

THE PRESENTATION OF POLITICS:

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

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VOLUME ONE

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy.

The University of Leeds, School of History, November 1981.

Abstract

The Representation of the People Act of 1918 and the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 trebled the electorate and created a near universal franchise. Politicians of the two principal inter-war parties - Conservative and Labour - declared their commitment to rational political education as the basis of effective democracy. Yet belief in the continuing ignorance and irrationality of the electorate, in the dishonest propaganda of their opponents and, for the Conservatives, in the threat to democracy posed by socialism, encouraged the use of less than rational propaganda in order to achieve and maintain power. The size of the electorate gave a new emphasis to large scale party propaganda while the party organisations were adapting themselves to the new conditions. The Conservative Party used its financial reserves and anti-socialist support to develop new publicity techniques, particularly in its use of film. The Labour Party attempted to do likewise, but was hindered by financial difficulties and local party independence, as its experience with film publicity demonstrated.

The new media of broadcasting and film were seen to have considerable implications for democracy. At the BBC John Reith and his senior staff believed broadcasting to be democracy's perfecting element, and attempted to develop what they saw as an impartial and rational means of universal political communication and education. The political parties and the government of the day, however, recognised the power and dangers of the medium, and party jealousy and disagreement, together with government pressure, reinforced internal factors acting against the successful prosecution of this aim. In particular certain of the BBC's ideals and objectives were mutually incompatible. Thus it proved less than easy to reconcile the objective of impartial and comprehensive foreign affairs coverage with a conscious promotion of international amity. Moreover the BBC's very commitment to democracy could militate against effective political education, especially at a time when the concept of democracy was being questioned and totalitarian alternatives offered

abroad.

In the film industry the cinema newsreels were the most important contribution to political communication and the provision of news. Their editors proclaimed both their impartiality and, in some cases, a serious intent. Yet coverage of domestic politics was limited and overwhelmingly concerned with government activities. The considerable attention given to the newsreels by the Conservative Party and the National Government complemented existing editorial predilections, and the consequence was a less than independent or impartial stance. Thus despite the valuable contribution which both radio and film made to political information and education, their use as democratic integrators in response to the totalitarian challenge was actually to prove in some degree inimical to the rationalist and educative element of the democratic ideal.

This thesis considers the aims and efforts of those responsible for the new methods of political presentation. It touches on the question of the actual impact of these methods, but does not attempt a detailed evaluation. Using new material from the papers of the Conservative and Labour parties, the BBC, Foreign Office News Department and individual politicians, in addition to film viewing and interviews with those involved, its intention is both to explore new fields and to shed fresh light on old ones.

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Acknowledgements

I have visited many libraries and archives during the course of my research and am most grateful to the staffs of the following for their assistance: Conservative Central Office and Research Department; the Labour Party Archives; the Public Record Office, London; the Brotherton Library, Leeds; the Bodleian Library, Oxford; Visnews, Pathe, British Movietone News and the British Film Institute. At the British Universities Film Council I received an unfailingly kind welcome and much assistance from Jim Ballantyne and his fellow workers. In particular the BBC Written Archives Centre at Caversham Park, Reading, under Mrs. Jacqueline Kavanagh, must be singled out for friendliness and helpfulness beyond my deserving. Patient Gwyniver Jones coped wonderfully with my many and unreasonable requests. I thank her and all the BBC Archives staff for making my research there so pleasant.

A number of people granted me interviews or wrote about their experiences. The combined memories of Mr. Vernon Bartlett, Mr. Ted Candy, Mr. Percy Cohen, Mrs. Margaret Grierson, Miss Pat Holder, Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Lockstone, the late Rt. Hon. Malcolm MacDonald, the late Mr. William Mattock, Mr. John O'Kelly, Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Sanger and Mr. Pat Wyand have contributed considerably to my understanding of the period.

This research was only made possible by a Social Science Research Council grant, awarded through the School of History at the University of Leeds. Its conclusion was immeasurably facilitated by the great kindness of the curators of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and of David Vaisey, the Keeper of Western Manuscripts there, in permitting me to take three months study leave for that purpose.

I should like also to express my thanks to a number of friends. Dr. Philip Taylor gave me much needed guidance, especially while I was still inexperienced in the ways of research. Trevor Ryan, my fellow thesis sufferer, gave me someone with whom I could discuss the

subject, compare ideas and generally grumble. I benefited greatly from our talks. Trevor and Jan, his wife, have transformed my southern-bred image of Bradford, and I thank them for this and for their friendship. For constant moral support, for seeing me through and putting up with me, I thank Clive and Jenny Barrett, Marian Spon and Mike and Alison Wood. They made the last few years bearable.

The typing and production of this thesis was the work of Peter and Pauline Kaznowski, who laboured mightily on my behalf and gave of themselves much more than I could possibly have hoped or expected. I thank them most sincerely.

Dr. Philip Jones, Dr. Robert Evans and the late Mr. Eric Collieu of Brasenose College, Oxford, saw me through my undergraduate career and gave me encouragement to start on postgraduate research. I am also grateful to Dr. John Ramsden of Queen Mary College, London, for his valuable advice. From Professor David Dilks, Chairman of the School of History at the University of Leeds, I have received support, consideration and counsel whenever it was needed. I thank all of these for their trust and generous assistance.

My principal debt, however, is to my supervisor, Nicholas Pronay. Without his advice, exhortation and supervisory skills this research would not have been conceived, started or brought to its present end. His articles on the cinema newsreels aroused my interest initially, and under his sympathetic guidance this thesis has taken shape. His kindness, encouragement and confidence in me are appreciated more than I can say.

Finally my family. Both parents assisted with the proof-reading. My mother helped to check the footnotes, my father helped to take my mind off them and my brother, Christopher, provided sustenance and criticism. All gave love, comfort and support when it was needed, which was often. How very fortunate I am.

Oxford, October 1981.

Terminology and abbreviations

The term 'political broadcasting' is sometimes used to denote specifically 'party' political broadcasting. In order to avoid ambiguity in the following chapters, however, I have not used it in this sense at all. I have referred to general broadcasting about politics as either 'political broadcasting' or 'political affairs broadcasting', whilst for broadcasts by or with the close involvement of the political parties I have used the terms 'party political broadcasting' or 'party broadcasting'. One phrase not used below is 'current affairs broadcasting', as both the term and the concept are comparatively modern. 'Current affairs' was rarely used inside the BBC during the period under consideration; indeed current affairs broadcasting as such - the day to day, up to the minute discussion of events as they happened - was then virtually unknown, apart from certain topical talks which followed or formed part of the news bulletins. It would be hard to recognise most broadcasting about politics in the 1920s and 1930s as 'current affairs' in the modern sense.

While this research was in progress the archives of the British Broadcasting Corporation were being completely reindexed. Where the new index number was known during the course of writing it has been used. Elsewhere a series of initials has been used to denote specific BBC files. These initials, together with the new index numbers, are listed in the bibliography.

Other abbreviations used, either in the text or in the footnotes, are as follows:

AC(T)	Assistant Controller (Talks)
BBC	British Broadcasting Company British Broadcasting Corporation
BBFC	British Board of Film Censors
BMN	British Movietone News
BPN	British Paramount News

BUF	British Union of Fascists
CCO	Conservative Central Office
CEA	Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association
CFA	Conservative and Unionist Films Association
CP	Cabinet Papers
C(P)	Controller (Programmes)
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CRD	Conservative Research Department
CWS	Co-operative Wholesale Society
DDG	Deputy Director General (BBC)
DG	Director General (BBC)
FO	Foreign Office
GBN	Gaumont British News
GPO	General Post Office
HO	Home Office
ILP	Independent Labour Party
IO	India Office
ITA	Independent Television Authority
IWM	Imperial War Museum
LCC	London County Council
LNU	League of Nations Union
LPAR	Labour Party Annual Report to Conference
MEPO	Papers of the Metropolitan Police
MOI	Ministry of Information
NACEC	National Association of Co-operative Educational Committees
NCL	National Council of Labour
NEC	National Executive Committee of the Labour Party
NFA	National Film Archive
NJC	National Joint Council of the NEC, TUC and PLP
NJFC	National Joint Film Council
NPB	National Publicity Bureau
NSC	National Savings Committee
NUCUA	National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers' Movement
PAC	Parliamentary Advisory Committee (of BBC)
PEP	Political and Economic Planning

PG	Pathe Gazette
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
PMG	Postmaster General
PRO	Public Record Office
Prem.	Papers of the Prime Minister's Office
RPA	Representation of the People Act
SDP	German Social Democratic Party
SNE	Senior News Editor (BBC)
TAC	Talks Advisory Committee (BBC)
T&GWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
WFA	Workers' Film Association

Introduction.

The extension of the franchise in Britain in the first three decades of the twentieth century was widely regarded as a necessary, but nonetheless alarming, step. In 1910 some twenty-eight per cent. of the adult population enjoyed the right to vote, numbering just under 7,700,000 men out of a total population of nearly 45,000,000. By 1919 the proportion of men and women eligible to vote had been increased to seventy-eight per cent., and by the election of 1929 to ninety per cent., of the adult population, in absolute terms nearly 29,000,000 of both sexes, including the so-called 'flappers'. These years thus saw the electorate almost quadrupled, and the most important and responsible democratic right given to working class men and to women who had until now been considered too ignorant or irresponsible to deserve it.

The granting of the vote, however, did not follow any radical alteration of opinion on the part of those who granted it, as to the knowledge or inherent wisdom of the newly enfranchised, and the question remained

how the promiscuous crowd of old and young, of learned and unlearned, of rich and poor, who are all declared collectively arbiters of their political destinies, would be able to discharge their new function of "sovereign"¹.

Severe doubts remained, and it was not surprising that, despite educational progress since the Education Act of 1870, the objective of an educated and fully literate society still seemed remote. The general level of education was perceived as still being low, with the concerns of the majority too restricted for them to take a wider and more responsible view of their democratic duties. The increasing

1. M.I. Ostrogorski, Democracy and the Organisation of Political Parties, London 1902, 3.

complexity of society, moreover, made it ever more difficult for the electorate to comprehend the political and social issues presented to it.

Nor was education necessarily associated with greater rationality. Increased literacy, combined with a still limited education, was seen as exposing the people to a number of influences and pressures which were not necessarily beneficial, whilst the development of a minimum level of standard education was felt by some to have dangers for individuality. The franchise extensions of the second half of the nineteenth century had been followed by the development of 'caucus' politics and of political practices which many deplored, developments which were nevertheless to prove fundamental for party politics in the twentieth. Moreover, from the 1890s onwards, the growth of the popular press and changes in reading habits amongst the working classes had created a new and significant influence upon public opinion. These new factors were seen as being of mixed value for democracy, and useful primarily to unscrupulous politicians, and to newspaper proprietors such as the Harmsworth brothers and later Lord Beaverbrook, who proved themselves very ready to use or abuse the power of the platform which they had raised. As William Lecky wrote in 1896,

To set the many against the few becomes the chief object of the electioneering agent. As education advances newspapers arise which are intended solely for this purpose, and they are often almost the only reading of great numbers of voters.²

Thus reason, political knowledge and understanding, which Lecky believed to be the prerogatives of the educated and propertied classes, would be subsumed within a general ignorance, which would be manipulated by men of influence for their own ends. Writing a few years earlier, Sir Henry Maine described the factors at work in this manipulation of the gullible, an analysis of the operation of one form of propaganda:

2. W.E.H. Lecky, Democracy and Liberty, London 1896, 18-19.

a ready belief in generalities has shown itself to be a characteristic of imperfectly educated minds. Meantime, men ambitious of political authority have found out the secret of manufacturing generalities in any number All generalisation is the product of abstraction; all abstraction consists in dropping out of sight a certain number of particular facts, and constructing a formulae which will embrace the remainder; and the comparative value of general propositions turns entirely on the relative importance of the particular facts selected and of the particular facts rejected.

The mid-Victorian rationalist individualist vision was therefore believed by many to be still unattainable in present conditions; yet the alternative democratic scenario, trusting in the instinctive common sense of working men, a common sense based not on knowledge but on daily experience, was also considered suspect in view of increasingly prevalent theories as to the nature of man in the mass. These were 'scientifically' formulated in the ideas of such social psychologists as William McDougall and Wilfred Trotter, whose writings on man's herd instinct struck a chord amongst the many, both democratic and elitist, who were finding traditional liberal assumptions about rationalist individualism inadequate.⁴ Thus in the early years of the twentieth century a debate arose between those who held that recent experience had shown traditional theories to be fundamentally unsound and those who believed the recognised flaws to be capable of remedy, the consequence of concrete factors such as the nature of society, the level of education, and the political consciousness of the electorate. Yet Britain was, by now, almost irrevocably committed to the path of franchise extension. If the

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3. Sir Henry Maine, Popular Government, London 1885, 107.
 4. R.N. Soffer, 'New Elitism: Social Psychology in Prewar England', Journal of British Studies, vol. 8 (1969), 111-140. The Labour leader, James Ramsay MacDonald, read Trotter and cited him in his own writings. A copy of Trotter's Instincts of the Herd In Peace and War was to be found at the library of the Conservative Research Department when this was established in 1929.

battles against the female and 'flapper' votes were bitter and prolonged, they could be no more than holding actions. In such an atmosphere the leaders of all the major political parties could only express their confidence in a democratic future, rejecting the pessimistic and elitist conclusions of the social psychologists, whilst adopting some of their pseudo-scientific reasoning in order to explain the apparent continuing irrationality of the electorate.

By 1914, therefore, there was a widespread and powerful, if most crudely conceptualised, post-Freudian belief in the tremendous psychological forces at work in man and society, and a growing conviction that, once recognised, it was possible to manipulate them in particular directions, for good or ill. The growth in commercial advertising during this period was partly a reflection of such a belief, and one whose significance was not lost upon politicians anxious to sell their own 'product'. But it was the First World War which confirmed in the minds of all concerned the truly awesome power of propaganda. On both sides of the conflict a conviction arose, shortly after the war had ended, as to the major role which propaganda had played in the German collapse and the Allied victory.⁵ The word 'propaganda' assumed most undesirable connotations within a democratic system which aspired to and claimed a rational basis. This distaste was only strengthened when it was appreciated to what excesses of untruth both sides had sunk, and the wartime Ministry of Information became an early victim of the peace. During the 1920s and 1930s the democracies were to observe and deplore the eagerness with which the communist and fascist regimes adopted propaganda as a weapon with which to consolidate their power, guide the knowledge and thoughts of their people, and ensure national unity. Propaganda both repelled and fascinated. The inter-war years

.. H.D. Lasswell, Propaganda Technique in The World War, London 1927; Sir Campbell Stuart, Secrets of Crewe House, London 1920; J.D. Squires, British Propaganda at Home and in the United States from 1914 to 1917, Cambridge 1935; G. Bruntz, Allied Propaganda and the Collapse of the German Empire in 1918, Stanford 1938; D.C. Watts (ed.), Hitler's Mein Kampf, London 1974, 161-169.

saw a large number of writings on the subject and a debate as to the exact nature of propaganda, a term with as many definitions as analysts.⁶

Not surprisingly, the concepts of 'citizenship' and 'education for democracy' found great vogue during this period, a response partly to the new electorate and partly to the totalitarian challenge to democratic ideas.⁷ The notion of citizenship proved especially attractive, tying as it did the new practice of a universal franchise to the more traditional values of duty and service. The adult education movement received considerable support, and in their desire to be seen as supporting this praiseworthy cause the political parties themselves established colleges and held summer schools where, so it was claimed, non-partisan courses on citizenship were given and the cause of political education upheld. Politicians openly espoused reason and education as the essence of democratic decision taking, legitimating their own creed as truth, and denigrating irrational propaganda.

Yet political parties still had to counter the arguments of their opponents, communicate their own message to the voters and win support, and behind the scenes the need for effective propaganda - an activity only occasionally hidden behind the more euphemistic word 'publicity' - was fully recognised. Whilst the Conservative Party,

6. C.F. Higham, Looking Forward, London 1920; L. Doob, Propaganda: Its Psychology and Technique, New York 1935; M. Garnett, 'Propaganda', Contemporary Review, May 1935, 574-582; O. Stapledon, 'Education and Propaganda', Adult Education, April 1935, 193-199; A. Huxley, 'Notes on Propaganda', Harper's Monthly Magazine, December 1936, 31-41; D.W. Harding, 'General Conceptions in the Study of the Press and Public Opinion', The Sociological Review, October 1937, 372-375; A.J. Mackenzie, Propaganda Boom, London 1938; S. Rogerson, Propaganda in the Next War, London 1938; F.C. Bartlett, Political Propaganda, Cambridge 1940.
7. L.P. Jacks, Constructive Citizenship, London 1927; E.D. Simon, 'Education for Democracy', The Political Quarterly, vol. 5 (1934), 307-322; E.M. Hubback, 'Education in Citizenship', Adult Education, vol. 7 (1934), 53-59; P. Doyle, 'Education in Democracy', Adult Education, vol. 8 (1936), 226-233. An Association for Education in Citizenship was formed in 1933-4.

fearing the effects of 'socialist' and 'communist' propaganda, awaited an electoral disaster that never came, the Labour Party explained away its lack of success at the polls as being, to a large extent, the effect of deeply rooted propaganda of the Right. A large section of the electorate was perceived as being both volatile and uncommitted to any one party. Public opinion polls and psephological studies did not yet exist to demonstrate to anxious politicians the proportion of voters who had rapidly attached themselves to one or another of the principal parties and so settled into established voting patterns. Thus a widespread belief in the propaganda of the opposition and in the volatility of the newly enfranchised, led, in the 1920s and 1930s, to increased experiments in and attempts at mass political persuasion. Propaganda was tacitly accepted as a necessary evil.

It is, perhaps, necessary to provide a brief definition of 'propaganda', although the term certainly did not have a uniform meaning amongst those who used it. In some instances, for example, it was used to refer to certain forms and techniques of persuasion, as well as to the aims which lay behind their use. In the present context, however, 'propaganda' is taken to be an attempt by one individual or group to instil in others such beliefs as the author intends, using the selection of facts, the inventions of fiction or the appeals of emotion, or a combination of the three, to this end. The purpose of political propaganda is thus to narrow the recipient's choice of options, in the taking of any decision, to one. By contrast the objective of education in abstract terms is to broaden the recipient's understanding of the available options, and to provide all pertinent facts and arguments, yet without expressing a preference or weighting the evidence. In practice it is clear that little education and less 'political' education falls within these terms. For whereas propaganda can be defined in reference to its aims alone, education requires some consideration to be given to both aims and implementation.

Accepting such definitions, the first point to be made is that

certain forms of propaganda were not necessarily incompatible with a rationalist democracy. Propaganda which consisted of the selection and interpretation of facts could be reconciled to a system which required them all to be available to the voter. Given a pluralist society, and a means of communication which reflected that pluralism fully and effectively, the different propaganda strands would merely form part of the greater educational effort. This was an idea which lay behind many of the early hopes for broadcasting as the perfecting element in democracy. In a politically conscious and critical democracy even appeals to emotion could be regarded as valuable indications of a party's outlook, and hence not necessarily unacceptable. The nature of the persuasion could be a useful guide to the mind which originated it.

Yet at the same time it must be said that few indeed of those involved in political propaganda in the inter-war years considered the existing channels of communication to be either adequate or effective, whilst even fewer welcomed the 'dishonest' propaganda of the opposition as the acceptable counterpart, the equivalent, to their own activities. In the development of their own publicity organisations and methods the objective was not just to reach the electorate, but also, if possible, to reach it either alone or in an overwhelming preponderance. It need hardly be said that the absence, failure or inferiority of an opponent's propaganda, when observed, was a cause for celebration and not regret.

The second point to be made is that although 'propaganda' was not by definition an activity conducted by the few towards the many, in the circumstances of their aims and objectives the political parties were primarily concerned with large scale propaganda efforts. Such undertakings were considerably more complex and uncertain than individual persuasion, because of the diverse character of the target, and the lack of precise knowledge about it. As already stated, the public opinion poll was quite unknown for most of the period. For this reason there was, where it could be afforded, considerable experimentation in technique, experimentation

exemplified by the various attempts to use the new mass medium of film for 'mass' propaganda. It might also be tentatively suggested that the complex nature of the audience for propaganda encouraged the use of fairly simple, emotional appeals, appeals that would be understood by a larger body of people than might be capable of assimilating a factual argument.

Nevertheless, although propaganda in democratic Britain involved a narrowing of thought for the recipient, it was intended by the principal parties essentially as a short cut to the electoral decision which rational thought would, more gradually, have reached. As such the emphasis on 'rational' political education was perfectly genuine. Power in democracy had, it was felt, to rest on popular conviction if it was to be sustained. It was therefore very necessary to back up propaganda with the political 'education' which each party confidently believed would confirm the already implanted conclusion. This somewhat naive idea in large measure absolved the political parties, at least in their own minds, from the opprobrium incurred by utilising propaganda.

The inter-war years saw an increasing recognition that effective democracy required effective communication. It was not surprising, therefore, that whilst the popular press was largely rejected as the medium for this communication, in view of its structure and ownership, the new media of broadcasting and film were considered to have great potential for the fulfilment of this role. The creators of the BBC believed that broadcasting could indeed provide an essential element in the democratic system, and worked to that end. A large proportion of this study is devoted to an analysis of their efforts, and of the tensions and theoretical contradictions which so frequently frustrated them in their objectives. It would also have been odd indeed if the political parties, so concerned to communicate their messages to an enormous audience, and in some cases almost equally concerned to prevent their opponents from so doing, had not recognised in broadcasting a tremendous force for good or evil. The story of the BBC and political presentation is therefore largely one

with that of the parties and broadcasting.

In the world of film the documentary movement, founded by John Grierson, professed similar aspirations. Its work, however, must on the whole be considered to have been outside the mainstream of political communication, and its audience strictly limited. In view of this, and of the already extensive writings on the documentary movement, no consideration of it has been made in the present work.⁸ Within the commercial film industry, however, the cinema newsreels both enjoyed a large audience and made some pretensions to covering the political scene. At the same time they were fully commercial operations, and this fact was, as with the press, to prove a critical influence upon their approach to political presentation.

The 1920s and 1930s were a period during which, within the dominant Right, fears as to the threat of civil disorder, political upheaval and the overthrow of democratic institutions was rife. The predominantly Conservative governments of the day were increasingly concerned to defend the established order against possible totalitarian alternatives. The wireless and film were considered to be powerful weapons in this fight, both for and against. In any case their unique and seemingly ethereal nature, infiltrating, as it appeared, beyond the level of conscious perception, gave them a particular mystique. Their peculiar potency as media for persuasion and the moulding of public opinion was never doubted. The Government consequently took an increasing interest in them, particularly in relation to the presentation of foreign and defence policy, using the excuse of 'national interest' to justify such intervention. The question must therefore be considered as to whether government actions could be described as censorship, the natural stablemate of propaganda.

8. See F. Hardy, John Grierson, London 1979; J. Grierson, Grierson on Documentary, London 1966 (revised edition); R. Low, The History of the British Film 1929-1939 - Documentary and Educational Films of the 1930s, London 1979; P. Swann, The British Documentary Film Movement, 1929-1946, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Leeds 1979.

The presentation of politics was an activity as old as society itself. In the inter-war years, however, the extension of the electorate and the perceived threat, both internal and external, to democracy itself, caused politicians, educationalists and those in control of the channels of communication, to consider it in a more serious and organised way than hitherto. The debate between propaganda and education was to be a practical as well as a theoretical one during this period, despite popular abhorrence of the former. For as Macgillivray of Scotland Yard asked John Buchan's hero, Richard Hannay,

Propaganda Dick, have you ever considered what a diabolical weapon that can be - using all the channels of modern publicity to poison and warp men's minds? It is the most dangerous thing on earth.

9. J. Buchan, The Three Hostages, London 1924, 53. John Buchan was particularly conscious of the power of propaganda, for he had been director of Lloyd George's Department of Information during the war, prior to the creation of a full Ministry of Information.

CHAPTER ONE

The Conservative Party and Party Publicity.

"Propaganda, now recognised as the world's most potent weapon
Our one great advantage: Wealth. Let us use it. Its expenditure
should be regarded as an insurance premium."

Notes for speech by Stanley Baldwin to Party
financial backers, March 1927.

"We are faced with the intensive propaganda of Socialism The
maintenance of an educated democracy depends on unceasing propaganda
pressed with vigour and enthusiasm, and at the same time directed
with a full and exact knowledge of the facts...."

Stanley Baldwin, in Politics in Review, 1934.

"The honourable gentleman knows that in present conditions,
unfortunately, political advertisement is necessary on the part of
every party. Some of us do it better than others [laughter and
cheers].

Stanley Baldwin, in the House of Commons, June
1935.

The extensions of the franchise in 1918 and 1928 received a mixed reaction from Conservative politicians, but left almost all deeply worried as to the Party's continuing electoral prospects. A general fear and suspicion of the rationality of the new electorate was widespread, and reports of voters' ignorance and gullibility circulated freely. As one commentator wrote in 1920:

There should be no delusions about the political prospects of the immediate future. All the recent by-elections have shown a tremendous landslide towards Labour, which demonstrates the extreme instability of the new electorate.¹

A comparative newcomer to the ranks of the Unionist peers, Lord Sydenham of Combe, believed that

The Government of all "advanced" States will ... pass into the nominal control of electoral mobs, which can construct nothing but may at any time destroy at the bidding of temporary passion,² or of artificially created misunderstanding.

