He admitted that already the Government's failure to ban the weekly publication in Britain of the Comintern's International Press Correspondence gave the Soviets just such an argument. But whereas the British press was free,<sup>292</sup> 'I understand that we have ways and means of influencing the BBC'.

The recent visit of Harry Pollitt to Moscow and his speech in support of Comintern activities, gave Rex Leeper the excuse to contact Dawnay and explain that any broadcast by Pollitt would weaken the British case in protesting to the Russian Government about Comintern propaganda.<sup>293</sup> Vansittart used the same argument with Reith and added that the Italo-Abyssinian conflict made a talk by Mosley equally undesirable.<sup>294</sup> The BBC, however, was more than usually inclined to take a strong line. Most importantly invitations to Mosley and Pollitt had already been sent out, and it would have

290. BBC, CHM, R. Wilson to H. Morrison, 22 July 1935.

291. FO 371/19467, N4463/998/38, Minute by J.L. Dodds, 30 August 1935.

292. Ibid.

293. FO 371/19467, N4463/998/38, Minute by Leeper, 14 September 1935.

294. BBC, TCHG, BBC statement handed to Vansittart, 15 October 1935.

been difficult to cancel without losing face. In addition the series had been sufficiently important to have gone before the Board for approval, so that an informal discussion and agreement on the issue between the FO and BBC executives was simply not possible. Equally the series had been suggested and approved by the BBC's Adult Education Advisory Committee, which would undoubtedly have objected vociferously to interference and cancellation. Last but not least the incident was particularly important precisely because a fascist and communist were involved. The Corporation was conscious of accusations that it was failing to give air-time to such important if minor sections of opinion, and saw this comparatively academic approach as a good way of doing just that. As Dawnay explained to Vansittart, BBC policy was to allow the periodic discussion of communism and fascism, provided a full opportunity was given 'for the arguments put forward to be countered adequately and conclusively immediately afterwards'.<sup>295</sup> The BBC Board felt strongly that the series should go ahead. In view of the Italian attack on Abyssinia there was no time in fascist history when the arguments of fascism would be less likely to commend themselves to the British public. Talks would be checked to ensure that the Italo-Abyssinian conflict was not mentioned. As for Pollitt's talk, there was no comparison between this series and Comintern propaganda. The Governors were confident that

There should be no difficulty in making it plain to the Soviet Ambassador that the BBC ... is neither authorised nor inspired by any Government Department in arranging this or any other similar series of talks.<sup>296</sup>

More harm than good would be done by 'muzzling' such speakers. The Board concluded with the hope that this disagreement would not change the 'happy and satisfactory relationship' between the BBC and Foreign Office.

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295. Ibid.

296. Ibid.



Vansittart was faced with a problem. He admitted that the BBC had presented its case well, and was loath to resort to the PMG's formal veto. At the same time he felt that British policy was wrong in merely protesting to the Russians instead of prosecuting them for contravening international agreements on overseas propaganda:

If we were to drop protest and take to prosecution, our objection to the BBC allowing its microphone to be used for soviet propaganda would largely vanish. But so long as we maintain the system of protest we cannot really withdraw our opposition to the proposals of the BBC.<sup>297</sup>

Yet although this point was put to Dawnay the only hope he held out to the FO was that an early General Election might possibly cause the automatic cancellation of the last five talks. When the Election was announced a few days later the most the Corporation would do was to 'postpone to a later date' the five concluding talks.<sup>298</sup>

The Foreign Office hoped at this point that the incident would die a natural death, but in December the Corporation readily agreed to the suggestion of its Adult Education Advisory Committee that the talks be revived in the New Year. Cecil Graves, who had now taken over from Dawnay as Controller of Programmes, accordingly wrote to Vansittart to ask that he reconsider the BBC's arguments and give his comments.<sup>299</sup> Reviewing the case J.L. Dodds considered that the series resulted from the BBC's 'perverted sense of liberalism'.<sup>300</sup> It was absurd, he argued, to suggest that the Soviet Government could 'easily' be convinced of the BBC's independence:

297. FO 371/19467, N5491/998/38, Minute by Vansittart for Secretary of State, 16 October 1935. The Secretary of State at the time was, of course, Sir Samuel Hoare, not Eden, as stated in A.Briggs (1979), Op.Cit., 198.

298. BBC, TCHG, BBC Press Announcement, 26 October 1935.

299. BBC, TCHG, Graves to Vansittart, 18 December 1935.

300. FO 371/19467, N6663/998/38, Minute by J.L. Dodds, 30 December 1935.

This is emphatically not so. Nothing will persuade the Soviet Government that HMG have not authorised the talk and that HMG's protests about propaganda need not [sic] be taken seriously.<sup>301</sup>

On 15 January 1936 Lord Stanhope, the Under-Secretary of State, met the PMG, G.C. Tryon, who assured him of his readiness both to take the matter to Cabinet and to use his formal veto to prohibit the talks.<sup>302</sup> Armed with this assurance Stanhope met Graves on 23 January.<sup>303</sup> He emphasised that both the Foreign Secretary (now Eden) and the PMG were vehemently opposed to broadcasts by Mosley and Pollitt, and that the Government considered such talks extremely embarrassing. But, as Graves recorded, Stanhope went beyond this:

He further told me that if necessary they would be prepared to tell us that the talks were not to be given ..... He was not anxious for such a course to become necessary; it was naturally preferable if we, on our own initiative could cancel the talks, but if we could not find a formula for doing this he was quite prepared for us to say that we have cancelled them because the Government were not anxious that they should be given.<sup>304</sup>

The following day Stanhope rang Graves to say that Eden would actually prefer it if the Government were not mentioned in any cancellation announcement.

The BBC therefore knew that, whether or not the Government would actually dare to implement the veto, it certainly considered the issue to be sufficiently serious to consider and threaten such a

301. Ibid.

302. FO 371/19467, N6663/998/38, Minute by Lord Stanhope, 15 January 1936.

303. This vital meeting and conversation is not mentioned by Briggs in his account, and the whole emphasis of persuasion and capitulation is thereby crucially altered.

304. BBC, TCHG, Record of interview with Lord Stanhope by C. Graves, 23 January 1936.



move. Faced with the strong possibility of a veto the Board agreed to a compromise, namely cancellation on condition that a public announcement could be made that this action was the result of government anxiety on the matter.<sup>305</sup> In fact, having won his point, Stanhope then took pains on 6 February to assure Reith that a veto had never been likely. But the BBC's decision had been taken with very different information, whilst a Cabinet decision on 12 February actually agreed that if necessary the veto would be used.

Having gained this much Stanhope was anxious to see if he could win more. The BBC had compromised once over the most important issue; it might be persuaded to compromise again, and to this end he presented the Corporation with arguments of expediency:

I imagine that the Board has considered the effect that may be produced in Parliament by a public announcement, shortly before the new charter comes up for discussion, that the Government have felt impelled in the public interest to stop a series of talks. It seems to me that it may strengthen the case for those who demand more Parliamentary control of the BBC.<sup>306</sup>

Reith and Norman were impressed by this argument; as already seen they were particularly conscious of the need not to rock the boat at this time. Reith told Graves that it was 'a matter of expediency'.<sup>307</sup> Graves, however, disagreed, and argued his case forcefully. When the Governors met on 12 February Stanhope's letter was discussed, but it was resolved to adhere to their previous decision to broadcast an explanation of the cancellation.<sup>308</sup> Ronald Norman, however, now took advantage of his position as chairman of the Board. At the

305. BBC, TCHG, Graves to Lord Stanhope, 31 January 1936.

306. FO 371/19467, N692/75/38, Lord Stanhope to Graves, 5 February 1936. Quoted by A. Briggs (1979), Op. Cit., 199.

307. Reith to Graves, 7 February 1936. Quoted by A. Briggs (1979), Op. Cit., 199; BBC, TCHG, Graves to Reith, 6 February 1936.

308. BBC, BGP, Board Minutes, 12 February 1936. Briggs is incorrect in implying that the Governors capitulated at this point.

Cabinet meeting on 12 February the matter had been discussed and Tryon authorised to negotiate with the Corporation.<sup>309</sup> The following day Norman and Tryon met, and Norman compromised on the brief given him from the Board by agreeing that, although the Adult Education Advisory Committee would be told of Government intervention, no mention of it would be made in the public announcement of cancellation.<sup>310</sup>

The Adult Education Advisory Committee was no more impressed by being told of Foreign Office representations than was Oswald Mosley, on being informed that he had been cancelled in view of 'the effect which the proposed talks might have on an international situation already aggravated by recent developments'.<sup>311</sup> Yet despite complaints from both Mosley and the Committee the Foreign Office had succeeded both in getting the talks cancelled without use of the veto and in reducing knowledge of its own involvement to the minimum. At the same time it had undoubtedly interfered with a series which was not concerned with foreign affairs, and had certainly limited the BBC's ability to discuss the issues of communism and fascism at even an academic and constitutional level. As Mosley wrote,

I can see nothing which can aggravate any international situation in the fact of Englishmen discussing their own Constitution and their own structure of Government.<sup>312</sup>

This was a view shared by the chairman of the Adult Education Advisory Committee:

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309. Cabinet minutes, 12 February 1936. Quoted by A. Briggs (1979), Op. Cit., 200; Cab.24, C.P.29(36), Memorandum by A. Eden, 7 February 1936.

310. BBC, TCHG, Record of meeting between R. Norman and G.C. Tryon, 13 February 1936.

311. BBC, COM, Rose-Troup to O. Mosley, 26 February 1936. For the reaction of the BBC's Adult Education Advisory Committee see A. Briggs (1979) Op. Cit., 200-201.

312. BBC, COM, O. Mosley to Rose-Troup, 5 March 1936.



The discussion of constitutional questions has always been the touchstone of any real freedom of speech. No latitude in controversy on other topics can compensate for a lack of freedom here.<sup>313</sup>

'The Citizen and His Government' affair did not damage BBC/FO relations. Indeed, in that it showed the Corporation how far Foreign Office interest in its programmes extended, it brought the two bodies closer together. Reith was undoubtedly convinced that a responsible attitude entailed close liaison and a considerable degree of co-operation with Foreign Office wishes. He felt a close sympathy with Sir Robert Vansittart, with whom he got on well, and their contact was increased from late 1935 onwards by their joint membership of the Committee of Imperial Defence's Sub-Committee on Broadcasting, their liaison over preparations for war, the commencement of overseas broadcasting services and plans for the contemplated Ministry of Information. Reith's personal involvement in preparing for war almost certainly made him more sympathetic to the problems of the Foreign Office. Between 1936 and 1939 there is evidence that whilst his subordinates sought an expansion of foreign affairs discussion, Reith proved more amenable to senior Foreign Office views. It is also noticeable that whilst the FO News Department remained comparatively liberal in its outlook, Vansittart and his Secretaries of State grew increasingly unhappy about foreign affairs broadcasting.

Relations between the two bodies remained good and virtually without incident throughout 1936. The weekly commentary on foreign affairs, which had been given a winter break, was resumed in April. Leeper was informed of this and replied that the FO would be grateful to have a talk with speakers who were to deal with questions shortly to be, or actually being, discussed with foreign governments.<sup>314</sup> Earlier Hitler's re-militarisation of the Rhine had induced Reith to ring Orme Sargent and himself offer 'to put on a special talk tonight

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313. BBC, TCHG, J.H. Nicholson to C. Graves, 6 March 1936.

314. BBC, FOC, Leeper to Graves, 6 April 1936.

if FO liked, to offset scare headlines etc.'<sup>315</sup> Sargent, however, was dubious, perhaps because he then had to listen to Reith's own uninformed and confused appreciation of the situation.

In July producer Moray McLaren proposed a series of discussions between two politically opposed nationals of foreign countries, on vital and unresolved issues, in particular such territorial questions as Danzig and the Polish Corridor.<sup>316</sup> This series, to be called 'Vexed Questions' went to the BBC Board and was approved, although in the event inter-country disputes were not dealt with, presumably because of their sensitivity. Instead two Spaniards, Germans, Belgians, Italians, Russians and Frenchmen argued respectively over the Spanish Civil War, the Nazi regime, Rexism, Italian fascism, the new Russian constitution and the French political situation. This was certainly a new and bold departure, but it had inevitably been checked with the FO beforehand. Orme Sargent had been encouraging, but had made what Graves called

the very sound point that, supposing things were internationally taking a turn for the better it would be stupid to bring into the limelight issues which at that particular moment it might be desirable to gloss over.<sup>317</sup>

One of the discussions was to be between a Jew and an Arab on the issue of Palestine. The Colonial Office was consulted and Rose-Troup promised to keep in close touch, 'so as to ensure that the talk on Palestine did not occur at an unpropitious moment'.<sup>318</sup> Yet even this assurance did not please the Colonial Secretary, W.Ormsby-Gore. On hearing of the proposal he immediately sent a message that he felt 'very strongly' that such a talk was both 'undesirable' and

315. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 209, 7 March 1936.

316. BBC, IFA, M.McLaren to Graves, 16 July 1936.

317. BBC, TVQ, Graves to Rose-Troup, 30 July 1936.

318. BBC, TVQ, Rose-Troup to Graves, 24 September 1936.



'dangerous'. Rose-Troup could only concede that 'we must, of course, respect such a strong expression of opinion', and the discussion was cancelled.<sup>319</sup>

1936 and 1937 saw a limited discussion within the Government and Foreign Office as to the pros and cons of greater public information and guidance on foreign affairs. The question was discussed in Cabinet in March 1936, where it was agreed that public opinion 'was very ignorant as to the reasons as to the Government's policy towards France and Germany'.<sup>320</sup> It was suggested that the best means of rectifying this would be a broadcast by either the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary. The one - and decisive - argument put forward against the proposal, however, was party political. Ministers were reminded that the BBC would insist on any such defence of Government policy being answered by the two opposition parties. Yet although Duff Cooper, the Secretary of State for War, felt that this would not do much harm, and although Vansittart subsequently gave it as his opinion that Hugh Dalton would make a good broadcast on the subject, wariness of criticism prevailed and Eden and Baldwin decided not to broadcast.<sup>321</sup> Most ominously for the future the Cabinet considered that

if [the BBC] were told that the situation was such that any broadcast, except by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, was undesirable in the present international situation, they would probably at least refrain from arranging for independent expressions of views on the situation.<sup>322</sup>

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319. BBC, TVQ, Rose-Troup to Graves, 25 September 1936. Reith's account of this incident is almost completely erroneous - J.C.W. Reith (1949), Op. Cit., 288.

320. Cab.27/603, Cabinet Committee Minutes, 30 March 1936.

321. Avon papers, FO 954/7, f.431, Minute by Vansittart for Eden, 31 March 1936.

322. Cab. 27/603, Cabinet Committee Minutes, 30 March 1936.

Within the Foreign Office Rex Leeper was beginning, in 1936, to expand his conception of the role of the News Department in educating public opinion both abroad and at home. He believed that international relations had reached the stage where the British public needed to be rearmed both materially and morally and brought 'face to face with realities'.<sup>323</sup> While Goebbels was using propaganda to unite the German people, the British were receiving minimal guidance. He urged that the News Department should link the various media and opinion-forming bodies, including the BBC, in order to instil a greater sense of realism into the public. Vansittart agreed in principle - the public were receiving no adequate education to prepare them for the coming trials.<sup>324</sup>

Yet, in practice, education to Vansittart entailed a greater degree of FO supervision over BBC output than the Corporation was prepared to concede, or, indeed, than was really practicable. Sympathetic and co-operative as it was, there were limits as to how much consultation the BBC would countenance or consider necessary. Two broadcasts in early 1937 gave Vansittart cause for complaint. The first was a schools broadcast on Russia by John Hilton, in a series called 'History in the Making'. Collie Knox of the Daily Mail accused Hilton of indulging in communist propaganda, of praising without condemning the Soviet regime. In retrospect Hilton's talk appears as a typical example of BBC impartiality, mildly critical and mildly laudatory, well calculated, because it did not come down in overall condemnation, to incense a person of Vansittart's violently anti-communist outlook.

The second broadcast was part of a series entitled 'As Others See Us', which had succeeded 'Vexed Questions'. In these programmes foreign nationals, including a German Nazi, were given the opportunity to broadcast their views on Britain and British policy -

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323. Minute by Leeper, 27 January 1936. Quoted by P. Taylor, Op.Cit., 286.

324. Minute by Vansittart, 1 February 1936. Quoted by P. Taylor, Op.Cit., 288.



a good instance of the BBC's attempts to improve international amity by giving its audience an insight into foreign attitudes. The Foreign Office, however, was unhappy about the German broadcast; Charles Peake considered it 'a characteristic piece of Nazi propaganda', whilst Leeper equally felt that

Many listeners (they are not all intelligent) will miss the point and will in the process swallow a lot of propaganda.<sup>325</sup>

Vansittart in particular was not impressed by the BBC's international ideals:

It is most definitely not the business of the BBC to put people on the air to tell us "how others see us". That is simply opening the door wide to subversive or offensive propaganda, and it is really childish at this time of day that the BBC should be guided in its programmes by these out of date conceptions not only of its functions but of the principle of that blessed word "impartiality".<sup>326</sup>

Vansittart's conclusions from this analysis were made clear a few days later when, at his request, Reith visited him to discuss the matter. At this meeting Vansittart told Reith that

I thought that if it were possible it would be better to give no prominence for the next year at least to lectures either on Communism or Naziism. If however this was not compatible with making the BBC programmes attractive and up-to-date, I felt sure that no lectures should be delivered on these subjects without the closest previous contact between the Foreign Office and the

325. FO 395/546, P1223/20/150, Minute by C. Peake, c.24 February 1937; Minute by Leeper, 25 February 1937. Peake was a First Secretary at the Foreign Office, and subsequently head of the Press Section of the News Department.

326. FO 395/546, P1224/20/150, Minute by Vansittart, 25 February 1937.

BBC. It would be very difficult to devise any form in which lectures on these subjects could be delivered without their taking the form of either polemics or propaganda, both of which it was for the time-being in our national interest to avoid.<sup>327</sup>

So highly did Vansittart rate the importance of a close working understanding between BBC and FO that he stated that he would himself be at all times available for consultation with Graves, Maconachie and Reith. Thus Vansittart argued in effect that, whilst frank criticism was preferable to BBC impartiality, silence was preferable to both, since criticism only made international relations worse.

Reith was impressed and sympathetic. He told Graves that, although Vansittart might have been exaggerating about the seriousness of the international situation, there could be no doubt about the urgency of his appeal to the BBC. At the same time he considered him to be somewhat 'unbalanced' in his attitude, and so did not give positive instructions about the omission of talks on Communism and Nazism.<sup>328</sup> He did, however, pass Vansittart's views about this on to Graves and advised greater contact still with Rex Leeper.

Vansittart had also talked about the Spanish Civil War. Franco, he said, was convinced that the BBC and The Times were against him and that, since he believed them to be government controlled, the British Government was against him also. It was obvious now that Franco would win, and the Cabinet was anxious to avoid anything that would drive him further into the arms of Germany and Italy. One problem was that because the BBC tended to receive more news from the Junta than from Franco this was reflected in its news bulletins. Vansittart asked, therefore, that greater care should be taken to

327. FO 395/546, P1225/20/150, Minute by Vansittart, 9 March 1937.

328. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 214, 9 March 1937. Vansittart later claimed that he had only meant that the BBC should not discriminate between fascism and communism. This is clearly not so - C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 233, footnote 12.



balance exactly the amount of news broadcast from either side. He also hoped that the BBC might substitute the word 'nationalist' for 'insurgent' as a description of Franco's forces. Indeed, as Reith told Graves,

It is quite obvious, in fact, that he would be glad if we became sufficiently obviously pro-Insurgent to convince Franco that we and therefore the Government are not anti-Franco.<sup>329</sup>

Reith's response to these requests was somewhat equivocal:

I think we can without inconvenience do what he [Vansittart] wants with regard to Spanish news, but I don't think we can adopt the new term. We might, however, drop the old one.<sup>330</sup>

Whether the phrase 'do what he wants' referred to adopting a pro-Franco stance or merely to balancing news output, was unclear, although it would hardly have been in character for Reith, however sympathetic, to agree so readily to the former, which was tantamount to using the news as veiled propaganda.

As a result of this meeting, which had been entirely amicable, Graves and Sir Richard Maconachie visited Rex Leeper. Leeper was still somewhat at odds with his superiors as to the desirability of improved guidance of public opinion. He saw the BBC, properly directed, as giving a real lead in getting the public thinking along the right lines. But Vansittart was doubtful if the BBC could be positively directed by FO wishes in the way that Leeper suggested. Despite Reith's obvious sympathy Vansittart remained convinced that in its lower echelons the BBC had a left wing bias.<sup>331</sup> He doubted very much whether the Corporation could be a positive aid to the Foreign Office, and Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary, agreed:

329. BBC, IFA, Reith to Graves, 9 March 1937.

330. Ibid.

331. FO 395/547, P2120/20/150, Minute by Vansittart, 24 May 1937.

is it really inevitable that there should be more BBC talks on Foreign Affairs. I wish that there could be less, and I share the apprehensions expressed in these minutes as to its quality.<sup>332</sup>

The overall Foreign Office view was therefore hostile to any degree of broadcast foreign affairs coverage and Leeper's more positive proposals were left in abeyance.