Naturally the Conservative case was considered both rational and honestly presented, so that the voters' emotionalism was considered an electoral disadvantage. As Neville Chamberlain sadly told his diary,

the new electorate contains an immense mass of ignorant voters,

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1. J.B. Firth, 'The future of the Conservative Party', Fortnightly Review, vol. 113 (1920), 220. See also The Nineteenth Century and After, vol. 95 (1924), 12-13, and the Contemporary Review, vol. 125 (1924), 2, 13.
 2. The Nineteenth Century and After, vol. 103 (1928), 32 - 42.

of both sexes, whose intelligence is low and who have no power of weighing evidence.³

The Conservative MP Sir Henry Craik, speaking in 1912, saw nothing to be pleased about in the prospect of an enlarged franchise:

The one thing that is certain about this addition to the electorate is that its movements will be absolutely uncertain, that it may turn in favour of one party just as much as of another, that it will be moved by fitful and changeful impulses, and that it will be largely under the control of dexterous manipulation and careful Machiavellian electioneering dodges.⁴

The extension of the franchise to the working classes was seen as dangerous for the Party particularly because of the claim by Labour to represent the working man's cause. Austen Chamberlain, for example, believed that the name 'Labour' was 'an excellent electioneering asset,' and other Conservatives agreed.⁵ The female franchise was felt to be equally dangerous because of the supposed flightiness and extra gullibility of women. Sydenham continued:

We are being brought face to face with mob-psychology - largely feminine - as an ultimate determining force in national politics.⁶

That the women's vote was largely responsible for the 1923 election

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3. K. Feiling, Life of Neville Chamberlain, London 1946, 110.
 4. House of Commons Debates, 5th Series (hereafter H.C. Debates), vol. 39:col. 1414, 17 June 1912.
 5. The Contemporary Review, vol. 121 (1922), 300. See, however, Beatrice Webb's contrary view that "'Labour" cannot be a long-lived epithet, it smells too flagrantly of sectional interest.' - M.I. Cole (ed.), Beatrice Webb's Diaries 1924-1932, London 1956, 162, 14 February 1928.
 6. The Nineteenth Century and After, vol. 103 (1928), 32-42.

defeat was apparently 'well rubbed-in' in Conservative circles.⁷ Even J.C.C. Davidson, who was sympathetic to the women's cause and did much to improve the status of women within the party organisation, felt that

It is always unwise to forecast the result of an election, more especially nowadays when the women's vote is such an inconsistent factor.⁸

'Inconsistency' amongst the electorate was something that the Party, with its pre-war emphasis on party loyalty through regular registration campaigns, still at heart deplored, despite the fact that it was itself about to exploit this very fault of the voter through the party publicity developments of the inter-war decades. Neville Chamberlain was not the only senior Conservative politician to regret that

we may never get back to the old days when every little boy or girl was either a little Liberal or a little Conservative.⁹

To this general belief in the electors' volatility, in the ebb and flow of support between the parties, must be ascribed much of the determination with which certain party leaders and managers were to undertake the role of persuaders and educators to a mass audience. Philip Cambray, deputy head of the Conservative Central Office Publicity Department in 1927, stated the problem in his apologia for party persuasion, The Game of Politics:

Members [of Parliament] now face an electorate of forty to fifty

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7. K.W.D. Rolph, Tories, Tariffs and Elections, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Cambridge 1974, 140.
 8. J.C.C. Davidson papers, Davidson to R.T. Harper, 19 November 1923. These papers are as yet unindexed, and no more detailed reference is therefore possible.
 9. Neville Chamberlain papers, NC18/1/938, Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 9 November 1935.

thousand. In some constituencies it is even more numerous, and from one fifth to a quarter may change with every new register. The definite party 'fors' and 'againsts' form but a small part of the whole. Even in a well organised constituency, under present day conditions, the number of declared Party adherents forms a minority of the whole body of electors.¹⁰

His conclusion was natural and logical, and represented the view of others besides himself:

A commander in the field who, through unjustified scrupulousness, neglected to avail himself of every opening to defeat the enemy, would promptly and rightly be removed from his command. As the politician has the duty of defeating his opponent, so he also has the responsibility of preparing himself for the task which he has to perform.¹¹

The extension of the franchise thus necessarily affected the approach of the Party to political communication and persuasion. As the Party Chairman from 1926 to 1930, J.C.C. Davidson, told Baldwin in 1928,

Before the War it was possible with a limited and highly expert electorate to put forward Party programmes of a restricted and well defined character, but nowadays I am quite sure that while

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10. P. Cambray, The Game of Politics, London 1932, 8. This book, which was intended almost as a Clausewitz for politicians, certainly shows a well developed and not unsophisticated theory of the mechanics of political persuasion. Without over-emphasising the power of particular techniques or weapons, and recognising their limitations, Cambray makes considerable claims for the effectiveness of well planned party tactics and propaganda, in an attempt to arouse politicians to the need for a considered electoral strategy. Chapters include 'Propaganda Offensives', 'Futility of Defensives', 'The Value of Surprise', 'Concentration of Effort', and 'Weapons and Machinery in relation to Political Strategy'. Cambray had been a senior member of the Central Office Publicity Department since the war.
11. Ibid. 185.

not departing from the principles of our Party we must endeavour to gain the confidence not only of our own supporters but of the mugwump vote¹²

Such statements as to the uncommitted nature of the larger part of the electorate were not based on any poll or psephological study, but on ingrained beliefs as to the voting habits of the new electorate, and on observation of the changing fortunes of the three parties. Party managers' understanding of the electorate was not improved by the fact that after the 1918 Representation of the People Act the task of electoral registration was lifted from the parties and accepted as a duty of the state.¹³ The rapid abandonment of registration campaigns left the Conservative Party machinery available to pursue other means of obtaining and holding votes, and the relative importance of direct publicity campaigning within the work of the Party was thereby naturally increased. Direct publicity became more than ever necessary as a means of communicating with the electorate now that registration no longer provided such a point of contact between party and voter.

The 1918 and 1928 Acts had serious consequences for the Conservative Party's attitude to mass propaganda. So did the post-war rise of the Labour Party. Long before 1918 fears had been expressed about the new party's natural identification with the working classes, and its use of trades union organisation for furthering its support.¹⁴ But with the tremendous leap forward that Labour made in the 1922 General Election, gaining 142 seats, it became for the first time the true second party in parliament, and thereby the alternative party of government. More worryingly Labour polled only 1.5 million votes less than the Unionists, having put up more candidates than the

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12. Davidson papers, Davidson to Baldwin, 14 February 1928.
 13. D. Butler, The Electoral System in Britain since 1918, Oxford 1963, 8-9.
 14. J. Ramsden, The Age of Balfour and Baldwin 1902-1940, London 1978, 55.

Liberal Party. Indeed no fewer than 103 M.P.s of all parties were returned with majorities of less than 1,500.¹⁵ In 1923 the figure was to be 115. Never since then has the outcome of an election been decided on so few votes. Indeed it has been shown that with 8,000 votes less, split evenly between 37 select constituencies, the Unionists would not have had a parliamentary majority in 1922.¹⁶ In such circumstances it was justifiable to claim that the campaign had a very real likelihood of affecting the outcome. If it is now recognised that the Representation of the People Act of 1918 left the Unionists in a remarkably sound position as far as safe seats were concerned,¹⁷ this was not seen at the time, and nor was it obvious from the elections of 1922 and 1923.

Consequently there was a widespread fear and expectation of electoral defeat by Labour amongst Conservatives throughout the inter-war period, and notably in 1927-1929 and 1933-1935. As 'an enquirer' stated before the 1922 election,

'The appearance of an organised Labour Party, bidding frankly for the control of national Government remains the new factor of the election.'¹⁸

Following it the editorial of The Nation and Athenaeum declared that 'The Labour Party has at last achieved the promise of its second birth'.¹⁹ Although the Conservative Party leadership did not go as far as the Daily Mail in proclaiming that 'A vote for the Labour Party is a vote for Bolshevism', there is every reason to suppose that they were seriously worried by such an apparently inexorable

15. M.S.R. Kinnear, 'The British General Election of 1922', unpublished D.Phil. thesis, Oxford 1965, 228.

16. Ibid., 430.

17. M.S.R. Kinnear, The British Voter, London 1968, 72, 122-4.

18. The Nation and Athenaeum, 32 (1922), 149.

19. Ibid., 306-7.

rise. This was no short lived and passing fad. In Arthur Ponsonby's satisfied words it was

not due to any swing of the pendulum; it represents the steady,
continuous growth of a new force.²⁰

Increasingly the party battle was seen in terms of a socialist/anti-socialist axis, and as the Liberals slowly faded into insignificance the Conservatives made a conscious bid to pick up the remnants and their supporters. Thus Austen Chamberlain commented:

To those who feel that the Liberal party is without a future and will never again be in a position to form a Government, the great preoccupation must be how, in its gradual dissolution, we shall secure our share of its old supporters.²¹

The Labour and socialist movement was therefore seen to be destroying the traditional two party political system and, by 1924, one of the traditional parties themselves. It offered a threat both by its impressive rise and through what it stood for.²² These facts alone encouraged active counter-measures. But it also offered an object lesson to the Conservative Party in the methods by which it was seen to be reaching for power.²³ Henderson's propagandist machine was felt to be a new and effective force in political persuasion, and the pride which Labour leaders took in declaring theirs to be the most deliberately propagandist and educationalist party had its effect on their opponents. In 1929, for example, Neville Chamberlain explained the Party's defeat as the result of

20. Ibid., 347; Contemporary Review, 125 (1924), 11.
21. Evening News, 30 July 1924. Quoted by J. Ramsden (1978), Op. Cit., 199.
22. See for example an article by Walford P. Green, The Nineteenth Century and After, vol. 96 (1924), 741, 746.
23. See pp.140-141,145-147 below.

the ceaseless propaganda that has been going on among the working classes, to the effect that things would never be right for them till a 'Labour' government came in.²⁴

An editorial in The Times in 1924 stated that

no body of politicians in this country has ever had a shrewder idea of the value of propaganda, written and spoken, than the organisers of the Labour Party.²⁵

This point was not lost upon Conservatives, and they reacted accordingly. The Party was to prove itself ready, throughout the period of study and subsequently, both to accept responsibility for its own electoral failure when necessary, and to adapt to the new conditions. Having identified external factors, its leaders turned inwards in order to analyse the inadequacies of its policies, methods and organisation. Thus Matthew, McKibbin and Kay have argued that although

the Liberals were wedded to the forms of the 1867-1914 political community ... the ideologies of both the Labour and Conservative parties made them better able to exploit a fully democratic franchise.²⁶

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24. K. Feiling, Op. Cit., 168.
25. The Times 22 September 1924, 13c. The editorial concluded by warning the Conservative and Liberal Parties that 'the Labour Party is very much awake and is prepared to make as much capital as it can out of its period of office. The Opposition has a good case to present to the country; but the best case in the world will go by default if it is not disseminated widely enough. There may be no need to copy the Labour Party's methods of propaganda; but from a national point of view it is surely important that the argument for the Opposition should be as accessible to the electorate as is the argument for the Government.'
26. H.C.G. Matthew, R.I. McKibbin, J.A. Kay, 'The Franchise Factor in the rise of the Labour Party', English Historical Review, vol. 91 (1976), 723.

They conclude that it was for this reason that 'the future lay between two distinctly popular parties'.²⁷ John Ramsden likewise makes the point that

The conscious rejection of ideology by British Conservatives has indeed been one of their most distinctive features, and arguably one of the reasons for their long term success It was this readiness to subordinate policy and ideology to the drive for power that enabled the party leaders to draw their followers steadily to the left, never quite losing touch with the currents of popular opinion, for this was the means to power.²⁸

Thus paradoxically Conservatives made a virtue out of progressive concession.

The progressiveness, however, came predominantly from the head, and the concession was to a large extent wrung from the body of the Party. The reaction against organisational change, inevitable within a conservative party but equally present within the Labour, manifested itself, for example, in disagreements between the completely independent local constituency associations and the centre. Indeed this problem was to be a continuing source of irritation and a hindrance to the development of party organisation as envisaged by successive central party managers. By the mid 1920s ways were being sought to circumvent parts of the organisation which were behind in development. From 1931 onwards a group at the centre of party affairs was attracted to the National Government idea, and the attendant concept of a centralised 'national' organisation, in the hope of achieving precisely that end, thereby calling down upon themselves a confusing mixture of praise and alarmed objection. Indeed, as early as 1923, following his own narrow personal election defeat, J.C.C. Davidson had begun to entertain such ideas. His plans for party reorganisation included

27. Ibid., 749-50.

28. J. Ramsden (1978), Op. Cit., x-xi.

- A) the Central Office carrying out its normal functions, only with much more drive and enthusiasm, working through and with local associations in the constituencies, and
- B) an outside organisation carrying out national propaganda, financed by a fighting fund to be raised by the same methods as some of the great cities have raised funds to fight Socialists in municipal and parliamentary elections ... that fund should provide paid organisers to carry out educational propaganda of a non-party character.²⁹

Such proposals were to recur. Indeed the emphasis on 'non-party' anti-socialist propaganda was a common one. If it was somewhat naive to believe that such propaganda could be non-partisan, the desire nevertheless carried a clear message for 1931. Under Baldwin, and with support from Davidson, the Party was guided towards a more centrist political image as a conscious attempt to appeal to the middle and working classes. As Davidson told Baldwin in February 1928,

If our strength in the country is to be maintained and we are to win over to our support the majority of the politically uneducated electorate, we must combine intensive political education with the appeal that the present Government pursues a policy which is in the interests of every class of the community, and in fact is national and imperial and not party.³⁰

This aim coincided excellently with Baldwin's own stance and with his style as the man of reason, honesty, integrity and stability. Baldwin was the Party's leader from 1923 to 1937, and his public image of a straightforward Englishman has become legendary, and has been frequently copied.³¹ It was ideally suited to the coming of

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29. R.R. James, Memoirs of a Conservative, London 1969, 191-2.
30. Davidson papers, Davidson to Baldwin, 14 February 1928.
31. K. Middlemas and J. Barnes, Baldwin, London 1969, 501-4. The last question which Robin Day asked Mr. Callaghan on 'Campaign

the mass media style of persuasion. Not only was the message an electorally appealing and catholic one, well to the left in the Party, but the medium of the man was also excellent. His quiet but determined voice, his contrast with the oratorical excesses of Lloyd George, his ability to paint brilliant word pictures of abstract concepts such as tradition, duty and English character, stood him in good stead in his personal appearances and his radio broadcasts. He was photogenic - in a more immediate and obvious way, for example, than Neville Chamberlain or Clement Attlee - and this again was an invaluable electoral asset, both when reproduced on leaflets and posters and when he appeared on film.³² In his pipe he had an instantly identifiable 'prop', only later equalled in value by Churchill's cigar and Harold Wilson's pipe and Gannex, and cameramen and cartoonists made full use of this image identifier. Both his voice and his appearance mirrored his overall political image which was instantly recognisable, beautifully simple, and one with which it was all too easy to associate. His style was at the time described as 'piano'.³³ This ability of Baldwin to be himself an immediate symbol of all he represented was just what was needed in an age which was increasingly coming to appreciate and use instant images as attitude formers.³⁴ Baldwin was well aware of this and, more than many party leaders, was concerned about the need for his party to undertake the political education and persuasion of the people. Many

'79', the evening before the 1979 General Election poll, was whether he believed himself to resemble Stanley Baldwin.

32. Baldwin himself disliked intensely the necessity of making film appearances and avoided it whenever possible. 'More difficult than trying to extract blood from a stone' was how the Party's film adviser described persuading Baldwin to make a film speech. His performances, however, were always impressive, no doubt aided by his use of an early version of the 'rolling autocue', which the Party's film crew devised for his benefit. Thus he could appear to speak from the heart whilst actually reading a prepared statement. But he found it a nerve-racking process, and after each 'take' would bury his face in his hands - S. Chesmore, Behind the Cinema Screen, London 1934, 58.
33. The Times, 21 May 1929, 15d.
34. D. Southgate, The Conservative Leadership, London 1974, 197-8.

of his books of speeches, which were themselves used as party propaganda and sold in considerable quantities, include reference to this.³⁵ After the 1923 defeat he personally involved himself in preparing the Party for the next election, believing that the war had left people particularly susceptible to the presentation of ideologies such as socialism, and that appeals must therefore be made both to the head and to the heart of the electorate.³⁶ Indeed it is clear that he and his closest supporters made use of his acknowledged position as a valuable electoral asset in order to consolidate his hold upon the leadership of the Party.³⁷

Baldwin recognised the inevitability, the necessity and the justice of franchise extension, declaring that 'the franchise has become a right'. Nevertheless he too feared the mass electorate. All the justifiable qualms of liberal rationalism were summed up in 1928, when he wrote:

Democracy has arrived at a gallop in England and I feel all the time that it is a race for life; can we educate them before the crash comes?³⁸

He believed that 'the status of our electorate has got a little bit ahead of its culture', and that 'the greatest work of all that lies

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35. For example S. Baldwin, 'Our Inheritance', London 1928, 8, 13, 29-36.
36. Middlemas and Barnes, Op. Cit., 264-6. At the party meeting at the Hotel Cecil, 11 February 1924, Baldwin reminded his audience of the extension of the electorate and declared; 'Old cries, old methods, may be equally useless in new conditions and against new enemies, and I do not think to an old electioneer - and most of us are old electioneers - there is any one phenomenon more striking than the impossibility both in the election of 1922 and in the one which has just taken place of any even approximately accurate forecast being made of the result by the most experienced electioneers [sic]'- Gleanings and Memoranda, March 1924, 231.
37. J. Ramsden, The organisation of the Conservative and Unionist Party in Britain, 1910 - 1930, D.Phil.thesis, Oxford 1974, 96.
38. K. Middlemas and J. Barnes, Op. Cit., 503.

before us is to make democracy fit for its task'.³⁹ He justified 'political education' - the arousing of the political consciousness of the people and their provision with 'knowledge' for the taking of political decisions - for the reason that

there are large masses in this country who have not, from the nature of things, yet had time to develop a keen political sense themselves. And they are only too prone to be led away by really skilful and clever propaganda designed by appealing to their better qualities, to lead them to ends they would be the last to desire if they realised what those ends were.⁴⁰

Yet it seems doubtful whether, in arousing the political consciousness of the electorate, either he or his Conservative colleagues ever considered that the recognised and valid distinction between provision of knowledge and subjective interpretation of it was either necessary or relevant as far as their own 'political education' was concerned. That he could argue, in opening the Party's political college in 1923, that the lecturers there had been chosen not to give propaganda but to speak the truth, demonstrated not hypocrisy or naivety regarding the nature of objectivity, but a firm belief that the obvious conviction of those who supported the Conservative cause made the subjective communication of evidence justifiable.⁴¹ The only questions that were relevant were ones of degree and method, and it is to these that we must now turn, looking first, briefly, at the pre-war situation.

The National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations and Conservative Central Office had been established in 1867 and 1870 respectively, and under John Gorst began the adaptation of the Party to modern conditions. Progress, however, was slow and the considerable electoral success of the Party in the latter part of

39. S. Baldwin (1928), Op. Cit., 29.

40. Ibid., 30.

41. S. Baldwin, On England, London 1926, 156.

the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries made any radical and rapid reorganisation appear superfluous. In the first decade of the new century certain old-fashioned individuals, such as Balfour and his Chief Whip and Central Office controller, Sir Alexander Ac land-Hood, hindered organisational progress. At the same time internal party dissensions, arising from dissatisfaction with the direction of the Party, led to factiousness and confusion in the organisation.⁴²

The disastrous and frustrating elections of 1906 and 1910, however, demonstrated clearly the parlous condition of the Party and the necessity for extreme measures to put it once again on the path where lay electors' votes. The replacement of Balfour by Bonar Law, of Ac land-Hood by Steel-Maitland, and the appointment and report of the Unionist Organisation Committee in 1911 were the first signs of the new broom that would sweep the Party and prepare it for the organisational demands of the twentieth century. The 1911 reorganisation was of great significance for the structure, working, and organisational efficiency of the Conservative Party from that date until the Maxwell Fyfe reforms of 1948, and it provided the organisational basis for a new approach to party propaganda.

Some developments had, of course, already been made in order to take account of the increased electorate. An army of 160 speakers had been employed to proclaim the party's message throughout the country. To transport them Central Office had acquired a fleet of 42 motor vans. Gramophone records with a propaganda message were being sold, and large scale if ponderous leafleteering utilised, 40 million leaflets being distributed at each of the General Elections of 1910. In 1910 there was appointed as press adviser to Central Office Sir Malcolm Fraser, thereby placing party management of, and relations with, the press on an immeasurably more professional basis than previously.⁴³

42. R.B. Jones, The Conservative Party 1906-1911, unpublished D.Phil.thesis, Oxford 1960, passim.

43. J. Ramsden, The organisation of the Conservative Party, Op. Cit., 215, 263.

The 1911 reorganisation, however, was significant as a conscious recognition of the new requirements for a mass party with a popular base. It represented a step away from traditional dependence upon registration campaigns and the party loyalty and constancy of electors as the principal determinants of the outcome of an election. It was a move towards a more positive form of political propaganda aimed not only to bring out the known Conservative voters but also to convert others from their previous allegiance, and to catch the newly enfranchised. Perhaps above all it was the first of a series of reorganisations which gradually increased the importance of central control over electoral propaganda management, even when so much of this propaganda was ultimately only carried out with the assent and assistance of the local parties themselves. Amongst its recommendations were the creation of the new post of Party Chairman to take charge of the Party outside parliament, including Central Office, a treasurer to raise funds, the reabsorption by Central Office of certain functions of the National Union, including the publication of literature and organisation of the Party's professional speakers, and the rapid reform of the local parties, putting them on a more permanent basis and with a more conscious responsibility for active propaganda.

Firstly under Balfour and then under Bonar Law the newly appointed Party Chairman, Arthur Steel-Maitland, began the implementation of the 1911 recommendations. Ramsden describes the extent of this pre-war reorganisation, and it is evident that, although 1914 found the Party still in the process of reform, much had already been achieved. The financial independence of the local constituency parties, however, still made thorough reorganisation from the centre difficult to carry through.⁴⁴

Although the First World War did not seriously disorder the party machinery in the way that the Second did, party publicity does seem

44. J. Ramsden (1978), *Op. Cit.*, 70-72, 102-105. For details of the pre-war developments I have relied heavily on this work.

to have suffered, and it suffered even more during the succeeding coalition years, when confusion over the direction the Party was taking was reflected in a partial regression in its organisation. One section affected was the Literature Department; it managed to produce only five million leaflets for the 1918 election and only just over one million in 1919.⁴⁵ Constituency parties lacked the finance to purchase large quantities of literature, the journal Gleanings and Memoranda was poorly subscribed, and no posters were produced in the latter year.⁴⁶ This failure to meet the requirements for the new electorate was exacerbated by the short notice at which the 1922 and 1923 elections were held, thereby leaving little time for the production of adequate and appropriate propaganda literature.

Relations with the press were also damaged whilst the Party was a member of the coalition. Although Unionist papers predominated within the press, they were virtually united in support of diehard opposition to the continuation of the coalition, only the Daily Telegraph⁴⁷ upholding the pro-coalition stance of the party leaders. The Party had put considerable amounts of money into the press before the war, most notably for Max Aitken's purchase of the Daily Express, but it was now increasingly felt that it was not receiving the return it might have expected. Following the collapse of the coalition in 1922 a large proportion of the press supported the new Unionist government, but the uncertainty of its allegiance was demonstrated by its coolness and even hostility to the Tariff election of barely a year later. Central Office was well aware of this fragile relationship, most particularly with the press barons: 'R[othermere] is going to advise all Conservatives not to vote',

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45. National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations (hereafter NUCUA), Report of Executive Committee to Central Council, 11 March 1919; Report of Publications Sub-Committee to Executive Committee, 18 November 1919.
46. NUCUA, Report of Publications Sub-Committee to Executive Committee, 18 November 1919; Report of Executive Committee to Central Council, 18 November 1919.
47. J. Ramsden (1978), Op. Cit., 148.

J.C.C. Davidson informed the Party Chairman, Lt. Col. Stanley Jackson, in November 1923.⁴⁸ The disloyalty of the Daily Express was the cause of many angry words about it and its owner at Central Office in the early 1920s. Difficulties were such that, despite the general support of the Rothermere and Beaverbrook press in the 1924 election, Central Office broke off relations with the Daily Express the following year, and this situation continued for two years.⁴⁹

As the decade progressed party managers became increasingly concerned at the Party's apparently reduced influence over the press. Such a term was, of course, relative. In 1927, despite the decline of the provincial press,⁵⁰ Conservative Central Office still provided articles and editorials for, or managed,⁵¹ 230 newspapers. Of the newspaper magnates the Conservatives could rely upon the support of the Berry brothers, and especially Sir William Berry, created Lord Camrose in 1929 for services to the Party.⁵² But it was Rothermere and Beaverbrook, ever extending their press domains and ever increasing the proportion of the press audience reading their newspapers, who continued to be a source of worry to J.C.C. Davidson as Party Chairman in the later 1920s, even before the almost irreconcilable differences created by the Empire Free Trade issue of the early 1930s. Thomas Marlowe, recently editor of Rothermere's Daily Mail, told Davidson in September 1927 that Rothermere and Beaverbrook intended to stab Baldwin in the back and support Lloyd George.⁵³ Rothermere's 'defection' to Lloyd George was confirmed

48. Davidson papers, Davidson to S. Jackson, 24 November 1923.

49. J. Ramsden (1978), Op. Cit., 233.

50. C. Seymour Ure, 'The Press and the Party System between the Wars', in G. Peele and C. Cook (ed.), The Politics of Reappraisal, London 1975, 233-5.

51. Baldwin papers, Bal. 53/ff108-113, Report on Conservative Organisation at Central Office and in the Constituencies during 1927.

52. R.R. James, Op. Cit., 292-297.

53. Davidson papers, note by J.C.C.D., 24 September 1927.

for Davidson by Sir William Berry the following year.⁵⁴ Only three months later Davidson had reliable information that Rothermere was⁵⁵ threatening to support the Labour Party at the coming election. As late as March 1929 relations between the Conservative Party and this potentially politically valuable or dangerous individual, whom Davidson had done much to pacify, were still sufficiently uncertain for a rumour, that Rothermere had given a quarter of a million pounds to the Labour Party's election fund, to be seriously discussed by Baldwin.⁵⁶ In the event Beaverbrook proved more generally friendly, and Rothermere less positively hostile to the Party until after the 1929 election than party leaders feared. Nevertheless the fact remains that there existed considerable concern for the allegiance of the most important sections of the national press and for the potential damage to the Party's fortunes that might result from a serious rift, and this fear did much to determine the actions of party managers throughout the inter-war period.

The Party's professional speakers were also not providing an adequate service, or so it was felt.⁵⁷ Following the rise of Labour, a party which emphasised the value of its propagandists as educators, the emotional tub-thumping of the full-time Conservative speakers and missionaries was seen to be quite inappropriate to meet this new challenge. Increasingly during the 1920s these paid speakers gained the reputation of being something of a liability to the Party.⁵⁸ A hold-over from the days when politicians employed others to speak for them, they were felt, in the 'new Conservatism' of the

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54. Davidson papers, J.C.C.D to Lord Irwin, 7 June 1928. Davidson's conclusion from this was that Beaverbrook would be forced to support the Conservative Party.
55. Davidson papers, J.C.C.D. to Baldwin, 13 September 1928.
56. T. Jones, A Whitehall Diary, London 1969, 174.
57. See for example Conservative Agents' Journal, October 1922.
58. Davidson noted in 1928 for Baldwin: 'What is being done to improve our speakers? Numerous complaints of quality.' - Davidson papers, undated memorandum entitled "M's attitude".

Baldwin age, to present an old and damaging image of the Party to the world, and constituency associations proved increasingly reluctant to use them.⁵⁹

Organisationally, therefore, the Conservative Party in the early 1920s was strong but not without its weaknesses. Although there was remarkably little criticism of the party machinery by disappointed politicians and party workers following the 1923 defeat, the replacement of Admiral Sir Reginald Hall as Principal Agent by an organisational expert, Herbert Blain, indicated a recognition that considerable improvement was possible. Publicity developments had followed the pre-war initiative but had as yet to prove wholly satisfactory. Press relations were far from satisfactory, and already party managers were noting with some alarm the decline of the independent provincial press and its absorption within the cartels of those two most unreliable of party supporters, Lords Rothermere and Beaverbrook.

Two individuals, J.C.C. Davidson and Joseph Ball, must receive special attention in any account of the Party's development of publicity. It was their attitudes and activities which, more than those of any other person, governed the future techniques of persuasion that the Party would employ. If Baldwin provided the unique political style and message, it was Davidson and Ball who decided how that style would be used, how presented to the public, how stage managed. Under Davidson the task of party publicity acquired a new importance in the business of Central Office. Under Ball the efficiency and drive of the party publicity machine reached new heights.

Davidson was Chairman of the Party from November 1926 to May 1930. A close friend and protégé of Baldwin, he had been Private Secretary to Lord Crewe, Lewis Harcourt, Baldwin and Bonar Law, and sat in parliament for Hemel Hempstead from 1920 to 1923 and 1924 to

59. J. Ramsden, *The Organisation of the Conservative Party*, Op. Cit., 245.

1937. He was Parliamentary Secretary to the Admiralty immediately prior to his appointment as Party Chairman. A fervent party man and even more devoted to Baldwin, young, eager and determined, he was convinced of the need to pull the organisation into line with modern conditions. With a harshness typical of the Conservative Party in defeat he was made a scapegoat for the failure of 1929 and for the succeeding tensions in the Party, and was more or less forced from office. This was not fully deserved, for whilst chairman he initiated radical alterations and improvements in organisation and publicity which not only helped to minimise that defeat, but also to put the party organisation on a more stable footing for the future. When he left Central Office there was still much to be done, and it must be said that his over sensitive personality, which led him to react too strongly to criticism, created many problems in the efficient working of the party machine. Nevertheless his achievements were many and, in the area of publicity, of extreme importance. By 1928 Baldwin could declare that

I believe our organisation today is better than it has ever been at Headquarters and in the country.⁶⁰

Davidson took an active interest in party publicity as early as 1923, after the electoral defeat of that year and three years before becoming Chairman. Indeed it is interesting to note that both he and his successor as Chairman, Neville Chamberlain, who also took a close interest in organisation and publicity, suffered personal defeat or near defeat in elections during the 1920s. Davidson lost his seat in 1923 by an infuriating 17 votes, whilst Chamberlain just managed to retain Birmingham Ladywood in 1924 against the formidable opposition⁶¹ of Oswald Mosley, holding on by a narrow 77 majority. Whether or not these close personal shaves influenced their views on the need for publicity and organisation, they were not alone in the Conservative hierarchy in urging such necessities. Robert Topping,

60. The Times, 28 September, 7d.

61. R.R. James, Op. Cit., 188-9; K. Feiling, Op. Cit., 117.

for example, soon to be Principal Agent and then General Director at Central Office, felt equally strongly about the importance of continuous 'Organisation and Propaganda'.⁶² Pembroke Wicks, a senior official in the Chairman's Office at Central Office, likewise gave this advice to Davidson four months before he became Chairman:

Whilst it is true that the superficial character of the modern electorate renders them particularly liable to be swayed by election cries and eleventh-hour proposals, it is equally true that it is far less easy, with an electorate of modern dimensions, to make up for lost time in propounding a real policy at a General Election unless ample time has been given for the principle upon which that policy is based to be assimilated by the public.⁶³

The point all stressed was that preparation should begin immediately and be continuous.

Davidson acted rapidly, dismissing Herbert Blain as Chief Agent and appointing Sir Leigh Maclachan in his place. He later recorded that

This was in order that I could do what I thought was necessary in the party organisation - divide information and publicity from the duties of the Chief Agent whose job was organisational.⁶⁴

This division automatically raised the work of publicity in comparison with the other work of the Chief Agent, who had until now been the undisputed head of the party machine. Now Davidson on his own initiative split the work of Central Office into 'Organisation' and 'Operations', with Joseph Ball in charge of the latter as the new

62. J. Ramsden (1978), Op. Cit., 229.

63. Davidson papers, Wicks to J.C.C.D., 6 July 1926.

64. R.R. James, Op. Cit., 266.

Director of Publicity. Moreover Davidson himself showed a greater interest in Operations. He appointed a Deputy Chairman, Lord Strathcona, to take responsibility for the organisation side so that, in Ball's words,

The Chairman ... would devote himself mainly to the supervision of operational matters, eg. plans generally, publicity, propaganda, research, information, education and training; matters with regard to which I should be still, as I am now, directly responsible to him.⁶⁵

In November 1927 Davidson decided to undertake a thorough investigation of party organisation, and the committee he appointed to do this reported in December. Its main recommendations reinforced the new importance of publicity by suggesting a tripartite system in which the Principal Agent, the Director of Publicity and the Office Controller should have equal status under the Chairman and Deputy Chairman.⁶⁶ It also advised the removal of certain undesirable elements from Central Office, individuals whose views on propaganda did not suit the Party's desired image of truth and straightforwardness in its political education. Davidson was later to stress that the propaganda he made use of was honest:

I did not agree with untrue propaganda, nor white lies or overstatement of the truth I took the Information and Propaganda machinery out of the hands of the Principal Agent, and put the task into the hands of people whose sole job was to put forward the policy of the Party truthfully and factually.⁶⁷

The man Davidson chose for this crucial post was Major (George)

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65. Davidson papers, Ball to Strathcona, 17 May 1927.
66. Davidson papers, Report of Conservative Central Office Reorganisation Committee, 20 December 1927.
67. R.R. James, Op. Cit., 270. The particular undesirable was Philip Cambray, whose internal intriguing and underhand electoral tactics exceeded what Davidson was prepared to tolerate.

Joseph Ball, by subsequent reputation a curious choice if truth and straight dealing were the prime requirements. For a man about whom so little is known Ball has become notorious, infamous even, as 'a highly experienced behind-the-scenes-operator the classic Tory "éminence grise"⁶⁸, an 'enigmatic' and 'slightly sinister' man⁶⁹ whose 'strong suits were conspiracy and unscrupulousness'. Davidson himself knew that

Ball has had as much experience as anyone I know in the seamy side of life and the handling of crooks.⁷⁰

Ball's background was in military intelligence, having joined MI5 in 1913 and after the war become Civil Assistant to the Director of Military Operations at the War Office immediately prior to being recruited for the Conservative Party. Davidson and he had met during the war in the course of Davidson's duties as a link between Bonar Law and the Secret Service. Indeed Ball maintained contacts with military intelligence while at Central Office.⁷¹ It seems possible that Ball first made proposals for the reorganisation of the Party's publicity in 1924 and that Davidson recommended him to the then Chairman, Jackson, as 'a first class man'.⁷² Although opinion differs as to precisely when he joined Central Office,⁷³ by

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68. L. Chester, H. Young., S. Fay, The Zinoviev Letter, London 1967, 162.
69. B. Page, D. Leitch, P. Knightley, Philby, London 1977, 88-9.
70. R.R. James, Op. Cit., 272.
71. In March 1938, for example, Ball obtained an intriguing dossier on communist activities and labour incitement in Trinidad. This he sent to a friend in military intelligence, and received the reply that this information had already been obtained from other sources. - Conservative Research Department papers, Trinidad Labour Troubles file, March - July 1938.
72. Davidson papers, J.C.C.D. to Jackson, 2 January 1924.
73. J. Ramsden (1978), Op. Cit., 197, suggests that he came to Central Office in 1924. Percy Cohen, who worked for the Party

February 1927 he had been appointed to the newly created post of Director of Publicity, a position in which he exceeded all expectations.

The new status of publicity and the success of Ball was illustrated early in 1928 when Davidson decided to get rid of Maclachlan as Principal Agent. 'Mac', one of the old school of agents and close to retiring age, had shown himself to be:

1. Jealous of D[irector] of P[ublicity] and Miss Maxse and women generally;
2. Ignorant of possibilities of new forms of propaganda;
3. Blind to the increasing importance of women and their vote;
- 6. Opposed to education altogether in any shape or form.

Accordingly both Neville Chamberlain and Lord Younger, the Party Treasurer, strongly recommended Ball for a suitable replacement, as being 'head and shoulders' above anyone else.⁷⁴ Davidson, however, was unwilling to lose such an ideal Director of Publicity:⁷⁵

I regard the progressive improvement of propaganda, which has undoubtedly enormously improved during the last year, as a vital factor in the winning of the next election. That improvement and development is due in detail entirely to Ball.⁷⁶

The Deputy Chairman, Lord Stanley, agreed that

from 1911 to 1959, denies this categorically and states that he was appointed in 1927 over Philip Cambray, to whom he was at no stage subordinate. Other evidence found tends to support this view.

74. Davidson papers, undated memorandum entitled "'M's' attitude". Miss Marjorie Maxse was Women's Officer at Central Office and, from 1928, Deputy Principal Agent.
75. Davidson papers, J.C.C.D. to Lord Stanley, 25 January 1928.
76. Ibid.

the publicity side of the office is just as important as the agent's side, if not more so.⁷⁷

Accordingly Robert Topping was appointed instead of Ball.

Ball's intelligence experience was put to good use, as Davidson recorded:

With Joseph Ball I ran a little intelligence service of our own, quite separate from the Party organisation. We had agents in certain key centres and we also had agents actually in the Labour Party Headquarters, with the result that we got their reports on political feeling in the country as well as our own. We also got advance "pulls" of their literature This was of enormous value to us because we were able to study the Labour Party policy in advance and in the case of leaflets we could produce a reply to appear simultaneously with their production.⁷⁸

Another valuable quality of Ball's was that 'He was a man who was always intriguing and who knew how to make contacts'.⁷⁹ As one colleague put it, 'Ball knew how to make a friendship at the top quick'.⁸⁰ This was useful both in gaining the support and trust of his political masters - he was intimate both with Baldwin and above all with Neville Chamberlain, whose right-hand man he was to become

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77. Davidson papers, Stanley to J.C.C.D., 27 January 1928.
78. R.R. James, Op. Cit., 272. A possible example of this spy system, which existed during the 1930s also, occurred in November 1935. From a letter in the Conservative Research Department files it would appear that Ball knew the text of Arthur Greenwood's election broadcast in advance, for he asked the Ministry of Health to provide a reply for Sir Kingsley Wood to a specific point made by Greenwood, several hours before Greenwood spoke. - Conservative Research Department papers, 1935 General Election - Press Publicity file, A.N. Rucker (Ministry of Health) to Ball, 4 November 1935.
79. A. Beichmann, 'Hugger-Mugger in Old Queen Street', Journal of Contemporary History, vol. 13 (1978), 681.
80. Percy Cohen in interview with author, 20 April 1979.

in the 1930s - and in gaining support and trust from those in influence outside the Party, a skill in which Ball prided himself.⁸¹

Thus Davidson and Ball complemented each other in their determination to make the best possible use of party propaganda. It was at this time that advertising agencies were first employed on a professional basis. Once again Davidson had already suggested using an advertising man to design the party's manifesto in 1923⁸², and when he became Chairman first the Holford-Bottomley Advertising Service, and then S.H. Benson, the large advertising agency best known for its Guinnessⁿ contract, were employed on poster and leaflet work, most notably for the 1929 election.⁸³ The Party additionally had informal contacts with other advertising agencies, and when Sir Patrick Gower joined Central Office as Deputy Chief Publicity Officer in 1928 his friendship with Sir Charles Higham reinforced these contacts.⁸⁴ The Party was to use Benson's again for poster work in the 1931 and 1935 elections. It also employed a smaller agency, 'Press Secretaries Ltd.', who actually installed one of their directors and one or two of their staff in Central Office on a full-time basis, to produce certain regular party journals.⁸⁵

Professionalism was the order of the day, but central to any expansion of propaganda activities was the question of finance. Since 1918 the Party had suffered considerable difficulties, firstly under

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81. He was particularly confident of his infiltration of the commercial cinema industry. See pp.663-664 below. For further details of Joseph Ball see note A at the end of chapter, p.109.
82. Davidson papers, J.C.C.D. to Admiral Hall, 13 November 1923.
83. Conservative Central Office papers (hereafter CCO), CCO4/1/20, Bottomley Advertising Service file. Bottomley's had been used occasionally before, but not on a regular basis; Percy Cohen to author, 20 April 1979.
84. When Gower left Central Office in 1939 he became Chairman of Higham's.
85. Percy Cohen to author, 20 April 1979.

the later treasurership of Lord Farquhar (Party Treasurer 1911-22), and then during the chairmanship of Sir Stanley Jackson (1923-26).⁸⁶ Although the Conservatives never suffered the same difficulties as Labour, or the Liberal Party when the Lloyd George fund was withheld from it, it was often a slow and complex task to extract money from the Party's various sources, particularly as the sale of honours was increasingly frowned upon by Davidson and Baldwin. Davidson, however, proved to be an excellent fund-raiser, and later claimed that he had raised over a million pounds in three years.⁸⁷ His particular skill was in 'milking' the City, and it was in preparation for what was probably the first of such fund raising campaigns, in March 1927, that either he or Ball set out in note form the attitudes that were to guide them and the party in publicity matters over the succeeding years. Davidson was just beginning his tenure as Chairman and clearly felt the importance of his proposals. Accordingly he arranged a dinner to be held at the home of Lord Tredegar to which various eminent and wealthy businessmen would be invited, subsequently to be addressed by Ball, himself and Baldwin, with a view to establishing a fund with which to fight socialism. Ball was to set the scene with a description of the dangers of the existing situation and the activities of their socialist opponents:

1. 1924 Election Results; seats, votes, labour increases, graphs.
2. Revolutionary tail wags Labour dog, e.g. General Strike, Coal Strike, China.
3. Efforts of opponents:
 - a) Elaborate S.S. (FBA, VDA, and thirty other ramifications).
 - b) Labour Educational Activities.
 - c) Intensive propaganda by outside committees, Communists, National Minority Movement, I.L.P., Daily Herald, Lansbury's Labour Weekly, Arcos Information Department, Sunday Worker, Young Communists' League, Labour Monthly, United Press Association of USA, and many others.

86. J. Ramsden (1978), Op. Cit., 170, 219.

87. R.R. James Op. Cit., 289-90.

4. Funds at disposal of enemy:
 - a) Trade Union levies. b) Co-operative subscriptions
 - c) Moscow propaganda fund d) Special education funds
5. Dice at present loaded against us⁸⁸

The conclusion to be drawn and emphasised from this analysis was that:

Our only hope at the next Election lies in an intensive propaganda campaign, carefully planned and co-ordinated on the most modern lines.

Davidson's speech was to follow, outlining the details of the proposed counter-campaign, and the notes for it deserve to be quoted at length in order to illustrate the comprehensive and ambitious nature of his thinking:

1. Necessity of reaching the uncoⁿverted and the opponent.
2. Methods of reaching the uncoⁿverted:
 - a) At home: by the morning paper, leaflets, broadsheets.
 - b) On the way to work: Advertisements and posters on vehicles, station platforms, etc.
 - c) At Work: Our own propagandists among the workmen, armed with information and with free leaflets and broadsheets.
 - d) During the dinner hour: Out-door speakers and distribution of leaflets.
 - e) After working hours: Cinema vans, out-door meetings and such Empire and patriotic propaganda as can be arranged at cinemas and places of amusement generally.
 - f) Saturday afternoons: At football matches - leaflets, advertisements, sky signs, community singing.
 - g) On Sundays: Extensive use of the Sunday Press and Saturday distribution of leaflets.

88. Davidson papers, undated, unsigned notes for speech contained in correspondence, February-March 1927. I have been unable to interpret the initials S.S. (Secret Service?), F.B.A. and V.D.A.

3. For agricultural constituencies: Cinema vans, missionaries, posters and leaflets. Local press advertisements, correspondence and possible subsidies.
4. General education: a) Stott College as a Staff College. b) Summer Schools. c) Study circles d) Local training centres for speakers, canvassers and other party workers. e) Correspondence classes for workers. f) Travel Bureau.⁸⁹

Finally Baldwin was to sum up with one of his 'inimitable little speeches so free from party bias'.⁹⁰ He was to point out

The effect of propaganda, now recognised as the world's most potent weapon.

Once again there was the suggestion of an additional anti-socialist 'educational campaign' to be run independently of the Conservative Party. But the most important point for Baldwin to emphasise was

Our one great advantage : WEALTH. Let us use it. Its expenditure should be regarded as an insurance premium.

This method of raising funds from the City proved extremely successful, and similar dinners were held in 1928 and 1929, as a result of which some £306,000 was raised.⁹¹ In addition to this in 1927 or 1928 a provisional agreement was made with certain major banking firms to put up large sums for a secret anti-socialist fighting fund, a scheme which fell through only because Reginald McKenna of the Midland Bank refused to give his support.⁹²

89. Ibid.

90. R.R. James, Op Cit., 289.

91. Ibid.; Middlemas and Barnes, Op. Cit., 517; T. Jones (1969), Op. Cit., 176.

92. Neville Chamberlain papers, NCS/21/9, Ball to Chamberlain, 14 April 1934.

The effect on Conservative publicity was immediately apparent. These were the years when mass leafleteering reached its peak, as the following table demonstrates:

Table 1.1: Production of leaflets and pamphlets 1919-39 (excluding elections).⁹³

<u>Year</u>	<u>Millions</u>
1919	c. 1.3
1920	c. 10.3
1921	c. 2.2
1922	unknown
1923	1.5
1924	8.1
1925	5.3
1926	6.8
1927	19.4
1928	9.7 ^a
1929	c. 16.5 plus ^b
1930	unknown ^c
1931	unknown ^d
1932	'almost negligible' ^e
1933	0.9
1934	unknown ^d
1935	unknown ^d
1936	minimal
1937	minimal
1938	minimal
1939	slight increase

93. NUCUA, Executive Committee Minutes, Reports of Executive Committee to Central Council, Reports of Central Council to Conference, 1919 - 1939.

- a. Of which 4 million were distributed in the last 3 months of the year.
 - b. No figure known for post-election period. This figure covers only from 1 January 1929 to Dissolution of Parliament, c. April - May.
 3. No Conference this year. Therefore no figure reported.
 4. No figure given.
 5. Minutes of Executive Committee of National Union, publications Sub-Committee, 30 May 1934.
-

The high point of 1927 was the result of intensive activity to counter Labour campaigning against the Trade Disputes Act. In fact this Conservative counter-campaign became something of a by-word as a successful confirmation of the new methods of propaganda. Percy Cohen, active in Central Office at the time, described it as a 'jumping off ground for a new type of propaganda'⁹⁴, and both Davidson and Ball referred with some pride to this early vindication of their beliefs, for opposition to the Act in the country proved minimal.⁹⁵ Unfortunately the precise figures for leafleteering were not regularly stated after 1928, and so it is only by general indications that it can be concluded that after 1929 the Party's literature production was greatly reduced, partly because of the economic crisis, which hit the Party along with the rest of the country. It should be added that both these figures and those for leafleteering in General Election campaigns refer only to leaflets produced by Conservative Central Office and sold or distributed to local associations. At election time the addresses which all candidates produced were additional to the centrally produced

94. P. Cohen, Disraeli's Child, unpublished typescript at Conservative Research Department Library, vol 2, 315.

95. R.R. James, Op. Cit., 297; Chamberlain papers NC8/21/9, Ball to Chamberlain, 14 April 1934.

literature listed below:

Table 1.2: Literature produced for General Elections, 1922-1935⁹⁶

<u>Year</u>	<u>Millions</u>
1922	18.5
1923	26
1924	36
1929	93.5
1931	23.5
1935	9 ^a

- a. Only 1.5 million had been distributed January - 1 August 1935. No doubt much was done before the election in November, but this was a drastic reduction from 1929, particularly when it was known that an election would be called within the next year. 9 million were distributed in the penultimate week of the campaign, suggesting a rather larger overall total.
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This tremendous output in the first five months alone of 1929 of over 110 million leaflets and pamphlets, excluding individual candidates' addresses and subsequent campaigning between June and December, represented nearly four leaflets per elector. 8.3 million were of the party manifesto, which had itself become a major mass propaganda vehicle. There is evidence that this was an early case of 'overkill', and it was certainly never repeated. ⁹⁷ Indeed no party

96. NUCUA, Executive Committee minutes, Central Council minutes and annual reports, 1922-1936.
97. According to Davidson, in a speech to the Party's annual conference, certain constituencies to whom literature was issued failed to distribute it all - The Times, 23 November 1929, 7d. - This was, however, a regular problem at General Elections.

before or since has come close to this figure.⁹⁸ To write and lay out these leaflets the Party used professional journalists. C.H. Butler, for example, who joined the Department in 1927, had formerly been literary editor of the Daily Express, and most recently the Editor of Pearson's Magazine.⁹⁹ With the employment of advertising consultants the style of presentation also became more popular. In an attempt to capitalise on the cigarette card craze the Party produced a series of eight cards with a derogatory or inspirational cartoon on one side and a brief message on the other.¹⁰⁰ It has been suggested that leaflets were distributed free at Central Office expense.¹⁰¹ Although this happened only on rare occasions it is true that leaflet production was heavily subsidised from Central Office funds, which consistently made a financial loss on this operation.¹⁰² The Party also experimented with a degree of direct mailing of leaflets to specific interest groups - for example to nurses. That it could afford such expenses shows its very different financial position from that of the Labour Party, and the effect this had upon the relative extent of their propaganda.

The production of posters does not show the same absolute increase, although even here a rise for the elections of 1924 and 1929, before a cut-back in 1931, can be observed:

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98. In the February 1974 election Central Office produced and sold only 6 million leaflets, less than half Labour's figure - D. Butler and D. Kavanagh, The British General Election of February 1974, London 1974, 236.
99. R.D. Casey, 'British Politics - some lessons in campaign propaganda', Public Opinion Quarterly, vol. 8 (1944), 78.
100. Typical ones showed MacDonald blowing soap bubbles of 'Socialist Promises', with the caption 'He's for ever blowing bubbles'; also MacDonald and Lloyd George as shifty burglars breaking into a safe containing 'The People's savings'. A set of these cards is at the British Library.
101. R.D. Casey, 'The National Publicity Bureau and British Party Propaganda', Public Opinion Quarterly, 1939, 630.
102. Davidson papers, Central Office annual balance sheets, 1925 - 1929.

Table 1.3: Poster production for General Elections, 1922-1931¹⁰³

<u>Year</u>	<u>Million</u>
1922	0.3
1923	0.3
1924	0.5 ^a
1929	0.45
1931	0.2

a. The Times, 29/9/27, 12g, reports this as 477,000 posters and cartoons, not much higher than in 1929.

In 1924 part of the increase may have been due to a last minute poster campaign which Philip Cambray, in charge of Central Office publicity, initiated in response to the Zinoviev letter.¹⁰⁴ Ramsden suggests that the reduction in poster use in 1929 reflects a move towards new forms of visual aid in the increasing use of films,¹⁰⁵ and indeed this was the first election in which film played a prominent part. However the absolute reduction in poster numbers, if there was much of one, was more likely due to the fact that the number of large size posters used was greatly increased. Previously the standard poster size used by parties had been 'double crown' -

103. NUCUA, Executive Committee minutes, Central Council minutes and annual reports, 1922-1932. No figure is available for 1935.

104. L. Chester et al., Op. Cit., 90-1. There is a picture of one such poster opposite page 93.

105. J. Ramsden (1978), Op. Cit., 232.

that is the smallest sheet size of 20" x 30" although occasionally some larger formats had been used. Such posters were adequate for announcing meetings and for close viewing, but because of their small size they inevitably lacked impact. In commercial parlance,

the function of outdoor advertising is to create the decisive impact, at the last possible moment, so that a sale will result, not at some distant time, but within a minute or so ... [Also] by repetition the poster and sign assist in creating a familiarity with the name of a product.¹⁰⁶

It was with these ends in mind that the Conservative Party also produced 16, 32 and 64 sheet posters (that number of times the size of double crown)¹⁰⁷ for the 1929 election. These were very large indeed, the 16-sheet being the size most commonly used for commercial advertising, and the 8-sheet the smallest generally recommended for billboard use.¹⁰⁸ It is noticeable that the Party was beginning to follow commercial practice, no doubt partly because of their employment of Benson's for poster production and billboard hire.

The cost of this poster campaign was by contemporary standards extraordinary. The publishing costs alone were £11,000, a proportion of this being recovered by sales to constituencies. The campaign itself cost the Party an additional £27,000. Thus posters took nearly a quarter of a total publicity budget for the election of

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106. A-Barrister-At-Law, Outdoor Advertising, London 1957, 1-2.
107. R.D. Casey, 'The National Publicity Bureau', Public Opinion Quarterly, 1939, 630. Casey states that this was the first time such very large posters were used for political advertising. The Conservative Research Department collection of party posters unfortunately contains double-crown and crown posters only, so that it is difficult to check this claim.
108. Modern Advertising, London 1926, - a compendium of articles on advertising technique.

£155,500.¹⁰⁹ Although Philip Cambray with hindsight doubted the value of this poster campaign, believing it to be too short to be effective,¹¹⁰ this was very far from the general view. One of the smaller posters sold to constituencies, and extremely popular with them as well as being used in the national campaign financed by Central Office, was subsequently to become notorious amongst Conservatives as contributing substantially to the Party's defeat. This was the famous 'Safety First' poster which it was felt had, by emphasising a singularly unexciting slogan suggested by Benson's,¹¹¹ discouraged the new electorate of millions of young voters.

The use of large billboard posters demonstrated an increasing awareness of the power of visual impact. In the 1929 election it also ran close to the wind in evading the spirit, if not the letter, of the laws regarding election expenditure. Between the announcement of the election and the dissolution of parliament the billboards contracted to an anonymous national manufacturing firm were made available for Conservative use, expenditure declaration technically only beginning from the dissolution. After the Second World War the spirit of the law was to be observed more closely, and in 1950 Conservative posters on display when the election was announced were covered until the dissolution, after which all poster displays were costed.¹¹²

109. Davidson papers, Accounts for the 1929 election. The purchasing power of the 1900 £ in 1929 was 10/7d. In 1978 it was 5p - D. Butler and A. Sloman, British Political Facts, 5th edition, London 1980. 348-9. By 1978 standards, therefore, this campaign cost in excess of £1.6 million.