Faced with such an attitude and given its own outlook it was not surprising that the BBC itself acted cautiously. The ideas and the desire for more ambitious programmes were there at all levels of the Talks Department, but suggestions, even when acted upon, rarely came to fruition. In September 1937, for example, the Assistant Director of Talks, George Barnes, proposed a series of talks on the post-war historical development of the various eastern European states. The format was to be a factual description of how and why they had been created.<sup>333</sup> Maconachie fully supported the idea and by March 1938 the series was in an advanced state of preparation. Maconachie boldly suggested that one programme should be on the question of racial minorities and the Jews, although he admitted that such subjects were 'obviously explosive' and noted a recent Roumanian objection to a similar talk by Wickam Steed.<sup>334</sup> Yet only days later the international situation caused him reluctantly to cancel the entire project and to admit that

It does not seem to be practical to give a series on international affairs at all while conditions are fluctuating so violently and feelings running so high.<sup>335</sup>

A fortnight later he likewise rejected a proposal of C.V.Salmon's

332. FO 395/547, P2120/20/150, Minute by A. Eden, 31 May 1937.

333. BBC, TTP, G. Barnes to Maconachie, 7 September 1937.

334. BBC, TTP, Maconachie to G. Burgess, 8 March 1938.

335. BBC, TTP, Maconachie to Talks Department, 18 March 1938.



for a 'non-controversial' series on the international economic situation, with the sad comment:

I ..... have come to the tentative conclusion that we can only get a non-controversial subject outside the range of politics and economics e.g. the theatre, literature etc.<sup>336</sup>

The regular weekly 'World Affairs' series, broadcast throughout 1937; was increasingly taken over in 1938 by talks on such non-controversial topics as trade agreements, and by ministerial statements on defence measures. From July to October it was brought to a temporary close and replaced with what was initially intended as a weekly lightweight talk by Harold Nicolson on 'The Past Week'.

The most interesting programme cancellation occurred at the beginning of March, when a debate on the German claim to colonies - in which it was anticipated that the German case would appear in an unfavourable light - was withdrawn by Reith at the personal request of the new Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax. Halifax's telegram on the subject to the British Ambassador in Berlin, Sir Neville Henderson, provides a fascinating example of how the BBC could be used as an arguing point with Hitler, and deserves to be quoted at length:

In view of the conversations in Berlin I saw Sir J. Reith yesterday who agreed that he would on his own responsibility cancel the arrangement. It was clearly understood between us that there was no question of Government intervention. Unless you see objections, I should be glad if you could convey to the Chancellor [Hitler] in confidence intimation of the action taken by the BBC on their own initiative as a token of their desire not to create difficulties. You should at the same time make it clear that the BBC have acted independently, as I am most anxious to avoid giving the impression that the Government are attempting to muzzle either the BBC or the press. Our intention is merely to

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336. BBC, TTP, Maconachie to G. Barnes, 29 March 1938.

instil a sense of responsibility in difficult and delicate circumstances. If it was thought that action in this instance had been taken at Government instigation, His Majesty's Government might be held responsible, in a measure, for anything that is put out in future.<sup>337</sup>

Despite this increasingly restrictive atmosphere a certain amount was achieved by the BBC, in line with its growing sense of frustration; but it was done most responsibly. A valuable series on the political and strategic importance of the Mediterranean was planned and began in October 1938. The Foreign Office was, of course, consulted in advance. Earlier in the year talks on 'The Way of Peace' had been given. In these the interlocutor technique was used to examine the value of the League of Nations and alternative suggestions for the maintenance of peace, such as isolationism, pacifism and the New Commonwealth. Yet when, in arguments against pacifism, Josiah Wedgwood planned to make certain remarks about Hitler, Mussolini and Franco which the Corporation considered unwise, he was asked to alter them. Wedgwood refused to do so, withdrew from the talk and was replaced by Wickham Steed.<sup>338</sup> In a reference to this and other debates on international issues Sir Stephen Tallents defended BBC 'reserve', on the grounds of foreign belief in the BBC as government controlled:

we cannot without irresponsibility disregard the special bearing of these accidental qualifications on our treatment of international issues in home programmes.<sup>339</sup>

Harold Nicolson's talks on 'The Past Week' provide at one and the same time examples of the BBC at its most informative and topical,

337. FO 371/21679, C1523/184/18, Lord Halifax to Sir Neville Henderson, 4 March 1938.

338. BBC, TWP, 'Talks - The Way of Peace' File. For further details of this incident see Note C at the end of chapter, p.614.

339. BBC, TPBG, Tallents to Control Board, 15 March 1938.



and at its most circumspect. With the worsening international situation it was decided by the Corporation and Nicolson together to alter the nature of his talks from a lightweight chat to a more serious commentary. From 14 July he began to include foreign affairs in his talks and gave, for example, an explanation of the Czech problem on 1 August. From mid-August his talks were entirely devoted to a commentary on developments in Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland and, to an extent, Japan and Manchuria. The programmes were explanatory, mildly interpretive and most informative. With these talks and its increased news bulletins during the crisis, the BBC did seem to be doing its duty in keeping the audience well informed of events as they happened. The Foreign Office was consulted beforehand and the scripts probably approved. On the whole, however, its attitude was liberal and Nicolson, a former Foreign Office official himself, was praised for his skill in dealing with the subject.<sup>340</sup>

On 5 September, having received that week's script from Nicolson, George Barnes visited Rex Leeper.<sup>341</sup> Leeper fully approved the commentary, but referred it to Sir Alexander Cadogan, who had now taken over from Vansittart. Cadogan in turn referred it to Halifax himself, who clearly disliked the whole idea, and Leeper told Barnes that the FO would prefer that no talk on the German/Czech situation was broadcast that week. Acting on Basil Nicoll's instructions Barnes rang Nicolson and asked him to talk on a different subject. This Nicolson agreed to do, but his resubmitted script proved still to be contentious, describing as it did the Nazi assault in church of the Bishop of Rothenburg. Only after a long argument did Nicolson agree to omit completely such references and to talk instead about the rise in milk prices to 7d a quart.

Nicolson, a National Labour MP, felt that the FO's strong line was possible only because it could rely upon him not to make the veto

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340. Perhaps Nicolson's best talk was given on 26 September 1938, with events at their most critical. See The Listener, 29 September 1938, 639-40.

341. BBC, CHN, Memorandum by G. Barnes, 5 September 1938.

public. Immediately after the Munich terms were known he became an outspoken critic of Chamberlain's final concessions. Yet during the crisis itself, although he did not omit to mention opposition to the negotiations, the weight of his commentary was sympathetic to the Government. As he said in the rewritten talk on 5 September,

the situation today is so delicate and so changeable that anything I say could perhaps be twisted into something which might give offence to the German people with whom we all desire to live on terms of friendship. I am confident myself that the Prime Minister and Lord Halifax are striving, calmly, persistently, courageously - to find some solution which will bring peace to the world ... I should not wish, when the whole of Europe is a powder magazine, to strike even the tiniest match.<sup>342</sup>

By the end of 1938, therefore, the Foreign Office could be reasonably content with the working relationship it had established with the BBC and with the responsible attitude taken by the broadcasters. Its objectives were twofold: to prevent the broadcasting of matter to which other governments might object, and to educate the Corporation accurately as to what British foreign policy actually was. Thus Leeper could note that

The connections of the News Department both with the Press and with the BBC are now so close that it can conduct this work quietly and smoothly without giving the impression of propaganda.<sup>343</sup>

The Government, however, had objectives additional to those of the Foreign Office. It wanted the country to present a united face;

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342. Broadcast talk, 'The Past Week', 5 September 1938.

343. Memorandum by Leeper, c. October 1938. Quoted by P. Taylor, Op. Cit., 413.



it desired full support for the foreign policy it was pursuing. Not least it wished to keep criticism to a minimum. We have already seen that the Government's primary condition in agreeing to the broadcast party political debates in 1939 was that foreign affairs should not be discussed. Yet at the same time the speeches of the Prime Minister were broadcast, by virtue of his office, without reply and as statements of national policy. Within the Corporation Sir Richard Maconachie was particularly conscious of the 'informal pressure from Government'. He argued strongly with Nicolls and Ogilvie that a situation should be reached where, 'no subject of current political interest which is discussed in the Press can be pronounced unsuitable for broadcast ventilation'.<sup>344</sup>

At the end of March 1939 the matter was raised in the Commons by a Liberal member, R.T.D. Acland. Acland argued that since political broadcasting was determined by the party leaders and since the opposition leaders desired to broadcast on foreign affairs, it was effectively the PM who chose whether or not opposition views could be heard.<sup>345</sup> This was an accusation which Chamberlain himself evaded and the Postmaster General denied by saying that such matters were for the BBC to decide. Its point, however, was not lost on the BBC's chairman, Ronald Norman. In a letter to Tryon on 5 April he laid before the PMG the difference between the Corporation's technical freedom and its actual control by government. He accepted that the BBC had a duty to regard the PM's own speeches as statements by the nation's leader, outside the party battle, even when they contained passages of a party nature, as many had in recent months. But, he continued, the main difficulty arose with other speakers:

for the obligation to balance speakers means, in effect, where political questions are at issue, that the refusal of any one of the three main parties - or at any rate of the two main parties - to co-operate in a discussion results in an absolute banning of

344. BBC, PPBG, Maconachie to Ogilvie via B. Nicolls, 6 March 1939.

345. H.C. Debates, vol;/ 345:cols.1842-1850, 27 March 1939.

that particular question.<sup>346</sup>

In this way foreign affairs had been excluded as a debatable subject:

These issues are frequently debated in Parliament; they are daily canvassed in the press; but the vast audience of thirty millions who listen to the wireless in this country are deprived of the opportunity of getting, through the unrivalled instrument which we control, such an education in the most vital controversial questions as it is in the sole power of broadcasting to offer. All this is due to the reluctance of the Government to allow their members or supporters to discuss the questions in front of the microphone, coupled with our policy of balance. Thus it is uncomfortably near the truth to say that the decision who should speak is in the hands of the Prime Minister.<sup>347</sup>

He concluded that since it could not be right that such politicians as Lloyd George, Churchill and Eden were not heard, the policy from which their effective exclusion stemmed could equally not be right:

It may be that the Government policy of refusal to participate is wrong: that is for you to consider; or it may be that our insistence on balance is pressed too far: that is for us to consider. But in some way or another I feel that it is essential to bring to the microphone from time to time not only the principal members of His Majesty's Government,<sup>348</sup> but also the leading statesmen who are not holding office.

This was the crux of the matter. The inherent preference of government for limited and controlled transmission of information, its desire not to upset foreign governments accidentally, combined with the BBC's 'reasonable' approach and its regard for balance of

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346. Prem. 1/301, R.C. Norman to G.C. Tryon, 5 April 1939.

347. Ibid.

348. Ibid.



output rather than balance of broadcast opportunity, led inevitably to severe if unwritten restrictions upon the free expression of views. Tryon considered Norman's proposals 'most dangerous', whilst O.S. Cleverly, Chamberlain's Principal Private Secretary, felt that any such broadcasts - for example by Lloyd George - would be 'irresponsible and mischievous'.<sup>349</sup> Cleverly told Sir Horace Wilson, one of Chamberlain's closest advisers, that

whatever may be said in Parliament and in the Press it is definitely undesirable that at times like the present issues of Foreign Policy should be discussed on the air.<sup>350</sup>

What he was saying in effect was that whilst the Government could do nothing to prevent 'irresponsible' criticism in the press and on the platform, it could and would use its greater influence over the BBC to prevent this most powerful medium being used for attacks upon it.

The Corporation received no response to its Chairman's appeal. Norman's term of office was coming to an end in any case and he was replaced by Sir Allan Powell. Reflecting its slightly more adventurous policy in other areas the BBC did broadcast a modest series on the background to such current issues as Czechoslovakia, Danzig and Suez.<sup>351</sup> In June 1939 Basil Nicolls told the Talks Department to prepare a series of talks on 'What I Stand For', in which prominent men, including Eden and Churchill, could state their views on what it was worth living and fighting for.<sup>352</sup> This series, planned for October, was overtaken by events. Weekly foreign affairs commentaries had been resumed in March, with Voigt again as the principal contributor. But in May even these were withdrawn. As the international situation worsened there was little that the BBC could

349. Prem. 1/301, J. Napier to O.S. Cleverly, 6 April 1939; Memorandum by O.S. Cleverly, 20 April 1939.

350. Prem. 1/301, Memorandum by O.S. Cleverly, 20 April 1939.

351. BBC, TTP, G. Barnes to Lindsay Wellington, 21 August 1939.

352. BBC, TTP, Memorandum by Maconachie, 20 June 1939.

do but give the news and prepare itself for war.

v) Broadcasting and Politics: Conclusion.

It is undeniable that in seeking to establish itself firmly within the body politic, and for a variety of other reasons, the BBC did come too close to accepting the views of a certain established order, of the current representatives of that system of government to which it sought itself to contribute. Perhaps the Corporation was unfortunate that its formative inter-war years were so completely dominated by Conservative or National governments. The BBC's aim of strengthening and confirming the democratic system was a respectable objective, and in a somewhat freer, challenging atmosphere and changing society, Reith might have found it easier to practise what he had preached about the free play of ideas as a basic requirement of democracy.

It would be quite wrong to dismiss what the BBC did achieve - a greater outpouring of information, news and informed thought to a wider audience than had ever before been possible. Yet another aspect of the liberal democratic aspiration by which Reith and his staff continued themselves to be influenced was to militate against complete broadcast freedom. This was the idea of a reasoned and reasonable rather than an emotional or doctrinaire response to problems. This approach married naturally with the Corporation's statutory duty to maintain its political impartiality and encouraged a certain antipathy towards party politics. But it also had as a direct issue certain notions as to the need for a degree of pragmatism and a readiness to appreciate the problems of government. Above all such an outlook laid particular emphasis on the BBC's positive duty to the nation - a duty embodied in the concept of national interest - which, in the prevailing climate, tended naturally to come down on the side of the status quo. For when the BBC looked to the national interest it could not but pay regard to the state as it was and not as it might be in a perfect democratic system. In this respect, as in such areas as its international



aspirations, the BBC's ideals were therefore to prove inimical one to another.

Yet in that climate, in which not just democracy but the democratic states were perceived to be under threat, it was not surprising that the BBC tended in its own operations to stress the particular ideal, both democratic and totalitarian, of national unity. It was only unfortunate that in so doing other equally important aims suffered. The experiment of an educated, rational, politically intelligent and integrated democracy had little opportunity to show its potential when the state conceived of itself as being in danger. It had little opportunity, despite repeated declarations by all concerned that only through such a fulfilment of the democratic ideal would the democracies survive the threat both of alternative ideologies and of the emotional depravity of the mass mind. The 'integrating' element of the BBC's commitment could exist and prove invaluable without the democratic, and it certainly received greater weight during these years. In one sense, therefore, the Corporation failed to fulfil the democratic aims initially held out for it because of the very pragmatic concerns of parties and governments for political success, and of the state itself for survival. But in another it could be said that the BBC was hamstrung by its own ideals.

Note A.

One further possible source of interference, with potentially political implications, should be given, although the details of the

particular example are obscure. According to the files of the Metropolitan Police, the BBC News Editor, Rose-Troup, agreed on 28 October 1932 to broadcast, if required, police requests to the general public to keep away from the demonstrations of the National Unemployed Working Men's national march. It would seem likely that the initiative came from the police, who were genuinely concerned lest the demonstrations got out of control. Nevertheless the BBC should have been conscious that such an action would have highly political implications. It may have seen it as consistent both with the Licence requirement to broadcast police messages and with its own advocacy of conciliation and integration. Yet it could equally be regarded as symptomatic of a wider establishment fear that the NUWM had undemocratic political intentions in organising these demonstrations. Whether the BBC was bound to broadcast such messages, or voluntarily undertook to do so, this incident reveals a further influence upon the BBC which might have led it to an undeniably political action. There is no evidence that in the event any message was requested or broadcast. The relevant file, Mepol.3064, is closed to research. The incident is mentioned by John Stevenson in G. Peele and C. Cook (ed.), The Politics of Reappraisal, 1918 - 1939, London 1975, 153. Further details have been obtained from John Stevenson, who saw the file before it was closed.

#### Note B.

A comment should be made on the ominous sounding 'internal administrative action'. Curran and Seaton (1981, p.157) state that the producer concerned lost his job. This was not so. Archie Harding was presumably ticked off and apologised for the furor he had created. Later, in September 1933, he was promoted to Programme Director of the North Region, where he continued to assert his independence of spirit by broadcasting an interview with hunger-marchers and, on another occasion, transmitting a regional concert by unemployed Merseyside musicians in preference to a national one by Pablo Casals - D.G. Bridson, Prospero and Ariel, London 1971, 39; A. Briggs (1965), Op. Cit., 328, 330. According to D.G. Bridson Reith



saw the northern appointment as something other than a promotion; when it was made he is said to have told Harding: 'You're a very dangerous man, Harding. I think you'd better go up North where you can't do so much damage'. - J. Curran and J. Seaton, Op. Cit., 154. Bridson describes Harding as an 'Oxford intellectual Marxist'. - D.G. Bridson, Op. Cit., 28.

### Note C.

The BBC's objections to Wedgwood's talk were that his remarks were conjectural. The two particular passages he was asked to modify were:

Franco's Spain will want Gibraltar and justice, Egypt will want the Sudan and justice, Poland or Roumania will want Palestine and justice, Pirow wants Bechuanaland and justice, and de Valera might want Ulster first and Liverpool next.

and:

What Hitler wants is - Austria, Czecho-Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Esthonia, some of Poland and the Ukraine, and, I hope the southern Tyrol - not to mention Switzerland, Alsace-Lorraine, Schleswig-Holstein and Malmedy. Mussolini is more moderate, but requires Majorca, Malta, Cicilia, Palestine, Egypt, Arabia, Tunis and the control of Spain.

The BBC did not object to criticism of Hitler if factual and deserved; in Wickham Steed's replacement discussion with Sir Arthur Salter the former stated:

You begin by saying "All war is wrong" ... You say further that if enough men in any nation held sincere convictions along these lines the Government of that nation would not dare to go to war. Would this prevent the governments of other nations which persecute the Catholic and Evangelical Churches as the Nazi

Government of Germany is doing, from going to war? You know what for - in order, as Herr Hitler puts it in his book, "to establish peace upon the victorious sword of a ruling race bending the world to the service of a higher Kultur" ..... Take [Hitler's] doctrine upon the treatment of inferior races. Suppose you let him apply that to the inhabitants of large stretches of Africa? ..... Would you preach to the African natives the Christian virtue of non-resistance - and to our people the virtue of conciliation? Or would you wish a strong League of Nations, such as Herr Hitler emphatically rejects, to call the Germans to order?

It should, however, be added that whereas in Wedgwood's talk the dictators had been central, here they were only incidental. - BBC, TP, Memorandum by BBC Home Intelligence Department, Public Relations Division, 4 March 1938.



## CHAPTER NINE

The Cinema Newsreels and Politics, 1929 -1939.

"I think that years hence it will be found very entertaining - when more is known of the world to-day than we may know now - to look at the news-reel of to-day. The news-reels will seem the comics, and it will be the Marx Brother films that seem more truthful, less distorted in their picture of civilization which has found ways of preserving everything but itself."

Charles Grinley, 'Notes on the Newsreel', Life and Letters, 1937.

The newest mass medium of the inter-war years was the talking film, although the industry which created it was already of enormous proportions, with a thirty year history and time-established customs. Where John Reith had a clean canvas upon which to leave his impress, the cinema industry was already a colourful and gaudy picture, giving little opportunity for the long, sweeping brushstrokes of the visionary. Yet for immediacy and accessibility the talking film seemed incomparable, combining as it did verbal and visual images in a way that was quite unique. The possibilities of using the medium for genuine and valuable education - social, moral and political - appeared immense. Few of those who entered the industry specifically for this purpose, however - John Grierson and J. Arthur Rank amongst them - enjoyed popular success whilst they confined themselves to furthering their consciously articulated ideals. Yet the efforts of the Conservative Party and belatedly of Labour to use films to project a political message outside the commercial cinema industry, must be considered as of only minor significance in comparison to the potential which existed within and for working through it for political education and propaganda. The efforts of left wing film groups to get some of their films, in 35 mm. versions, past the British Board of Film Censors, and the one Conservative attempt at a commercially viable feature documentary, demonstrated a firm belief that to break into the commercial industry and cinema circuits could bring untold rewards.

The weekly audience for 'the pictures' was indeed a valuable prize. In 1934 there were 4,305 registered cinemas in Britain (excluding Northern Ireland), providing 3,872,000 seats. There was an average weekly audience of 18.5 million, totalling 963 million annually. If a proportion of the audience visited a cinema twice weekly, so that the total number of individual patrons was something less than 18.5 million, it still represented a high proportion of the population.<sup>1</sup> By 1939 the weekly figure was in the region of 21 million. The Social Survey of Merseyside, in 1934, estimated that

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1. N. Pronay, 'British Newsreels in the 1930s. 1. Audience and Producers', History, vol 56, October 1971, 412.



some 40% of the area's adults visited the cinema each week, whilst according to a wartime survey of The Cinema Audience, carried out in 1943, 70% of adult civilians visited the cinema occasionally, whilst 32% went once a week or more frequently. Even allowing for a higher<sup>2</sup> attendance in wartime than in peace these figures were impressive.

It is also clear that the working class predominated as cinema patrons, that the ratio of seats to population was highest in industrial areas and that the highest proportion of 'regulars' was to be found in the working class age group from 15 to 35. This was a politically significant age and a stratum of the population for which newspapers, books and the wireless were not so important, as sources of information and entertainment, as they were amongst the middle classes. The cinema was undoubtedly one of the principal pleasures of the working man and woman throughout the period, and its place in society was recognised in a number of social surveys.

As an added inducement to the audience to patronise his cinema rather than that of his rival the exhibitor offered hors d'oeuvres before the main feature, in the shape of cartoons, shorts, cine-magazines and a newsreel. Such additional items were popular and became an obligatory part of the package which the cinema-goer came to expect for the price of his ticket. Indeed the newsreel predated the feature and, by the coming of the 'talkies', was long established as a necessary part of the programme, albeit one severely restricted in its news-carrying potential by the lack of sound. This latter development, however, in 1929-30, was as significant for the newsreel as for the main film. The personalities on the screen could talk to the audience, and the newsreel editors could equally describe and interpret the events they chose to portray. As a device for communicating either an objective or a subjective picture of the most important news of the day the newsreel was full of possibilities. Yet the comments of contemporaries hardly suggested that this was recognised by the newsreels themselves. Writing in 1937 Charles

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2. The Wartime Social Survey, The Cinema Audience, London 1943. Quoted by A. Aldgate, Cinema and History, London 1979, 56-57.

Grinley described how the reels catered for audience tastes:

materfamilias has to have her item. She has, say, the Duchess of Hogs Norton at a Bazaar, or scenes at a poultry show; something to appeal to her shopping instincts. Paterfamilias likes to remember his young days, so we have a beauty parade .... and a sport item. Pater-to-be is still interested in sport, so we have a bit more, and as the "rising generation" is mechanically minded, we have airplanes or cars. The young man's girl has to be considered (that's why he bought two seats) - she gets a giggly bit about sunbathing ..... Then, to encourage all of them, there's another military parade or "naval occasion" .... while bands blare over the whole show. There's your reel. And there it has to be, because the cinema caters to that audience.<sup>3</sup>

In like manner John Grierson described newsreels as

dim records .... of only the evanescent and the essentially unreal, reflecting hardly anything worth preserving of the times they recorded.<sup>4</sup>

A recent film historian has described them as 'for the most part faultlessly neutral and bland'.<sup>5</sup>

It is certain that a large proportion of each newsreel was devoted to items similar to those thought up by Charles Grinley, and his explanation of this phenomenon had more than an element of truth in it. Additional reasons are not hard to find. Such items had made up the staple fare of the silent newsreels whose personnel now ran

3. C. Grinley, 'Notes on the Newsreel', Life and Letters, vol. 17, 1937, 122-128.
4. J. Grierson, Grierson on Documentary, London 1979, 72. Quoted by A. Aldgate, Op. Cit., 65.
5. Rachel Low, The History of the British Film 1929-1939, Films of Comment and Persuasion in the 1930s, London 1978, 18.



the sound. The filming of real news, of sudden events as they happened, was in any case an expensive process, and like every business the newsreels were concerned to pay their way.<sup>6</sup> The pre-arranged event, the regular function, was cheaper to film; it was also a great deal easier to get the cumbersome newsreel film equipment to it and set up in good time than it was in the case of the unexpected story. Little spontaneous and real news happened by chance under the watchful eye of a newsreel camera; it can hardly have been coincidental that when, in 1939, unemployed protestors sat down in front of the London traffic, they did so at the junction of Oxford Street and Berwick Street, a matter of yards from Movietone's offices.<sup>7</sup>

Yet if a major part of most reels was devoted to pre-arranged events, non-news items and sport, by the same token a fair proportion did deal with real political issues from home and abroad. Indeed the international nature of the film and newsreel industry had the effect of promoting a system of constant exchange of news film between countries, so that images of America, the Empire and of other European countries became familiar, for the first time, to British audiences. This was not an inexpensive item in the newsreels' budget, as far more film was imported weekly than could be used, and it was necessary to pay import duty on all incoming film, whether or not it was put into the actual reel. If the newsreels' motivation for importing foreign news items was partly a natural response to their international structure and partly a desire to make use of the curiosity value of such scenes, it nevertheless also reflected a recognition of increasing public interest in foreign affairs, and of

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6. Suggestions that the newsreels, owned by the big feature companies, were break-even ventures designed to keep the names of their parent companies before the audience, and that they may have been subsidised, do not appear to be totally warranted. Gerald Sanger, the editor of British Movietone News, told the author that there was never any question but that his reel had to pay its way. For details of the cost and size of the newsreels see A. Aldgate, Op. Cit., 27-34.
  7. British Movietone News (hereafter BMN), Issue No. 502a, 19 January 1939. 'Unemployed Men's "Liedown" Strike'.

inter-war idealism as to the need for harmony between nations. The end product was a ten minute mixture of news, sport and miscellanea which satisfied few serious critics, but which remained virtually unchallenged as the commercial cinema's major contribution to political education for a quarter of a century.

How did the newsreels themselves assess their role? Did they see themselves as entertainers, news-providers, or a mixture of both? Few newsreel editors have written about their work, either at the time or since, evidence perhaps that few if any entered the business with a conscious vision or for anything other than purely commercial reasons. As Gerald Sanger, British Movietone's editor, has stated of his attitude in 1929, when the first sound reel was started:

Obviously I hoped that it would have a good future before it - preferably some weight. But at that time the whole idea of a sound newsreel was so challenging, so attractive, that I doubt if I had any actually formed idea of what the future might hold for it.

Elsewhere he commented that newsreels

were simply the recorders of events, whose editors were guided by what they judged was popular opinion and public interest at the time .... News, yes. But in our case, we were expected by our customers to cram into ten minutes the headline news of the newspapers from all the world, the sensational news of catastrophes at home and abroad, fashion news, exhibitions and other great spectacles ... and above all sport.

With only two issues a week this was indeed a tall order.

8. Gerald Sanger in interview with author 21 April 1979.
9. Statement by Gerald Sanger prepared for Metropolis Pictures film, 'Before Hindsight' 1977, a copy of which was given to the author. Only a very small part of this useful statement was incorporated into the film.



Popular opinion and general interest were therefore primary considerations for editorial policy, but other editors professed an altogether higher vision. Responding to an article in the Gaumont British house journal, R.S.Howard, the editor of Gaumont Sound News, wrote:

the writer was good enough to say that the news film could be as great a national force as our daily newspapers. It is indeed becoming a vital factor in the life of the people - growing and progressing almost every week - and, although still in its evolutionary stage, it is already recognised by the governments of the world as the medium for reaching the masses. In this way the Newsreel takes its place side by side with "The Times" and the BBC, but it has the additional advantage of bringing the living personalities of our leaders before the public, which neither the BBC or the newspapers can ever do.<sup>10</sup>

Later in the year he added his opinion that

the newsreel is principally a matter of recorded sight, and not of synthetic emotion - as, for good or ill, newspaper reports so frequently are.<sup>11</sup>

The editor of British Paramount News, G.T. Cummins, was initially more circumspect in his declarations. Like Sanger he recognised the importance of public opinion:

Propaganda is forbidden. Partiality is proscribed and parochialism is taboo. The daily life of the whole civilised world is to be told in pictures, nothing must be omitted. But nothing must be included which the average man will not like.<sup>12</sup>

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10. R.S. Howard, Gaumont British News (house journal), June 1932.
  11. Film Weekly, 2 December 1932.
  12. Newsreel Supplement, Kinematograph Weekly, 25 October 1934, 8.

Yet when, in 1937, Jeffrey Bernard of Gaumont British expressed similar views, Cummins was sharp in his retort:

To me, the newsreel [is] a phenomenon of the twentieth century, which deserves greater intelligence than as a medium for the presentation of mediocre pictures of laying of foundation stones or seaside baby shows solely for the purpose of scoring with an effective wisecrack. The newsreel deserves the position which it can achieve of being a worthy screen representative of the Fourth Estate - reporting, with equal freedom and as much intelligence<sup>13</sup> the trends and events of this amazing world in which we live.

Likewise Fred Watts, Pathe's Production Manager, rejected the idea of tame newsreels such as would result from censorship:

An emasculated news-reel shorn of enterprise and virility, would be a bad thing both for the kinema and the public. News editors were just as conscious of their responsibilities as were the editors of the daily press.<sup>14</sup>

Such high-sounding references to the fourth estate, The Times and the BBC did not marry well with the newsreels' desire not to offend 'the average man'. Nor did they bear much relationship to the majority of newsreel practice. But they did reflect a certain desire, on the part of these editors, to assume a degree of journalistic respectability, and to aspire to a position of importance in the field of news reportage. The title of 'newsreel' was valued by the men who worked in the industry, and they certainly saw themselves as part of the journalistic profession, even if only a few had journalistic experience.<sup>15</sup> The motto displayed at the beginning of

13. Today's Cinema, 16 September 1937.
14. F. Watts, 'Reeling Out the News', Photographic Journal, April 1936, 230-232.
15. For the typical background of most newsreel men see A. Aldgate, Op. Cit., 35-37.



each reel, that Gaumont British was 'Presenting the World to the World', was indicative of this assumption, whilst Movietone's 'It Speaks for Itself' was a profession of objectivity, a natural corollary to the dictum that the camera could not lie. Movietone had particular reason to see itself as part of the journalistic world, for it was part owned by Esmond Harmsworth, and was effectively part of the Rothermere empire.

It is interesting to note that when the editors did make such declarations of broad policy, it was more often in response to demands that they reduce the serious content of their reels than to criticisms that it should be increased. Thus R.S. Howard's comments were made in reply to suggestions that the reels should include more film stars and 'human touches', and fewer politicians. Cummins equally rejected the idea that unpleasant news should not be mentioned:

If the public does not learn the facts of life, so to speak, from the accredited news organs, they are very liable to get them in a distorted or perverted form through less reputable channels. The suppression of all public reference to the sterner realities is a very old-fashioned plan for improving conditions, and is seldom effective ..... we are providing an attractive feature which meets the public demand for authentic news entertainingly presented .... and there is always sufficient news of a lighter character to relieve the unavoidable sombreness of any particular story. We aim to please most of the people all the time, but so long as we are reporting news, and news only, we cannot produce a newsreel in which England wins all the Tests, and the problem of unemployment is solved by a wave of a fairy wand.<sup>16</sup>

Editors were also anxious to assert their reels' impartiality, their rejection of propaganda and their freedom from censorship or other control. Cummins stressed that although the camera could lie it

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16. G.T. Cummins, 'Can Newsreels be Censored?', Kinematograph Weekly, 8 March 1934, 2.

was essential that newsreels used it for telling

the strict truth .... We do not even asked to be allowed to show on the screen anything that would be harmful to the public interest, but we do wish and intend to show all the news that is fit to screen.<sup>17</sup>

Gerald Sanger made the point even more clearly:

The commentary on Movietone is purely of an explanatory nature and it should be hardly necessary to stress the fact that "British Movietone News" never has and never will abuse its influence as a news publishing medium to distort the significance of events or to give them propagandist flavour. It is in a public-spirited manner and complete disinterestedness that Movietone will follow the events of this busy and confused world.<sup>18</sup>

The stated policies of the newsreels, such as they were, were therefore not ignoble, not unidealistic. If the primary concerns of making money and increasing business were not mentioned, this was hardly surprising. To achieve these latter aims the need to entertain was also recognised - the cinema was, after all, first and foremost a pleasure palace to which people went for relaxation. The vast majority of the audience went primarily for the feature film, and so incidental was the newsreel that distributors frequently "tacked" their particular reel onto the feature, making acceptance of one condition for provision of the other, in order to persuade the independent cinemas to accept it.<sup>19</sup> The cinema chains of the major film producers and distributors inevitably showed their own company's newsreel, but there was constant competition for the patronage of the other 79% of independent film theatres, using the weapons of price

17. Ibid.

18. Newsreel Supplement, Kinematograph Weekly, 14 November 1935.

19. G. Sanger to author, 21 April 1979.



under-cutting, tacking and simple popular appeal of the reel. It is perhaps significant that, according to World Film News in 1938, the reel with the largest circulation was Universal, easily the most lightweight of the newsreels, followed by Gaumont British, the most aggressively and exhilaratingly packaged and entertaining.<sup>20</sup>

This is not to suggest that the news function of the newsreels was not popular with much of the cinema audience. One correspondent to Film Weekly rejected the many complaints at excessive politics and argued that the screen interview provided an intimate, personal touch:

To me Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, Mr. Baldwin and others have only become real personalities since I met them on the screen.<sup>21</sup>

The industry considered the newsreel sufficiently popular to establish specialist newsreel theatres, rising to an eventual total of 35 throughout the country. Few of these, however, were really successful<sup>22</sup>; nor did they restrict themselves to the showing of newsreels. Cartoons and other short films were also staple fare, although the newsreels did occasionally produce specials to go into their news theatres, and also used these cinemas as an outlet for the American, Empire and other overseas stories and reels which they received weekly, but could not put into the domestic issue.<sup>23</sup> The considerable cost of producing specials and prints of overseas reels for such very limited exhibition, however, proved a serious hindrance to the extensive development of this trend.

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20. World Film News, vol. 2, January 1938, 37. World Film News was a well informed and researched journal, and it seems not unreasonable to accept these facts as probable.
21. J.Gammie, 'Women Are interested in Newsreels', Film Weekly, 18 November 1932, 10.
22. See N.J. Hulbert, 'Newsreels must give us the real news', Kinematograph Weekly, 13 January 1938.
23. G. Sanger to author, 21 April 1979.

Operating as they were in a commercial context, constantly jockeying with each other for business, the newsreels could not afford to alienate themselves from their audience by straying too far from the requirements of entertainment. They recognised, as did the popular press, that news was a saleable commodity if it could be leavened by a generally popular and entertaining presentation. It is noticeable that even Movietone, which must be regarded as one of the more serious reels, introduced the majority of its news stories with unflinching jolly music irrespective of the mood of each item. When parliament reassembled in October 1937 and a petition was delivered by the fishermen of Newlyn, this was the cockney commentary, admittedly untypical for political items, from Movietone:

Well the boys is back 'orace, back wiv throttles open to the 'eavy grind of parliamentary life. From the 'urry they're in you'd think they'd got an important job on 'and. I suppose after a time yer gets the idea the country can't get on withaht yer. Funny ain't it. And blimey, if this ain't a packet of all right blowin' in from nowhere. 'The Rosebud', not 'alf. Sailin' all the way from Cornwall and tyin' up at Westminster pier. The blokes on board 'as got a petition to 'and to the Minister of 'ealth, and it's all abaht their 'ouses which someone says is slums and 'as to be pulled dahn. Perhaps yer knows the place, 'orace, Newlyn<sup>24</sup> in Cornwall. Nice place for an 'oneymoon I should say ....

In such ways the newsreels attempted to make themselves more attractive to the audience and hence to the exhibitor who actually booked them. This presentation in a reel which otherwise employed few such crude and patronising devices reflected a recognition of the pluralist environment in which the newsreels operated, vying with one another for business. Yet it was not the pluralism of the press; unlike the newspaper reader the average cinema-goer did not choose the newsreel he watched. He came for the feature, and the choice of reel was the prerogative of the exhibitor, unless part of a dependent

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24. BMN, Issue No. 438, 25 October 1937, 'Parliament - by Carl Bernard'.



chain. Put another way, the newsreel editor did not choose his audience; he was presented by the exhibitor with a mixed bag of men, women and children whose only common denominator was their love of Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler, Clark Gable and Myrna Loy. Profit being the main objective, both for newsreel and exhibitor, there was no strong reason for the newsreels deliberately to incur the displeasure of the audience and hence the exhibitor, by excessively unpopular items or by blatant political propaganda which would be objectionable to a proportion of patrons. The newsreels were apparently in a situation where they suffered all the commercial disadvantages of a pluralist system, without enjoying the freedom to state freely their own opinion on controversial issues, such as would normally have been the case.

Yet at the same time they were commercial operators, bound to impartiality of presentation not by a charter and licence such as the BBC's, but solely by an understanding of what was good commercial practice. Commercial sense sometimes suggested that a particular line should be taken. Where newsreels considered public opinion sufficiently unanimous, and where it complemented their own personal inclinations, they could throw themselves whole-heartedly behind it. Never was this more evident than after Munich, when Pathe devoted its entire issue to a biography of Neville Chamberlain,

the man acclaimed today as the First Stateman<sup>s</sup> of the Empire, the world's great advocate for peace and justice amongst nations. Cheered by the people, honoured by our gracious King and Queen, we join in praying for success for his efforts, health and happiness for him, and the lady who shares his joys and sorrows. Britain will never forget the hour and the man<sup>25</sup> who fought so hard for the peace of the world, and won [cheers].

The Gaumont British edition was equally a masterly paean of praise, the climax of the newsreel editor's art, whilst Movietone admitted

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25. Pathe Gazette (hereafter PG), Issue No. 38/80, 6 October 1938, 'Man of the Hour - Neville Chamberlain'.

that 'our words of admiration and thanks are exhausted for the man who averted Armageddon'.<sup>26</sup>

Such overt editorialisation was comparatively rare. But, as we have seen, the reels were run by men who claimed to aspire to the freedom and independence of the press, and who looked to it as their example, even in the structure of their organisations.<sup>27</sup> With such a means of communication available to them, without any legal proscription upon editorialisation, and lacking any tradition or stated guidelines as to the practice, obligations and meaning of impartiality, it was hardly surprising that their personal inclinations occasionally got the better of their pure business sense. In any case it was almost inevitable that, given the limited space they had available to them, their selection of stories should reflect in some degree their personal approach not only to their business responsibilities and priorities, but also to society and to the political situation.

Personal inclination, public opinion and other factors, therefore, could all act in opposition to the line of impartiality indicated by primary business considerations, just as those same business considerations could work against the definite sense of duty to provide real news as well as titbits and other trivia. To what extent, then, did the newsreels cover real political news, and in what degree did they deviate from their professed impartiality?

In research of this nature the considerable cost of present day film viewing prevents a comprehensive analysis of the reels themselves. It is possible to view only a very small proportion of the output of the five major newsreels. Some stories are missing whilst others of those seen have lost their soundtracks. Nor, at the time of writing, is it possible to study the surviving scripts of

26. BMN, Issue No. 487, 3 October 1938; see also Gaumont British News (hereafter GBN), Issue No. 497, 3 October 1938.

27. For the structure of the newsreels see A. Aldgate, Op. Cit., 34-43.



three of these reels - Gaumont British News, British Paramount News and Universal News.<sup>28</sup> Only a fraction of those of Pathe Gazette have survived and almost none (pre-war) of British Movietone News. The newsreel issue sheets, which recorded the title of every story in each issue and occasionally a brief description, have survived, with the exception of those for Gaumont Sound News, which preceded Gaumont British, from 1929 to 1933. Inadequate though it is, however, a quantitative analysis of stories, based on titles as recorded by the issue sheets, does give some guide to newsreel policy and the extent to which they attempted to deal with serious news.

Two such quantitative analyses of British newsreels have been carried out already. The Slade Film History Register looked at stories relating to Germany or the Germans as issued by Paramount and Movietone between 1933 and 1939. It divided these stories qualitatively into 'News Type items' (viz. serious news) and other, and reached the following conclusions::

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28. Visnews, the film library holding these scripts, is currently undertaking extensive rebuilding, such that during the period of this research access to them was not allowed.