110. P. Cambray, Op. Cit., 178.

111. T. Jones (1969), Op. Cit., 186, 1 June 1929; R.R. James, Op. Cit., 299. See Note B at end of chapter for Sir Patrick Gower's account of this incident, p.111.

112. P. Cambray, Op. Cit., 157, E.A. Rowe, The British General Election of 1929, unpublished D. Phil. thesis, Oxford 1960, lists and describes the posters used by the Conservative Party in 1929, showing them to be of three types. 1) Scare posters against Socialism 2) Posters of ridicule against the Liberal Party 3) Posters of moderation in support of Baldwin. He does not, however, mention the question of poster size, probably because the large posters have not survived.

The Liberal Party also used large posters in 1929. Unlike the Liberals, however, the Conservative Party made little use of press advertising. Publicly it was declared that such advertising would contravene the Representation of the People Act and make necessary a declaration of press advertising expenditure by each candidate in whose constituency the newspapers concerned had been put on sale.¹¹³ Only £200 was spent on this form of advertising,¹¹⁴ and perhaps it was felt that the readers of those papers that would accept such Conservative Party advertisements did not need persuading. But if the Party did not undertake overt party publicity in the press between 1927 and 1929, it was very far from dormant in its attempts to make the best possible use of the medium. As we have seen, relations with the press were generally good, except where Rothermere and Beaverbrook were concerned. Davidson did everything he could, while Chairman, to appease these powerful individuals. When an opportunity came in September 1928 to gain Rothermere's support Davidson urged that it be pursued.¹¹⁵ He also did all he could to prevent the complaints of the party rank and file about the attitude of the press being voiced more openly, for this could only have inflamed the situation.¹¹⁶ At the same time, however, he worked to halt the expansion of the Rothermere and Beaverbrook empires into the provinces, co-operating with Sir William Berry to prevent the Derby Evening Express, and subsequently an Aberdonian evening newspaper, from being bought by Rothermere.¹¹⁷ Playing a double game as he was, Davidson was extremely anxious that Conservative Central Office's part in thwarting Rothermere's ambitions should not be

113. The Times, 17 May 1929, 10d.

114. Davidson papers, 1929 General Election Accounts.

115. R.R. James, Op. Cit., 296.

116. NUCUA, Minutes of the Executive Committee, Motion by Sir Charles Marston, 12 February 1929. Neville Chamberlain, the succeeding chairman, likewise worked hard to avoid deliberate antagonism - see for example Minutes of the Executive Committee of the National Union, 17 June 1930.

117. R.R. James, Op. Cit., 294-5, and other correspondence about sale of Derby Evening Express in Davidson papers.

revealed. He also took pains to ensure that Berry remained sympathetic, meeting him on several occasions, asking his advice, and granting his request for a peerage.¹¹⁸ For daily contact with the press there was, as there had long been, a small Press Section in the Publicity Department, and a special party press correspondent was appointed to interview ministers who were not prepared to see the press itself. Ball reported that

by the adoption of this method publicity can be secured, not only in Conservative Press organs, but in most of those of the Opposition, and even in that section of the Press which, while calling itself Conservative, is constantly attacking the Government.¹¹⁹

In such matters as press relations diplomacy could reap large rewards, but direct propaganda to the people was equally essential. Leafleteering and posters were considered to be of vital importance for this, but direct contact between party and people was still felt to be necessary. The decreasing use of professional speakers did not as yet represent a reduced belief in the worth of the public meeting, although this was shortly to follow, nor in the importance of face to face canvassing. It was merely a reflection of dissatisfaction as to their competence, and as to the image they presented to the public. In their place the Conservatism of Baldwin and Davidson emphasised greater involvement by rank and file party members in voluntary speaking. The Party's Philip Stott College ran weekend courses in public speaking, and the Bonar Law College at Ashridge, opened in mid-1929, had regular lectures on 'Public Speaking', 'How to Obtain Political Information' and 'Organisation', and a weekend course on 'Public Speaking and the Formation of Public Opinion'.¹²⁰ Evening

118. Davidson papers, note of conversation between Davidson and Berry, 13 December 1928.

119. Baldwin papers, Bal. 53/f111, Report on the Publicity Department during 1927, 30 December 1927.

120. Gleanings and Memoranda, 1930-1934.

classes on public speaking were also held at Central Office and elsewhere.¹²¹ Clearly the Party still felt the public meeting to be essential, for between November 1928 and April 1929 the Speakers' Section of Central Office arranged 13,849 days of engagements for its 'staff' speakers.¹²² By this time, however, the Party's employed speakers had been so cut back that it had only 14 permanent and 18 retained propagandists, too few to undertake these engagements.¹²³ Even using in addition its 21 permanent organisers a further 30 to 40 full-time speakers would have been required. It seems probable, therefore, that for the 1929 election Conservative Central Office, in addition to its 53 permanent and retained staff, either employed temporary speakers or paid an honorarium to volunteers who spoke. Whichever was the case the Party was adapting its traditional methods of publicity to meet the new demands, and thereby attempting to present a new and attractive face to the electorate. It was also, in its use of volunteers rather than paid speakers, following the practice of the Labour Party, which employed only two paid speakers but laid great emphasis on the value of the spoken word, both by volunteers and by leading party politicians. The Conservative Party too made increasing use of eminent political figures for normal campaigning and, with Labour fielding up to forty volunteer speakers at by-elections, followed suit by having, for example, 55 M.P.s lend their support at Smethwick in 1927 and 36 at Chelmsford.¹²⁴

The 'modernisation' of public speaking, however, reached a peak in the 1929 election, when the new loudspeaker and telephone systems

121. The Times 27 June 1929, 9c; 17 October 1929, 11g.

122. NUCUA, Report of the Central Council, 1929.

123. Davidson papers, List of staff employed by Central Office, 1928.

124. Conservative Agents' Journal, April 1927; during 1927 the size of Central Office's voluntary speakers list was increased, and MPs and peers spoke at meetings arranged through Central Office on 652 occasions - Baldwin papers, Bal.53/f104, Report on Conservative Organisation at Central Office and in the constituencies during 1927.

enabled the Party to indulge a love of technical experimentation and gadgetry which has ever since put it in the forefront of developments in party propagandist technique. This election saw the first use of mobile loudspeaker vans, in which candidates could travel round their constituencies declaiming to a much larger audience than could be reached by the unaided voice. Hecklers could be ignored, and opposing candidates drowned out of hearing. Central Office itself is not known to have had more than one such van in 1929 - 'Mr Baldwin's Number 1' - equipped with loudspeakers, two microphones, apparatus for receiving and amplifying music or political speeches from the BBC, and a gramophone.¹²⁵ It would seem, from complaints in the Conservative Agents Journal at the disturbance of the peace and the public nuisance caused by loudspeakers, that the Liberal Party got off the mark first in the use of this new 'engine of propaganda'. Tory defence of the public quiet, however, soon vanished in direct confrontation between rival party megaphones, as candidates obtained loudspeaker vans for their own use.¹²⁶ By 1931 Central Office had a small fleet of these vans and nearly 100 portable public address systems.

It was at major public meetings and rallies, however, that the party used loudspeaker systems to best effect in 1929, using Baldwin himself to reach the largest possible immediate audiences. Baldwin could probably be said to have spoken live to more people, without the aid of radio or television, than any other British politician during an election campaign.¹²⁷ Not only were the political meetings he attended in 1929 of traditional electioneering proportions, but his speeches were also regularly relayed by telephone lines from the hall in which he was speaking to overflow halls and gatherings. Nor were these necessarily in the same town as

125. The Times, 6 June 1928, 14d.

126. Conservative Agents' Journal, 1926-9.

127. Lloyd George may have exceeded his score for the size of audience for one speech. See the Manchester Guardian, 16 May 1929, editorial entitled 'A mechanical election'.

the one in which he spoke; frequently in addressing a meeting in one town of an area, he would simultaneously address up to eight separate meetings in different towns in the district. Thus when speaking at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester, in February, he addressed an audience of over 30,000, situated at nine meetings, telling his hearers that:

Democracy is on trial ... It is the first election of a fully enfranchised democracy of manhood suffrage. I trust the fight may be a fight on the basis of fact and not of fable.¹²⁸

Already his speech at Newcastle on 24 January had been relayed to Berwick, South Shields, Stockton, West Hartlepool and Whitley Bay,¹²⁹ and subsequently in speaking at Blackpool his words were heard by a crowd of 60,000 on the beach.¹³⁰ Speaking at Bristol he was relayed to all the more important towns of Somerset,¹³¹ and the rallies he addressed at Tredegar Park and Cardiff, already large, were heard by many other meetings in Wales.¹³² Amplifiers and telephone relays for the 1929 General Election cost Central Office the considerable sum of £8,138.¹³³

As with previous elections the Party tried to utilise the gramophone for its propaganda. Neville Chamberlain was one of the

128. The Times, 28 February 1929, 9e.

129. The Times, 25 January 1929, 11b.

130. The Times, 21 May 1929, 10b.

131. The Times 10 April 1929, 16e.

132. The Times, 8 May 1929, 16e. It is interesting to compare Baldwin's mass rallies, held towards the close of the period when such methods of electioneering were felt to be of value, with the largest gathering Mrs Margaret Thatcher addressed during the 1979 election campaign. This was at Wembley, 29 April 1979, the audience numbering no more than 2,000, except during the 30 seconds which were televised by courtesy of the broadcasting organisations in their news bulletins.

133. Davidson papers, 1929 General Election accounts.

ministers who recorded a speech.¹³⁴ These records were then sold to local constituency associations, who could either sell them or play them over their loudspeakers as they wished. As a means of persuading the uncommitted such records would seem to have had their limitations, although there are no reports as to their effectiveness or popularity. An even more optimistic method of propaganda was used by the agent¹³⁵ of one county candidate, who distributed leaflets by aeroplane. There were reports of other candidates touring widely spread constituencies by aeroplane.¹³⁶ A far more generally acclaimed propaganda device was the lantern slide lecture, which the Party had been using with considerable success since the 1890s, but which had been developed considerably in the 1920s.¹³⁷ But the most important developments of the 1920s for political propaganda were the establishment of radio broadcasting for public consumption, the confirmation of film entertainment as one of the most important and powerful pastimes for the mass of the people, and the invention of synchronised sound film. The Conservative Party's reaction to radio broadcasting will be discussed elsewhere. The use that it made of film, however, is of especial interest not least because it was almost alone amongst the parties in such use throughout the inter-war period.

The Conservative Party's earliest known contact with film was premature. In about 1911 Bonar Law and F.E. Smith were filmed by Cecil Hepworth, using his new vivaphone synchronised sound system, a technique which evidently proved unsatisfactory since little more was

134. Chamberlain papers, NC18/1/651, Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 27 April 1929.

135. The Times, 14 May 1929, 8e.

136. The Times, 28 May 1929, 9d.

137. M. Ostrogorski, Democracy and the Organisation of Political Parties, London 1902, 398; Interview with Percy Cohen, who compiled these slide lectures.

heard of it.¹³⁸ There was an awareness even at this stage that the political potential of film could be raised immeasurably by the addition of sound. The chief difficulty with film use, however, was not in its lack of adequate sound - Baldwin was usefully to appear on various occasions in the silent cinema newsreels, smoking his pipe, demonstrating the good relationship he enjoyed with his industrial workers, and proving the size of his following by being seen addressing crowds said by the newsreels to be over 60,000 at party rallies.¹³⁹ The principal problem was that of exhibition. Film coverage of party activities could be obtained in two ways - through the commercial newsreels or by the Party's own production of propaganda films. Hidden propaganda through feature films was only later, and then very tentatively, contemplated. Although advertisement of the Party through the newsreels would have ensured the largest possible audience, there were serious obstacles to such overt display of politics in the commercial cinema. The cinema newsreels were felt by those who produced them to be almost entirely visual media, an opinion which was most evidently justifiable before the introduction of sound. Politics and political campaigning, on the other hand, before film had encouraged even a limited visual sense in politicians, were seen by the newsreel-makers as almost wholly verbal activities, unsuitable for regular film coverage and placed outside the newsreels' parameters of visual and entertaining news. The silent newsreel, therefore, rarely provided an opportunity for party publicity, and consequently the Party was encouraged to consider its

138. British Film Institute, Personalities Index, Unpublished note on Cecil Hepworth. In 1914 the Party's attention was again drawn to the political possibilities of film when the Ideal Film Company made a film of the Sutherland forests, in order to disprove Lloyd George's statement that thousands of people had been evicted from their homes to provide a deer forest - Our Flag, vol. 10 No.2, February 1914, 25.

139. The British Inter-University History Film Consortium's archive series film on Stanley Baldwin, by John Ramsden, provides an excellent opportunity to study his screen persona, and illustrates how in what were remarkably infrequent and brief screen appearances Baldwin effectively demonstrated and confirmed for the mass audience his reputation as a bluff and honest Englishman.

own film production. Moreover, as Joseph Ball discovered, politics was a taboo subject not only for commercial film producers but also for cinema exhibitors. As he reported in 1927,

the managers of cinematograph theatres [are] unanimous in their opposition to the exhibition of any film of a political character.¹⁴⁰

Not surprisingly the prospect of angering half their patrons by projecting a politically unwelcome message, and another section of the audience by introducing a serious and propagandistic note into an entertainment show, did not appeal to cinema managers, and the Party was therefore forced to find alternative means of exhibition:

The problem of exhibiting political propaganda films [declared Ball] is one of such difficulty that at the present time it is only by the production and use of our own cinema vans that they can be placed before the public.¹⁴¹

The method of exhibition mentioned, which brilliantly solved the problem of how to obtain an audience for such films, and made a virtue of a necessity, was the daylight cinema van. This was a seven ton pantechinon with a hooded viewing screen at the back and a projector, back-projecting film onto the screen.¹⁴² Such a van enabled films to be shown in the street at any time of day, wherever the van's speaker/operator cared to stop. The draw of a free film show, particularly in rural areas where films were still a novelty, was sufficient to attract large audiences of mixed political

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140. Baldwin papers, Bal. 53/ff113-5, Report on the Work of the Publicity Department during 1927. See pages 635-640 below on opposition of exhibitors to politics in the cinema.
141. Baldwin papers, Bal. 53/ff113-115, Report on work of Publicity Department during 1927.
142. 'Politics and the Film', Sight and Sound, 1 (1932), 49-50. A picture of the first van is in Home and Politics, September 1925, and is reproduced in J. Ramsden (1978), Op. Cit., 395.

persuasions - precisely the people that the Party desired to reach. Here was the first great advantage of film as a propaganda medium. Unlike other available techniques such as posters and pamphlets, film was automatically associated not with persuasion or serious politics but with entertainment. The cinema vans proved an effective psychological draw by using the audience's pre-conditioned reaction to film as a pleasurable experience in order to gain an attentive viewing for a political message. Indeed reports indicated how appreciative the audiences for these film shows were, although this was no guarantee of the films' effectiveness.¹⁴³ The Party's message could only benefit from such an association with entertainment, and this association was encouraged by making the films themselves as entertaining as possible.¹⁴⁴ A film of a parliamentary candidate could even be a better crowd-puller than the real thing, particularly when shown with non-political entertainment films, and for this reason candidates were always urged to be present when the cinema van was in action, in order that they might take over the audience already captured. Davidson believed that the vans would be of particular value after working hours when people would be returning home. In the evening also, with more people on the street than today, a large number of them on their way to or from the regular cinema, the opportunity to attract a large audience was good. In trying to reach the new voters - working class, women and the young 'flapper' - who would not normally attend evening political meetings, the Party was also incidentally aiming at precisely those sections of society who visited the cinema most frequently, and this fact evidently had a hand in interesting Joseph Ball in film propaganda, as he explained in 1927:

The enormous increase in the popularity of cinemas particularly

143. Interview with Kenneth Lockstone, formerly Organising Secretary of the Conservative and Unionist Films Association, and General Manager of British Films Ltd., 31 January 1978. It was, of course, difficult to heckle an amplified film which carried on regardless of interruption.

144. Ibid.

among the working classes, pointed the way, early in 1927 to the cinema film as a method of placing our propaganda before the electorate.¹⁴⁵

In fact the precise origins of the Party's interest in film and outdoor cinema vans is obscure. It first experimented with one van in August 1925, before either Ball or Davidson had become officially involved with Conservative Central Office.¹⁴⁶ Davidson, however, later claimed that the idea of such a van was that of Sir Frank Smith, his director of scientific research at the Admiralty, and that Thorneycrofts, the shipbuilders, had constructed the first one.¹⁴⁷ Elsewhere it was stated that Conservative film publicity began immediately after the 1914-18 war¹⁴⁸ and that Sir Albert Clavering, a name of importance for party film after 1930, may be regarded as the inventor of sound cinema vans.¹⁴⁹ It seems likely that the idea of the self-contained, silent-film, daylight cinema van originated commercially, shortly after the war. Vans designed to carry projection equipment for erection in halls existed before this - the War Aims Committee, for example, had a fleet of 22 'cinemotors' by 1918.¹⁵⁰ But the Conservatives do seem to have been the first to have developed the idea of daylight cinema vans to any extent. The first van was built not by Thorneycrofts, who only became involved in 1927, but by the firm of Blunt and McCormick, who also made some of the Party's earliest films¹⁵¹, and the Party became involved with

145. Baldwin papers, Bal.53/ff113-115, Report on the Publicity Department during 1927.

146. NUCUA, Report of the Central Council, 1925.

147. R.R. James, Op. Cit., 303.

148. Political and Economic Planning (Dartington Hall Enquiry), The Factual Film, London 1947, 161.

149. A. Beattie, D.Dilks, N. Pronay, Neville Chamberlain, Leeds 1975, 5.

150. Public Record Office, National Savings Committee papers, NSC 29/15, correspondence relating to vans, 1918.

151. Information provided by Mrs. Margaret Grierson in letter to author, 23 March 1979.

film propaganda only when it acquired the prototype van in 1925, and not before. Smith was probably responsible for developing the earliest sound vans with Thorneycrofts in 1927. Clavering also became involved in 1927 as a director of the British Talking Picture Co., who provided sound equipment and films.

The scheme was at first experimental, the van touring the Midlands for three months in 1925.¹⁵² Audiences of up to 2,000 could be obtained in large towns and cities, and two or three meetings held each day. A show in a small town of 600 adults would attract two thirds of the population. In such cases the operator would show films for half an hour, give a speech and then answer questions. He discovered that

the mere presence of this huge van stimulated interest in the Party and in the work of the Government. Its presence answered queries from the apathetic or the cynics who wondered "What the Conservative Party was doing in the constituencies."¹⁵³

Clearly the cinema van's original function was not just to propagandise through the films, but also to act as a crowd-puller for what then became an ordinary, if unusually large, political meeting. The speaker who accompanied the van in the General Strike year of 1926 stressed its value in gaining a hearing in the politically unsympathetic mining districts, when he reported that

We toured many colliery areas and were everywhere given a really good hearing. Without the van and the films this would not have been the case.¹⁵⁴

With running costs of £30-40 a week he argued that the van did far

152. NUCUA, Report of the Central Council, 1925, 1926.

153. Baldwin papers, Bal. 48/ff73-79, Report on Tour of Daylight Cinema Van, April-November 1926, by the speaker, W. Courtenay.

154. Ibid.

more effective work than any two or three ordinary speakers, attracting much larger audiences, and that it was both a better and a cheaper form of propaganda. A practical demonstration of the superiority of the vans over ordinary political meetings was to be recorded by Neville Chamberlain in 1931:

It is very remarkable how they can get publicity when meetings fail. During the L.C.C. elections on two nights when large halls had been booked and good speakers brought down only about 50 people turned up. On the same two nights speakers going round with the van reckoned that they addressed audiences amounting in the aggregate to over 3,000 each night.¹⁵⁵

The value of the first van as a means of reaching a wide audience was rapidly brought to Baldwin's attention, and shortly after becoming Party Chairman Davidson confirmed the Party's interest in film by acquiring the patent for one of the earliest practicable cinema sound systems, the 'phonofilm',¹⁵⁶ two years before the commercial 'talkie' appeared in Britain. Taking advantage of the gift of a party sympathiser, Davidson ordered ten phonofilm outdoor cinema vans from Thorneycrofts.¹⁵⁷ A fleet of twelve smaller vans carrying portable projection equipment for showing films at indoor meetings was also ordered, following successful experimentation with a prototype paid for by the Junior Carlton Club.¹⁵⁸ By the time of the General Election in 1929 the Party had 23 indoor and outdoor cinema vans available and continuously touring throughout the

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155. Chamberlain papers, NC18/1/728, Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 1 March 1931. See also 'The Value of Cinema Vans in Borough Divisions', in Conservative Agents' Journal, August 1931.
156. Minutes of the 1922 Committee, May 1927; In the early 1930s the Party also acquired the patent of a 16 mm film sound system. This proved a failure, however, and was not used.
157. Davidson papers, Party Accounts 1928. Three were paid for by the party supporter, seven by the Party.
158. Ibid. ; The Man in the Street, August 1926.

country.¹⁵⁹ The phonofilm vans were recognised immediately as of 'infinite value'¹⁶⁰, and it was reported in 1928 that they

prove to be an exceptionally effective means of drawing many thousands of people and providing a new and telling engine of education and propaganda.¹⁶¹

Davidson told Churchill and Neville Chamberlain that

for rural districts the phonofilm cinema van is by common consent the most powerful agency at the disposal of the Party.¹⁶²

An improved sound system introduced after 1930 was found to be quite audible up to 250 yards distant.¹⁶³

The first films used were largely empire and colonial films borrowed from various dominion offices, and the shows were always to use non-party films, including some from the Empire Marketing Board, to fill up the programme.¹⁶⁴ In early 1926, however, Central Office began to commission its own films. The films produced, as with the system employed for displaying them, demonstrated ingenuity and an appreciation of the most effective method of reaching the intended audience. Ball wrote:

it was decided to endeavour to produce cartoon films (similar to

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- 159. NUCUA, Report of the Central Council, 1928, 1929.
 - 160. Davidson papers, undated memorandum (1930) by Davidson, on his period as Chairman.
 - 161. NUCUA, Report of the Central Council, 1928.
 - 162. Davidson papers, J.C.C.D. to Churchill, 5 April 1928.
 - 163. National Savings Committee papers, NSC 29/15, H.C. Robertson to NSC Regional Commissioners, 29 February 1940.
 - 164. Information provided by Mr. W. Mattock, a staff member of the Publicity Department during the 1920s and 1930s, in a letter to the author, 7 March 1978.

the well known "Felix the Cat" films) ridiculing the policy and tactics of our political opponents.¹⁶⁵

William Ward, one of only three known active film cartoonists in the country, was engaged to make films exclusively for the Conservative Party.¹⁶⁶ Typically these cartoons lampooned the Opposition leaders, showing MacDonald and Snowden as incompetent plumbers, or Lloyd George as a garage mechanic whose hamfisted attentions ruined the 'Car of State' driven by John Bull. Another (non-cartoon) film, showing Cabinet Ministers at work in their offices, was intended to

give the public intimate peeps of prominent political personalities, known to the majority only by name.¹⁶⁷

Other films showed pictorially the beneficial effects of Government policy - the increases made, for example, in housing.

The Conservative Party had found a highly effective new medium of publicity, particularly for reaching the politically adverse or apathetic, and one which was as yet unique to itself.¹⁶⁸ By 1929 it

165. Baldwin papers, Bal. 53/ff 113-115, Report on the work of the Publicity Department during 1927.

166. Ibid.; Letter from Mr. Mattock, 7 March 1978. The cartoons themselves were neither politically subtle nor technically advanced, using knockabout humour to ridicule Labour and Liberal politicians and policies, and well used artistic cliches such as expanding and contracting eyes to denote rage and dotted lines from the eyes to the object being looked at. Films started with the cartoonist's hand drawing on a blank sheet of paper. All these stylistic details had been in use during the war. But these were the techniques generally still used in Britain, and the audience would not have been accustomed as yet to anything better.

167. Man in the Street, August 1926; Chamberlain papers, NC7/11/19/15, Lord Halifax to Neville Chamberlain, 15 September 1926, 14 December 1926.

168. The only other known user of outdoor cinema vans, until the Co-operative Wholesale Society acquired one in the late 1930s, was the National Milk Publicity Council who, having hired the Conservative vans briefly, bought two outdoor vans between 1936 and 1939. Several other organisations, including the G.P.O. and Shell, used vans carrying indoor projection equipment.

was spending considerable sums on film propaganda, and even managed in that election to have its films widely shown in commercial cinemas, thereby presenting its propaganda to a large, captive and non-political audience.¹⁶⁹ Indeed the Party was well pleased with all its new propaganda efforts, and it was a shock to find itself out of office despite all publicity and political achievements. Davidson, who had expected defeat given the Party's lack of a positive programme for the propaganda machine to publicise, argued nevertheless that by organisation and propaganda, concentrated in eighty marginal seats, the defeat had been minimised.¹⁷⁰ Although ultimately he was made something of a scapegoat, and Chamberlain called in to undertake further administrative reorganisation, it is evident that following the 1929 election the Party at large was in no doubt as to the vital need for mass propaganda. The defeat only encouraged this conviction. Baldwin declared his own feelings a month after the election:

the whole organisation, the political organisation of a party, has to adapt itself to the modern conditions of electioneering, and to the enormous electorate that has come into existence after the war; and I doubt if any party has yet adapted itself fully to meet the new conditions.¹⁷¹

The Central Council of the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations immediately resolved that

no time should be lost by Party experts in making a close local study of the mass psychology of the electors.¹⁷²

It felt that 'an intensified educational programme of propaganda'

169. Davidson papers, Accounts for 1929 General Election.

170. R.R. James, Op. Cit., 299.

171. Gleanings and Memoranda, August 1929, 178.

172. Ibid., 91.

should be immediately carried out. Davidson himself began to review his organisation before he resigned.¹⁷³

One department reorganised early in 1930 was the film section of the Publicity Department. Successful as film propaganda had been, the small section which ran it was very much an amateur organisation. The Party was being exploited by commercial companies with which it had dealings, and was not obtaining the most effective service for what was becoming one of its more costly publicity devices.¹⁷⁴ The new Chief Publicity Officer, Sir Patrick Gower, who replaced Ball when the latter became Director of the Conservative Research Department in mid-1929, recognised this problem. Desiring to further film propaganda by establishing firm contacts in the commercial cinema, he disbanded the film section and formed the independent, though largely party financed, Conservative and Unionist Films Association (CFA), under a new Honorary Organising Director, Albert Clavering. Clavering brought the stamp of professionalism and a practical knowledge of the cinema industry to Conservative film propaganda, and, with Joseph Ball, was largely responsible for the good relationship that existed between the Party and the commercial cinema industry throughout the 1930s. He was deeply involved in the cinema trade, being himself a minor magnate. An entrepreneur of film production and distribution, he was one of the founders of the Kinematograph Renters' Association and a leading member of the powerful Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association. During the First World War he had controlled the distribution of the Topical Budget News Film, working closely with No. 10, Downing Street, to further war propaganda. He owned a cinema and newsreel theatre chain.¹⁷⁵ Widely respected in the commercial

173. Davidson papers, J.C.C.D. to Neville Chamberlain, 5 July 1930, proposals for the further reorganisation of Central Office and the Party.