Figure 9.1: Stories relating to Germany or Germans, 1933 -1939.<sup>29</sup>

	British Paramount			British Movietone		
	'News type items'	Others	Total	'News type items'	Others	Total
1933	20	11	31	20	10	30
1934	12	7	19	11	8	19
1935	18	16	34	21	11	32
1936	16	22	38	16	8	24
1937	26	15	41	11	5	16
1938	43	12	55	43	9	52
1939	29	5	34	16	1	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>190</b>

The Slade register worked on the estimate that each issue of each reel contained an average of twelve stories. In fact this is something of an overestimate, certainly for the earlier years, for neither Paramount nor Movietone often exceeded eight items per issue and averaged about seven. Only Gaumont British approached eleven or twelve, with Pathe averaging about ten and Universal eight. All the companies issued some 104 reels each year. Working from these figures it can be seen that Paramount and Movietone produced roughly 730 stories annually, Universal 836, Pathe 1040 and Gaumont British some 1150. From this it would appear that the number of serious stories on Germany by Paramount and Movietone was low in proportion to the total newsreel output - no more than 3% for either company - but high in proportion to the total number of stories on Germany - 65% for Paramount and 70% for Movietone. Moreover, assuming each issue to

29. Slade Film History Register, Unpublished 'Survey on Stories Relating to Germany or Germans, 1933-1939. Quoted by A. Aldgate, Op. Cit., 76.



contain only one story on Germany, over 22% of all Paramount issues and nearly 19% of Movietone contained serious stories on Germany, a not dishonourable proportion. Care should be taken not to assume that the majority of such serious stories were more than factual 'surface' news, or that they provided a full understanding of the German situation. Yet just occasionally they could produce commentaries which in a few words got surprisingly close to the heart of the matter. Thus one such in the autumn of 1933:

Adolf Hitler, the founder of the Nazi legions which now parade before him, reviews his followers. Militarism long dormant in Germany has been rekindled by the dynamic Hitler. Nightmare visions of war rise before our eyes. Only wise statesmanship can preserve peace now.<sup>30</sup>

A similar exercise has been carried out by Anthony Aldgate, assessing newsreel coverage of the Spanish Civil War. Analysing items on the war in all the reels, from its start in late July 1936 to Franco's entry into Madrid in April 1939, he comes up with the following figures:

Figure 9.2: Stories on the Spanish Civil War, July 1936–April 1939<sup>31</sup>

Newsreel	Total number of issues	Stories on Civil War
Gaumont	280	77
Paramount	277	67
Movietone	281	66
Pathe	278	64
Universal	281	39

30. Quoted by N.Pronay in British Universities Film Council Newsletter, No.35 (1978), 19.

31. A. Aldgate, Op. Cit., 77.

The very different priorities of Universal from the other reels is obvious from this analysis, for only 14% of its issues contained stories on the war. Of the remaining four, however, even Pathe included stories in 23% of its issues, whilst for Gaumont British the figure was 27.5%. As Aldgate concludes,

To suggest that the newsreels were exclusively trivial in content is unfair. Sport may well have been the most popular newsreel topic by far. But a good deal of time was also given to foreign affairs and to war in particular.<sup>32</sup>

An analysis of the issue sheets in order to assess British political affairs coverage is similarly possible, but cannot produce such clear-cut results. It is possible to record every issue sheet title in which a British politician or party is mentioned, each obvious strike and demonstration, items relating to slums, rehousing, the economy, industry (excluding technological stories) and foreign affairs where Britain is mentioned on the sheet. This reveals that in the period 1932 - 1937 such items occurred in only about 8.5% of Universal's issues, 13% of Pathe's and between 23% and 26% of those of Gaumont British, Movietone and Paramount.<sup>33</sup> These figures, however, are certainly somewhat on the low side. A large number of foreign affairs stories mentioned Britain and British policy even though this was not recorded in the title. Other items on Abyssinia, the Spanish Civil War, Germany, American policy, international rearmament, the Empire and especially the League of Nations, would also, to an audience of the time, have had implications for Britain, even when it was not mentioned. In addition many items, titled as one story, were in fact linked together by the newsreel. Thus Movietone's

32. Ibid.

33. These dates, 1932-1937, have been taken as 1932 was the first year when all five reels were operating fully, whilst after 1937 the increase in defence stories (A.R.P.etc.) and the Munich crisis tends to distort and confuse the normal state of affairs. The average for Gaumont British is based on issues between 1934 and 1937 only, as issue sheets before 1934 do not exist.



1937 story on parliament reassembling and the Newlyn protest, facetious though it was, actually consisted of three separate items, for the two quoted were followed by one of Lloyd George at a horticultural show. This item also illustrates how difficult it is to assess stories qualitatively from their titles. The issue sheet description reads 'Parliament - by Carl Bernard - A few observations on political topics and other doings'. Only by seeing the item would it be possible to discover that Bernard was Movietone's cockney humorist.

It may be safely assumed that a large number of the issues of Paramount, Movietone, Gaumont British and even Pathe and Universal, would have been considered by the audiences of the day to contain serious news stories. By far the majority of these, however, were foreign affairs items, perhaps with a reference to British foreign policy. Purely domestic issues occupied a tiny fraction of newsreel time and attention. Eliminating, insofar as it is possible, obviously lightweight stories (for example on Lloyd George opening an irrigation system on his farm at Churt), it would seem that serious domestic news appeared in, at most, 17% of Paramount, 11% of Movietone, 10% Gaumont, 7% Pathe and 3.5% of Universal issues. Serious domestic political stories made up not quite 4% of Paramount and Movietone's items, 2.4% of Gaumont's, 1.4% of Pathe's and under 1% of Universal's.<sup>34</sup> The total time occupied was probably little greater, for if the Chancellor's budget filmed statement was longer than the average story, the Labour Party conference could be dealt with by a brief flash in the picture paragraph section of the reel. An exception was at General Election time, when news of the hustings and filmed statements by party leaders could occupy the larger part of two or three issues.

Like the BBC in the early '30s, therefore, the newsreels found it

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34. One of Movietone's sound recordists, Pat Wyand, recalls that out of some 800 items he covered for Movietone between 1934 and 1939 only about fifty had any political relevance, and even fewer of these were in any way serious items. - Letter from Pat Wyand to author, 4 March 1979.

somewhat easier to deal with foreign affairs than with domestic, a tendency encouraged by the industry's structure and, of course, by the very important part which foreign and defence policy was increasingly to play in the minds both of populace and politicians. Nevertheless to many writers, both of the period and since, it has appeared surprising and positively reprehensible that the newsreels gave so very little attention to domestic issues at a time of economic and industrial depression, continuing slum conditions, demonstrations and political activity. Given the means of political communication, why did the newsreel men communicate so little politics?

Some of the reasons have already been given. As a ten minute bonus in the evening's entertainment it was not for the newsreel to cast a pall over the proceedings by an overly serious catalogue of depressing or emotionally antagonistic stories. The audience, it was felt, did not want to know what their own lives were like, although they were interested in the cause of peace, in foreign wars and the problems of other nations. As Nicolas Pronay has commented,

What good would the other approach have done [the audience]? It could have brought militancy and further embitteredness which might have appealed to their self-chosen champions, but hardly to the ordinary people who, as their vote showed, had no such intentions. As for the newsreels, it would have led to the loss of their public .....<sup>35</sup>

The exhibitors were strongly opposed to anything which might upset their audiences being foisted on them, and knew that politics would always be a dangerous area. Joseph Ball had discovered in 1927 that cinema owners would not display party political films, and in 1929 the Bioscope warned its readers not to screen election films:

King Picturegoer is a pleasure-loving monarch. In his hour of

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35. N. Pronay, 'British Newsreels in the 1930s. 2. Their Policies and Impact', History, vol 57, February 1972, 67.



relaxation he does not wish to be troubled with affairs of state.<sup>36</sup>

A Gaumont cinema manager in 1930 told the cautionary tale of a colleague who suffered every exhibitor's nightmare - lost custom - when he announced a by-election result to his audience and had the orchestra play the Red Flag.<sup>37</sup>

The few political speeches that newsreels did include were considered by the exhibitors to be too many. The party political speeches which preceded the 1931 election provoked a storm of protest from cinema managers. At the meeting of the South Wales and Monmouthshire branch of the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association it was reported that audiences had 'audibly objected' to political speeches. It was unanimously agreed that such speeches in newsreels were detrimental to business. This complaint was echoed by the CEA's South Midland's branch, which passed a resolution opposing

any kind of propaganda being introduced into news reels, as being distasteful to various sections of the audience.<sup>38</sup>

Mention was made of the fact that because each newsreel print was used by up to five cinemas, each showing it for half a week, some would even then, weeks after the poll, be showing Ramsay MacDonald appealing for votes. In the Devon and Cornwall branch, cinema manager Joe Tapley complained that,

Personally, he was very sick of showing Ramsay MacDonald and other politicians on the screen. They had among their patrons people of all parties and creeds, and they did not want politics thrown at them at places of amusement.<sup>39</sup>

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36. Editorial, The Bioscope, 10 April 1929, 21.
37. F. Hughes, 'Beware of Politics', Gaumont British News (house journal), May 1930, 16.
38. The Bioscope, 18 November 1931.
39. The Bioscope, 2 December 1931.

His motion to support other branches 'protesting against the introduction of politics in news reels' was carried unanimously. These complaints were taken up by the General Council of the CEA, where it was reported that one exhibitor had had to cut out the political part of his newsreels, with the result that there was very little left to show. It was resolved to protest to the newsreel companies 'against the introduction of controversial political matters on our screens as being detrimental to our business'<sup>40</sup>.

Although the amount of politics, both speeches and news reports, was greatly reduced from its election peak, the occasional item still annoyed exhibitors. In March 1932 it was suggested that the protest to the newsreel companies be repeated, whilst Joe Tapley complained again in April 1933 that 'too much politics was creeping into the news reels again'<sup>41</sup>. A fellow CEA member said he had noticed that

as soon as certain politicians were put on the screen many patrons walked out. That, he said, was not good for the business.<sup>42</sup>

These protests were summed up in a strident editorial in Kinematograph Weekly, in October 1933:

There is not an exhibitor in the country who will defend the policy of letting political views intrude upon the screen. The CEA has repeatedly protested against it. News reel editors have acknowledged the justice of these protests. And yet from time to time we get enthusiastic politicians trying to get their lessons preached to audiences who may or may not agree with them, but do very definitely realise that, while there is a time and place for all things, political propaganda in a kinema entertainment is an

40. The Bioscope, 18 November 1931.

41. The Bioscope, 16 March 1932,; Kinematograph Weekly, 6 April 1933.

42. Kinematograph Weekly, 6 April 1933.



offence .... There is no excuse for letting any political speaker address the people who have paid money at the Box Office to be entertained. If they show their resentment by disorderly conduct, who can wonder? But if, as is more usually the case, they show it by staying at home, and keeping<sup>43</sup> their cash in their pockets, it is the exhibitor that suffers.

Although it was not made clear, it would seem likely that greatest objection was taken to filmed statements by politicians, rather than to news reports. These were often badly delivered and, like party political broadcasts, decidedly dull to those who were not interested.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, apart from the occasional statement by Lloyd George and non-aligned speakers, they were almost exclusively by government spokesmen. The exhibitors' demands for less 'propaganda', however, did not particularly distinguish between speeches and news reports, nor between propaganda of the Government and of other parties. When the Leicester CEA branch discussed politics in newsreels it was agreed that, although the people of Leicester might not consider it propaganda,<sup>45</sup> care should be taken to avoid all political references. The following month the General Council of the CEA made a formal protest to Paramount for including a statement by Oswald Mosley and a news report on Hitler.<sup>46</sup> This protest<sup>47</sup> was paralleled by one made at the LOC by Herbert Morrison. Later in the year Kinematograph Weekly reported a protest by Ernest Bevin at a filmed statement by Lord Lloyd in favour of increased armaments:

43. Editorial, Kinematograph Weekly, 26 October 1933.
44. J.P. Carstairs, 'Those newsreel Scenes', Picturegoer, 26 August 1933: 'the inevitable speech from one of the chief politicians of the day would be bearable if they let him stand up for a change instead of being discovered at a large desk with three "property" books placed on the left of same'. The books were to hide the microphone.
45. Kinematograph Weekly, 27 April 1933.
46. Kinematograph Weekly, 4 May 1933.
47. Kinematograph Weekly, 13 April 1933.

Even when you come to such places as this for your amusement [the Lyceum Picture Palace, Laisterdyke, where he was addressing a meeting], you are faced with propaganda which is aimed against your own class, and I appeal to you to show resentment against such tactics. When you see your Lord Lloyds and similar people shown to you in the news-reels, hiss them off.<sup>48</sup>

A further complaint by the indomitable Joe Tapley that recent reels had included Lloyd George, MacDonald, Baldwin and the 'very unpopular' Chancellor of the Exchequer, Neville Chamberlain, was reported by Kinematograph Weekly in June.<sup>49</sup>

These complaints appeared to produce some response, for it was recorded at the Nottingham and Derby CEA meeting that one newsreel had agreed to exclude political propaganda in future, whilst the Devon and Cornwall branch was told that the General Council had received assurances regarding politics in newsreels, in response to its protests.<sup>50</sup> So slight were the figures already for domestic political stories, however, that it is impossible to observe any further reduction in newsreel coverage. The editors would seem to have resisted these calls for the total exclusion of controversial political stories, but to have recognised equally that there was absolutely no demand and no justification for an increase. Not until 1936 did the CEA General Council graciously give 'permission' to the newsreels to include statements by cabinet ministers, a decision which made no effective difference to the amount of politics the reels actually included.<sup>51</sup> Nor did this permission suggest a more liberal attitude. The trade was still cautious:

In these troublous days, it is only too easy to include items

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48. 'Trade Union Protest', Kinematograph Weekly, 26 October 1933.

49. Kinematograph Weekly, 8 June 1933.

50. Kinematograph Weekly, 25 May 1933; 6 July 1933.

51. Kinematograph Weekly, 23 July 1936.



which cause the deepest resentment to people who take the affairs of the world seriously. If newsreels are to commence to comment on the rights and wrongs of any political event, it will inevitably mean dividing cinemas into political categories - a result which would be disastrous to the box-office.<sup>52</sup>

If most complaints were about the inclusion of politics generally and of unspecified 'propaganda', the trade did occasionally identify and protest at particular biases. During the Spanish Civil War occasional complaints were made of pro-Franco tendencies, accusations which Aldgate has shown to be quite justified.<sup>53</sup> Thus in February 1938 the Glasgow CEA cited it as a well known fact that Franco played up to newsreel men in Spain, so as to gain advantageous publicity:

It would be a very regrettable thing if the cinemas in this country became the cockpit for propaganda.<sup>54</sup>

Following the orgy of praise after Munich it was hardly surprising that many exhibitors complained of propaganda. The fear was expressed at the CEA General Council that

the screen would tend to lose its entertainment value if party politics were introduced to such an extent.<sup>55</sup>

A meeting with the Newsreel Association, formed earlier in the year and comprising representatives of all five major newsreel companies, was therefore arranged, and the General Council accepted the reels' statement that

The policy of the newsreel companies in which the CEA concur is

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52. Editorial, The Cinema, 1 March 1938, 5.

53. A. Aldgate, Op. Cit., 104-194.

54. Today's Cinema, 18 February 1938.

55. Kinematograph Weekly, 17 November 1938.

and has always been to present political and controversial items impartially and according to their news value, and that commentary should avoid anything in the nature of criticism or approval.<sup>56</sup>

There is little doubt that most of the reels firmly believed in their professions of impartiality, for after this meeting it was recorded in the Newsreel Association minutes that

the few complaints instanced by Exhibitors had but little foundation in fact, and there was no reason for the Newsreel Companies to modify the practice they had always adopted of presenting their reels without bias or partisanship.<sup>57</sup>

The newsreels were also subject to constant objections from exhibitors and others concerning the depiction of violence in their issues. War, riots, assassinations and even lynchings, visually newsworthy as they might be, were continually objected to by those who considered such scenes morally repugnant, particularly when children and other sensitive souls could be in the audience to watch an otherwise anodyne Buck Rogers programme. As one critic wrote,

The actual horrors of modern war are too dangerous to screen before audiences which may include pregnant women.<sup>58</sup>

Protests came from exhibitors, the press and local authorities, and in these instances a positive newsreel response was clear. In September 1930 Movietone decided of its own accord that film of the recent riots in Bombay was too horrific to be shown uncut<sup>59</sup>, whilst

56. Ibid.

57. British Movietone News Offices, News Reel Association minutes, 14 November 1938.

58. R. Herring, 'Films on Spain', Life and Letters, vol. 16, Summer 1937, 129.

59. The Bioscope, 3 September 1930.



in 1933 Paramount withdrew film of a lynched man with the comment that 'We are servants of the public and we withdraw it as a gesture to their opinion'.<sup>60</sup> In 1937 film of the bombing of Shanghai provoked discussion of just how much the newsreels should show. Jeffrey Bernard of Gaumont British pointed out that the exhibitors ran the cinemas in order to entertain the public:

The public trust exhibitors to show entertainment and therefore they take their children. I contend that to show a film of the bombardment of Shanghai in a discreet manner, to show the horrors of war by showing the debris, and, in long shots, the devastation that can be caused through bombing a town, is perfectly in order, but to show the ghastly destruction of human beings in the most<sup>61</sup> horrific form is, I contend, letting down the exhibitors.

The directors of Movietone similarly declared that

The editorial policy of British Movietone News eschews the exhibition of horrific films or horrific incidents in a film. It is no part of a newsreel's function to shock or horrify any section of its audiences.<sup>62</sup>

Interestingly they added that,

In general our company considers itself governed by those principles which have proved efficacious in the case of feature films under a film censorship, the application of which to newsreel work is not, of course, practicable.

For the most part, therefore, the newsreels were sympathetic to the likes and dislikes of their audience and exhibitors. This was

60. The Times, 2 December 1933.

61. 'Shanghai Film Disagreement', Today's Cinema, 15 September 1937.

62. 'Horror in Newsreels', Today's Cinema, 17 September 1937.

hardly surprising for a commercial enterprise - not for them the Reithian autocratic approach of giving the audience what it ought to have rather than what it wanted. But if added pressure on the newsreels to comply was needed it was provided by the ever present threat of censorship. Throughout the period the British Board of Film censors (BBFC), closely regarded by established authority, exercised a firm control over the character of films exhibited commercially in Britain, control which Nicolas Pronay and Jeffrey Richards have demonstrated comprehended a very effective political censorship.<sup>63</sup> Newsreels were exempted from this official regulation, in view of the speed with which they had to be produced and exhibited, but this putative freedom did not in fact free the newsreels from the need to be careful. Because the exemption from censorship was primarily for technical reasons rather than the moral one of press freedom, the reels were greatly concerned to give no grounds for the removal of their privileges. Censorship would have slowed down the newsreel operation, and speed to the newsreelman was everything. For it was feared that few - amongst the audience, exhibitors and especially the authorities - had recognised in cinema a new means of communication, only a new source of entertainment. Just as the audience would have objected had it been excessively 'communicated to' in its entertainment, so the idea of newsreels enjoying press freedom would have appeared ridiculous at a time when the other, far older, forms of entertainment - the book and play - were still subject to the Lord Chamberlain's control. As Neville March Hunnings has commented, exemption from censorship only placed the reels in a more exposed position, for they were completely unprotected by the law.<sup>64</sup>

Newsreels existed in a business where censorship was the norm, unlike the traditionally free press. The fact that there were

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63. N. Pronay, 'The First Reality: Film Censorship in Liberal England', in K.R.M. Short (ed.), Feature Films as History, London 1981, 113-135; J. Richards, 'The British Board of Film Censors and content control in the 1930's: Images of Britain; Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, 1.(1981), 95-116.

64. N.M. Hunnings, Film Censors and the Law, London 1967, 110.



continual calls for extending censorship to newsreels, throughout the 1930s, indicates that people did not feel the same way towards them as they did towards the press. Screen journalism was not considered to be an important press freedom. The Times called for censorship after Paramount's lynching film, whilst Warwickshire County Council made complaint twice in 1934 to the Film Censorship Consultative Committee at the Home Office.<sup>65</sup> Following the lynching film and film of the assassination of King Alexander of Serbia in October 1934, questions were asked in the Commons and newsreel censorship suggested. After the second of these incidents the Home Secretary, Sir John Gilmour, stated that he had seen representatives of the newsreels and warned that,

it rests with them so to handle their material as to make it unnecessary for the Government to consider the imposition of any censorship on newsreels.<sup>66</sup>

The newsreels knew, therefore, that censorship was a constant possibility. But in any case they were aware that the whole question of the legal status of their exemption was being considered. Following the independent production of the documentary/propaganda film 'Whither Germany' in 1933, using newsreel film, the BBFC had decided to take legal opinion on what constituted a 'photograph of current events', the phrase used to exempt newsreels from censorship. Both Counsel consulted had deemed that although a silent newsreel might come under such a definition, a sound one could not:

A film which included a commentary on the events shown on the film could not be said to be a "photograph of current events" within the meaning of the condition. Such a film would be a photograph of two things - current events and what Mr. A.B. said about current events.<sup>67</sup>

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65. See A. Aldgate, Op. Cit., 80-81.

66. H.C. Debates, vol.283:cols.1297-8, 4 December 1933; vol. 293:col.339, 1 November 1934.

67. F.D. Morton, in British Board of Film Censors Annual Report, 1933, 21.

Neither the BBFC nor the Home Office, however, had any desire to bring newsreels formally within the definition of films requiring to be censored, and it was accordingly decided to re-word the exempting clause following discussions with the newsreels themselves. At these discussions it was made clear to the companies that, whilst censorship was not contemplated, there was a widespread desire that they should be even more careful than previously to avoid irrelevant and offensive scenes. Moreover, as Sir Cecil Levita, chairman of the Film Censorship Consultative Committee, told them, it was accepted that

simple description of a picture should be permitted by definition, but that criticism and propaganda should be excluded.<sup>68</sup>

The newsreels were anxious to avoid possible censorship and to refute any suggestion that it effectively existed. At this same meeting Gerald Sanger read out a prepared statement on behalf of all the reels, declaring that,

Absolute editorial discretion is necessary for the complete exercise of this responsibility [of running a newsreel], as in the case of the press; and we maintain that the newsreels should continue to enjoy the same freedom from outside control as newspapers enjoy.<sup>69</sup>

He rejected Levita's suggestion that when an editor was in doubt about putting out an item he should consult the BBFC informally. Later in the year he told Movietone and Gaumont British staff:

It is up to us to correct any disposition to impose any form of censorship on news-reels. News-reels should be as free as the

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68. Public Record Office, Home Office papers, HO 45/17955, record of meeting between Sir Cecil Levita and newsreel representatives, 28 March 1934.

69. Ibid.



Press and the discretion of editors of news-reels, who are experienced people, should be trusted neither to outrage the feelings of the public or to attach to the film any commentary that was likely to inflame the public. There have been attempts recently to put a certain amount of pressure upon news-reels and to restrict our activities and functions, that we must resist.<sup>70</sup>

Again, in 1939, after a well directed resolution by the Association of Cine-Technicians, condemning political censorship of the newsreels, the Newsreel Association 'emphatically refuted the implication that there was any official or semi-official censorship of the newsreels'.<sup>71</sup>

'Censorship' in this context clearly referred to the submission of editorial judgement to external and official pressure, such that the editorial decision was actually changed as a result of such pressure. The willingness or otherwise of the editor to acquiesce was incidental to whether external influence was or was not censorship, but it was a vitally important consideration to those newsreel editors who were accused of thus deferring to authority. To submit against their will and better judgement was to yield to censorship; to willingly acquiesce to 'reasonable' requests with which they had sympathy was editorial discretion. The word 'censorship' had undesirable connotations to those who aspired to be part of the journalistic profession, and so they rejected the idea that, outside wartime, they were censored. Yet it is evident that there were several occasions when requests from authority evoked a sympathetic response, as well as some where there was acquiescence, if not agreement.

In 1930, for example, the cuts made by Movietone in its film of

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70. 'Movietone Chief on Liberty', Kinematograph Weekly, 5 July 1934, 23.

71. News Reel Association, minutes, 8 May 1939.

the Bombay riots followed a request by the India Office which was anxious that the item not be shown. The result, according to the Bioscope critic, were shots which were

relatively free from any kind of pictorial suggestion as to what all this Indian business really means .....[they] not only fail to convey the truth of the situation, but help to create still more confusion.<sup>72</sup>

Such publicity for public expressions of opposition to government were always unwelcome to the authorities, and in 1932 there occurred an example much closer to home. Following the May Day demonstrations in Hyde Park the Commissioner of Police, Lord Trenchard, suggested that in future the Office of Works should refuse permission to film in the Park to any film-maker who intended to use the results for communist or even Labour Party propaganda. Clearly he was concerned with rather more than public order.<sup>73</sup> It was therefore agreed that whenever a permit request was received,

Special Branch can be consulted on each occasion as to whether the views of the promoters of the demonstration are patriotic or not.<sup>74</sup>

There was certainly no fear that the newsreel companies would abuse the privilege of filming in the Park, but it was clear from this last statement that the criterion for permission to film was as much the intentions of the demonstrators as those of the film-makers.

Accordingly, when the National Unemployed Workers' Movement organised their hunger march to London in October 1932, Trenchard let

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72. The Bioscope, 10 September 1930, and 3 September 1930.

73. Public Record Office, Metropolitan Police Papers, (hereafter MEPO), MEPO 2/3236, Minute by Lord Trenchard, 2 May 1932; Trenchard to R.R. Scott (Home Office), 9 May 1932.

74. MEPO 2/3236, Deputy Assistant Commissioner to Trenchard, 27 May 1932.



it be known to the newsreel companies that he did not want this demonstration filmed. In addition the Office of Works refused permits to film in Hyde Park. The response from Universal, Pathe, Gaumont and Movietone was immediate. Universal's editor, Cecil Snape, wrote to

hasten to assure you that it is not our intention to take or publish such pictures either for cinemas in the country or abroad.<sup>75</sup>

In addition the editors of the five reels met to discuss the question and Gaumont's Editorial Manager, Louis Behr, reported accordingly to the Commissioner:

We understand that it would be against the wishes of the Authorities for any pictures to be taken and published either in England or abroad, and we therefore agreed that this subject should not be covered by us. The Editors of the other Newsreels with the exception of Paramount Sound News, were in agreement on this point ....<sup>76</sup>

Paramount was already gaining a reputation for independence. When eventually the Newsreel Association was formed it was to refuse to join at first. Its editor, Tom Cummins, was determined that such a visually spectacular show as the massive NUWM demonstration should be shown, particularly since he would thereby gain a complete scoop. Using hand held cameras amongst the crowd he therefore obtained unique pictures of the ensuing clashes between demonstrators and police. Cummins, however, was certainly no subversive and the commentary that was attached to these shots showed where Paramount's sympathies lay. Some central parts of it, unfortunately, are today indecipherable:

75. MEPO 2/5507, C.R. Snape to Trenchard, 26 October 1932.

76. MEPO 2/5507, L.F.Behr to Secretary of the Metropolitan Police, 27 October 1932.

Caption: Hunger Trek Ends. London. Police shepherd marchers! Unemployed from all parts meet at Hyde Park to demand removal of dole restrictions.

Commentary: Hunger marchers from all over England converge on London, and the Southern contingent crosses Chelsea Bridge on the way to Hyde Park. Near to the end of their thirty days four hundred mile trek the Scottish section approach the top of Edgware Road. All available police, specials, and the entire strength of the mounted section are here, and every precaution is taken to keep order. And in Hyde Park, although they speak peace, the marchers' leaders rally their supporters with extremist speeches.

Caption: Disturbances in crowd take ugly turn but cool tempered police soon restore order.

Commentary: Traffic's completely disorganised, and the police are hard put to it to keep things moving. The most humane force in the world has its own methods of keeping order. Mounted reinforcements are quickly on the scene. But the hooligan element is getting out of hand, and inside the Park [drunkards?] unconnected with the marchers give the police a warm time. The mob take anything they can lay their hands on, but discipline tells and its one more [indecipherable]. By calmness and great courage the <sup>77</sup> police have averted bloodshed and serious disturbance.

The film, which Film Weekly described as 'Really graphic and exciting .... [with] several "close-ups" of mounted-police charging the rioters with drawn batons'<sup>78</sup> was too much for the other newsreels and the Metropolitan Police. Gerald Sanger defended his decision not to show the film:

The exhibition of the pictures showing the clashes which took place in Hyde Park will undoubtedly exacerbate the situation ...

77. British Paramount News (hereafter BPN), Issue no. 175, 31 October 1932.

78. Film Weekly, 4 November 1932.



and it was for this reason that the editors of British newsreels either forebore to cover the subject, or to release such pictures as they obtained.<sup>79</sup>

In a joint letter to the Police Commissioner the four newsreel editors stated that they had decided not to show these pictures, 'in the national interest', and deplored Paramount's action, particularly since it had exported the pictures for showing abroad.<sup>80</sup>

Trenchard therefore decided to teach Paramount a lesson and when, a few days later, all the newsreels requested permission to film the Lord Mayor's Show, this was granted to all but the offending company. Cummins and his News Editor, J. Slee, were appalled; much of their regular news depended upon such routine permission being given. Slee immediately wrote to the Home Secretary and visited the Home Office and Deputy Commissioner of Police to apologise. He explained that he had been uncertain whether or not to take the film because the Commissioner's wishes had only been passed on, second hand, via a rival company:

there was no direct request from the Commissioner that pictures should not be shown; their film exhibited the police in a favourable light; they consulted the Trade censor (by telephone) and were told that he, knowing their reputation and record, would raise no objections; and in all the circumstances they released the Marble Arch film, but not the Trafalgar Square film (of rioting), which was "too bad".<sup>81</sup>

To the Deputy Commissioner Slee was

79. 'Should Newsreels be censored?', Film Weekly, 11 November 1932.
80. MEPO 2/5507, joint letter from Movietone, Gaumont, Pathe and Universal to Trenchard, 3 November 1932.
81. Home Office papers, HO 45/17415/456374, Minute by ? - indecipherable (Home Office official), on meeting with J. Slee, 7 November 1932.

full of apologies and emphatic that his firm were most anxious to fall in with the views of the authorities on any matters of this kind ....<sup>82</sup>

He agreed to try to stop the film being exhibited in America and sent a telegram to Paramount U.S.A. to this end. Although this proved to be too late, it was decided that Paramount had learnt its lesson and the company was removed from the blacklist. As the Police Commissioner's Secretary, H.M. Howgrave-Graham, commented,

the incident was useful as it made clear to all the news film companies that we could hit them pretty hard if they don't behave nicely.<sup>83</sup>

In February 1934 another hunger march raised the issue once again. Again the Commissioner asked the newsreels not to cover the event as being contrary to the public interest, and again Cecil Snape of Universal replied that 'we are only too anxious to fall in with your wishes'.<sup>84</sup> On this occasion Paramount was in full agreement:

In view of the Commissioner's feeling in this matter we deem it a pleasure to accede to his request.<sup>85</sup>

Only Gaumont British queried the decision, but its reason was even less anti-authoritarian than Paramount's had been:

we have not taken any picture of the hunger marchers marching through London, but today we took a short picture of the

- 82. MEPO 2/5507, Deputy Police Commissioner to Trenchard, 9 November 1932.
- 83. MEPO 2/5507, H.M. Howgrave-Graham to Sir Patrick Gower, 3 December 1932.
- 84. MEPO 2/5507, C. Snape to Trenchard, 3 February 1934.
- 85. MEPO 2/5507, J. Slee to H.M. Howgrave-Graham, 5 February 1934.



Deputation in Downing Street, with a very different object, which is as follows:- We have secured film of Riots in Spain, Paris, Austria and also shots of Hitler Meetings and it was our intention to make a comprehensive picture showing the disturbed state of European Countries compared with the peaceful conditions at home, such a picture, adequately edited with an impressive commentary, would make excellent propaganda.<sup>86</sup>

This item was in fact issued, although Trenchard had opposed the idea.<sup>87</sup> Gaumont reasoned correctly that it could hardly be penalised for such a very correct piece of propaganda.

The riots in Paris in March were nearly the occasion for once again landing Paramount in trouble. Film of this rioting had been suppressed in France and the French Government requested that British Paramount News, which had also obtained film, should not show it. It would seem that the Foreign Office was approached, for according to Cummins 'diplomatic representations, delayed the release of this film for two days'.<sup>88</sup> That the result was delay and not cancellation suggests that the French desire for suppression was not endorsed by the British Government and that no severe pressure was placed on Paramount.

Universal had consistently shown itself to be the most cautious and least controversial company. It was not therefore surprising that when Cecil Snape decided to produce an item on the League of Nations Union Peace Ballot, in November 1934, he took the precaution of consulting the Home Office beforehand. The idea was to have two opposing speeches by Lord Cecil and Lord Beaverbrook, but having decided on the item Snape began to have doubts. Accordingly he

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86. MEPO 2/5507, R.S. Howard to H.M. Howgrave-Graham, 27 February 1934.
87. Gaumont British News (hereafter GBN), Issue No. 14, 15 February 1934, 'Turmoil in Europe'. Neither the film nor the script is currently available for viewing.
88. Kinematograph Weekly, 8 March 1934, 4.

telephoned A.S. Hutchinson of the Home Office and told him that,

since they [Universal] had entered into negotiations for this film, they had had qualms as to whether it might not be acceptable to the Government, and I gathered that they had been impressed by the "ticking-off" which they got from the Home Secretary in connection with the film of the assassination of King Alexander ... The Editor said that he was quite willing to do whatever the Home Secretary suggested and he would like to know as soon as possible whether the Government had any views on the matter.

Hutchinson immediately contacted the Foreign Office and was told that indeed,

looking at the matter from the Government point of view, the production of the proposed film would be undesirable.

Not only could Beaverbrook not be considered as representative of opponents of the Peace Ballot, but also the Ballot itself could not be considered a balanced and fair poll. It was made clear to Universal, in a letter which carefully avoided outright opposition, that the Government would rather such a film was not made, a wish with which Snape of course complied.

In 1935 it was the turn of Gaumont British nearly to get into trouble. Following the start of the Italo-Abyssinian dispute Gaumont produced an item with the clear message that Britain should not involve herself. According to a Foreign Office informant,

89. FO 395/515, P3230/119/150, A.S. Hutchinson to H.J. Seymour (FO), 12 November 1934.
90. FO 395/515, P3230/119/150, H.J. Seymour to A.S. Hutchinson, 13 November 1934.
91. FO 395/515, P3230/119/150, A.S. Hutchinson to C. Snape, 14 November 1934.



it was certainly extremely tendentious, and designed to give ignorant people the impression that the Government was pursuing a strong isolationist policy.<sup>92</sup>

The subsequent events were described by C.F.A. Warner of the Foreign Office:

I have been in touch with Sir Albert Clavering, who is responsible for the National Government films, and he has spoken to the Manager of Gaumont British, who has since telephoned to me and offered to withdraw the film, explaining that it was produced with no kind of propaganda motive and that the last thing Gaumont British wished to do was to embarrass the Government. In accordance with Sir. A. Clavering's suggestion, I arranged with Gaumont British that the news-film should be withdrawn at the end of this week. To withdraw it earlier would be likely, as on a previous occasion, to give rise to stories of Government pressure; but if it is withdrawn at the end of this week it will at least not be shown at any of the small theatres up and down the country.<sup>93</sup>

This was not the first or the last time that Clavering, or other Conservative officials such as Sir Patrick Gower, were to make an appearance as liaison between government and newsreels.

The nature of government influence over newsreels was therefore

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92. FO 395/532, P2935/2896/150, unsigned and undated review of Gaumont British newsreel issue on Italo-Abyssinian dispute. Apparently the film contained 'a number of silent shots of Mr. MacDonald, Mr. Baldwin, Sir Samuel Hoare, Mr. Eden etc., printed across with such remarks as "We shall not fight for 7,000,000 Abyssinians", "We must keep out", "Our duty is to keep peace within the Empire". This was done to give the impression that these remarks were made by the subjects of the photographs. The film ended with the Union Jack and "Land of Hope and Glory"'.  
 93. FO 395/532, P2935/2896/150, Minute by C.F.A. Warner for Mr. Hoyer Millar, 27 August 1935.

clear and its degree considerable. Yet a member of the newsreel trade, Norman Hulbert, MP and Managing Director of a news theatre chain, saw no inconsistency in the two halves of his statement that

There is no censorship of newsreels, and I hope there never will be, because newsreels are talking newspapers.... There was no government control, although sometimes a hint might be given that it is not desirable to publish a certain item, and it was usual to respect their wishes on such occasions.<sup>94</sup>

The following month during the abdication crisis, which most reels ignored until they could do so no longer, Paramount daringly issued an early story on the question and almost immediately withdrew it again, although there is no evidence as to why it did so.

The two most notorious instances of deletion at government request require little expansion, having been discussed already by Aldgate and Low.<sup>95</sup> In February 1938 Paramount covered Anthony Eden's resignation by allowing Clement Attlee to make a statement in which he declared that the Government was

not prepared to stand for the League of Nations; they are not prepared to stand for democracy; they are prepared to make any kind of a deal with the dictatorship powers. There will be no longer in this country a Government that is prepared to stand up for international law and right, but a Government that is prepared to enter into any kind of a deal with aggressive Fascist powers.<sup>96</sup>

Not surprisingly this produced a reaction, such that

94. Kinematograph Weekly, 5 November 1936, 17.

95. A. Aldgate, Op. Cit., 84-90, 175; R. Low, Op. Cit., 36.

96. BPN, Issue No. 730, 24 February 1938, 'Mr. Attlee expresses the views of the Opposition parties'. Quoted by A. Aldgate, Op. Cit., 175.



within a few hours of the delivery of this reel to the exhibitors<sup>97</sup> urgent orders were issued that the item must be deleted.

The speed of the deletion was consistent with action taken by Gower or Clavering rather than the Foreign Office or other government officials, who tended to take a day or two to act, but further evidence on this incident is lacking.

Whilst Gaumont, Movietone, Pathe and Universal took a very sympathetic line to the events of Munich in September and October 1938, Paramount once again demonstrated its different approach by including, in its reel of 22 September, some highly critical film statements by Wickham Steed and A.J. Cummings. Steed, in his comments, stated:

Our Government, together with that of France, is trying to make a present to Hitler - for use against us when he may think the time has come - of the 3,000,000 men and the thousands of aeroplanes that he would need to overcome Czechoslovak resistance .... And all this because British and French ministers feared to take a risk when they could have taken it successfully and believed they could diminish the risk by helping Hitler to gain a triumph, when he was at his wit's end, instead of standing up to him.<sup>98</sup>

Cummings, in his turn, declared bluntly that 'our statesmen have been guilty of what I think is a piece of yellow diplomacy'.<sup>99</sup> The same day that this issue was released, however, a telegram was sent by Paramount to all cinemas showing it, with the instruction to delete the item as, 'we have been officially requested to do so'.<sup>100</sup>

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97. Letter from cinema manager, Kinematograph Weekly, 3 March 1938. Quoted by R. Low, Op. Cit., 36.

98. BPN, Issue no. 790, 22 September 1938, 'Europe's Fateful Hour'. Quoted by G. Mander, H.C. Debates, vol. 342: cols. 1276-7, 7 December 1938.

99. Ibid.

100. H.C. Debates, vol. 342: col. 1275, 7 December 1938.

What exactly had happened? Recent accounts of the incident have considered only the Commons discussion of it. Thus on 23 November Liberal MP Geoffrey Mander asked why the Government had made 'representations' to the American Embassy to secure the deletion of the Paramount item, to which Sir John Simon replied:

His Majesty's Government considered that certain passages in the newsreel referred to, which was being shown at the time of the Prime Minister's conversations with Herr Hitler at Godesberg, might have a prejudicial effect on the negotiations. The Ambassador of the United States, I understand, thought it right to communicate this consideration to a member of the Hays organisation which customarily deals with matters of this kind and which brought it to the attention of Paramount who from a sense of public duty in the general interest, decided to make certain excisions from the newsreel ..... I am glad that the Ambassador and ourselves were in complete accord.<sup>101</sup>

Subsequently Neville Chamberlain himself denied that the Government had specifically requested that the items be deleted: 'the attention of the American Ambassador was drawn to certain items and he was asked to look into the matter'.<sup>102</sup>

Not surprisingly this explanation failed to convince many MPs, and Geoffrey Mander instigated a full Commons debate deploring any attempt to establish direct or indirect political censorship. He argued that 'in every case where cuts have been made, nothing anti-Government, nothing anti-Fascist is permitted, but anything that is favourable to the policy the Government is pursuing is allowed to go forward', and he suggested that Conservative Central Office was 'not wholly disinterested in or without knowledge of what is going

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101. H.C. Debates, vol. 341: cols.1727-8, 23 November 1938. Quoted by A. Aldgate, Op. Cit., 84-85.

102. H.C. Debates, vol. 342: col. 584, 1 December 1938. Quoted by A. Aldgate, Op Cit., 86.



on'.<sup>103</sup> He blamed the newsreel producers and exhibitors for lacking courage. Sir Samuel Hoare, for the Government, reminded the Commons that 22 September had probably been the most critical day of the crisis:

The Foreign Secretary was definitely of the opinion that it was undesirable that those two speeches should be heard while the talks at Godesberg were actually in progress on that particular date 22nd September .... It was his view, with reference to that film, during the time the talks were going on at Godesberg, that, while he did not wish to apply any pressure - and he did not apply any pressure - and there was no question of censorship,<sup>104</sup> those speeches might compromise the chances of peace.

This line of argument, however, was effectively, but as we shall see not wholly justifiably, answered by Dingle Foot, who scorned the idea that the Godesberg talks might have been influenced by a newsreel showing in London:

Is that the proposition which the Rt. Hon. Gentleman is seriously putting before the House of Commons? I do not suppose that any Hon. Member will believe it for a moment.<sup>105</sup>

The crucial question was the extent to which pressure had been brought to bear. The actual events of 22 September are revealed in the Foreign Office papers. Immediately upon its issue the Paramount reel was monitored by Conservative Central Office, who had a rough transcript produced. Patrick Gower at once contacted Vansittart at the Foreign Office, commenting that the item was

pretty outrageous sort of stuff, and if any steps could be taken

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103. H.C. Debates, vol. 342: col. 1273, 7 December 1938. Quoted by A. Aldgate, Op. Cit., 89.