174. Baldwin papers, Bal. 170/ff83-4, Patrick Gower to Geoffrey Lloyd, 5 April 1935.

175. Baldwin papers, Bal. 170/ff85-6, Report on career of Sir Albert Clavering, c. April 1935. Clavering was knighted for his services to the Party in 1935.

cinema industry, he was a close friend of Isodore Ostrer, President of Gaumont British, whilst his brother Arthur was a director of Pathe. Michael Balcon and Alexander Korda advised and assisted him on propaganda film production.¹⁷⁶ By 1935 Sir Patrick Gower could tell Baldwin that Clavering's service was an important reason

why we, as a party, are so far ahead of the other parties in the development of film propaganda, which is likely to become increasingly important as time goes on.¹⁷⁷

One useful innovation was the insistence that all constituencies visited by a van fill in a report on each meeting held, detailing the audience size, its reaction, the Agent's opinion as to the quality and value of the film programme and the speaker, and, interestingly, the predominant topics and questions raised by the audience and the subjects of greatest concern to them.¹⁷⁸ Such feedback was useful not only to the CFA in gauging its effectiveness, but to Gower, to whom the reports were sent,¹⁷⁹ in assessing those subjects on which propaganda was most needed.

But Clavering not only improved the cinema van system; he also went over to the offensive in attacking the public exhibition of Russian films, which were now beginning to arrive in this country. According to Gower he had successfully prevented the commercial exhibition of Russian films throughout Britain in 1929.¹⁸⁰

176. Interview with Kenneth Lockstone, 31 January 1978.

177. Baldwin papers, Bal. 170/ff83-4, Patrick Gower to Geoffrey Lloyd, 5 April 1935.

178. National Savings Committee papers, NSC 29/15, W.R.C. Howard (Organising Secretary, Conservative Films Association) to Mr. Francis, 14 February 1940 - contains a sample copy of this form.

179. Baldwin papers, Bal. 47/ff103-8, Gower to Baldwin, 1 August 1935.

180. Baldwin papers, Bal. 170/ff85-6. Report on career of Sir Albert Clavering, c. April 1935.

Certainly in 1930 he organised a strong protest by Central Office against the exhibition of films such as 'Potemkin' and 'Turksib' by the Film Society and the London Workers' Film Society. No doubt he firmly supported the L.C.C. (of which he was a member from 1931 to 1934) in its decision to refuse a licence for the showing of 'Mother' by the Masses Stage and Film Guild in the same year.¹⁸¹ He believed passionately that the exhibition of left-wing and Russian films must be stopped at all costs, and it might, perhaps, be allowable to suggest that the already ultra-cautious British Board of Film Censors took serious note of these views of the Conservative Party, and particularly of Clavering and Gower, who were not infrequently taken by members of the film trade to be unofficial government channels when the Conservatives were in power.¹⁸²

Clavering was equally appalled by the left-wing nature of the G.P.O. Film Unit led by John Grierson.¹⁸³ He complained repeatedly about its activities to his superiors, though with little apparent success. Paul Rotha believes that the strongly critical Select Committee Report on the G.P.O. Film Unit in 1934, which recommended severe restrictions on its productions, was prompted in part by Conservative Party interests, and this seems quite possible.¹⁸⁴ Rotha's further allegations, however, of a 'skein of intrigue and manoeuvre' by the 'Film Trade' and Conservative politicians, are insubstantial and must be open to doubt.¹⁸⁵ The G.P.O. Film Unit

181. R. Bond 'Dirty Work', Close-Up, August 1930, 98-100; The Times, 16 June 1930, 11f; British Board of Film Censors papers, Notes of deputation received by the Home Secretary from the Parliamentary Film Committee and various film societies, 15 July 1930, to protest against the banning of Russian films. These unindexed papers are held at the British Film Institute.

182. See pp. 654-664 below.

183. Kenneth Lockstone, Clavering's deputy, described Grierson as a 'Communist', and admitted that he had himself protested vehemently about the 'Socialist propaganda' put out by the G.P.O. film unit, which prior to 1933 was the Empire Marketing Board film unit.

184. P. Rotha, Documentary Diary, London 1973, 117; Report from the Select Committee on Estimates, H.M.S.O., July 1934, ix-xiii,

185. P. Rotha, Op. Cit., 115, 122. See also note C at end of chapter ,p.111.

was fortunate in having as its patron the Postmaster General, Sir Kingsley Wood, who showed himself to be one of the Conservative politicians most interested in propaganda and the value of film.

Above all Clavering was to prove invaluable for his knowledge of and contacts with the commercial cinema industry. He was able not only to take the advice of such men as Korda, Balcon and Ian Dalrymple (Chief Editor of London Films Ltd.), but also to maintain close contact with the various cinema newsreel companies, advising them of particular issues which the Party or Government was anxious to publicise, and frequently taking film of political items that they had shot, for use on the cinema vans. Two leading figures of British Movietone News actually joined the CFA's central editorial committee, responsible for devising and approving propaganda film scripts. These were Sir Gordon Craig, who was initially Chairman of New Era Films and subsequently General Manager and Director of Movietone, and Movietone's Editor, Gerald Sanger, who was one of the most important figures in the newsreel industry. After Clavering left the CFA Sanger became its Honorary Films Adviser, from 1948 to 1959, and wrote several of the film scripts. In particular the very presence of Clavering as an official contact for film matters in party and government circles prompted the newsreels to get in touch whenever they were contemplating a political item or desired to interview a minister.¹⁸⁶ Clavering could then either give assistance or advise against the coverage of an unsuitable issue, thereby ensuring that the reels were aware of the Party or Government attitude in advance. It would be wrong to read too much into this relationship, for Clavering was essentially fulfilling the role of Film Press Officer. But such a position was a novel one and undoubtedly benefited the Party in the coverage which it received from the newsreels. The Labour Party did not have an equivalent officer to look after its newsreel presentation. The precise nature of the relationship between the Conservative Party and the newsreels, and particularly British Movietone News and Gaumont British News, was a complicated one, and

186. See note D at end of chapter, p.112.

has been the subject of much speculation. This question will be considered more fully in a later chapter dealing specifically with newsreels and politics.

By 1930, therefore, the Conservative Party, although it had lost the election, seemed well prepared to fight back, so far as mass propaganda was concerned. It had experience of running large scale leafleteering campaigns and had pioneered important developments in political poster work, employing commercial techniques with the advice of publicity experts. Throughout the Party there was a strong belief in the need for positive and large scale propaganda campaigning, and in the cinema van system and its films it had a unique and powerful new propaganda medium, now enhanced by the skills of a professional who was well equipped to infiltrate the commercial industry in the Party's cause.

The election, however, had depleted the Party's financial resources, and a cut-back in expenditure was found to be necessary in the immediate future. The budget of the Publicity Department was reduced from its peaks of 1928 and 1929.¹⁸⁷ By 1931 the national economic crisis was having severe effects upon party organisation as railway shares, in which the Party had invested heavily, plummeted.¹⁸⁸ Accordingly the new Party Chairman, Neville Chamberlain, demanded that all departments of Central Office reduce their expenditure drastically. The Publicity Department was required to cut its budget by half, a decision taken many months before the

187. Davidson papers, Party accounts, 1928, 1929; COO, Director of Organisation's file series, summary of party expenditure 1930 - 1936, contained in file entitled 'Report on Party Organisation, April 1937'. At the time of writing the papers of Conservative Central Office are only partly sorted and no more detailed reference is possible.

188. Percy Cohen to author 20 April 1979; R.D. Casey, 'The National Publicity Bureau', Public Opinion Quarterly, 1939, 624.

formation of the National Government and the landslide election made mass propaganda temporarily superfluous.¹⁸⁹ Party publicity was also seriously hampered by the internal crises which the Party suffered from 1929 to 1931. The long unresolved question as to Baldwin's leadership made positive propaganda difficult, whilst the attacks on Davidson further complicated his organisational tasks. The replacement of Joseph Ball by Sir Patrick Gower in the central position of Chief Publicity Officer was certainly significant for party publicity. Ball, secretive and devious, was well suited to the aggressive propagandising favoured by Davidson. Gower, by contrast, came to Central Office after a highly respectable and successful career in the Civil Service, having been Private Secretary to Bonar Law, Ramsay MacDonald and Stanley Baldwin at No. 10, Downing Street. His was a training in administration, diplomacy, and public relations. Acting as intermediary between the Premier and the press was his forte, an interpreter, for public announcement, of the Prime Minister's decisions, and frequently the writer of Baldwin's speeches.¹⁹⁰ Although he had been deputy Publicity Officer for a year under Ball, it was to a large extent his previous experience of public relations that he brought to the Publicity Department in 1929, although he also was particularly keen on film propaganda.¹⁹¹ Gower was very much Baldwin's man, like Davidson who was responsible for his appointment, and continued whilst Chief Publicity Officer from 1929 to 1939 to act also as an unofficial public relations officer for the Party's leader. Such close ties between the leader and the Chief Publicity Officer certainly benefited Baldwin; but given his difficult personal position in 1930 they probably did little to further party publicity.

189. COO, Director of Organisation's file series, Topping to Stonehaven, 'Interim Report on Office Reconstruction and Reduction of Expenditure', 30 July 1931; Report prepared by Chief Publicity Officer to the General Director, undated (early 1931). These reductions were successfully carried out.

190. Percy Cohen to author, 20 April 1979.

191. Kenneth Lockstone to author, 31 January 1978.

These various factors, together with the highly unusual circumstances of the 1931 General Election and the National Government which followed it, meant that there would be a significant pause in the organisational strides made in the 1920s, and that the style and extent of Conservative propaganda between 1931 and 1934 would be rather different from what had gone before. The Chamberlain Committee on Office Reorganisation recommended in 1931 that the Party's speakers be reduced still further, and the previously highly successful glass slide lecture lending service was also run down, due to reduced demand and the constituencies' preference for cinema vans.¹⁹² For the election of 1931 the Party produced only 23.5 million leaflets and 222,000 posters, although once again Benson's was used for poster preparation and exhibition. Despite the bitterness with which the campaign was fought the mechanics of Conservative propaganda work were much reduced compared with 1929. Lack of preparation, the diminished resources of the local constituency associations, the change in organisational personnel and the difficulties of having to adapt propaganda from an exposition of Conservative to 'National' policy, all had a deleterious effect on party publicity. Although Baldwin was later to congratulate the Party on the ease with which it swung behind the National Government, considerable re-adjustment proved to be necessary in propaganda, organisation and attitudes.¹⁹³ In consequence the Films Association acquired a certain importance in the election campaign. It too was hit by the creation of the National Government - films and cartoons produced in 1930 satirising MacDonald and Snowden were immediately made redundant¹⁹⁴, and the election found it with free capital of

192. COO, Director of Organisation's file series. Report on Office Reconstruction and Reduction of Expenditure, 30 July 1931; NUCUA, Report of the Central Council, 1929.

193. 'To switch over, as in a night, from party warfare, party programme, party propaganda, to the support of the National Government was a great achievement, and an achievement no less of the organising skill of those who accomplished it than it was of the patriotism of the rank and file.' - NUCUA, National Union Annual Conference report, 1932.

194. Kinematograph Weekly, 24 May 1934.

only £3. However it immediately launched a fund-raising drive amongst the London Conservative clubs, filmed speeches by the National party leaders¹⁹⁵, and took its vans to 79 marginal towns where 543 meetings were held. In addition it obtained the use of nine loudspeaker vans and two other sets of loudspeaker apparatus, which it sent out to 48 towns where 404 meetings were given.¹⁹⁶ The Association also arranged the three films made of the party leaders which were shown in the newsreels to audiences estimated at 25 million. It should be added that although the newsreels also showed films of the Opposition leaders they proved generally more co-operative and sympathetic to the National Government parties and undoubtedly gave them greater coverage.¹⁹⁷ In MacDonald's own constituency of Seaham Clavering arranged for the Prime Minister's film speech to be displayed in every cinema at each performance for the week preceding the poll, a policy of blanket propaganda which no doubt contributed to the 6,000 majority achieved there.¹⁹⁸

The Party had made great use of the cinema vans both before and

195. The British Inter-University History Film Consortium's archive series film on Baldwin shows two speeches filmed at Paramount in 1931, on the same day, one which was issued on the newsreel, and one which was aimed particularly at Conservatives. John Ramsden suggests that the latter was made for the C.F.A. and was intended for showing on the cinema vans. The outdoor vans, however, were intended to capture a general, non-political audience. This film may therefore have been intended for indoor projection only, to audiences which, showing sufficient interest to attend indoor meetings, were predominantly Conservatives. The fact that such a film was considered necessary illustrates some concern for the support of the rank and file of the Party.
196. NUCUA, Executive Committee minutes, 8 December 1931.
197. See pp.664-668 below.
198. Baldwin papers, Bal.48/ff238-9, unsigned, undated memorandum (probably by Albert Clavering, mid 1934); for such a strong Labour mining seat MacDonald's success was a considerable achievement which many believed impossible - R. Bassett, Nineteen Thirty-one, London 1958, 319. How this cinema speech was exhibited within the R.P.A. laws regarding election expenditure is not known.

during the election.¹⁹⁹ But the financial crisis had undoubtedly struck it severely. Despite a realization that propaganda must be continuous to be effective, the overwhelming electoral victory made party publicity an obvious area for major economies.²⁰⁰ In the months following the election, demand for literature, and consequently production of it, virtually ceased.²⁰¹ Early in the New Year Gower told Clavering to put the cinema vans and the CFA itself into mothballs²⁰², for despite the fact that the vans had been hired out to the constituencies the operation had still been an expensive one for Central Office. In order to bring the cost of van hire for the local parties within the stringent laws regarding electoral expenditure the weekly charge had merely covered hire and maintenance for that week. Consequently the cost both of film production and of maintenance of the vans and staff when not in use had had to be financed from Central Office, and from private donations raised by the CFA. But the Association was not closed down; Clavering and his Organising Secretary, Kenneth Lockstone, objected strongly to the idea of having dead capital tied up in the vans. At Lockstone's suggestion they created an independent company, British Films Ltd., to hire the vans from the Party, maintain and run them on its behalf, and, when it was not using them, to hire them out to commercial firms wishing to use this new propaganda technique. The Company would also produce short commercial advertising and documentary films. The venture was highly successful, and British Films was able to keep the vans running for the Party and to plough money back into the CFA as a result of its commercial contracts, which ranged from advertising cigarettes to health resorts. This was to prove particularly profitable during the Second World War when the vans were hired to the National Savings Committee for five years and

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199. See Also Conservative Agents' Journal, March 1931, April 1931.
200. New Year's message to party workers from Lord Stonehaven, Conservative Agents' Journal, January 1932; The Times, 18 February 1932, 14c.
201. NUCUA, Executive Committee minutes, 15 June 1932.
202. Interview with Kenneth Lockstone, 31 January 1978.

made a profit of some £36,000.²⁰³

During the next three years mass propaganda, the CFA excepted, was minimal. The Publicity and Speakers Departments had their budgets still further cut, and in 1932-3 the amount of literature distributed in the constituencies was 'almost negligible'.²⁰⁴ There was an unwillingness on the part of Conservative sympathisers to give money for National publicity and of National Government supporters to provide funds for the Conservative machine, although in the absence of large National Labour and Liberal National organisations the Conservatives still had to bear the brunt of National organisation. Considerable resentment of this fact was felt by many constituencies and back-bench MPs, who accused the Party Chairman, Lord Stonehaven, of giving undue regard to the claims of MacDonal's and Simon's parties.²⁰⁵ It was even suggested that Baldwin and he actually refused money from Conservative sympathisers because of the National nature of the Government.²⁰⁶ These accusations were quite unjust given Stonehaven's behind-the-scenes hostility to National Labour and defence of Conservative Party rights. But it was understandable that many local parties should feel aggrieved; nearly 60 had sacrificed their own man for Liberal or National Labour candidates in 1931. A further 90 had been opposed at that election by a candidate of the other National Government parties, and so still felt themselves to be very much concerned with the advocacy of Conservatism rather than with political unity.²⁰⁷ Those constituencies who had returned a Conservative candidate were also confused as to whether they should

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203. This was achieved despite the profit tax, although at the expense of wear and tear on the vans.
204. NUCUA, Executive Committee minutes, 30 May 1934.
205. Meeting of Agents in Western England, Conservative Agents' Journal, March 1934; Meeting of Agents in South Eastern England, Ibid., June 1934.
206. Baldwin papers, Bal. 48/f245, unsigned memorandum to Baldwin, c. February 1935.
207. T. Stannage, Baldwin Thwarts the Opposition, London 1980, 24.

carry on Conservative or National propaganda. Although they were urged by Baldwin and others to propagate a spirit of national unity, they were at the same time told by party organisers to retain their Conservative identity and to actively attract new members to the Party.²⁰⁸ It was perhaps not surprising that in this confused situation, yet with a solid national mandate, local party propaganda should virtually disappear, particularly since many constituency associations²⁰⁹ also found themselves in serious financial difficulties. Stonehaven had an unhappy time defending the continuation of the National Government against an increasingly hostile minority of the rank and file, and not unnaturally this led to some deterioration of party organisation. Symbolic of the Party's condition was the demise in January 1934 of its most informative and useful publication for party workers, Gleanings and Memoranda, and its replacement by the less frequently issued Politics in Review.

In 1929 Davidson had used his modern central propaganda machine both to stimulate national organisation, and as a means of circumventing those parts of the Party which had proved backward in adapting to the new mass electorate. He had complained of the 'dead hand of obstruction on the part of the Agents', and was proud that he had freed the 'powerful exercise of every engine of propaganda' from their control. The cinema vans in particular, he had believed,

will prove increasingly of infinite value to the Party, provided that some method of running them independently of the Party Agents can be devised.²¹⁰

Now in 1934 Joseph Ball, who had been keeping a close eye on his former department, informed Neville Chamberlain of the dire situation

208. Speech by Robert Topping at Western Agents' meeting, Conservative Agents' Journal, April 1932.

209. Conservative Agents' Journal, March, July, 1933, February 1934.

210. Davidson papers, undated memorandum (early 1930) by J.C.C.D., on his achievements as Party Chairman.

as far as propaganda was concerned. He reported that

.... since the National Government came into office there has been a complete lack of adequate propaganda ... throughout the country.
211

He was convinced that what little literature there was had been distributed to firm Conservatives in secure Conservative constituencies:

As the distribution figures show, this system, as a national system of propaganda, has broken down. Many constituencies refuse to take Central Office publications at all; others say they cannot afford to do so; others disregard all communication about them.

His conclusion was a damning one:

We can surely no longer afford to allow the question whether or not effective publicity shall be given in any particular constituency to the Government's record or policy to be dependent, as it often is today, upon the whim of the agent or the state of the constituency's finances, or the effectiveness of its distribution system.

Similarly in May Gower admitted to Stonehaven and Baldwin his own worries about the Government's inadequate liaison with the press.
212

The one relieving feature in this picture was provided by the Films Association. Throughout the period and throughout the Party it

211. Chamberlain papers NC8/21/9, Ball to Chamberlain, 'Some notes and suggestions about propaganda', 14 March 1934.

212. Baldwin papers, Bal.47 /ff229-30 Gower to Stonehaven, 8 May 1934.

was hailed as being invaluable. The Northern Counties declared that

This form of propaganda, most easily understood by the untrained
mind, has been successful in attracting large audiences.²¹³

The Eastern Area felt that 'it enables the voter who never attends
ordinary political meetings to be reached',²¹⁴ whilst from the East
Midlands it was reported that

There is an increasing demand for this service which is generally
recognised as the best form of propaganda the Party Organisation
has at its disposal.²¹⁵

The verdict from the West Country summed up general opinion:

Opinion seems to be unanimous that of all forms of propaganda the
cinema van is the most effective.²¹⁶

Despite its initial thriftiness Central Office obviously concurred
with this view, for the CFA's annual budget always equalled, and in
1934 was triple that of the Publicity Department itself.²¹⁷ The CFA
was also made responsible for organising the Party's loudspeaker vans
and equipment, for it possessed 96 public address systems to hire to
local parties, and its work with both methods of propaganda was of
great value at by-elections. At North Hammersmith, for example, a
cinema van toured with a film of the candidate and enabled him to be

213. NUCUA, Report of the Central Council, 1937, Northern Counties Area Report.

214. NUCUA, Central Council report, 1931, Eastern Area Report.

215. NUCUA, Central Council report, 1935, East Midlands Area Report.

216. NUCUA, Central Council report, 1935, Western Cornwall, Devon and Somerset Provincial Divisions Report.

217. COO, Director of Organisation's file series, Summary of Party expenditure, 1930-36, in file entitled 'Report on Party Organisation, April 1937'.

seen at 78 meetings, itself addressing 18,000 voters. ²¹⁸

By 1933-34 there was a growing recognition that positive National Government propaganda could not be delayed if the deficiencies in organisation during the previous three years were to be adequately countered. By-election reverses were becoming worrying, whilst the Publications Sub-Committee of the Party complained at the attacks made upon the Government by the popular press, and warned of the Labour Party's 'Victory for Socialism' crusade. ²¹⁹ Local parties were urged to improve their organisation by introducing the 'block' system of canvassing and leaflet distribution. The Conservative Agents' Journal in 1933 referred repeatedly to the agents' anxiety for Central Office direction regarding publicity, and in June 1934 the Central Council of the National Union passed the resolution

That this Council is of opinion that more definite and active measures should be taken by Constituency Associations to combat the menace of Socialism and urges better organisation of propaganda during the coming months. ²²⁰

At the same meeting the Central Office Publicity Department was urged to make its literature more avowedly Conservative rather than National, a demand Stonehaven not surprisingly stamped on, arguing that Central Office propaganda had to be designed to appeal to non-Conservatives as well as to Party supporters.

The reasons for the Central Council's differentiation of

218. Conservative Agents' Journal, February 1933, May 1934.

219. NUCUA, Executive Committee minutes, 30 May 1934; The Times, 30 November 1933, 15b (leading article), discusses the anti-National Government bias of the popular press - the Daily Herald, the News Chronicle, Daily Express, Daily Mail and Evening News; Baldwin was told by Stonehaven that 'practically the whole of the so-called popular press is closed to us' - Baldwin papers, Bal. 48/f228, Stonehaven to Baldwin, 10 May 1934. See also Note E at end of chapter, p.112.

220. Politics in Review, vol. 1 (1934), 88.

Conservative and National propaganda were to be found in the activities of the National Government Co-ordinating Committee, and it was with these activities that political propaganda took a new turn. This body had been created in April 1933 by the three National Government party organisations, in order to secure

the closest possible co-operation between them for the purposes of National Government propaganda and other forms of political activity.²²¹

In fact it was initially more concerned with such matters as by-election candidate selection than with propaganda. Consisting of a committee of senior representatives of the party organisations, it had little power at first to improve publicity. However the Co-ordinating Committee did represent the first step in a move to give the three party machines a more united appearance, a move which was to have important financial benefits, at the same time as arousing local Conservative constituency association fears of party amalgamation.

If the Conservative Party organisation was in the doldrums between 1931 and 1934, those of the Liberal Nationals and National Labour were struggling even to survive. Apart from a sporadically issued newsletter, which was in no way intended as propaganda, the Liberal Nationals carried out virtually no propaganda on their own behalf. National Labour, despite its poor parliamentary representation, was initially in a slightly stronger position. Above all it could rely upon the goodwill attracted by MacDonald himself, and by what many saw as his self-sacrifice in the nation's interest in 1931. This fact was to be of considerable consequence for the support that certain leading cinema newsreels and film producers such as Michael Balcon gave the National Government. MacDonald had also attracted to the National Labour ranks two eminent men who were to give particular attention to its publicity, though with little

221. Gleanings and Memoranda, May 1933, 417.

success. Clifford Allen, lifelong socialist and pacifist, urged the production of a regular National Labour News-Letter, to act as an arena for educative and controversial debate. Although MacDonald disparaged the value of such a publication, a fortnightly journal, of remarkable quality given the circumstances under which it was produced, was started in April 1932 in the optimistic hope that

The Labour electors must get the facts and must do some stiff thinking upon them. This newsletter is issued to help him [sic].²²²

Within four months Allen had resigned his editorship, ill and severely disillusioned by MacDonald's lack of interest and desire for more popular propaganda - fewer 'essays' and more 'shot and shell'²²³ - and disgusted by the Government's apparent total neglect of self advertisement and explanation of policy.²²⁴ The News-Letter, however, continued to function until 1947, but certainly not as a method of propaganda of any importance.

Although MacDonald had been uninterested in Allen's efforts he was an ardent propagandist, and in late 1931 had invited Robert Donald, former editor of the Daily Chronicle and one of the most respected men of Fleet Street, to take charge of National Labour publicity.²²⁵ Donald undertook this work with determination, supporting the News-Letter, but also looking for a larger outlet for

222. The National Labour News-Letter, Foreword by J.R. MacDonald, 1 April 1932.

223. Quoted by Arthur Marwick, Clifford Allen, London 1964, 122.

224. 'I have never known any Government pursuing such a successful policy, so entirely neglecting the public platform and the press. This is not only stupid politically, but it is most unfair to the patient rank and file enthusiasts, who want to understand and support the Government's policy and instead find themselves absolutely neglected.', Allen wrote to Malcolm MacDonald, 11 June 1932. M. Gilbert (ed.), Plough My own Furrow, London 1965, 262.

225. H.A. Taylor, Robert Donald, London 1934, 257-9.

National Labour views. This he found in Everyman, an intellectual and literary magazine which, once acquired in mid-1932, he turned into a valuable and widely respected journal of current affairs. Together with Donald's other work for National Labour Everyman, although still hardly large-scale propaganda, could have provided the Party with reasonable independent publicity. But Donald's death in February 1933 deprived the organisation of a servant it could ill afford to lose. National Labour propaganda remained minimal. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that despite MacDonald's suspicions of his Conservative allies, and his fear of being absorbed by the larger party, he welcomed the creation of the National Government Co-ordinating Committee and saw its role as a propagandistic one.²²⁶

The organisations of all three National Government parties needed rousing, and roused they were by the results of the by-elections in the autumn. At East Fulham the Government candidate was defeated, whilst at four other by-elections within the month the average swing against the Government was over twenty per cent.²²⁷ The Co-ordinating Committee recognised at last that some kind of defence of Government policy was necessary, and began to organise a campaign for the New Year, although this was only made possible by the special donation of funds by a wealthy sympathiser.²²⁸ Baldwin, in that high moral tone which he always employed when talking about propaganda (one of his favourite phrases was 'I hate propaganda'²²⁹), showed his understanding of the necessity for it when he wrote to party workers that

The maintenance of an educated democracy depends on unceasing

226. There is a brief correspondence on the formation of the Committee in the MacDonald papers at the Public Record Office - PRO 30/69/1/396, April 1933.
227. C.T. Stannage, 'The East Fulham By-Election, 25 October 1933', Historical Journal, vol. XIV (1971), 165-200.
228. The Times 2 December 1933, 12e; National Union Executive Committee minutes, 30 May 1934.
229. P. Cohen, Op. Cit., 582 - Interview with Sir Patrick Gower.

propaganda, pressed with vigour and enthusiasm, and at the same time directed with a full and exact knowledge of the facts, towards clearly defined ends. A confusion of aim or a lack of enthusiasm renders propaganda weak and ineffectual.²³⁰

Three weeks later a campaign was launched consisting of four elements: a large number of mass meetings addressed solely by the heads of the Government²³¹, a national poster campaign in 250 constituencies, the distribution of popularly designed pictorial broadsheets in more marginal areas, and later in the year a national cinema van campaign.²³² For the first time a national campaign was organised, run and wholly financed by Central Office without apparent support from the constituency associations.

In connection with the cinema van campaign Clavering organised an extremely successful publicity stunt with the newsreel companies. It was arranged that the newsreels would film and exhibit the three National Government party leaders inspecting and 'sending-off' the fleet of outdoor cinema vans from New Palace Yard at the beginning of the campaign, thereby increasing public awareness of and interest in it. It also allowed MacDonald to say a few words on the achievements of the National Government and to declare to a national audience of many millions the campaign motto 'Pull together and pull the country through'.²³³ The PM was warned, however, by Sir Patrick Gower to

Avoid using the word "political", because that might prejudice the distribution of the film, as some exhibitors might think that

230. Politics in Review, vol. 1 (1934), 3.

231. National Labour News-Letter, 20 January 1934, 3 February 1934.

232. NUCUA, Executive Committee minutes, 30 May 1934. A typical film show of this campaign, lasting between 1 and 2.5 hours, is described in the papers of the Metropolitan Police at the Public Record Office, MEPO 2/3075. Not all of the 8 films described would have been shown at each 'pitch'.

233. British Movietone News, Issue no. 263, 18 June 1934, 'Picture paragraph - London - Government Talkie Vans'.

it was too propagandist.²³⁴

This stunt was shown on Pathe, Paramount, Gaumont British and Movietone newsreels, with the latter describing the vans as 'mechanical tub-thumpers'.

A new Press Officer was also appointed to Conservative Central Office during 1934. After twenty three years with the Daily Telegraph, ten of them as Chief Sub-editor, A.P. Rowe brought valuable inside knowledge of the workings of the press to his small but important department, whose particular function it was to deal on a day-to-day basis with the national press, keeping them informed, supplying information on request, and securing the maximum publicity possible.²³⁵

Such a national campaign, although an important start, could be afforded for only four months. Central Office was also geared to organisation through the local parties rather than to campaigning over their heads, and this effort was only a limited success. Certain individuals, however, were thinking on an altogether larger and more permanent scale. Joseph Ball, having recognised the difficulties under which the existing party organisation was labouring, and having apprised Neville Chamberlain of the current state of party publicity, went on to make proposals for the creation of a new and independent organisation, the sole purpose of which would be to propagandise the achievements of the National Government and to work for its return at the next election. This organisation would be distinctive in that, whilst admitting its purely limited electoral aims, it would also be the manifestation of the idea first mooted in 1923 for an anti-socialist fund-raising and fighting body.²³⁶ The techniques to be

234. J.R. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/1/397, Gower to H.G. Vincent, 12 June 1934.

235. COO, Director of Organisation's file series, unsigned memorandum (probably by Gower), 'Report on the Publicity Department', 14 October 1937.

236. Chamberlain papers, NC8/21/9, Ball to Chamberlain, 14 April 1934.

used were those Ball had first experimented with as Director of Publicity - a national campaign of large letterpress posters by Benson's, a cinema van campaign, a planned attempt to influence personally those press proprietors and editors who actually controlled the policy of their papers, similarly to bring influence to bear on the controllers of the cinema newsreels and, going further, to secure the adoption, by sympathetic feature film producers, of

scenarios dealing with e.g. historical Imperial subjects in such a way as to enlist the sympathies of the audience on the side of the present Government.

In addition he advocated mass leafleteering, but by post to ensure effective distribution, direct mail pamphleteering to specific sections of the electorate, and a greater attention to be given to broadcasting. Ball contended that Central Office was not a suitable instrument for such propaganda, tied as it was to the existing party organisation, whilst the latter needed considerable stimulation and development before it could be considered sufficiently accommodated to the enlarged condition of the electorate. He did not dare go so far, however, as to suggest that the existing publicity services of the Party be closed down.

Such proposals would, of course, have been useless without financial support. By making the new bureau 'non-party', but entrusted with the task of conducting the propaganda of all anti-socialist organisations, Ball was convinced that he could obtain considerable financial support from banks, joint-stock companies and big business, and in this he was to be proved correct. Significantly the committee he proposed to work out the details of the venture included Chamberlain and Sir Kingsley Wood, 'who has a real flair for publicity as well as an ear constantly to the ground'.

237. Ibid.

238. Ibid.

Chamberlain was immediately struck by the idea ²³⁹, and recognised the greatest advantage in such a bureau as being its ability to circumvent the local associations, and to conduct a campaign in which government leaders could control the content, extent and timing of propaganda irrespective of the whims of local party workers. ²⁴⁰ With Kingsley Wood and Ball he began immediately to plan what was to become the National Publicity Bureau. Like Ball he believed that if it were established as a non-political organisation, professing to work in the national interest and without apparent party affiliations, then substantial financial backing could be gained.

Chamberlain's support for the idea virtually guaranteed that it would go ahead. Throughout 1934 he was to become increasingly anxious about the Government's electoral tactics, and with Ball's assistance drew up a detailed programme of intended policy with which the Government might go to the country, a programme which was accepted by his cabinet colleagues largely intact. ²⁴¹ For Chamberlain was steadily becoming the backbone of the Party and Government, and had for long taken a considerable interest in both party organisation and publicity. Knowing well the vital need for good public relations he had since 1929 held regular press conferences, both general and with representatives of selected newspapers, a rare attention for a senior politician and minister to give the press. ²⁴² Early in 1931 he had

239. Indeed he may even have suggested to Ball that he investigate the feasibility of such a plan. Ball stated that Chamberlain's mind was already working along similar lines.

240. Chamberlain papers, NC18/1/867, Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 21 April 1934.

241. Chamberlain papers, NC2/23A, Political Diary for 1934.

242. Both his diaries and his letters to his sisters show a continual attention to press relations. See for example NC18/1/713, Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 18 October 1930; NC18/1/756, Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 26 September 1931; NC18/1/767, Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 17 January 1932. For an inside view of Chamberlain's use and abuse of the press see James Margach's The Abuse of Power, London 1978, Chapter 4.

worked hard to finance, and persuade Lord Camrose (William Berry) to publish, a Conservative national evening newspaper to counter the Rothermere and Beaverbrook press, although this scheme came to nothing.²⁴³ His protracted negotiations with Beaverbrook and Rothermere helped temporarily to keep these lords sweet when they took umbrage at Baldwin's leadership. Chamberlain had also shown particular interest in film as a method of publicity, and demonstrated an exceptional awareness of the nature of the medium and of the techniques required to master it.²⁴⁴ In 1932 he introduced the procedure, followed annually thereafter, whereby the Chancellor of the Exchequer made a brief film speech on the newsreels in explanation of his budget. Later in the 1930s several of his public speeches were made with the newsreel audiences in mind and, quite evidently from surviving film, with an eye for the camera. This is noticeable, for example, during his famous statements at Heston Airport during the Munich crisis. He frequently referred in his diaries and letters to film interviews he had given, and to the work of the cinema vans, and was clearly most impressed by the films that the CFA produced.²⁴⁵ In this interest he was encouraged by his close working and personal relationship with Joseph Ball, for Chamberlain was Ball's immediate superior as Chairman of the Conservative Research Department and a friend with whom he went fishing on the Test.²⁴⁶

Ball was not the only person to devise ambitious propaganda schemes. At the same time as he was submitting his proposals to Chamberlain Sir Albert Clavering ventured an idea to Baldwin and others which topped all previous conceptions. Recognising the respect

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243. Chamberlain papers, NC18/1/727, Neville to Ida Chamberlain, 21 February 1931; R.R. James, Op. Cit., 359.
244. This is well shown in the British Inter-University History Film Consortium's Archive Series film on Neville Chamberlain, by A. Beattie, D. Dilks and N. Pronay.
245. Chamberlain papers, NC18/1/717, Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 15 November 1930.
246. Interview with Percy Cohen, 20 April 1979.

in which film propaganda was held throughout the Conservative Party, Clavering's suggestions encompassed nothing less than a large scale take-over of the commercial cinema industry in this country.²⁴⁷ He reminded Baldwin of the

psychological fact that a story told by the talking film is more easily understood and makes a more lasting impression upon the memory than the same story told either by the written or spoken word.

Citing Russia and America as nations which had fully appreciated the power of film, he argued that, properly conducted, film propaganda could become the most powerful weapon in the armoury of a political party. More films should be made for the cinema vans, the fleet of which should be enlarged. The newsreels should be given greater opportunities to film military subjects; this would be valuable both for national feeling and for international prestige. But in addition to such overt publicity Clavering suggested that hidden propaganda of a subtly anti-revolutionary, patriotic and imperialistic character could be produced either by procuring a financial interest in individual commercial feature films, or preferably by taking a controlling interest in a major British film company and cinema chain. For £10,000 sufficient interest could be bought in a film to be able to control the scenario, and to inject into it a suitable anti-revolutionary message. For £1,000,000 an interest in the largest cinema chain in the country, controlling 360 picture-houses, might be obtained. Best of all,

A substantial interest in a large British film company such as Gaumont British would enable us to influence the production of patriotic and national films, and would also place us in a position to secure the exhibition of suitable films by the films news agency which is under their control It would enable us

247. Baldwin papers, Bal. 48/ff231-239, undated and unsigned memorandum. Internal evidence suggests author and date, and Kenneth Lockstone confirmed that Clavering held such ambitions.

to exercise a considerable amount of influence in the entertainment world generally. It would give us substantial power in the cinema world, which could be used to prevent, or at least make more difficult, the public exhibition of films containing any objectionable matter.

Although the initial capital requirement would be high, the financial returns from such a commercial venture would be handsome, and the enterprise, although undertaken for political ends, could well become a profitable investment. He added, however, that

The question of disguising the activities of the Party would necessarily be an essential consideration.

Because of the potentially explosive nature of these proposals it is difficult to discover whether they were taken any further. The most ambitious schemes for company takeovers certainly were not - presumably the capital was not available, and it must be doubted whether Baldwin would have approved of such morally dubious ideas anyway. To discover whether a financial interest was ever taken in any feature film, in order to influence the plot, further research would have to be carried out in the papers of the commercial film companies concerned. Alexander Korda's friendship with leading Conservatives certainly needs further investigation; in September 1934 Korda announced plans, abortive as it happened, to produce firstly a series of 'Topical Shorts' on such subjects as 'Will Monarchies Return?', 'Unemployment', and 'Gold', and secondly a film commemorating the twenty-five year reign of King George V.²⁴⁸ Although Winston Churchill's close involvement in these proposals make any official party connection most unlikely, such films would have fitted well into Clavering's scheme, as would British National Film's (subsequently Rank) plans at the same time to make films entitled 'Recovery - the human story of industrial England', 'Song of

248. K. Kulik, Alexander Korda, London 1975, 254-5; Kinematograph Weekly, 25 October 1934.

England - a musical super of English life' and 'Rhodes'.²⁴⁹ This latter subject was filmed by Gaumont British in 1936 as 'Rhodes in Africa', a film which hid the dirty linen beneath a spotless deification of the central character, the film itself being a thinly veiled apologia for British empire-building.²⁵⁰ Indeed when one considers both the genre of British films which Jeffrey Richards has aptly named 'The Cinema of Empire', and the strict rulings of the British Board of Film Censors with regard to films on such subjects, it is impossible not to wonder with hindsight why Clavering felt that direct party involvement in the industry was necessary to produce the desired images.²⁵¹

The most important known result of these proposals was that the Party undertook secretly to finance and produce a 'feature documentary' for commercial release.²⁵² This was an hour long film called 'The Soul of a Nation' which used newsreel stock and specially shot footage to relate the history of Britain in the twentieth century, but from what was very much an establishment viewpoint. No mention was made in it of its political origins, which it concealed extremely cleverly in a pictorial chronicle, narrated by Felix Aylmer and directed by J.B. Williams, that was warmly praised by the critics²⁵³ when it was released, and which would hardly be dated today. Rolling titles at the beginning of the film emphasised to the audience that the film was

a true statement of fact, picturing events not as we should like them to have been, BUT AS THEY WERE.

249. Kinematograph Weekly, 10 January 1935.

250. J. Richards, Visions of Yesterday, London 1973, 140-142.

251. Ibid.; British Board of Film Censors, Annual Report, 1931, 6-7.

252. Interview with Kenneth Lockstone, 31 January 1978.

253. J.B. Williams also directed the English version of the controversial film 'Whither Germany' in 1934, a film which was refused a certificate by the B.B.F.C. because of its politically overt (anti-Nazi) stance.

Most obviously stressed were the monarchy and parliamentary democracy, but it was what they represented that was important. Of Edward VII the commentary stated:

the free democracy and the constitutional monarchy express the very spirit of the nation. When Edward VII opened his first parliament in 1901 it had never been felt more strongly that this ceremony, combining a changeless tradition with a constantly changing parliament, was the perfect symbol of that progress without violence which Britain enjoys beyond all others.

Of his successor George V:

The paradox of constitutional monarchy remained the perfect expression of the national spirit and the inspiration of Britain's traditional stability.

Britain's constitutional solution to the crisis of 1931 was contrasted sharply with the violence, rioting and suppression that the rest of Europe was shown as suffering:

All this distress, all this extreme nationalism, all this rattling of sabres, perhaps they are no more than a nightmare through which struggling humanity will come ... Perhaps the sun will soon rise again upon the rest of civilisation ... In the meantime we still have the English Channel and the cliffs of Dover. They are not the barrier they were, but the tradition of peace and security associated with them appears to have left a permanent mark. And behind them is a country quietly tackling its difficulties.

The achievements since 1931 were listed without mention of the National Government, but ascribing Britain's greatness to the British character - 'doggedness, good humour and common sense' and the film ended with a repetition of the statement that Britain's greatest advantage over all other nations was its tradition of 'progress

without violence'.²⁵⁴

'The Soul of a Nation' was a well crafted piece of work, novel in conception, nicely executed, and far more expensive than any British political party had previously attempted. The reviews it received indicated that it was successful both in putting across its message and in hiding its political origins, even though Michael Balcon, Alexander Korda and the Chairman of the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association all knew who its sponsors were.²⁵⁵ The serious drawback of the film, however, was its length. Never before had anyone tried to hold the attention of an audience for over an hour with a factual film, and exhibitors proved unwilling to put it to the test. It had a limited release in its full length²⁵⁶, and was then divided into six parts and exhibited as a series of shorts. As such it had a fair circulation and was able not only to reach a larger audience than would otherwise have been the case, but also to hit them repeatedly for several weeks - a valuable bonus which helped to make up for its loss of cumulative impact. But commercially it fell far short of recouping its costs, and the Party never again attempted such an ambitious project.

Joseph Ball's brain-child, however, had progressed steadily. In November 1934 MacDonald himself began to express concern about the Government's lack of propaganda, and following an offer by Sir Charles Higham, the advertising consultant, to organise a press campaign for the Government, the Prime Minister was goaded by H.B. Usher, his Principal Private Secretary, into writing to the National

254. A 35 mm. copy of 'The Soul of a Nation' is held at the Imperial War Museum. Picture quality is excellent, the soundtrack variable.

255. Interview with Kenneth Lockstone, 31 January 1978. For reviews of the film see Kinematograph Weekly, 20 December 1934; Picturegoer, 4 May 1935; Monthly Film Bulletin, February 1935.

256. Interview with Kenneth Lockstone, 31 January 1978; Kinematograph Weekly 10 January 1935.

Government Co-ordinating Committee.²⁵⁷ After congratulating it for its film propaganda MacDonald stated his worries:

I feel that methods of political propaganda are about a generation out of date and that now we are appealing to a vast mass of electors we may find we have a good deal to learn from the publicity expert.²⁵⁸

The same day he told Lord Elton that

The advertisement scheme really must be pushed on. Roosevelt sweeps the country just on account of advertisement! So far as our press and our advocates are concerned, we might be living on top of a mountain above the clouds.²⁵⁹

Within a month rumours were beginning to circulate in the press about the creation of a new propaganda department, and fears were expressed that Sir Kingsley Wood, who was expected to take charge of it, would emulate propaganda developments in Nazi Germany.²⁶⁰ The new bureau had begun to raise funds earlier in the year, and had actually²⁶¹ been financing National Government propaganda since October. However it was not until March 1935 that the establishment of the National Publicity Bureau was officially announced, to a mixed press reception and to some anxiety within Conservative ranks who desired propaganda that was wholly

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257. MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/1/397, H.B. Usher (P.P.S. to PM) to MacDonald, 6 November 1934.
258. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/1/397, MacDonald to David Margesson (Chairman of Co-ordinating Committee), 8 November 1934.
259. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/5/46, MacDonald to Lord Elton (Editor, National Labour News-Letter), 8 November 1934.
260. Manchester Guardian 20 December 1934, 8e; News Chronicle 28 December 1934, 10c.
261. COO, Director of Organisation's file series, memorandum by J. Ball entitled 'The Next General Election', c. late 1945 - early 1946.

Conservative rather than National.²⁶² Indeed the Party was always to remain extremely suspicious of the National Publicity Bureau (NPB) because of the implied subsuming in its activities of the interests of the Conservative Party among those of its minor allies, and hence of its potentially leftward bias. A demand at the Central Council of the National Union for Conservative films, literature and propaganda was effectively answered by Lord Stonehaven, the Party Chairman. He assured the meeting that the NPB was a purely temporary body which would cease to operate after the election, that Sir Patrick Gower was to act as liaison officer between the new bureau and the existing party organisation, and that it would be a completely separate body with no authority over Central Office, which would remain free to issue its own broadsheet, pamphlet, leaflet and poster propaganda.²⁶³ This was to be something of an empty promise, for although Central Office continued to produce its educative pamphlets and literature for party workers and members, much of its mass propaganda role was taken over by the NPB, including use of the CFA's cinema vans.

The National Publicity Bureau immediately commissioned eight new - and most impressive - documentary short films which explained in a serious manner the achievements of the National Government in such fields as agriculture, market gardening, industry and Scotland, as well as a series of humorous films in which the well known vaudeville artists Stanley Holloway, the ventriloquist Arthur Prince and Florence Day the singer, gave comedy sketches into which were injected a National Government propaganda message. Neville Chamberlain saw these films, was 'immensely impressed' and found it

difficult to see how anyone not completely hard-boiled could resist the conclusion that the N[atational] G[overnment] had worked

262. The Times, 28 March 1935, 15c; Morning Post, 4 March 1935, 11g, 21 March 1935, 12c, 13g; News Chronicle 14 March 1935, 10b.

263. The Times 28 March, 8d. Following the General Election Sir Kingsley Wood asked the Central Council not to insist on the closure of the NPB, and it agreed to its continuation.

wonders in all directions.²⁶⁴

In addition the NPB established its own film department and purchased 17 indoor cinema vans to complement the CFA's daylight vans (the CFA's indoor fleet had been sold after the 1931 election as unsatisfactory).²⁶⁵

Once again Benson's were called in to handle the poster campaign, although the NPB executive committee, which included representatives of all three government parties, were responsible for actually approving all propaganda, most of which was under the direction of Ball and Gower. Large 16, 32, and 48 sheet letterpress posters were employed, the slogans of which were changed regularly. Typical posters included statements of fact: 'NEW RECORDS - A MILLION NEW HOUSES BUILT UNDER NATIONAL GOVERNMENT', more purely emotional sentiments - a picture of three soccer players representing the three National Government parties, advancing together towards the goal, with the message 'ITS TEAM WORK THAT COUNTS - SUPPORT NATIONAL GOVERNMENT', and combinations of the two: 'BRITAIN STILL FORGING AHEAD UNDER NATIONAL GOVERNMENT - MORE TRADE - MORE WAGES - MORE WORKERS - LOWER TAXES - SOUND FINANCE ALWAYS PAYS'.²⁶⁶ Other advertisements designed to appeal to shop-workers were displayed on the London underground. The fee for Press Secretaries Ltd., the firm which since 1930 had been employed to produce the Party's popular magazine 'Home and Empire' and to provide a press service for sympathetic and provincial newspapers, was now paid by the NPB

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264. Chamberlain papers, NC18/1/916, Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 18 May 1935.
265. COO, Director of Organisation's file series, unsigned memorandum (probably Gower), 14 October 1937, Report on the Publicity Department; The Morning Post 5 November 1935, 14a; interview with Kenneth Lockstone, 31 January 1978.
266. R.D. Casey, 'The National Publicity Bureau', Public Opinion Quarterly, 1939, 632-633. This contemporary article, relying heavily on press reports, has several errors in its relation of the formation of the NPB, but is a valuable source of information about the actual campaign.

instead, although they remained at Central Office and did the same work.²⁶⁷ The NPB also developed and took over the distribution of Central Office's latest venture in written propaganda, a monthly pictorial broadsheet printed in tabloid newspaper form and with much content of general interest, known as 'Popular Illustrated', 'New London Pictorial', or 'Scottish Illustrated', according to where it was distributed. By producing an attractive pictorial sheet, identifying it in the readers' minds with the popular press and distributing it in large quantities in strictly selected marginal constituencies, the NPB hoped that the principal difficulty of all printed propaganda could be overcome - to get it read, and by the people who mattered. With a circulation rising from 3 to 5 million at its peak, regularly produced and with an assured distribution through full-time canvassers employed by the NPB, the 'Popular Illustrated' no doubt did reach a wide and important audience, and its human interest pictures and women's features probably ensured that the politically significant messages were also seen.²⁶⁸ Considerable direct mail pamphleteering also ensured that specific groups of the electorate were reached, and the NPB's full-time canvassers toured all the marginal constituencies, in effect taking over the role of the local party workers where this was needed, and encouraging them to greater propaganda activity. But following this campaign Ball was to express total disillusionment with the local parties, and with ordinary mass leafleteering:

We have definitely decided against using the ordinary political leaflet, and we have abandoned all hope of securing effective distribution of any propaganda through existing constituency organisations. Until these latter have been thoroughly overhauled and brought up to date we must face the fact that for the distribution of such propaganda publications as 'The Popular Illustrated' we must depend solely upon a paid and properly

267. COO, Director of Organisation's file series, unsigned report on Publicity Department, 14 October 1937.

268. These propaganda papers are deposited at the British Library Newspaper library, Colindale.

supervised professional distribution.²⁶⁹

Certainly traditional Central Office leafleteering was much reduced, and Gower had to admit to Baldwin in August 1935, less than four months before the eventual election date, that his own Publicity Department had issued only 1.5 million leaflets that year. Following this Central Office's publicity work was stepped up, for 57 different types of leaflet were eventually produced and over nine million distributed to the constituencies.²⁷⁰ But the Party as a whole was ill prepared for the election.²⁷¹ Gower therefore urged Baldwin to delay it until the New Year, believing that an extended cinema van campaign would do much to compensate for the lack of other propaganda,

because I am firmly convinced that visual propaganda of this kind is very telling in its effect.²⁷²

In contrast to the parlous condition of Central Office and the constituencies, who came to rely heavily on NPB propaganda aid²⁷³, the Bureau ran a full scale campaign for nearly ten months before the election, and was evidently geared to continuing into the New Year had Baldwin taken Gower's advice. Political opponents were seriously worried by the NPB's campaign, which far exceeded anything that Labour or Lloyd George could attempt²⁷⁴, whilst the size of the

269. Baldwin papers, Bal. 48/f259, Ball to Baldwin, 6 December 1935.

270. Conservative Research Department Library, party leaflets, bound in volumes; Morning Post, 5 November 1935, 14a.

271. See also J.C. Robertson, The General Election of 1935, Journal of Contemporary History, vol. 9 (1974), 115-6.

272. Baldwin Papers, Bal. 47/ff103-8, Gower to Baldwin, 1 August 1935.

273. NUCUA, Report of the Central Council, 1935, 1936.

274. T. Jones, A Diary with Letters, London 1954, 147, note of conversation with Lloyd George, 16 May 1935. L.G. expressed concern that 'Kingsley Wood was covering the country with poster-propaganda while he (L.G.) was silent'.

poster campaign made it necessary for Central Office to prime Conservative workers on how to answer questions from the public as to whether the posters were paid for out of taxpayer's money.²⁷⁵

Certain questions about the National Publicity Bureau need clarification - who controlled it, who financed it, and how its propaganda differed in practice from that which Central Office might otherwise have produced? For while Conservative MPs were worrying at its lack of a strictly Conservative viewpoint, and fearing that Kingsley Wood, who was an acknowledged careerist, would turn it into a rival organisation to the existing party machine, there were strong grounds for belief that it was in reality no more than a front for a Conservative body. Its Executive Committee was, of course, composed of representatives of all the Government parties, as were its publicity sub-committees. However its Chairman was Sir Kingsley Wood, who admitted that in practice it was run by Conservative officials.²⁷⁶ Patrick Gower spent much of his time there. Above all its Deputy Chairman and Director was Joseph Ball who had devised the Bureau, brought it into being and to a large extent ran it from his office in the Conservative Research Department, although it did have separate offices under the management of its Organising Secretary, Col. E.H. Davidson, who had been a member of Lord Northcliffe's propaganda committee in the First World War. Malcolm MacDonald, the National Labour representative, remembers that

we left a lot of work to be done by Joseph Ball, who was a very efficient professional operator at publicity propaganda through the media.²⁷⁷

Yet at the same time the Conservative controllers of the NPB seem

275. Notes for Conservative Workers, August 1935.

276. COO, Director of Organisation's file series, memorandum by Sir Kingsley Wood, 8 March 1938, in file 'Lord Monsell's Committee', 1937-8.