104. H.C. Debates, vol. 342: col. 1305, 7 December 1938.

105. H.C. Debates, vol. 342: col. 1313, 7 December 1938.

to prevent it being shown during the rest of the week it would save a great deal of harm being done ..... My experience of [the newsreel companies] is that they wish to be friendly, but their desire to portray events in the most dramatic manner, combined with their ignorance of politics and diplomacy, lead them on occasions to put out stuff that may be extremely damaging from our point of view. I am inclined to think that if they were approached they might welcome co-operation.<sup>106</sup>

Vansittart and the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, agreed and Halifax immediately contacted Joseph Kennedy, the American Ambassador, about 'the desirability of cutting out the speeches'.<sup>107</sup> Kennedy contacted Paramount's American Managers (the Hays Organisation was not mentioned and does not seem to have been involved) and reported that they were willing to delete the item if desired. Kennedy did, however, point out to Halifax that such censorship might cause a public reaction. On Halifax's instructions, therefore, Oliver Harvey, his Private Secretary, discussed the matter with the Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare:

The Home Secretary was of the opinion that it was definitely undesirable that such speeches should be heard in the cinemas whilst the talks at Godesberg were actually in progress. Whilst he did not wish to apply any pressure and there was no question of censorship, he would prefer that the speeches should be taken out on these grounds.<sup>108</sup>

Kennedy was informed accordingly and he in turn communicated in this

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106. FO 395/622, P2759/2645/150, Gower to Vansittart, 22 September 1938. Earlier that day Gower had spoken to Vansittart's secretary on the matter. It would seem probable, although not certain, that this letter, enclosing the transcript, was hand delivered the same day, Conservative Central Office and the Foreign Office being only 200 yards apart.

107. FO 395/622, P2759/2645/150, Minute by Oliver Harvey (Private Secretary to Lord Halifax), 22 September 1938.

108. Ibid.



sense direct with Paramount. The next day press suggestions of censorship induced Kennedy to propose a suitable obfuscation to the Foreign Office, and it was agreed to state that the Ambassador 'had merely been asked to look into it (not to hold it up)'.<sup>109</sup>

It would seem, therefore, that the action had been instigated as a result of Central Office alertness and that the Foreign Office had indeed expressed a strong desire that the item be deleted, whilst itself denying such an expression the name of pressure or censorship. At the same time Hoare would appear to have been correct in his Commons statement that the Government had been primarily concerned that such dissenting speeches should not be made whilst the negotiations were still in progress. However this only emphasises the point that, desirous as it was to prevent such speeches and discussion of alternative policies, but unable fully to censor the press, the Government took action to 'censor' such channels of communication as it did have influence over, namely the newsreels and the BBC.<sup>110</sup>

Unlike the newsreels the monthly current affairs film magazine 'March of Time', shown in Britain from late 1935, was subject to the rulings of the British Board of Film Censors, for it was considered rightly to be a compilation and not a film of current events. The strict and effectively political censorship of the BBFC ensured that

109. FO 395/622, P2759/2645/150, Minute by O. Harvey, 23 September 1938.

110. The ever well-informed Kingsley Martin described the indirect form of censorship exercised during the crisis: 'The Government propaganda organisation was, in fact, able to arrange that films supporting the Government's policy were widely shown everywhere and that films that challenged this policy were stopped. As regards the Press, unusual efforts were made to see to it that national organs of opinion were brought into line, and there is no doubt at all that Sir Samuel Hoare and other members of the Government took great pains to "noble" proprietors and other influential persons in the Press world.' - K. Martin, 'Public Opinion - Censorship and the Crisis', The Political Quarterly, vol. 10, 1939, 134. See also F. Gannon, The British Press and Germany 1936-39, Oxford 1971, 136-228.



this forthright magazine suffered repeatedly from cuts and even outright refusal of a licence. Thus its issues 'Geneva', about the League's failure to deal with the Italo-Abyssinian war, 'Rehearsal for War', about American and European intervention in Spain, 'Inside Nazi Germany', 'Algeria', 'The threat to Gibraltar', 'Arms and the League', 'the Resignation of Anthony Eden' and 'Britain's Dilemma', on the Munich crisis, were all the victims of censorship by the BBFC. Geoffrey Mander was convinced that the BBFC kept in regular contact with the Foreign Office, from whom it took its cue. This was not in fact the case.<sup>111</sup> But as Pronay has demonstrated, the structure and character of the BBFC were distinctly political, such that actual contact was hardly necessary.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, as with the newsreels, Conservative Central Office was vigilant and active. In January 1937 a note by Joseph Ball to Chamberlain informed him that

I have had some little success in stopping the exhibition of the "March of Time" film, but a great deal of damage has, I fear, already been done by it in some places.<sup>113</sup>

Given the Conservative Party and National Government interest in films for their own propaganda, it would have been surprising indeed had they not attempted to involve themselves in the commercial cinema and the newsreels. We have already seen how they received assistance in the making of their own propaganda films from film professionals such as Clavering and even Korda. It is equally evident that Gower,

111. FO 395/662, P526/526/150, P685/526/150, P837/526/150 and P1833/526/150, correspondence between G. Mander and Foreign Office, 15 February to 13 May 1939.

112. N. Pronay, 'The First Reality: Film Censorship in Liberal England', in K.R.M. Short (ed.), Feature Films as History, London 1981, 113-135. See also G. Elvin, 'This Freedom' and A.J. Cummings and G. Mander 'Censored', in The Journal of the Association of Cine Technicians, vol. 4 no. 19, January 1939, and vol. 4 no. 20, March 1939.

113. Conservative Research Department papers, Neville Chamberlain correspondence with CRD file, Ball to Chamberlain, 29 January 1937. Alongside this comment is the tantalising marginal note, 'See separate file'. This has not survived.



Ball and Clavering were at some pains to maintain good relations and close contacts with the newsreel companies. When Paramount found itself in trouble with the Commissioner of Police over the hunger strike film in 1932, Sir Patrick Gower was very ready to intercede on its behalf. He assured the Deputy Commissioner that

they had always found this Company most helpful and ready to do anything that they wanted. They took quite a lot of trouble, for instance, in connection with the Conversion Loan.<sup>114</sup>

Although he was defending Paramount, however, Gower's true interests were made clear by his comment to Trenchard's secretary, Howgrave-Graham, that 'it will not have done any harm to have asserted your authority'.<sup>115</sup>

Gower and Clavering felt that particularly valuable publicity could be obtained by getting filmed ministerial statements into the newsreels, and there can be no doubt that they were generally successful in persuading the reels to take such items when requested to do so. Frequently the companies themselves requested such items. Thus Sir John Simon's statement to Gaumont after Germany left the League in October 1933 followed an appeal to him to make a film by Patrick Gower, Simon having previously decided against the idea when approached by Movietone.<sup>116</sup> Similarly at the beginning of the Italo-Abyssinian dispute, when Clavering arranged for the withdrawal of the Gaumont British film, Gower again pleaded the newsreels' case to Sir Samuel Hoare:

They all feel that a short statement from you, in very general terms, would have a good influence, more especially as some of

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114. MEPO 2/5507, Deputy Police Commissioner to Trenchard, 9 November 1932.
115. MEPO 2/5507, Sir Patrick Gower to H.M. Howgrave-Graham, 6 December 1932.
116. FO 395/485, P2555/127/150, Minute from H.L. Hopkinson to Simon, 19 October 1933.

the newspapers have been indulging in somewhat sensational headlines. They have also asked me to remind you that your statement would be heard by millions and millions of people.<sup>117</sup>

Persuaded, Hoare arranged to make a film and only extreme pressure of work prevented him from fulfilling this engagement.

The Government had other cards to play in the constant effort to improve its film propaganda. By 1935 Joseph Ball's spy system had extended to Attlee's private office itself, and the Party was able to obtain a copy of Attlee's General Election newsreel statement before Baldwin made his. Patrick Gower, who wrote Baldwin's speech, sent him a copy of Attlee's, with the comment that

I am not supposed to have seen it, but I managed to secure a copy. I am told that his film speech is a very poor affair from every point of view, but I have endeavoured to counter his arguments in the draft which I am sending you.<sup>118</sup>

The result was indeed a superior effort, and a party supporter who saw the film at a cinema in Wood Green told Baldwin that his was the only film statement that was clapped:

As we came out, I overheard a working man say to another "What I likes about Baldwin, 'e don't sling no mud!".<sup>119</sup> In slightly different phraseology those are also my sentiments.

The National Government was clearly very much alive to the potential of the newsreels. The previous year Joseph Ball had been able to tell Chamberlain that, despite the film industry's public

117. FO 395/532, P2935/2896/150, Gower to S. Hoare, 23 August 1935.

118. Baldwin papers, Bal. 202/f.296, Gower to Baldwin, 27 October 1935.

119. Baldwin papers, Bal. 39/f.68, Miss J.M. Hardwill to Baldwin, 11 November 1935.



opposition to political propaganda in cinemas,

much has nevertheless been done without protest from the public  
by means of the "newsreels".<sup>120</sup>

He felt, however, that even more could be done and suggested that

an obvious line of approach is to bring influence to bear on the  
proprietors of the various cinema news organisations.<sup>121</sup>

During the next four years he personally worked to this end and by  
1938 could inform Chamberlain, confidentially, that

I have cultivated some close personal contacts with the "leaders"  
of the British Film Industry, and I am satisfied that I can count  
upon most of them for their full support to any reasonable degree  
.... we must devote the closest attention to the possibilities of  
exploiting screens of the ordinary cinema theatres throughout the  
country (seen by 20,000,0000 people weekly). I have already  
prepared the way for this with all the big circuits among  
exhibitors (including the all powerful Cinematograph Exhibitors'  
Association), with Korda among the producers, and with the  
Chairmen of the five News Reel Companies.<sup>122</sup>

Paramount's dissenting voice in September 1938 suggests that  
Ball's net was not as tight as he believed. Nevertheless the  
necessary question, given all these indications of general  
compliance, must be to what extent the various newsreel companies  
were sympathetic to the Conservative Party or the National  
Government. A quantitative analysis of serious domestic political  
stories reveals that all reels gave an overwhelming preponderance of

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120. Chamberlain papers, NC8/21/9, Ball to Chamberlain, 14 April  
1934.

121. Ibid.

122. Chamberlain papers, NC8/21/8, Ball to Chamberlain, June 1938.

coverage to the Government. However this merely emphasises the fact that the newsreels made no attempt to balance their coverage nor to deal with party politics as such. Just as it was natural for the government of the day to gain greater broadcast coverage in news and ministerials, so it was natural that this should be the case in the newsreels. Universal and Pathe gave minimal attention to domestic politics between mid-1930, when they started sound reels, and August 1931 when Labour lost power, but it would be difficult to deduce from this a definite political bias. Paramount, between its inception in March 1931 and August, gave the Labour Government no less coverage than it later gave the National. Symptomatic of its general independence was the fact that it covered Labour's 1931 budget by giving Neville Chamberlain, the Shadow Chancellor, the opportunity to criticise it. That Paramount was in active negotiation with the Labour Party at the time of the crisis, however, suggests that it had no positively anti-Labour line at that time. The Gaumont issue sheets of the Labour years have not survived, so that it is currently impossible to assess how it covered politics in 1930 and 1931. The Labour sympathies of the Ostrer brothers who owned Gaumont, however, would tend to suggest that coverage, when given, was not hostile. Movietone equally, the only reel to have been operating in sound throughout the Labour Government's term, gave it coverage which was certainly comparable with that subsequently given to the National Government, whilst the Conservative Opposition received only small attention.

The 1931 crisis and election, however, do help to give some indication of the newsreels' political positions. Pathe news coverage of the crisis was nondescript, although it did have a filmed statement by Baldwin. Its election issues, however, contained statements by Simon, MacDonald and Baldwin, a further Baldwin extract taken from a public meeting, one by Lloyd George, but, apparently, none by any Labour leader. The story title, following the election, was 'Now - Let us all pull together for prosperity - National Government of all parties elected by sweeping majority. PM flies back



to get on with the Job'.<sup>123</sup> Paramount included statements by MacDonalld and Baldwin, following the formation of the National Government, but it did also give Arthur Henderson the opportunity to state the Labour Opposition's case. When Britain left the gold standard Sir Josiah Stamp appeared to explain the move in terms sympathetic to the Government cause. During the election, however, the studio interview which Baldwin gave to the newsreels was not used by Paramount. An extract from his first public meeting was shown and film statements by MacDonalld and Simon also given, but so were statements by Lloyd George and Arthur Henderson. Gaumont's election coverage appears to have been the same as Paramount's, although it is uncertain whether or not the Baldwin interview was used. Universal's issue sheets, unfortunately, give little indication of how it dealt with the crisis and election.

Movietone's news coverage of the crisis was absolutely factual, but it did follow it with statements by the three National Government leaders - MacDonalld, Baldwin and Sir Herbert Samuel. When Britain left the gold standard Movietone described it as a 'courageous decision' by the Treasury and as a

united action of bankers and politicians to set us back on the main road again ..... in spite of the fact that the pound note may, for the time being, have less value than the gold sovereign united efforts will presently bring it back to its old purchasing  
<sup>124</sup>  
 power.

The Josiah Stamp interview was used, as was one by Keynes, in which he declared that leaving the gold standard was the best thing that could have happened to Britain. The election issues contained statements by MacDonalld, Baldwin and Simon, but also by Lloyd George and Henderson. The accompanying news items included a postal workers'

123. PG, Issue No. 31/87, 29 October 1931.

124. BMN, Issue No. 120a, 24 September 1931, 'Britain abandons the Gold Standard'.

demonstration in Hyde Park and a fisher girls' strike at Yarmouth, both in the same issue, but these were offset by a story, probably made up from stock shots, entitled 'Signs multiply of a better time coming. Hope revives in industrial Lancashire as mills and mines reopen and fires are stoked afresh'.<sup>125</sup> Stories from the hustings were fairly equally divided, although recorded extracts from speeches by Samuel, Churchill, Lord Burleigh, J.H. Thomas and Austen Chamberlain were generally longer and more comprehensible than those of the decidedly unrepresentative examples of Labour candidates shown, namely Ellen Wilkinson, James Maxton, Jack Jones, Fenner Brockway and Jenny Lee. The only determined heckling shown was aimed at a Labour candidate who had declared that capital was leaving the country:

If capital's leaving the country as you say, where's it going -  
Russia. Ask no questions and I tell you no lies.<sup>126</sup>

The final word from the hustings, however, went to Oswald Mosley:

You go to bed one night, you get up in the morning, and you find the great champions of yesterday side by side on the same front bench, arms round each other's necks, dear old pals in the same National Government ..... You could put the whole lot today, Henderson, Graham and Lloyd George, and MacDonald and Baldwin and Thomas all in one great bag, shake 'em all up, pour them along the front benches, and you'd have the same result that you've got today.<sup>127</sup>

During the 1931 crisis and election the National Government received generally greater and more sympathetic coverage than the

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125. BMN, Issue No. 123a, 15 October 1931.

126. BMN, Issue No. 124a, 22 October 1931, 'Britain's destiny at the ballot boxes'.

127. BMN, Issue no. 125, 26 October 1931, 'Sir Oswald Mosley has an uphill fight in Stoke'.



opposition parties. This was particularly true of Movietone. Shortly before the poll Leslie Landau, Movietone's News Editor, urged MacDonald to make a special 'last word to Electors' film. As he commented to MacDonald's secretary:

Naturally it would have had more value from the propaganda rather than the story point of view .... it was only because I thought it would have made so many people's minds up for them at the last minute that I persisted in urging you to ask the PM to do it ... I think you will agree that we have done our part both in putting over propaganda speeches and in stimulating interest in the election itself.<sup>128</sup>

Gerald Sanger himself, before the election, wrote that in their latest issue they had included a statement by Sir John Simon and that

We have run Simon as an extra item and it constitutes propaganda, pure and simple, for the National Government.<sup>129</sup>

He quoted with approval the opinion of a Movietone agent in Cardiff that 'British Movietone News is definitely helping the National Party' and that the film of Arthur Henderson 'demonstrated the feebleness of the official Labour programme, and as such, was an extremely welcome item'.<sup>130</sup> This speech of Henderson's was in the

128. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/5/42, L. Landau to Miss R. Rosenberg, undated.

129. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/5/42, G. Sanger to L. Landau, c. 22 October 1931.

130. Ibid. This agent reported that, 'As far as the Prime Minister is concerned even in the toughest of situations where there is a communistic element, the opinion as to the Prime Minister has veered around during the past two weeks. About three weeks ago we endeavoured to interest one of the Workmens' Hall Committees in British Movietone News as a regular item and the particular number we sent up contained a long speech of the Prime Minister's. This was almost hooted off the screen, but I find since then a complete change of opinion has occurred, and much to my surprise on Monday night last while discussing British

same issue of Movietone as the editorial statement that

British Movietone News, in presenting subjects which bear on the General Election, is hopeful of adding to the information of the public concerning the issues at stake. Naturally it does not identify itself with the views of any one leader or party.<sup>131</sup>

The exact nature of the relationship between Movietone and the Conservative Party has been a matter of some dispute. Paul Rotha, for example, has stated that Movietone had 'a close but unofficial connection with the Conservative Central Office', a suggestion which Gerald Sanger not surprisingly rejects.<sup>132</sup> Care, however, must be taken not to confuse the personal positions of the newsreel chiefs with that of the newsreel. We have already seen that Movietone's General Manager, Sir Gordon Craig, and its editor and producer, Gerald Sanger, were ardent Conservatives, as was its titular editor and director, Sir Malcolm Campbell, and that Craig was on the central committee of the Conservative Films Association. It would seem that Movietone personnel occasionally assisted the CFA in its own film production and exhibition, for Neville Chamberlain mentioned in July 1931 that

British Movietone News (Ye Gods! what a name) . . . . . have helped the C[entral] O[ffice] a good deal in cinema work.<sup>133</sup>

Yet such contact did not necessarily indicate newsreel bias. The

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Movietone News with a client from one of the mining centres, I heard that the audience cheered the Prime Minister'.

131. BMN, Issue No. 124, 19 October 1931, 'Britain's destiny at the ballot boxes'.
132. P. Rotha, Documentary Diary, London 1973, 122. For similar comments see N. Pronay, 'The Newsreels: The illusion of actuality', in P. Smith (ed.), The Historian and Film, Cambridge 1976, 118, footnote 24. See also Note A, at the end of chapter, p.693.
133. Chamberlain papers, NC18/1/749, Neville to Ida Chamberlain, 25 July 1931.



assistance which Chamberlain mentioned could not have referred to Movietone's own output, for so far its coverage of Conservative stories had been minimal compared to its coverage of the Labour Government. Craig, moreover, took no part whatsoever in making up the newsreel or in determining its policies, whilst Sanger is adamant that he took extreme care to distinguish between his CFA and his Movietone activities.<sup>134</sup>

It would have been surprising, given the Conservative predilections of many of Movietone's senior staff and the controlling interest in it of Esmond Harmsworth, who appointed Sanger as editor, had the reel not occasionally revealed certain sympathies.<sup>135</sup> Like the Rothermere owned Daily Mail, however, it certainly did not give undivided support to the Conservative Party. In 1930 and 1931 it alone of the newsreels (Gaumont issues being unknown), gave Oswald Mosley two opportunities to make a statement on his beliefs. Mosley was a good friend of Esmond Harmsworth, which may have influenced Sanger, although the latter has stated categorically that never once did he receive specific editorial instructions from Movietone's owner.<sup>136</sup>

Evidence against any strong link between Movietone and the Conservative Party is further provided by events immediately following the formation of the National Government. According to Sir Patrick Gower, Baldwin's film statement, taken by all the reels,

134. Sanger to author, 21 April 1979. Pat Holder, Movietone's film librarian, described Sanger as 'a real English gentleman of the old school', and the present writer came away from a long interview with exactly the same impression. These assurances by Movietone's editor were certainly made in all good faith.

135. Sanger and Harmsworth had been in the Royal Marines Artillery together and Sanger was Harmsworth's secretary before being appointed to British Movietone News.

136. In a letter to The Times, 30 November 1977, Pathe Gazette's news editor, commentator and script writer, Mr. Donald Barrington-Hudson, similarly stated that 'never at any time did I receive policy direction and was allowed to write my own commentary'. He denied any deliberate editorial bias.

caused him to have 'a goodly scrap with the British Movietone people'. Gower was still thinking as a Conservative:

I found that they intended to push it out as part of a tri-partite film containing Ramsay MacDonald and Herbert Samuel. This would have meant giving Ramsay about three minutes, and yourself [Baldwin] and Herbert Samuel less than a minute each ..... I put a veto on it and told them that in no circumstances could I agree to the film being used in this way. They got a bit nasty about it, but after a prolonged argument I told them that I could not give way one iota, so we left it at that.<sup>137</sup>

Yet despite such clearly stated objections Sanger went ahead with this film, a fact which apparently resulted in his being informed that Movietone had incurred Baldwin's 'serious displeasure'.<sup>138</sup>

Similarly while Movietone was attempting to help MacDonald, MacDonald was doing his best not to be helped. When Movietone attempted to take a sound film of him with J.H. Thomas in Derby, the Prime Minister was distinctly hostile:

"Who are you?" He asked, addressing the representative of the film company. "British Movietone News," was the reply. "Ah, you are an American Company," said the Prime Minister, and would not permit a "talkie" to be made.<sup>139</sup>

Again, following the election, Neville Chamberlain refused to make a statement on his new appointment as Chancellor, even though Movietone

137. Baldwin papers, Bal. 44/f.83-84, Gower to Baldwin, 5 September 1931.

138. N.J. Hulbert, 'News Films and Their Public', Sight and Sound, vol. 2, 1933, 133. Rachel Low's comment that these three talks were not shown is incorrect - R. Low, Op. Cit., 35.

139. Derby Daily Telegraph, 22 October 1931. Both Movietone and Paramount were frequently accused of being American. This was true in Paramount's case, but only partly so for Movietone.



had sent a crew to the country house where he was staying.<sup>140</sup> By 1934 Albert Clavering was convinced that Movietone could frequently be positively unfriendly, a fact which he ascribed to its connections with the Daily Mail. He told Baldwin that

On more than one occasion Movietone News has refused to include in its programme speeches by Ministers against whom the "Daily Mail" was running a campaign, and on one or two other occasions<sup>141</sup> speeches actually shown were badly mutilated.

According to one critic Movietone 'strives after a BBC impartiality, although it is a BBC jockey trying to ride a Wardour Street horse', and this is certainly the impression gained from viewing many of its issues.<sup>142</sup> Its news stories were largely factual and the commentary read, for the most part, in a flat and undramatic tone. Only occasionally and in the later 1930s did Movietone go in for background music and patronising cockney humour. In early 1931, when Movietone followed its coverage of the India Round Table Conference with a statement by Winston Churchill, it proudly, if somewhat exaggeratedly, declared:

British Movietone News thus fulfils its aim of presenting all sides of this most vital problem of our day.<sup>143</sup>

Further evidence of Movietone's serious aspirations was provided in 1933 and 1934 when it produced three one and two reel specials for its news theatres, specials which are quite remarkable for their innovatory techniques in the field of current affairs presentation.

140. Chamberlain papers, NC18/1/760, Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 7 November 1931.
141. Baldwin papers, Bal. 48/f.231-9, unsigned and undated memorandum. Internal evidence indicates author and date.
142. D. Fraser, 'Newsreel, Reality or Entertainment?', Sight and Sound, vol. 2, 1933, 89-90.
143. BMN, Issue No. 93, 16 March 1931, 'Winston Churchill foresees grave crisis in India'.

The first, 'Peace or War', was the least interesting, being made for Armistice Week and consisting simply of statements in praise of peace and decrying war, by four eminent women. Their statements were partly to camera and partly laid over film of war and devastation. In the second, however, Professor C.E.M. Joad, hardly a figure of the Conservative establishment, asked the question 'Will Civilisation Crash?'. Joad argued to camera that western civilisation was scientifically advanced but socially deficient. Illustrating his thesis with shots of scientific and industrial achievements contrasted with those of poverty and slum conditions, Joad suggested the need for a redistribution of resources and an alteration in the international economic system. He concluded by expressing optimism as a result of President Roosevelt's first nine months in office. The final film, technically by far the most accomplished, was 'Europe Today'. In this Vernon Bartlett, no longer with the BBC, sat at a desk like any latter-day television current affairs commentator, and gave a superlatively relaxed and professional analysis of the rising European ferment. Again this was partly to camera and partly to illustrative shots of events since Versailles, the rise of Hitler and subsequent reactions in Russia, France, Italy, the Balkans, Austria and Spain:

Germany signed the Versailles Treaty because she had to: today she feels strong enough to refuse to sign what she does not want to.

This impressive film, produced by Leslie Landau and described in Sight and Sound as 'a landmark in film journalism', was a serious attempt to tackle a difficult issue, not the trivial product of a narrowly Conservative company anxious to avoid trouble and to toe the line.<sup>144</sup> Its production costs, however, ensured that it would be a commercial failure, and it was the last such film Movietone<sup>145</sup> made.

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144. Review of 'Europe Today', Sight and Sound, vol. 3, 1934, 33-34.

145. All three of these films are at the National Film Archive.



Movietone's general attitude, partly sympathetic and partly independent, was best illustrated on the same occasion that Vernon Bartlett found himself in trouble, when Germany left the League of Nations. Following Germany's withdrawal both Movietone and Paramount rang the Foreign Office to ask Sir John Simon to make a film statement. Paramount went so far as to state that

they would prefer to give the Government's point of view on the subject. But if they cannot get you [Simon] or some member of the Government to do it, they would be obliged to fall back on some other speaker who would be prepared to do it, but who would perhaps not be so sympathetic with the Government point of view.<sup>146</sup>

Having just broadcast on the issue Simon felt no need to accede to these requests, whilst Baldwin, when shown Paramount's threat, called it 'blackmail'.<sup>147</sup> Movietone, meanwhile, had gone ahead and filmed a statement by Lloyd George in which he declared:

Germany disarmed in accordance with the Treaty [of Versailles]. The victors, instead of disarming, have increased their armaments and are still doing so. They have not carried out their undertaking, and that is the trouble which has arisen.<sup>148</sup>

In the same Movietone issue the President of the Disarmament Conference, Arthur Henderson, was shown reading the entire German statement on withdrawal and part of his own reply, whilst the Daily Mail correspondent, G. Ward Price, in an interview with Dr. Goebbels, interpreted the latter as saying,

146. FO 395/485, P2555/127/150, Minute by H.L. Hopkinson for Simon, 18 October 1933.

147. Ibid., note on Hopkinson's minute, by Baldwin: 'This is blackmail. I go to Belfast to-morrow evening pregnant with three speeches'.

148. BMN, Issue no. 228a, 9 October 1933, 'International crisis dominates mind of entire world'.

Germany took part in the negotiations of the Disarmament Conference only under the special conditions that Germany should receive equal consideration and equal rights. You [Goebbels] consider that the German Government, as a self-respecting regime, has no other course open to it except that of retiring from the League of Nations.<sup>149</sup>

According to Simon's Private Secretary, Henry Hopkinson, the Lloyd George speech was included

in spite of an appeal from Mr. Steward at No. 10 who urged that to show a film of this sort would be contrary to the national interest.<sup>150</sup>

Gaumont and Paramount immediately 'informed' on Movietone to Sir Patrick Gower. In Paramount's case, however, this was decidedly hypocritical since it too had decided to include an extract from Lloyd George's statement in its reel. Encouraged, therefore, by Ralph Wigram and Rex Leeper of the Foreign Office and by Sir Patrick Gower and Ramsay MacDonald himself, Simon agreed to make a statement, but exclusively for Gaumont as a sign of disapproval to Movietone and Paramount. Interestingly Gower had told Hopkinson that

British Movietone news have been very difficult to deal with on several occasions and that he would like to see them pulled up over this matter.<sup>151</sup>

Gerald Sanger was annoyed by what he considered to be 'discrimination' in giving Simon's interview to Gaumont only. He was also worried that Movietone might suffer if such ministerial statements were withheld in future. He assured Simon, therefore, that

149. Ibid.

150. FO 395/485, P2556/127/150, Minute by H. Hopkinson for Simon, 25 October 1933.

151. Ibid.



'our company has been at pains throughout its career to publicise the official view'.<sup>152</sup> Emphasising, however, that speed was the essence of newsreel work he added:

if the news reels are to put forward what the Government may regard as a discreet representation of any political question, the co-operation of Government spokesmen must be forthcoming in good time.<sup>153</sup>

A meeting with Rex Leeper ensued at which the latter stressed that if Movietone wanted the Foreign Office's assistance in such matters it should take their advice. Sanger agreed that it was desirable to keep in closer touch and the incident was closed amicably. Leeper's final comment to Simon, however, indicated that he himself would have preferred the newsreels to stick to trivia:

The trouble is that a powerful instrument for good or evil, like the news reels, is in the hands of men who are ignorant of foreign affairs.<sup>154</sup>

Whilst Movietone's relationship with the Government and the Conservative Party was complex and occasionally stormy, Gaumont's was generally much smoother. Following the 1931 crisis it would seem that the Ostrer brothers followed MacDonald away from the Labour Party and fell in line with the National Government. When Movietone disgraced itself by issuing the Lloyd George item in October 1933, Gaumont expressed its thorough disapproval of the speech and refused to take it for patriotic reasons. More to the point they made use of the fact that the Movietone newsreel was shown in a proportion of Gaumont owned cinemas to order the Lloyd George item to be deleted from the

152. FO 395/485, P2556/127/150, G. Sanger to Sir John Simon, 24 October 1933.

153. Ibid.

154. FO 395/485, P2556/127/150, Minute by Leeper to H. Hopkinson, and seen by Simon, 1 November 1933.

reels shown there.<sup>155</sup> It was not surprising then that Rex Leeper and George Steward, the Press Officer at No. 10, considered it 'quite safe' for Simon to give his interview to Gaumont.<sup>156</sup> By 1935 Gaumont's owners were firmly behind the National Government, and in March they took a further and highly significant step. For sympathy was turned to active support when a clear but highly secret link between Isodore Ostrer and the National Publicity Bureau was established,

to place the entire organisation of Gaumont British and the "Sunday Referee"<sup>157</sup> behind the Government.

This agreement had immediate effect when, at the request of the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, the whole emphasis of a projected story on German rearmament was altered in order to stress that the country stood for peace, and to conclude with a speech by Sir John Simon for the Government. According to Sir Derwent Hall-Caine,

it was quite obvious that Simons' [sic] remarks coming at that moment, made a deep impression on the audience, judging by the remarks that I heard from people immediately around me.<sup>158</sup>

The previous week Gaumont had shown a statement by Ramsay MacDonald, filmed in the Cabinet Room, in which he defended the

155. Kinematograph Weekly, 26 October 1933, 3. In return for the newsreel contract in a proportion of their cinemas Gaumont received copies of Movietone's foreign film, Gaumont itself not having a complete world service.
156. FO 395/485, P2556/127/150, Minute by H. Hopkinson for Simon, 25 October 1933.
157. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/6/38, Sir Derwent Hall-Caine to MacDonald, 21 March 1935. Hall-Caine, a former National Labour MP and active supporter of MacDonald, claimed to have organised this arrangement. The Sunday Referee was a small circulation and fairly highbrow Sunday newspaper owned by Ostrer, previously considered to be somewhat left wing.
158. Ibid.



recently issued White Paper on Defence. Stating that Britain had stood still whilst all around others were rearming, he declared:

we have now reached the time when we must make good some of the deficiencies in our defence. So we have issued our White Paper. This is no changed policy .... Peace remains the best policy for this Government. Peace will remain its policy; peace is its policy.  
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This interview was shown also by Pathe and Paramount, whilst Movietone built up a story around the question 'Is there to be an armaments race?'. For this item it abandoned its normally deadpan approach, the commentator adopting an urgent, insistent and driving voice, whilst background music was played throughout shots of evidence of world wide rearmament:

At the new home of the League of Nations in Geneva the chief news is of nations arming. It is announced that Britain will spend more on armaments. Why? Because the whole world is arming. [Japan, Germany, Russia, Italy and France are all rebuilding their military strength] and Britain, long content with dominance on the sea, contemplates bigger estimates for all three services; for the army, still the small professional body of tradition, successor to the Old Contemptibles; for the Royal Air Force, becoming more and more important to imperial defence; and for the navy also an increase. So the Government, in their quandary, proposed. Already the United States have faced the same problem, and have taken the same course which now seems to lie before Britain, an increase in armaments to preserve some defensive ratio with the offensive power of other nations.  
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Given national and international interest in questions of

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159. GBN, Issue No. 126, 14 March 1935, 'Mr. Ramsay MacDonald speaks on Armaments and Peace'.
160. BMN, Issue No. 300a, 7 March 1935, 'Is there to be an armaments race?'.

disarmament, rearmament, peace and war, it was not surprising that the newsreels gave these issues considerable attention. The disarmament conferences of the early 1930s were, for the newsreels, well covered, as was the work of the League of Nations. Movietone, for example, initiated a series of statements by world leaders, including Mussolini, Smuts and MacDonald, on the theme 'If the nations of the world could see and speak to each other, there would be no more war'.<sup>161</sup> The title preceding MacDonald's speech, made before the 1931 crisis, declared:

The deep sincerity of the Prime Minister's championship of world peace is fully attested by his record of public service in its cause.<sup>162</sup>

Throughout the 1930s the newsreels continued to play upon the public's hatred of war, using it for example, as Aldgate has indicated, to stress the undesirability of Britain involving herself in the Spanish Civil War, and thus lending tacit support to the Government's policy of non-intervention. The newsreels' antipathy to war, however, like that of the public, was quite genuine, such that at the time of the Sino-Japanese war Tom Cummins could defend his decision to show film of the bombing of Shanghai with the argument that

The only way to stop war is to give people a proper idea of what it means .... My opinion is that certain countries are getting very warlike. If the public saw more of the pictures such as we are showing, they would think twice before plunging nations into war.<sup>163</sup>

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161. BMN, Issues No. 83, 87, 105a, 110, January-July 1931.

162. BMN, Issue No. 105a, 11 June 1931, "'If the nations of the world could see and speak to each other there would be no more war'".

163. 'Newsreels give anti-war lead - The real facts from Shanghai battlefields - Courageous national service by screen editor', Today's Cinema, 14 September 1937.



As the 1930s progressed the newsreels' reactions to rearmament and Britain's defence tended to reflect government policy on the best way of maintaining peace. This was particularly so in the case of Gaumont British and Movietone, although the latter may already have been inclining towards a policy of rearmament before the Government openly adopted it. As ever the practical indications of this are small - in October 1933 Lord Lloyd was allowed to make a statement on the need for a larger airforce, whilst in September 1934 Earl Beatty welcomed Navy Week by advocating increased sea power.<sup>164</sup> Certainly Sir Malcolm Campbell's personal obsession with the need for effective air-raid defences and shelters caused Movietone to give early attention to these issues, from 1936 onwards. In April 1936 the projected army expansion was covered by the newsreels, and Gaumont and Paramount showed a recruiting appeal by the Secretary of State for War, Duff Cooper. Similarly in 1937 Hore-Belisha's army reforms were reported in such stories as 'Army - Joyrides for Tommy Atkins is excellent recruiting policy' and 'Army - Tommy Atkins thinks new military plans is a bit of all right'.<sup>165</sup>

Gaumont's support for the Government's defence policy was particularly marked and quite overt. The decision in February 1937 to spend £1500 million on rearming between 1937 and 1941 was reported with the following commentary:

Parliament has decided that Britain shall spend one thousand five hundred millions on arms in the next five years. Not directed against any one country, said the Chancellor, but because of our vast responsibilities in all parts of the world, and as a measure for the preservation of peace. This means no remission in taxation but it gives security. Even more than that, it will reduce the figures of unemployment. More ships mean more men at work, building, supplying them with every class of material

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164. BMN, Issues No. 227a, 270a, 12 October 1933 and 9 August 1934, 'Lord Lloyd states case for air might', and 'Earl Beatty sees Navy Week going'.

165. BMN, Issues No. 411, 429, 19 April 1937 and 23 August 1937.

needed in a modern man-of-war ..... Mechanisation of the Army will go forward at record speed, motor car factories will work full pressure, more men at work, more employment ..... Every aeroplane, every tank means more work and more safety. Even if it means an increase in taxation, what a great insurance. It is a life policy. Even if it does mean an increase it also means security, more employment, and the preservation of peace for this great country of ours, this British Empire [fade in Land of Hope and Glory].<sup>166</sup>

As World Film News commented, this was

a long and brilliantly presented sequence in justification of the new defence programme, and frequent shots of troops and battle ships mirror the ideals and intentions of the government.<sup>167</sup>

A similar item when Germany occupied Austria emphasised that

Production of armaments in all departments must be increased by national effort. Not to take part in war, not to interfere in the wars of others, but to preserve the peace of our own Empire. These are the guarantees of our national security, our independence, demanding expenditure down to the last shilling if necessary ... What sacrifice could be too great to make in exchange for security, the safety of our homes and our own people, your safety?<sup>168</sup>

Such wholly blatant propaganda and editorialisation was predominantly the property of Gaumont British. Yet it is clear that, whether or not they had a particular partisan bias, almost all the

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166. GBN, Issue No. 328, 18 February 1937, 'Britain re-arms'. Quoted by A. Aldgate, Op. Cit., 153-4. Gaumont British used 'Land of Hope and Glory' at almost every available opportunity.

167. 'Film as Propaganda', World Film News, vol. 2 no. 1, April 1937.

168. GBN, Issue No. 440, 17 March 1938, 'Britain re-arms on wartime basis'. Quoted by A. Aldgate, Op. Cit., 173-174.



newsreels accepted in practice that they had a positive role to play in the democratic system, forming part of the unifying mass communications system which, in Reith's phrase, was the nervous system of the body politic. In the face of apparent and encroaching international political, economic and social upheaval the newsreels were prepared to play their part in keeping democratic Britain united and steady. As Gerald Sanger later wrote:

Would a news-reel not be denying a great many of its legitimate functions if it did not record events which conduced to the upholding of established institutions? Such as the monarchy, the Christian religion, democratic Government, the rule of law, the trades unions and (by no means least) the Liberty of the Press? To show all these institutions in a favourable light is to create confidence in them, and to that extent is propaganda.<sup>169</sup>

If John Reith had no qualms about assisting in and propagandising for the harmonious unity of the established democratic system, was it surprising that newsreel editors had none either? This was reflected in their readiness to co-operate with government and government departments in what they considered to be the national rather than party interest, and in their tendency to produce stories comparing a stable Britain with a trouble-torn Europe, and projecting an essentially optimistic view of Britain's prospects.

Thus at the level of government messages, Pathe, Gaumont and other reels were happy to introduce 'Buy British' stories into their issues after the 1931 crisis.<sup>170</sup> When Leslie Hore-Belisha was developing the Highway Code the newsreels played their part in putting it across, whilst Pathe's special film on slums and rehousing, 'The Great Crusade', was made with the full co-operation and advice of the Ministry of Health and Sir Kingsley Wood, the ever

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169. G. Sanger, 'Propaganda and the news-reel', Sight and Sound, vol. 15 no.59, 1946, 79 -80.

170. Gaumont British News (house journal), vol. 2 no. 11, November 1931, 31.

publicity conscious Health Minister. This film, which even World Film News accepted was not government or party inspired, was nevertheless a statement of national progress and success in the field of housing. Although severe slum conditions were shown, these were followed by a long explanation of

the great strides that are being made by local authorities, under the National Slum Clearance Scheme, to better the conditions and amenities of these stricken districts.<sup>171</sup>

Having described how busy the various building industries now were, the commentary continued:

All this increased activity in so many industries has only one object - rapid progress in the great five year plan to abolish the slums and rehouse 1,300,000 people. Much has already been accomplished. Already in the two and a half years of the campaign new houses have been approved for well over half a million slum dwellers, and over 320,000 of them have moved into new homes.<sup>172</sup>

The film ended with shots of bonny babies, whilst the inevitable Land of Hope and Glory swelled to a victorious crescendo.