277. M. MacDonald to the author, 25 February 1979.

to have taken no more advantage of their position than the Party as a whole did as the principal partner in the Government.²⁷⁸ There was little official contact between the NPB and Central Office, and the representatives of the minor parties did play an active role in approving or vetoing the propaganda produced by the Bureau.²⁷⁹ Moreover it is clear that the NPB owed its existence predominantly to Liberal and National Labour sympathisers who would not put up with any Conservative duplicity. Kingsley Wood ascribed its creation to

the activities of a small group of big industrialists and other City men of varying political views, but consisting very largely of Liberals, who were not satisfied with the propaganda which was carried out in 1933 and 1934 on behalf of the National Government.²⁸⁰

Ball confirmed that the NPB's funds came largely from

Joint Stock Companies, the executives of which regard themselves as precluded from subscribing to any party organisation, and that, in so far as they came from individuals, the subscribers are largely Liberals who desire to see the National Government kept in office, and are, almost to a man, very suspicious of all the Party Headquarters.²⁸¹

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278. Percy Cohen stated that to his knowledge certain NPB money was used to finance the Conservative Research Department and even found its way to Central Office. In that the NPB employed Central Office staff and facilities and took over the financing of Press Secretaries Ltd. this may well have been so. But the content of NPB propaganda does not seem to have been any less 'National' or more Conservative thereby.
279. Malcolm MacDonald to author, 25 February, 1979. According to Kinematograph Weekly, 4 April 1935, certain films made by the CFA for the NPB had to be altered at the request of the minor National Government parties.
280. COO, Director of Organisation's file series, Memorandum by Sir Kingsley Wood, 8 March 1937, in file 'Lord Monsell's Committee'.
281. Chamberlain papers, NC8/21/8, Ball to Chamberlain, 1 June 1938.

For National Labour J.H. Thomas was apparently successful in gaining financial support for the NPB from city friends.²⁸² It would be sheer speculation to suggest specific individuals, but three names have appeared of men who may have been involved, namely Sir Julian Cahn and Israel Sieff²⁸³, and Lord Luke of Bovril, who had provided money to establish the Conservative Research Department and who had been invited by Ball to advise in the creation of the NPB.²⁸⁴ At least two backers gave assistance in kind, amounting to 'tens of thousands of pounds' of press and film propoganda.²⁸⁵ Whoever were the principal backers of the NPB, they did rather more than provide the finance. Not only did the Finance Committee of the Bureau, which considered all proposals for expenditure, consist of representatives of the NPB's sponsors, but even the Executive Committee which guided policy contained two such representatives in addition to Sir Kingsley Wood, Malcolm MacDonald, Lord Huteson (Liberal National), Joseph Ball and Sir Patrick Gower.²⁸⁶

The National Publicity Bureau was the natural culmination of ten years of development in mass party propoganda. It was created to utilise the finances of non-Conservative businessmen for anti-socialist propoganda. Freely using the services of commercial advertising firms its work represented a thorough belief in the powers of persuasion by modern mass publicity techniques. By the rejection of mass leafleteering in preference for selected

282. R.D. Casey, 'The National Publicity Bureau', Public Opinion Quarterly, 1939, 625.

283. Baldwin papers, Bal.47/ff245 and 249, unsigned memorandum, c. February-March 1935, mentions a rumour that Cahn and Sieff had supplied funds for non-party national propoganda.

284. Chamberlain papers, NC8/21/9, Ball to Chamberlain, 14 April 1934. The Research Department had some £50,000 of shares in Ashanti Gold Fields, a company of which Lord Luke was Chairman - COO, Chairman's Office series, correspondence with R.A. Butler file, R. Assheton to R.A. Butler, 18 April 1946.

285. Chamberlain papers, NC8/21/8, Ball to Chamberlain, 1 June 1938.

286. COO, Director of Organisation's file series, Report of Lord Monsell's Committee on Film Propoganda, December 1937.

distribution of broadsheets in marginal constituencies it showed itself to be fully aware of the significance of the quality of propaganda and of attention to distribution. Films, posters, broadsheets and direct mail methods were all designed first and foremost to gain attention, to place the National Government message in the way of people during the normal course of their everyday lives, demanding no personal effort from them, interspersing serious political argument simply stated with pure entertainment, and using popular association - vaudeville entertainers, soccer, the tabloid press - in order to identify the National Government in the electorate's mind with all things pleasurable in life. A noticeable feature of NPB propaganda was the increasing particularisation of the target. Many of the films produced were aimed at specific sections of the electorate, and direct mail pamphleteering was directed to teachers, parsons and lay readers amongst others. The Bureau was also a response to the believed tardiness of the existing party organisation in adapting to the modern conditions of electoral politics, and to the confusion created by the new situation after 1931.²⁸⁷ In organising a mass campaign of nearly a year's length, by financing it almost entirely from centrally directed funds rather than remaining dependent upon local enthusiasm, by making itself wholly independent of the local party associations for the selection and distribution of propaganda and by boldly rejecting traditional

287. This is in no way to suggest that nothing was being done to the existing machinery - far from it - but merely that the expansion and adaptation of an organisation the size of a national political party, comprising both voluntary and professional sections, could only be achieved gradually, for example in the creation of a larger and fully trained cadre of party agents, of an effective national system of party political education, and of an adequate army of voluntary canvassers. Thus Philip Cambray identified the development of mass propaganda methods as being the result of the failure of the local canvass. After describing voluntary canvassers as the 'front-line' 'storm troops' of a Party he noted the inadequacy of numbers to cope with the new electorate and concluded that 'Hence political strategists have to conduct their trench warfare with wholly inadequate forces. For this reason their election strategy is gradually changing over from the personal appeal to the use of forces which are calculated to affect opinion in the mass.' P. Cambray, Op. Cit., 180-182.

propaganda techniques and organisation which it believed to be outdated, the National Publicity Bureau was the progenitor of much subsequent Conservative Party propaganda method, as well as an impressive forebear to private industry's anti-nationalisation publicity, which was to become an important feature of post-war political propaganda.

Joseph Ball made large claims for the significant effect of the campaign. A comparison of the voting figures in 1935 in 330 key constituencies in which the Bureau functioned with those of the divisions where it did no propaganda, convinced him that the NPB had a 'decisive effect' on the result.²⁸⁸ Chamberlain agreed that it did 'prepare the way and must have won many votes'. But he also gave due credit to Baldwin's personal charisma, to his own policy work and to the programme of the Labour Party, which he considered

absolutely suicidal. It took no account of the fact that elections today are won or lost by the unattached voter, particularly the women, who will never be attracted by a purely class party, and who will always be frightened by proposals for revolutionary change.²⁸⁹

Thomas Jones also believed Baldwin's personality and Labour's internal difficulties to have been responsible for the election result.²⁹⁰ But the question of the actual impact of party propaganda is not here at issue. The present concern is with the attitudes and actions of party leaders and servants with regard to propaganda, and it is clear that as far as this was concerned they were most impressed by and even jealous of the NPB's work.

288. Chamberlain papers, NC8/21/8, Ball to Chamberlain, 1 June 1938.

289. Chamberlain papers, NC2/23A, undated diary entry (mid-November 1935; NC18/1/938, Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 9 November 1935; NC2/23A, undated diary entry (mid-November 1935).

290. T. Jones (1954), Op. Cit., 155-6, T.Jones to A. Flexner, 17 November 1935.

The 1935 campaign cost the NPB £300,000.²⁹¹ For a centrally funded publicity campaign this figure was nearly double the previous record expenditure of 1929. Nor were the coffers of its business backers exhausted, and Ball was confident that the Bureau's work could be continued without pause for the next five years. His hope, as he told Baldwin, was that the Labour Party's support would thereby be so weakened as to force it to abandon its extreme socialist policies of nationalisation of banking, coal, transport, iron and steel, and so render it safe as an alternative party of government.²⁹² Such a double-edged argument would not have pleased Conservative critics of the maintenance of the National Government.

Between 1936 and 1939 the National Publicity Bureau continued to operate, though on a much reduced scale. Its principal activities were those it had found most effective, if costly, in 1935. 'Popular Illustrated' was published irregularly and the press service was continued through Press Secretaries, providing regular news items, articles and editorials to 140 provincial newspapers and journals.²⁹³ This was in addition to Central Office's regular liaison with the national Press through A.P. Rowe, the Press Officer, and Gower himself. Ball continued to stress the need for

... a daily or evening newspaper with a wide circulation among the masses, and giving the Government regular and whole-hearted support.²⁹⁴

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291. COO, Director of Organisation's file series, undated memorandum entitled 'The Next General Election', by J. Ball, c. late 1945-early 1946. The purchasing power of the 1900 £ in 1935 was 12/2d - D. Butler and A. Sloman, *Op. Cit.*, 348-9. At 1978 prices, therefore, this campaign cost over £3.6 million.
292. Baldwin papers, Bal. 48/ff251-2, Ball to Baldwin, 6 December 1935.
293. Chamberlain papers, NC8/21/8, Ball to Chamberlain, 1 June 1938; COO, Director of Organisation's file series, unsigned memorandum on Publicity Department, 14 October 1937.
294. Baldwin papers, Bal. 48/f257, Ball to Baldwin, 6 December 1935.

Such a newspaper was needed in order to counter the Daily Herald, and the Daily Mail and Daily Express which, he felt, attacked the Government more than they supported it.

But once again a large part of the inter-election propaganda load was taken by the cinema vans of the CFA and the NPB, for which the NPB provided funds every year.²⁹⁵ This was in no sense cheap propaganda, and to have continued it the Bureau must have valued it²⁹⁶ highly. It is worth pausing briefly to try to assess just how significant the Party's use of film was, for although it was evidently highly regarded by both the central organisation and the local parties, it must be said that the contemporary comments cited as to the medium's effectiveness were made in a period of naively uncritical belief in the persuasive power of film. Although the phrases 'mob psychology' and 'mass propaganda' were in great vogue there was still little scientific basis for much of what was believed. It should be borne in mind that Davidson, Ball, Gower, Kingsley Wood, Chamberlain and others involved were essentially enthusiastic practising amateurs. They were learning their way, relying for their attitudes to propaganda upon past experience, upon evidence which was only gradually becoming more quantifiable, upon intuition, commercial practice which was more distinctive from than similar to the political case, upon unreliable testimony as to the significance of propaganda during the First World War, in Russia and Nazi Germany, and, it must be admitted, upon statements made valid by repetition. This is not to belittle their beliefs - political persuasion remains at heart an intuitive business. In their experimentation and use of professional journalists, film-makers and

295. NUCUA, Report of the Central Council, 1936, 1937; Conservative Agents' Journal, February 1938; Chamberlain papers, NC8/21/8, Ball to Chamberlain, 1 June 1938.

296. A six month campaign by 15 outdoor cinema vans cost £20,728 at the beginning of the War. This did not cover either the cost of running the NPB's 17 indoor vans, which would not have been much less, or the considerable cost of film production - National Savings Committee papers, NSC 29/15, Statement of costs of cinema van campaign based on CFA experience, by Sir Albert Clavering, 15 February 1940.

advertising consultants they did all they could to reduce the variables and, by so doing, gradually introduced new techniques and new attitudes to the art of political persuasion. Thus they placed a new emphasis in the 1930s on immediate mass propaganda in the absence of long term national and local organisation and education, which only more gradually recovered their former degree of importance in the extended party machine.

As for the Party's use of film, if the audience reached was a wider one than previously it was also likely to contain a larger proportion of hostile viewers. Moreover, with the reduction of other forms of propaganda, the total number of people reached by party publicity probably did not increase through film use, except when it was infiltrated into the commercial cinema. Results from the cinema vans, however, were not inconsiderable. They undoubtedly attracted large audiences, and the journal World Film News estimated that in the months immediately prior to the 1935 General Election 1.5 million people saw films from them.²⁹⁷ Even in a brief non-election campaign in the winter and spring of 1936-7 the indoor vans held 2,048 meetings in over 300 constituencies, whilst in the summer of 1937 the outdoor vans visited 230 constituencies and held 2,430 meetings in thirteen weeks, the two fleets having a total audience of over 900,000.²⁹⁸ These were figures ordinary political meetings could not have approached. Nor for the latter would the audience have been the one desired. When it is considered that the vans were concentrated in particular on marginals and by-elections, and, in the summer months, at packed seaside resorts, undoubtedly attracting both a good audience and one which would not have attended ordinary political meetings, than it becomes clear that the Party had one of the most effective disseminators of political views then available. A study of the surviving films also furnishes proof of their quality, for it was realised that to hold an audience accustomed to commercial

297. World Film News, December 1936, 29.

298. National Savings Committee papers, NSC 29/15, Memorandum by W.R.C. Howard on 'the use of Daylight Cinema Vans for Propaganda and Advertising purposes', 13 February 1940.

films the highest professional standards would be necessary.²⁹⁹ As for the superior persuasive power of film, the point was well made by the commentator who stated that although a public meeting on tariffs would be unlikely to attract one in a hundred electors, and an article on the subject in the press to be read by one in a thousand,

show that same group of people a film illustrating, for instance, the development of the home market garden industry and the vast number of men unemployed as the result of foreign dumping, and there will be scarcely one who will not carry away some vivid picture that they will associate with the idea of tariffs and the advisability of voting for Mr. X, who stands for protection. With their own eyes they have seen the tomatoes growing.³⁰⁰

The committee which in 1937 was established to review Conservative Central Office organisation was certainly well pleased with the Party's use of film during the previous twelve years. Its members emphasised

the importance which they attach to the production and display of films. They are satisfied that wireless and the cinema have altered the attitude of the general public towards political meetings, and that large audiences can only be obtained today by a speaker of the first rank, or in very exceptional circumstances. The exhibition of political films, however, is more and more attracting the attention of the electorate, and is today providing a most effective means of propaganda. The Committee think, therefore, these operations should be extended when funds permit.³⁰¹

299. See Note F at end of chapter, p.113, for filmography of all films known to have been made by or for the Conservative Party, 1926-39. This list is far from complete. Only a small proportion of the films described exceeded ten minutes in length. Few have survived.

300. 'Politics and the Film', Sight and Sound, vol. 1 (1932), 49. This article also contains a photograph of a van at work.

301. CCO, Director of Organisation's file series, Report of Lord Monsell's Committee on Film Propaganda, December 1937.

This committee provided an opportunity for a certain long unspoken hostility between Central Office and the NPB to be aired. It would have been hardly surprising if Sir Robert Topping, the General Director at Central Office, had not felt a certain resentment at the usurpation of his organisation's mass propaganda work by the NPB. Sir Joseph Ball³⁰² certainly gave the appearance in the Conservative Research Department and the National Publicity Bureau of removing authority from Palace Chambers and establishing an alternative centre under his own direction, and this was emphasised by the very close involvement of Chamberlain in the CRD's work, and Gower at the NPB. A certain personal antipathy developed between Topping and Ball, both strong and determined men.³⁰³ David Clarke, a member of the Research Department and later its director, described relations between the two bodies as 'frankly bad'.³⁰⁴ When Sir Patrick Gower, who was by now owing greater allegiance to Ball at the NPB than to Central Office, suggested in evidence to the Monsell Committee that the Conservative Films Association be almost wholly taken over by the NPB film unit, Topping objected. With the assistance of Douglas Hacking, the new Party Chairman, and Col. Ropner, the Treasurer of the CFA, he blocked the proposal, and the Committee, of which he was a member, even went beyond its brief by making suggestions for the better organisation of the NPB.³⁰⁵

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302. Ball was knighted in 1936.
303. Interview with Percy Cohen, 20 April 1979. Gower described Topping as 'tough as an individual but without much interest in propaganda and sometimes a little jealous of that side' - P. Cohen, Op. Cit., 581.
304. COO, Chairman's Office series, correspondence with R.A. Butler file, memorandum on Research Department by David Clarke, 2 July 1946.
305. COO, Director of Organisation's file series, Lord Monsell's Committee file, memorandum by P. Gower, 27 October 1937; memorandum by Col. Ropner, 10 November 1937; memorandum by R. Topping, May 1938; Topping actually drafted the Monsell Committee's Report on Film Propaganda. Interestingly Topping himself was not wholly convinced of the value for money of the cinema vans. Whilst acknowledging the propaganda advantages and extreme popularity of the vans, he pointed out in September

Following this tussle for control of film publicity, relations between the NPB and Central Office eased. The NPB, despite Ball's optimism, was slowly being run down and he was himself drawn into other spheres of activity, having been appointed Director (designate) of the Films Division of the embryo Ministry of Information, a position he owed almost entirely to the reputation for expertise in film propaganda which he had acquired in the Party's service.³⁰⁶ At the same time Topping could not ignore the great benefit which the Party had derived from the NPB, and was only concerned that the Party organisation should retain its own distinct identity. Central Office propaganda was still struggling - from December 1935 to March 1938 less than 3 million leaflets were sold and distributed by the Party³⁰⁷, and the Executive Committee of the National Union complained both in 1937 and 1938 at the serious lack of any propaganda work other than that provided by the NPB.³⁰⁸ In preparation for the abortive 1939 election Joseph Ball reviewed Party organisation once again, and yet again concluded that

in my view, neither is the Conservative Central Office equipped for planning and organising, nor are the constituency associations fit to be entrusted with the responsibility of carrying out, the long and intensive propaganda campaign which

1935 that each one cost about £40 a week to run. In terms of audience reached this worked out at 3d. per individual who saw the Party's films. By contrast constituency agents were permitted by election law to spend no more than 5d per elector during a three week election campaign. These tentative doubts, however, were overridden by the Chairman of the Party - COO, COO4/1/37, Topping to Stonehaven, 17 September 1935. Topping's jealousy of Ball and the NPB is therefore lent credence by his defence of the CFA in 1937 despite these doubts.

306. For details of Ball's subsequent career at the MDI see F. Thorpe and N. Pronay, British Official Films in the Second World War, London 1980, 25-34.

307. Chamberlain papers, NC8/21/8, Ball to Chamberlain, 1 June 1938.

308. NUCUA, Executive Committee minutes, 24 June 1937, 24 March 1938.

will be necessary if we are to win the next Election. ³⁰⁹

He did, however, recognise the considerable efforts that were being made to improve party organisation and to develop long term political education, for with Neville Chamberlain's ascension to the leadership a halt had been called to the slide in party organisation. Indeed in 1935 Ball had himself told Baldwin that for a strong and permanent party the chief requirement was an overhauled organisation and a nucleus of really competent party canvassers and workers in each constituency, ³¹⁰ able to argue the *Conservative creed, individual to individual.*

For this was one of the roots of the problem, of the situation which gave such apparent importance to organisations like the Conservative Films Association and the National Publicity Bureau, and emphasised the role of mass propaganda techniques - that the Conservative Party within the National Government was still in too strong a position, despite its fear of the socialist challenge, for there to be necessary anything more than a gradual if steady quickening of the organisational pace, a pace not helped by the financial troubles of the 1930s. Both the Party as a whole and the exponents of mass propaganda were well aware of the vital need to reinvigorate the party organisation, both local and national, and to provide for a scheme of much longer and more thorough political education. In the 1920s the encouragement of the Women's organisations and the Junior Imperial League, the establishment of a Political Education Department, Ashridge College and the Conservative Research Department, the increased professionalisation of the party agents, the slow weaning of the local parties from excessive dependence upon wealthy candidates and the positive moves towards a more democratic party - all this was testimony to the tremendous strides forward that

309. Chamberlain papers, NC8/21/8, Ball to Chamberlain, 1 June 1938.

310. Baldwin papers, Bal. 48/ff255-8, Ball to Baldwin, 6 December 1935.

had been taken.³¹¹ The changed situation in the 1930s, with the Party financially less secure and to some extent confused, but at the same time well established in government, slowed organisational change and, in the case of the local parties, delayed radical development until after the war. In the case of the central organisation it was only when Chamberlain became leader of the Party and Prime Minister that serious progress was resumed; the Fraser investigation of the Junior Imperial League, further developments in the training of agents, classes and schools for volunteer canvassers and speakers, the work of the Central Education Committee under R.A. Butler, increased discussion of the question of party finance and candidates' contributions, and the creation of committees to review various aspects of party organisation, were all developing when war put a stop to political activity.³¹²

Much was done both in the 1920s and between 1937 and 1939 to prepare the way for Woolton and Maxwell Fyfe after the war. But the adaptation of a political party to meet the conditions of the mass electorate could only be a gradual and complicated process, achieved by trial and error and against a certain inevitable inertia. It was for this reason that direct and centrally organised party propaganda, the most immediately obvious aid to electoral victory, and the face of the Party best known to the ordinary voter and most readily discernible by him, received the attention it did. As a wartime committee on the Party's finances reported in 1943,

In modern political activities, the importance of national propaganda in all its forms is constantly increasing, since it is only by propaganda that the vast unorganised masses of modern

311. The modernisation of the Agents and the question of local party financing are related in detail in J. Ramsden (1978), Op. Cit., 236-41, 244-55.

312. Ibid., 395; P. Cohen, Op. Cit., 400, 409; Politics in Review, vol. 5 (1937), announced the formation of a committee chaired by Sir Kingsley Wood, to examine the party organisation in the Metropolitan area.

democratic electorates can be ³¹³influenced. Such propaganda can best be directed centrally

It was equally for these various reasons, and because of the widely prevalent views as to the power of mass propaganda, that the party made such use of film, the newest and one of the most effective media for propaganda then available. In the tentative recording of audience reaction to its films, and in attempts to assess propaganda impact in selected constituencies, the Party was even just beginning to move towards a more soundly based approach to political persuasion.

Yet despite this latter development it must be concluded that the greater part of the Party's propaganda was essentially intuitive in its conception and implementation, and emotional in its character and aim. Although techniques changed in order to cope with the increased audience the objective remained much the same. Statements as to the need for continuous and rational political education did not alter the fact that the Party's primary concern remained short term electoral victory, and the inconsistency of its propaganda output reflected this fact. Even Baldwin, that curious mixture of idealist and astute politician, recognised this to be so and derived a wry satisfaction from his own party's propaganda strengths. As he commented on the newly created NPB, in the House of Commons:

The honourable gentleman knows that in present conditions, unfortunately, political advertisement is necessary on the part of every party. Some of us do it better than others [laughter and ³¹⁴cheers].

'Present conditions', by implication, were an uneducated and not

313. COO, Director of Organisation's file series, report of Committee on Party Finance 1943.

314. The Times, 26 June 1935, 8c.

wholly rational electorate, a socialist challenge and an international threat to democracy. The question Baldwin left unanswered, however, was when such conditions were likely to change.

Note A.

Ball, born in 1885, had been trained in the law and had taken First Class Honours at London University. Following the 1929 General Election he was appointed as the first director of the newly created Conservative Research Department, which he developed into a small but extremely valuable policy research unit. With Neville Chamberlain as its Chairman Ball soon became one of his principal aides, and their acquaintanceship was improved by their shared love of fly fishing. Ball was to be a trusted adviser in matters of both policy and strategy - see J. Ramsden, The Making of Conservative Party Policy, London 1980, 33-92. Ball also proved himself useful as a behind-the-scenes agent for Chamberlain once the latter had become Prime Minister. In 1937 he held unofficial meetings with Senor Batista y Roca, representative of the Catalonian Government, and put him in touch with Lord Halifax at the Foreign Office. In 1938-9 he met and held discussions with Staatstrat Wohltat, Göring's Commissioner for the German Four Year Plan, presumably on Chamberlain's behalf. Also in 1938 he acted as unofficial go-between between Chamberlain and Count Grandi, in negotiations which Chamberlain was carrying out

behind the backs of the Foreign Office. Further evidence of his continued contact with the intelligence services was provided in 1938. Following Eden's resignation as Foreign Secretary a group of Eden supporters began to meet regularly at the home of MP Ronald Tree. Joseph Ball, according to Tree, admitted to him during the war that he had arranged to have Tree's telephone tapped in 1938-9.

On the outbreak of war Ball became Director of the Film Division of the Ministry of Information. The outcry which greeted this appointment demonstrated how much he was disliked and distrusted amongst the intelligentsia of the documentary film movement. Consequently he was an early victim of the large scale reorganisation of the MOI which took place in 1939-40, and left to become Deputy Chairman of the Security Executive, the committee responsible for home intelligence and security, and in overall control of MI5. From the late 1930s Ball began to involve himself in business, particularly in South Africa, and became Chairman of Henderson's Transvaal Estates Ltd. and Lake View and Star Ltd., and a director of Consolidated Goldfields of South Africa. It is said that, shortly before his death in July 1961, he destroyed all his papers.

For a man so closely involved in intelligence work, and intent on remaining in the background, Ball acquired a conspicuously public reputation in political circles for secrecy, manipulation and so forth. This was a reputation he encouraged at Central Office by rarely giving reasons for his orders to his staff. Perhaps this was a characteristic of intelligence men, for it was one in which Sir Reginald Hall, Conservative Principal Agent 1923-24 and former Director of Naval Intelligence, also indulged. A former colleague, Mr. Percy Cohen, admitted to the author that Ball positively enjoyed his rather unsavoury reputation and acted up to it. Both Chester et al. and Page et al. use misleading evidence in order to add to his notoriety. His behind the scenes importance throughout the 1930s, and in a large number of diverse fields and incidents of national and international significance, is undoubted, but his present enigmatic reputation is a combination of fact and facade - K. Middlemas, The

Diplomacy of Illusions, London 1972, 108; M. Gilbert and R. Gott, The Appeasers, London 1963, 216, 224, 227; R. Tree, When the Moon was High, London 1975, 76; F. Thorpe and N. Pronay, British Official Film in the Second World War, London 1980, 25-34; N. West, MI5, British Security Service Operations 1909-1945, London 1981, 42, 154.

Note B.

In an interview with Percy Cohen in the early 1960s Sir Patrick Gower recalled the important part Benson's played in devising this poster. He and Ball

came to the conclusion that with Baldwin at the height of his popularity the P.M. must be the foremost figure in publicity for the Election. Ball and he produced a rough draft of a poster containing the P.M.'s photograph and the slogan, "The man you can trust". They then approached advertising agents who had great experience of poster work in the political field. They looked at the rough, and said "There are too many words: it must be shortened. We would like to take it back and give you firm advice later". They came back and submitted the new design with the slogan, "Safety First". Both Ball and he were rather hesitant, so they consulted J.C.C. Davidson, the Party Chairman, and the three together were persuaded to adopt it. (P. Cohen, Op.Cit., 581)

Note C.