Similarly when Paramount heard a rumour in 1936 that the Government was about to instigate a National Fitness Campaign it did not hesitate. As the News Editor, E.J.H. Wright, told Ramsay MacDonald's secretary when requesting an interview:

In fact we have been dealing with this subject for the last four months, having had an inkling that there was to be a drive by the

171. Kinematograph Weekly, 5 March 1936; World Film News, vol. 1 no. 1, April 1936.

172. National Film Archive, 'The Great Crusade'.



Government on this matter.<sup>173</sup>

By 1939 even a fun item on London Zoo's panda could be used by Gaumont British to boost milk drinking as part of a government campaign.<sup>174</sup> We have already seen that the newsreels were willing to co-operate in army recruitment campaigns and the publicising of air raid and civil defence precautions, and, according to John Grierson, as early as 1936 the Admiralty, War Office and Air Ministry 'attend faithfully on the doorsteps of the various Newsreels'.<sup>175</sup> By 1939 it was purely a matter of routine for the Newsreel Association to agree that Universal would act as liaison for all the companies with the Ministry of Labour for the forthcoming National Service Campaign.<sup>176</sup> Indeed neither W.J. Gell of Pathe nor Sir Gordon Craig had any hesitation in emphasising in a Newsreel Association meeting,

the readiness of all the Newsreel Companies to assist the Government and Public Departments on all suitable occasions in reproducing items deemed to be of special interest, although not necessarily of great news value.<sup>177</sup>

In 1938 and 1939 the reels were consulted by the embryo Ministry of Information as to their likely war role, and in this respect it is worth remembering that the Director designate of the Films Division of the Ministry was none other than Sir Joseph Ball. Where such 'official' matters were concerned the relationship between the

173. MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/6/39, E.J.H. Wright to Miss R. Rosenberg, 24 October 1936.

174. GBN, Issue No. 548, 23 March 1939. I am indebted to Nicholas Pronay for pointing out this item to me.

175. J. Grierson, 'Films in the Public Service', Public Administration, vol. 14, 1936, 369-370.

176. News Reel Association, minutes, 29 March 1939.

177. News Reel Association, minutes, comment by Sir Gordon Craig, 13 June 1938; see also comment by W.J. Gell in the News Reel Association minutes, 19 May 1938.

Government and all the newsreel companies was undoubtedly good.

The newsreels, however, went beyond this in the active support they gave to democratic unity. As Nicolas Pronay has stated:

They featured and played up the ordinary, the orderly, the well-arranged aspects and events of the society around them, rather than the truly sensational. The Newsreels laid stress on the points of similarity, identity of outlook and interest between the world of the government, and that of their working-class regulars. Above all, they stressed the points of consensus rather than the points of conflict.<sup>178</sup>

Although they did occasionally present items on domestic strikes, demonstrations and depression, their attitude to domestic news was essentially optimistic and hope-giving. More than any other reel Pathe paid attention to slum housing. Yet its stories were predominantly not about existing slum conditions but about what was being done to remove them. Typical items were "'Sweep away all slums" - Lady Astor, MP, lays foundation stone of model flats for workers', "'Sweep away all slums" - Princess Alice opens still another block of cheap and model flats for workers' and 'Clearing the Slums - Sir Hilton Young, Minister of Health, makes tour of inspection at Wandsworth'.<sup>179</sup> This last item went thus:

Commentator: Routing out slums in big cities has occupied the active attention of the National Government with local co-operating authorities. At Wandsworth, London's largest borough, the Minister of Health is interviewed on this problem by Pathe Gazette.

Sir E. Hilton Young: I'm very glad indeed to see the progress of our campaign against the slums in Wandsworth. I believe you have

178. N. Pronay, 'British Newsreels in the 1930s. 2. Their Policies and Impact', History, vol. 57, February 1972. 67.

179. PG, Issues No. 31/39, 33/59, 35/16, 14 May 1931, 24 July 1933, 25 February 1935.



nearly 700 unfit slum houses to demolish.

Wandsworth Representative: Yes we have dealt with nearly half our programme, and this is one of the largest areas of demolished houses.

Sir E. Hilton Young: You know we are setting out to rehouse nearly 1,300,000 persons. Although the first stages are the slowest, we are now rehousing them at the rate of over 150,000 persons per year, and that rate is getting faster all the time .... Certainly it is a great work for a great cause - no more slums.

Similarly, although the newsreels did not ignore the industrial depression they certainly did not emphasise it. The majority of industrial items were essentially items of hope. Thus Movietone in October 1933:

Caption: Britain shows signs of new prosperity. Casting of world's biggest ingot symbolises steadily improving conditions in industrial areas.

Commentary: Britain continues to make headway against the depression. British factories are gradually reducing the huge figures of unemployment as new orders find work for extra men. The English Steel Corporation's order for new electric plant in Canada is giving work and employment in Sheffield, and here a furnace is being charged for the forging of the largest ingot of special steel ever to be cast ..... The rising tide of trade and employment at a time of year when the normal trend is in the opposite direction is the most cheering augury for British industry for many, many years.

The visuals to this item consisted of shots of men and machinery at work, a newspaper headline - '74,410 more go back. Big drop in eight months. 360,000 since February. Tariff finding work. 792,000 more jobs in a year' - money, and workers smiling broadly as they received

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180. BMN, Issue No. 228a, 19 October 1933, 'Britain Shows Signs of New Prosperity'.

their pay. The courage of the workers in adversity, their unfailing cheerfulness and continued loyalty to the monarchy and other British traditions, were further features of such stories. Even sixpence on the income tax in 1938 was greeted with Movietone's comment, supposedly to Sir John Simon: 'Ah well, Sir, I suppose we shall have to pay up and keep smiling'.<sup>181</sup>

Indeed still more noticeable than stories of hope was the emphasis which newsreels lent to notions of stability, loyalty, democratic tradition and to a peaceful and non-violent Britain. Pathe's commentary on the Labour march of May Day 1936 used the event to tell a very different story:

Commentary: Once again May Day is Labour's heyday everywhere, and in London the processions process in the direction of Hyde Park, that hubbub of the universe and Mecca of the marching feet of fighters in a thousand causes. Other countries may have their strikes and disturbances, their fighting and broken windows, but Britain keeps orderly - He'll see to that [shot of policeman]. In fact the spirit of the day is love thy neighbour as thyself, and it's another peaceful victory.<sup>182</sup>

A favourite ploy of politicians and newsreels alike was to compare conditions at home and abroad. All the reels were ready to give Government spokesmen the opportunity to speak on such a theme, and the latter were ready to use these opportunities to best advantage. Thus J.H. Thomas, the Dominions Secretary, sent a Christmas message through Paramount:

181. BMN, Issue No. 464a, 28 April 1938, 'The Chancellor on his Budget'.

182. PG, Issue No. 36/36, 4 May 1936, 'Labour Day scenes in London'. See also PG, Issue no. 36/62, 3 August 1936, on the state of the Spanish Civil War: 'And while we watch this grim struggle let us be thankful that we live in a country where men are free to express their political opinions without being shot, where internal strife is a thing unknown. While we here live under the protection of the Law, young Spain learns to shoot'. - quoted by A. Aldgate, Op. Cit., 107.



At a time when the world is in turmoil, when there appear to be conflict [sic] almost throughout the world, it is a great pride and pleasure to be able to say that the British Commonwealth of Nations stands out today as an example to the world, in being the embodiment of a nation, indeed of an Empire, that makes peace and goodwill its motto. And above all a common allegiance to a monarch whose prestige stands higher today than at any other period in history. I believe we have now passed the worst. It's because I'm satisfied that at last there is definite signs of recovery that I am delighted to give this Christmas message of goodwill and good cheer.<sup>183</sup>

In a similar message in 1935 Thomas told Pathe's audience that 'democracy is firmly entrenched in this country, and wants neither dictatorship from the right or left'.<sup>184</sup> The best example of this type of film statement, however, came from Baldwin in November 1936, perhaps to prepare people for the abdication. Pathe, Paramount, Movietone and Gaumont British all showed it. Each reel chose slightly different extracts, but each used the comparison between Britain and elsewhere:

Baldwin: When we read of conditions and events in the world around us, I think that we must all be filled with a sense of profound thankfulness that we are living in this country under a system of national government. In many countries abroad we see fears and suspicion, economic and industrial depression, the destruction of liberty and freedom, conscription on an increasing scale, violence and disturbance, and in Spain we witness the climax in the terrible horrors of Civil War. Contrast these conditions with the peace and prosperity of our own country. For five years we have enjoyed a steady industrial recovery which is still continuing. In the first nine months of this year

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183. BPN, Issue No. 293, 18 December 1933, 'To Home and Empire'.

184. PG, Issue No. 35/4, 14 January 1935, 'J.H. Thomas in exclusive interview with Pathe'.

employment increased by well over half a million .... What is the reason for this remarkable contrast? It can be summed up in one word - confidence, confidence in industry, confidence in finance, and confidence in one another .... But it is also due to the fact that we as a nation, true to our old traditions, have avoided all extremes. We have steered clear of fascism, communism, dictatorship, and we have shown the world that democratic government, constitutional methods and ordered liberty are not inconsistent with progress and prosperity.<sup>185</sup>

This was a message which Pathe, Gaumont British and Movietone certainly projected on their own account. Movietone's issue for 14 February 1934, for example, made the point effectively by sandwiching a series of three foreign stories headed 'Europe strikes bad patch of trouble' - strikes and demonstrations in Paris, threatened insurrection in Spain and civil strife in Austria - between a political speech - 'Outlook is brighter, says Mr. Runciman. President of the Board of Trade, in talk on British Industries' Fair, sees good time coming' - and a series of stories entitled 'Picture paragraph of Britain at Play'. This last item ranged from Manchester University rag week to a two day football game played in the streets of Ashbourne, of which the commentator stated:

Among the great traditions which go to make England what she is must be included Shrovetide football at Ashbourne, Derbyshire.<sup>186</sup>

The reel ended with the Viceroy of India, Lord Willingden, reviewing his troops in Calcutta.

Undoubtedly, however, it was Gaumont British which once again excelled in the fervour of its proselytisation. The shooting of Dr.

185. GBN, Issue No. 303, 23 November 1936, 'Stanley Baldwin speaks on the achievements of the National Government'.

186. BMN, Issue No. 245a, 14 February 1934.



Dollfuss in Austria was the stimulus for this item in July 1934:

Caption: Study in Politics, comparing methods at home and abroad.  
 Commentary: M. Doumer, President of France, fell at the hand of a political assassin two years ago in Paris. Mr. Roosevelt, President of the United States, was shot at and narrowly escaped death while on a visit to Miami shortly after his election. Dr. Dollfuss is the latest victim of these gangster methods of conducting a political campaign. We in Britain may well think our own country a good enough place to live in. Even a dangerous looking meeting in Trafalgar Square is not too deadly to form a background for children to play against. Political demonstrators are confined almost entirely to the vapourings of soap-box orators in places like Hyde Park.<sup>187</sup>

In August 1936 Ted Emmett, Gaumont's commentator and film editor, brought all his newsreel skills to bear on a story which combined everything which Gaumont British wished to put across to its audience. This item is worth quoting at length as representative of Gaumont British in full flood and at its overpowering best. From the title, 'Wonderful Britain', to the last chords of Land of Hope and Glory, this entirely stock shot, fabricated story was newsreel work at its most impressive. Following two items on the Spanish Civil War, Emmett continued:

In a spirit not of boastfulness but rather of gratitude we turn from these fitful scenes to fortunate Britain, still, with its tradition of sanity, the rock of steadying influence amid the eddying streams of world affairs. Britain's industries have shaken off the chains that kept them fettered in the aftermath of the world war. They have risen from the Slough of Despond which clogged the wheels of progress in the depression of the last decade. Trade returns are steadily improving. Weekly and monthly the official statistics form a heartening accompaniment to the

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187. GBN, Issue No. 61, 30 July 1934, 'Study in Politics, comparing methods at home and abroad'.

efforts alike of the small merchant and the big boss of giant industry to better times ..... Frequently overlooked, but never to be forgotten, is the vital factor of British justice, the fairest in the world, the physician of civil life whose equity and incorruptibility has never been called in question. This honesty in the courts of evil and wrongdoing is a sure fortress against the social hatred that fosters revolution. The army, the navy and the air force of this country have proved a sure protector and deterrent in the unrest that has prevailed abroad. Britain is taking her stand in the belief that a strong defence is a guarantee of peace. Statesmen who may have drawn upon themselves criticism from time to time, have nonetheless worked unremittingly for peace at home and abroad. As we look back we realise that their efforts have brought this country safely through the innumerable crises that have beset it in the past few years. And above all we look to the head of this great nation, whose example and courage have won the admiration and envious respect of other nations less happy ..... For the King, already in the short time since his accession, he has proved a worthy successor to his great father and to his grandfather, Edward the Peacemaker.

Edward VIII: Humanity cries out for peace and the assurance of peace.

Commentary: Long may he continue to lead Britain from the chaos of world affairs closer to the days of lasting peace, prosperity and happiness [Land of Hope and Glory].<sup>188</sup>

During the 1930s the ten minute, twice weekly cinema newsreels could not hope to apply the same criteria, or to cover the same amount of serious news, as the BBC or the quality press. Although they did their best to obtain scoops and to get film of events into their reels within hours of having been taken, they could not seriously rival the radio or the press as instant providers of news.

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188. GBN, Issue No. 278, 27 August 1936. This item is quoted almost in full by A. Aldgate, *Op. Cit.*, 124-125, although the transcription given above differs in details from his.



In any case a large proportion of the audience saw the newsreel only when the news was several days, even weeks, old. The newsreels' greatest asset was that they added pictures to the news, so that when Malcolm Campbell broke the world land speed record the audience actually watched him doing so at Daytona, and when the Labour Government resigned in 1931 the audience stood with the crowd in Downing Street. What was shown was the visual representation of events, together with the newsreels' interpretation of the scene. Far from giving a comprehensive coverage of the serious news, the newsreels presented stories for which they had film - either actual or stock - stories which were visual, sensational or of particular public attraction or interest, stories which took the editors' own interest, could be used to pursue a particular editorial line, or which were responses to external pressures.

Yet it would be wrong to suggest that the newsreels did not also purvey serious and unbiased news, or that they did not occasionally issue items unfavourable to the National Government. Even Gaumont had its share of strike and demonstration stories, albeit handled in a distinctly bland manner. For an item to be withdrawn at government request it had first to be shown, indicating a desire to be bolder, as well as too great a readiness to accede to government wishes. This readiness, this general caution which prevented the reels from ever really fulfilling the objective of presenting important news in a comprehensive and impartial manner, was in part the result of the particular predilections of the various newsreel editors. But it was also because, like the BBC, the newsreels saw their role as being a threefold one - to inform if possible, to entertain certainly, but also, if required, to unite the several elements of the democratic state, to play their part in proving that a democratic Britain was not the equal but the better of its totalitarian and trouble-torn neighbours. These three objectives, however, were not compatible. In the prevailing mood of the 1930s, lacking age and the experience and tradition which were the cornerstones of a free and independent press, the newsreels did not have the strength, nor always the inclination, to resist many of the apparently reasonable factors

mediating a responsible, co-operative, but less than independent stance.

Note A.

An example of Rotha's evidence for Movietone's bias is given in his Documentary Diary, p.112-3. He describes the three film statements for the 1935 General Election as 'a typical example of newsreel political bias':

For Stanley Baldwin, leader of the Conservative Party, they built a sumptuous set, with pillars and impressive mahogany furniture and old master reproductions on the walls and a world globe on the desk next to a great bowl of flowers. When Mr. Baldwin was 'done', the set was cleared away and rapidly it was the turn of Sir Archibald Sinclair, leader of the Liberals. For him they built a mousy middle-class suburban room with chintz curtains and a basket armchair. Next came Mr. Attlee of the Labour Party. They brought in what looked like the corner of the workmen's canteen from a nearby factory. They took two hours to 'do' Mr. Baldwin, half an hour to 'do' Sinclair, and Attlee they polished off in a few minutes. This was done by Movietone a week prior to the election.

This account, however, is somewhat inaccurate. Nor does the incident prove deliberate bias. Samuel, not Sinclair, was filmed, whilst Baldwin was filmed after Attlee. The set for Baldwin was actually a passable and deliberate copy of the Cabinet Room, for Baldwin was, of



course, Prime Minister. Attlee's set, whilst plain, was not so basic as Rotha suggests, whilst Attlee adopted the most natural pose of the three, by perching himself on the arm of an armchair. His delivery, however, was stilted and unnatural, whereas Samuel's was excellent and Baldwin's good. Whilst Movietone may have produced these statements, which were made available to all the newsreel companies, it was more normal for such 'rota' speeches to be shot at Pathe's central London studios. Whoever was responsible for them, it was hardly political bias to attempt to place each politician in his natural habitat. A more probable instance of bias in these items was that the sound quality of Attlee's speech was appreciably worse than that of Baldwin's and Samuel's, owing to the removal from the camera of its 'blimp' - the cover which was used to eliminate the noise of the camera mechanism in such studio interviews. The result was an irritating background whirr throughout Attlee's speech.

## Conclusion

It has not been the intention of this thesis to evaluate the impact upon the audience of the methods of political presentation which it describes. Its concern has been with the aims and efforts of those responsible for them, for the attempted transmission rather than the effective communication of information and ideas. For as Asa Briggs has pointed out,

To talk of "mass communications" is to mislead: the agencies of so-called "mass communications" are really agencies of mass or multiple transmission.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless broadcasting and film did show themselves to be most effective channels of communication in the inter-war years. They were also, because of their particular character, their immediacy, national outlook, structure and audience, of importance in the creation of a sense of national community.<sup>2</sup> Their qualities as media were further strengthened by the nature of the messages they conveyed. The BBC's emphasis of a consensual and even non-party approach to politics, and the newsreels of a united national response to domestic and international problems, both in their own way complemented, and to some extent reflected the ideas embodied in the 'all-party' National Government. If the underlying motives were not identical the outward effect was much the same. But in any case these tendencies were further reinforced by the interest which the Government itself took in both the BBC and the newsreels. Given these various interlocking elements, therefore, it is perhaps not unreasonable to suggest that the new media were at least contributory factors in Britain's essential stability during the 1920s and 1930s.

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1. A. Briggs, Mass Entertainment - The Origins of a Modern Industry, Adelaide 1960, 29.
  2. For further evidence of this see M. W. Pegg, British Radio Broadcasting and Its Audience, 1918-1939, unpublished D.Phil. thesis, Oxford 1979, 419-422.



It must also be concluded that the use of broadcasting and film to unite the nation and mould opinion was not restricted to times of war. Those in charge of the BBC and the newsreels both saw national unity as a desirable and legitimate objective. Similarly the lessons of 1914-1918, fear of the totalitarian threat and of the supposed ignorance and irrationality of the newly enfranchised, were just some of the considerations which led the political parties and the inter-war, Conservative dominated government to take an increasing interest in the attitude of the British people towards the social and political structure within which they lived.

The two principal parties both espoused the cause of rational political education. Indeed there was nothing intrinsic in the mass proselytisation devices they used which excluded rational argument within a pluralist system. Not only the facts but also the way in which the two sides interpreted them had to be communicated to the electorate, and in the most effective way, lest the propaganda of their opponents and hostile elements in the press drew the attention and support of the voter. For this reason the parties strove to overcome certain organisational, and for Labour financial, shortcomings and to utilise modern publicity techniques to reach the required audience.

It was tacitly recognised, however, that democratic decision-taking was a mixture of both reason and emotion. The prospect of absolutely rational choice was a chimera which did not marry well with the reality of a pluralist society and democratic state. Consequently the parties appealed to the heart as well as to the head, using essentially emotional appeals as a short cut to the political power which, it was held, rational political education would bring. Moreover the Conservative Party and the National Government used their wealth, position and influence to forward their message through all the available channels, and proved correspondingly more effective than Labour in presenting themselves. They also, it must be concluded, took some advantage of their relationship with the BBC, of the 'responsible' outlook of the

Corporation's management and of the predisposition and complaisance of the majority of newsreel editors, effectively to obstruct the free transmission of ideas and opinions on certain vital issues. Indeed, although the Government itself did also initiate proposals for ministerials and film statements, its direct interest in the new media was largely negative - a concern to prevent either broadcasting or film becoming a complicating factor in the task of governing. But such negative liaison could have a very positive effect upon the balance of the message actually transmitted. In such ways the Conservatives and the National Government made use of the integrating powers of these two newest but most wide-reaching channels of communication, thereby showing themselves, perhaps not surprisingly, to be more committed to a particular concept of national unity and social equilibrium than to the educative element of the liberal democratic ideal.

For in liberal democratic Britain both non-rational propaganda and a degree of censorship were recognised as essential. They were necessary for the preservation of an 'educated' democracy in which the electorate was felt to be hardly educated, and of ordered liberty at a time when the people were seen as being by no means rationally ordered. Democracy, increasingly under ideological attack, was too important to be left to the undirected whim of the people. Thus rationalism as its basis continued to be a dream for the future, whilst other less idealistic practices remained essential elements in the fight for men's minds and the defence of the democratic concept.





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CC	Controversy Committee Minutes	R34/318
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CHM	" - Herbert Morrison	



CHN	Contributors - Harold Nicolson	
CJS	" - John Simon	
CMH	" - Ministry of Health	
COM	" - Oswald Mosley	
CEW	" - Walter Elliot	
CWF	" - William Ferrie	
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TVQ	"	: Vexed Questions	R51/612



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Miss Pat Holder, British Movietone News staff member.

Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Lockstone, former staff members, Conservative Films Association.

Rt. Hon. Malcolm MacDonald, former National Labour MP and Secretary of State for the Colonies.

Mr. William Mattock, former Conservative Central Office staff member.

Mr. John O'Kelly, former Gaumont British News and British Movietone News staff member.

Mr. Gerald Sanger, former Editor and Producer of British Movietone News.

Mr. Pat Wyand, former sound recordist, British Movietone News.