Paul Rotha, Op. Cit., 115, 122, suggests that Bruce Woolfe, Managing Director of Gaumont British Instructional, and Sir Gordon Craig, Chairman of New Era Films, were politically motivated in certain of their actions in opposition to John Grierson's movement. Certainly both had strong Conservative sympathies - Joseph Ball was a close friend of Woolfe and a director of one of his companies, whilst Craig was active in the C.F.A.. But equally Woolfe was one of the

deputation to the Home Secretary in 1930 in protest against the censorship of Russian films. Rotha relates that Craig had advised the abandonment of Grierson's first film, *Drifters*, in mid-production, and uses this proposal, which no evidence suggests was other than commercially motivated (Craig's firm was involved in its distribution), to implicate Craig in the underhand political and trade conspiracy which Rotha states existed in opposition to the documentary movement. Opposition there certainly was; evidence of a strong 'intrigue' is lacking.

Note D.

Clavering's secretary, now Mrs. Marjorie Lockstone, remembers that the newsreels rang very frequently, and that Clavering's chief problem was not to persuade the reels but to get ministerial co-operation. Busy ministers could not as yet be prevailed upon to attend to self-projection, and much valuable publicity was lost as a result. It was still the business of a minister's Private Secretary between the wars rather to keep the press away from his minister than to encourage direct contact at convenient times, and Clavering's efforts to publicize the National Government's work suffered repeatedly in the face of ministerial disdain and refusal to co-operate.

Note E.

Both Stonehaven and Gower continually urged on Baldwin and other ministers the vital necessity, for effective press coverage, of advance press notices and copies of speeches. The practice of providing the press with advance copies of statements was comparatively recent and far from universally accepted. Gower recognised that one of the principal reasons why the press failed to give ministers the attention they felt their actions warranted was not political prejudice, but simply that busy ministers were not

prepared to give sufficient attention to the daily needs of the press, nor to make themselves available to the working journalist - Baldwin papers, Bal. 48/f229-30, Stonehaven to Baldwin, 10 May 1934. This was a continual problem; Winston Churchill's total failure whilst Prime Minister to understand the day to day operation of a newspaper, and his firm belief that 'Press relations' meant dining with Beaverbrook and Berry, is related by J.Margach, The Abuse of Power, London 1978, Chapter 5.

Note F.

List of films produced by or for the Conservative Films Association, 1926-1939.

Below are listed all the films to which reference has been found. Often the reference is vague, and where it is not certain that a film was actually produced, or where the date of production is uncertain, this is indicated by a question mark respectively before or following the stated date. The order of production within any one year is unknown.

Date	Title if known, and brief details	Surviving copy.
1926	film of cabinet members at work. Silent	
1926-7	<u>Red Tape Farm</u> . Cartoon by W.Ward. Silent	NFA
1926-7	three further cartoons by W.Ward, one possibly entitled <u>Pets</u> . All silent	
1926-7	<u>John Bull's Hearth</u> . Skit on free trade. Silent	NFA
1927	speech by Sir W.Joynson Hicks on the General Strike	
1927	speech by Sir Douglas Hogg on the Trade Disputes Bill	
1927	film on housing progress	

- ? 1928 speech by S.Baldwin
- 1928 speech by Earl Beatty on disarmament
- ? 1928 speech by N.Chamberlain on housing and pensions
- 1929 speech by J.C.C.Davidson
- 1929 election speech by S.Baldwin in garden of No.10,
Downing Street
- 1930 Socialist Car of State. Cartoon NFA
- 1930 Impressions of Disraeli. Disraeli's speeches
recited by George Arliss, and introduced by
S.Baldwin NFA
- 1931 ? The Right Spirit. Cartoon NFA
- 1931 film on agriculture
- 1931 ? three further films on the fishing industry,
steel, and unknown
- 1931 speech by S.Baldwin
- 1931 cartoon showing Macdonald and P.Snowden as
incompetent plumbers
- 1931 Dinner Hour Dialogue (?). Two Lancashire cotton
workers discuss safeguarding. Acted sketch NFA
- 1931 Dinner Hour Dialogue (?). Two Yorkshire woollen
workers discuss safeguarding. Acted sketch NFA
- 1931 crisis
- 1931 speech by S.Baldwin on crisis Visnews
- 1931 speech by J.H.Thomas
- ? 1931 speech by N.Chamberlain
- 1931 election speech by J.R.MacDonald NFA
- 1931 election speech by S.Baldwin NFA
- 1931 election speech by J.Simon NFA
- 1932 ? The Price of Free Trade. On the need for
protection of the steel industry NFA
- 1934 The Great Recovery. On economic recovery under
the National Government NFA
- 1934 Empire Trade. On imperial trade policy NFA
- 1934 ? Tariffs. On the benefits to industry and
agriculture from tariffs

- 1934 A Brighter Countryside. The growth of agriculture due to the National Government NFA
- 1934 Nursery Gardening (?). How tariffs saved the glasshouse industry
- 1934 Housing and Slum Clearance (?). Including speech by Sir Edward Hilton Young
- 1934 ? an acted sketch, including a soap-box orator in Hyde Park
- 1934 The Soul of a Nation. 7 reel feature documentary IWM
- 1935 speech by J.R.MacDonald
- 1935 speech by J.R.MacDonald
- 1935 budget speech by N.Chamberlain. (taken from newsreels ?)
- 1935 film on agriculture, including speech by W.Elliot NFA
- 1935 speech on foreign policy by Sir John Simon NFA
- 1935 Britain Under The National Government. Narrated by S.Baldwin NFA
- 1935 Scottish Industries (?). For Scotland only
- 1935 Scottish Agriculture (?). For Scotland only
- 1935 Signs of the Times. Prosperity and holidays under the National Government NFA
- 1935 Without Prejudice. 'a story film with a moral'
- 1935 Arthur Prince and Jim. Ventriloquist's sketch NFA
- 1935 Sam Small at Westminster. Sketch by Stanley Holloway NFA
- 1935 Florence Day. Vaudeville singer
- 1935 election speech by Sir John Simon NFA
- 1935 election speech by S.Baldwin NFA
- 1936 speech by S.Baldwin (taken from newsreels?)
- 1937 Our Heritage The Sea. Documentary short which had commercial showing, and was also shown abroad by the British Council NFA
- 1937-8 speech by N.Chamberlain at Albert Hall. Possibly filmed as part of:- NFA
- ? 1937-8 The House of Chamberlain. On the Chamberlain family

- 1938 speech by N.Chamberlain (c.May)
1939 speech by Sir John Simon. This would seem to have
been a somewhat premature General Election Speech NFA

In addition to the above films, it was common practice for a film to be made of by-election candidates, whilst some 150 MPs had Christmas message films made by the CFA for screening in their local cinemas. .

CHAPTER TWO

The Labour Party and Party Publicity.

"To have passed from the small beginnings of the Labour Representation Committee to the formation of a Labour Ministry in so short a time is a remarkable testimony to the political education of the people and to the effective character of the Party's propaganda."

Labour Party Annual Report, 1924.

"a Party is a nation-wide organisation dependent for success upon the regular, year-in, year-out, professional work of a number of publicity trades. And these cannot continually live on Party enthusiasm. Their pay is honourably earned and paid."

H. Finer, - Encyclopaedia of the Labour Movement,
1928.

"Labour must shout or be lost, advertise or be damned."

Unsigned article - The Labour Organiser, April
1936.

Both the Liberal and the Labour parties made considerable play of their claims to be parties of reason, appealing to the electorate rationally with rational policies, laying an emphasis born of ideological conviction upon political education and enlightenment. The Conservative Party of course made similar claims; yet because rationalism was a central feature of their ideological make-up it became the principal property of the two more markedly doctrinal parties. Through universal education they believed would come the rule of reason and hence, in the hope of the early socialists,

the acceptance of programmes by reason of their justice,
rationality and wisdom.

As James Ramsay MacDonald wrote,

The sole way leading to Socialism is the way of education, which supplies the human qualities that demand the Socialist State for their satisfaction and support, and protect those working it out.

Given the relative positions of the Liberal and Labour parties, both electorally and ideologically, it might have been thought that the latter would have upheld this wholehearted belief in the raison d'etre of a complete democracy even more fervently than its progenitor. Yet certain recent historians of the relative fortunes of the two parties have argued that although the new Liberals after the First World War 'believed that calculation and good sense would move men', and therefore developed 'a style of politics that demanded

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1. J.R. MacDonald, Parliament and Revolution, Manchester 1919, 103 - quoted by S. Macintyre, 'British Labour, Marxism and Working Class Apathy in the Nineteen Twenties', Historical Journal, 20 (1977), 479.
 2. J.R. MacDonald, Socialism: Critical and Constructive, London 1924, (2nd. ed.) 218. For a critical analysis of Labour's attitude to education, both at school and political, see R. Barker, 'The Labour Party and Education for Socialism', International Review of Social History, 14 (1969), 22-53.

an informed and intelligent electorate', the Labour Party by contrast adopted a thorough conviction in the 'Party Government' view of the British constitution, which saw it in terms of direct competition between opposing parties for the votes of the mass electorate. Consequently,

In practice the Labour Party never believed that the electorate could be moved by democratic rationalism its publicly stated policy was not much more than a collection of shrewdly contrived slogans attached to deeper and more subtle calls upon class loyalty. Despite the traditions and aspirations of its leadership, Labour's politics were conducted in a pretty vulgar way.

Such an attitude was reflected both in the style and content of the Party's proselytisation and in its rapid development of an organisation designed primarily to win votes. This chapter will detail how Labour Party publicity organisation actually evolved, and the factors which influenced that development. It will again consider the extent to which the Labour Party believed film to be of value politically, and how its experience with film typified and clarifies its attitude towards and experience with propaganda generally. First, however, consideration must be given to the question of whether in fact the Labour Party did abandon its belief in 'democratic rationalism', and if so why.

The concept of education for democracy, so widely held in the early years of the century, was the natural result of compounding the over-optimistic idealism of nineteenth century rationalist individualism with a positivist view of human progress derived from the evolutionary theories of Darwin, Spencer and others. Education and the democratisation of the state were seen as vital requisites

3. H.C.G. Matthew, R.I. McKibbin, J.A. Kay, 'The Franchise Factor in the rise of the Labour Party', English Historical Review, 91 (1976), 747-8. See Note A at the end of chapter, p. 213, on the question of the Liberal Party and propaganda.

for evolution and clear evidence of it. With its growing consciousness the Labour Movement conceived its role as being to lead the working classes to a full awareness and understanding both of the nature of the state and of their party within it. For the political wing this meant perhaps even leading them to some comprehension of the ideals and implications of socialism, albeit a diluted version as expounded by Ramsay MacDonald. Thus it was argued that the aim of political education of the working classes should be

to raise politics from being a mere affair of voting for a man for any reason that it may suit parties to offer, and show it to be the workings of man's most sacred aspirations through the medium of the communal life of which he is a part Good citizenship must, in short, be cultivated by an education in social ethics rather than by a course in political history.

The notion of the evolution of man and society from an emotional and irrational state to a rational and socialist one was well illustrated by the comment that

A Socialist is a person who, reading the signs of the times, undertakes the task of preparing Man for civilisation. An anti-Socialist is a person whose mind, still in the semi-natural state, is unable to understand the message of the Socialist.

This thesis bore strong religious and moral overtones; if rationalism was the acknowledged aspiration of political education, it was largely derived from and paralleled by the continuing tradition, within socialist and Labour circles, of man's redemption from his state of original sin.

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4. J.R. MacDonald, 'The People in Power', in S. Coit (ed.), 'Ethical Democracy: Essays in Social Dynamics', London 1900, 74-75.
 5. R. Neft in D. Griffiths (ed.) What is Socialism?, London 1924, 57, quoted by S. Macintyre, Op. Cit., 485.

'Education', meaning specifically education towards a political end, was therefore felt to be of vital importance and, as was the case in all political parties of the period, the words 'education'⁶ and 'propaganda' became virtually synonymous in this context. Socialists considered it particularly important that the socialist message should be fully comprehended and accepted by the masses and not merely supported irrationally, for political understanding was half of that message:

If the people cannot construct Socialism in their minds they cannot build it into their institutions. A mere class consciousness will not guard the nation against this shortcoming, because, however useful it may be to imbue the workers with a sense of their class importance and their present class subordination, the political value of this is slight. The shortcoming is intellectual and moral Too much Socialist⁷ propaganda has been upon these insubstantial lines.

And again:

The task of the Socialist is to make enlightenment come quick - but it must be enlightenment If this is said to be slow, I reply that it need not be so, but that, if it is, it is so by the

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6. See B. Barker (ed.), Ramsay MacDonald's Political Writings, London 1972, 44.
 7. J.R. MacDonald (1919), Op.Cit., 59. See also B.C. Barker, 'The Politics of Propaganda: a study in the theory of educational socialism and its roles in the development of a national Labour Party', unpublished M. Phil. thesis, York 1972, iii, in which he states that, as MacDonald saw it, 'Politicians were educators and propagandists devoted to the moral reform of individuals and thence society Propaganda, elevated as the principal task of politics, provided the foundation of the balance MacDonald sought to create between the political responsibilities of a great party and the Labour Movement. If the problem in industrial society was individual failure, it followed that socialist politics would be primarily concerned with the restoration of moral sensibility rather than with the redistribution of wealth or even public ownership'.

nature of society.⁸

Yet emphasis on the need for working class support which was politically aware, and comprehending of socialist ideology rather than rote, led the early Party leaders, as it later led successive groups on the left of the Party, into a dilemma. For although they were expounding the cause of rational politicking, they had, in their desire to become politically involved and to further political education and political involvement among the working classes, already entered the political arena against whose persuasional methods they claimed to be fighting.⁹ In so doing, and in accepting the potentially all powerful partnership of the Trade Union Movement, Labour leaders became eligible to hold political office and to wield the highest power, an eligibility which became a real possibility with the passing of the Representation of the People Act of 1918. This was a carrot which no politically ambitious group could have refused, and nor did Labour. Although it might be over-nice to suggest that the first two Labour ministries were not perfect examples of gradualism, of MacDonaldism, as they have subsequently been portrayed, the Labour Party's taking of office within five years and three elections of its becoming a serious candidate represented a significant departure from the educative justifications of gradualism as only recently stated by its leaders.¹⁰ In 1919, for example, MacDonald had argued that Labour should only take power when its electoral support was a comprehending and wholehearted one:

Nothing will be more damaging to Labour than to take office in

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8. J.R. MacDonald (1919), Op. Cit., 99.
 9. Indeed MacDonald recognised that integration into the established political system before the war had the result that 'every one of us in Parliament had incurred the suspicion of opportunism'. He accepted this as a valid criticism of many of those Labour leaders who had decided to support the war - Ibid., 60.
 10. For arguments as to the excessively gradualist nature of the MacDonald Government see R. Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism, London 1961, 59-121.

the midst of shifting sands or to be presented with political power by the masses who vote for it because other parties are for the time being unpopular.¹¹

Bernard Barker argues from this that MacDonald 'was genuinely afraid that office might distract the Labour Party from its primary educative role'.¹² Certainly education appeared to be of paramount importance to MacDonald, and electoral success secondary, in 1900 when he wrote:

Until we can put on the political arena a body of men who recognise that their first duty is to educate the heart and the head of the people, and who are not afraid of being defeated while the educating process is going on, the politics of the English people will sink to lower and lower depths.¹³

Philip Snowden was articulating a belief as applicable to a Labour Government as a Conservative, in 1921 when he declared that

the nominal government of an ignorant democracy may be a greater danger to the State than even the despotism of an autocracy.¹⁴

The failure of the first Labour Government and the Labour Party's belief in the effect of the Zinoviev letter, were therefore as much vindications of the gradualism expounded by Labour leaders prior to 1923 as was the failure of the General Strike, and George Lansbury reflected this view at the 1928 annual conference:

Gradualness is inevitable because our people have not yet

11. Quoted by B. Barker, Op. Cit., 45-6.
12. Ibid., 46.
13. Ethical World, 13 October 1900. Quoted by B. Sacks, J. Ramsay MacDonald in Thought and Action, University of New Mexico 1952, 14.
14. P. Snowden, Labour and the New World, London 1921, 224.

developed sufficient wisdom, knowledge and understanding to enable us to advance more speedily to our goal.¹⁵

Although such views as to the unavoidably gradual nature of political education - but not necessarily as to the gradual implementation of socialist policy - continued to be stated throughout the inter-war years, and particularly after the disastrous defeats of 1931 and 1935, they were electorally anachronistic and had been since 1918.¹⁶ In recognising the 'wild emotion' and continuing gullibility of the electorate in such matters as Zinoviev, Labour leaders were by implication accepting the fact that so far they had failed to educate it to a degree that would make a socialist state the inevitable consequence. Yet to withdraw from political activity was by now impossible, and they were urged on by natural political ambition, by a desire to test the political temper of the new mass electorate and by their concern to prevent the development in the new voters of sustained Liberal or Conservative voting habits. Desirous of proving the worth of the political wing of the Labour Movement to its other sections, particularly following the short-lived threat of direct action through the use of industrial force in the years immediately after the war, the Labour Party thus entered the national party arena perhaps before its educative doctrine deemed

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15. Labour Party Annual Conference Report (hereafter LPAR), 1928, 150.
16. Thus Herbert Morrison wrote in October 1936:- 'We must in our propaganda and our thoughts revive Socialist first principles and feature in our work to a greater extent than has been the case in recent years positive Socialist education.' - Glasgow Forward, 17 October 1936. He would rather fight an election 'on a clear constructive policy of Socialism and fail to win fifty seats that I could have won by playing with superficial politics.' - Warrington Examiner, 23 March 1935. Quoted by B. Donoghue and G.W. Jones, Herbert Morrison, London 1973, 211. Similarly W. Wedgwood Benn declared that '.... the Labour Party did not merely want a victory that came from the swing of the pendulum; it wanted to construct a sound position for many years of Labour rule by a constructive policy understood by the people and accepted by them.' - Manchester Guardian, 5 July 1937. For Arthur Henderson's view after 1931 see page 212-213 below.

it either right or advisable to do so. Indeed it might be argued that the mass franchise came into existence too soon after the introduction of universal education and the beginnings of the growth of social consciousness within the working classes, for the successful prosecution of gradual, rationalist, political education as proclaimed by Labour. In accepting the ultimate political challenge by contesting for government the Labour Party was forced to fight on its opponent's terms, to fight to win, to use appeals to class loyalty, traditional religious morality and to trade unionist consciousness, to organise, publicise and propagandise on a national scale. For repeated failure could well have been fatal to a nascent party continually needing to prove its value to the classes and the industrial movement through which so much of its power and influence might come.

There is every reason to suppose, however, that it accepted this fact willingly, and that, indeed, it had never been the wholly rational educator it proclaimed itself to be. The Labour Party was after all a 'compromise', its policy a result of the uneasy¹⁷ relationship between its socialist and trade union components. Its propaganda was likewise largely the product of this relationship. Thus the potential objective of that propaganda was seen by the Party's different elements as being to educate the electorate in the principles of socialism and to arouse the political consciousness present but dormant in the working classes, in order to stimulate them to consider the particular question of class or labour representation. Despite the statement of socialist aims in the 1918 constitution, the inter-war Labour Party was in most respects dominated by its trade union element. It became increasingly a party with a socialist objective but a programme far from wholly socialist, and not even uniquely progressive. Partly as a response to this fact it also rapidly became a party which propagandised itself largely on its claim to be the true representative of the working classes, particularly through its unification of class and union interests.

17. H. Tracey, The Book of the Labour Party, London 1925, 165.

Such a selling point lent itself to emotive advertisement, and the Labour Party in consequence showed itself to be not so morally superior in its propaganda techniques as might have been inferred from its indignation at those of others. Moreover the politically active trade unionists in the Party, Arthur Henderson included, did not have the inhibitions about premature assumption of power that many of their socialist colleagues professed, although doubts remained within the union movement as a whole as to whether governmental power was the proper aspiration of its representation in parliament.

It was also generally accepted that the creation of a national party organisation in its own right, outside the confines of the trade union movement, would immeasurably enhance the educational power of Labour. The decline of the Liberal Party and the enfranchisement of women did after all present a vast non-union market to the Party, and the demand was made increasingly for the recognition and encouragement of individual party membership through local parties.

Finally, although MacDonald and others averred an ideological commitment to 'education' before political power, and to political power only through political education, their writings on the subject were often vague and ambiguous. It is evident that they were well aware of the impracticability of adhering strictly to the spirit of this ideal, given both existing political practice as they saw it, and the current state of mass society. Indeed MacDonald admitted that mass education and the universal franchise were not necessarily the liberating forces hoped for:

Conservatism no longer resists but welcomes a democratic franchise, because experience has shown it that it can manipulate that franchise, and owing to its control of the press and the influences that make opinion, it can get from a wide electorate - especially from the broad margin of electors who take no rational or abiding interest in politics or in their national affairs -

mandates which suit itself. The democracy has become its tool, and it finds renewed strength in masses of newly enfranchised people. In unawakened subordinate minds it finds both its strength and its justification.¹⁸

Thus MacDonald realized that popular education and the mass franchise could be turned to advantage by the governing classes, who

found that these majorities were moved by no definite idea and sought no definite goal. They lived from hand to mouth. They could be stirred into passion by things which were trivial, they could be easily deceived, they were fond of dramatic representations and were very credulous ... The "governing classes" have striven to keep things so. They have discovered that the effect of popular education was not to make people intellectually vigorous, but to make them slaves of what they read, and that the effect of having the vote was not to make them consider what they would do with it, but to make them enjoy an election.¹⁹

Norman Angell echoed this disillusionment with popular education in 1925:

The errors [of democratic decision] have not been due to the intellectually baffling nature of the problems, but to the flat refusal on the part of whole nations to face self-evident facts, because to face them would have meant abandoning the indulgence of a temper, or appetite, or emotion. If the people can disregard in their collective decisions the facts of which they are already perfectly well aware, they can just as easily disregard that further knowledge with which a wider education in this sense of "knowing things" might endow them.²⁰

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18. J.R. MacDonald, A Policy for the Labour Party, London 1920, 53.
 19. J.R. MacDonald (1919), Op. Cit., 57.
 20. N. Angell, The Public Mind, London 1926. 21.

Likewise he argued that Conservatives had recognised that 'democratic devices ...²¹ are now actually factors of fundamental Conservatism'. As MacDonald sadly concluded, 'surrounded by democratic reforms, the "governing classes" have maintained their authority and have used democracy to maintain it'.²²

Inevitably the press was seen as an arch enemy:

The power of the press as a moulder of working class opinion cannot be over-emphasised. The ideas and thoughts of most workers come from the capitalist controlled press.²³

Conspiracy theory was a common theme, even of former Liberals:

the mass of workers are distracted and beguiled by the "organs of public opinion", which play upon their credulity and their lighter tastes and interests so as to keep them from any form of organisation that is really dangerous to the powers above.²⁴

Only a few, Kingsley Martin and Norman Angell among them, identified the fundamental motivation behind the popular press as being as much economic as political. Yet having financial incentives did not make the attitude of the press any less deplorable:

One immediate effect of the increasing financial competition amongst newspapers is a tendency to reduce politics, like all other subjects, to the level of a stunt.²⁵

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21. Ibid., 143.
 22. J.R. MacDonald (1919), Op. Cit., 58. See also Note B at the end of chapter, p.214.
 23. W. Paul, The State: its origins and functions, Glasgow 1917, 187. Quoted by S. Macintyre, Op. Cit., 481.
 24. J.A. Hobson, Democracy after the War, London 1917, 149.
 25. K. Martin, 'Public Opinion: Rationalisation of the Press and Democracy', Political Quarterly, 1 (1930) 429.

And again:

giving the public what it wants in this case means offering it that which it will buy most readily in an unthinking mood, that which flatters its class and national prejudices and keeps alive each treasured myth. Broadly its influence is to stimulate exactly those mental habits which an educated person has learnt to avoid. It is an antidote to education.²⁶

Despite their insistence on gradualism, therefore, a feature of the writings of MacDonald and others was frustration and impatience, particularly at the apparent stupidity of the masses who had so far failed to recognise where their best interests lay, but who instead constituted for the Labour Party 'the marshalled opposition of mass habit'.²⁷ Although MacDonald continued to emphasise political education as the only solution, he confessed that the people 'took infinitely more interest in getting the vote than they have taken in using it',²⁸ and plaintively protested that the 1918 election had not shown that the people yet possessed

that vigilant watchfulness and that consistency in thought and interest which James Mill had assumed.²⁹

Earlier he had written:

the ordinary man, not of the street but of the suburb ... does not understand what Socialism means - and probably does not want to understand It is nothing but a waste of time to explain new ideas to such people. They are the despair of everyone who tries to bring commonsense into politics, and the victims of

26. K. Martin, 'The Influence of the Press', Political Quarterly, 1 (1930), 176.

27. J.R. MacDonald (1924) Op. Cit., 270.

28. J.R. MacDonald, in S. Coit (ed.) Op. Cit., 60.

29. Quoted by B. Sacks, Op. Cit., 17.

those who appeal to popular ignorance and fear.³⁰

The problem was not simply one of capitalist repression or of lack of education, although further socialist education and propaganda remained the only solutions identified by Labour leaders. The problem was in the continuing irrational character of human nature. Indeed MacDonald at times even seemed to be admitting the ineluctability of the irrationality of man and society. Impressed by the arguments of Wilfred Trotter, whose Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War provided a scientific, or pseudo-scientific, explanation of the inevitability of irrationality in the mass, MacDonald accepted that

Adaptive reason cannot be exercised by the crowd ... because the crowd cannot employ the processes of balanced judgement to control its will.³¹

Philip Snowden equally felt that

It is not the institution of Parliament, nor the system of democracy which is at fault, but the state of mind and the lack of intelligence on the part of the electorate.³²

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30. J.R. MacDonald, Socialism, London 1907, 1.
31. J.R. MacDonald (1924), Op. Cit., 219. For MacDonald on Trotter see 'A Policy for the Labour Party', London 1920, 67. See also R.N. Soffer, 'New Elitism: Social Psychology in Pre-war England', Journal of British Studies, 8 (1969), 111-140, for details of Trotter and his contemporary social psychologist, William McDougall. Interestingly Ross McKibbin supports the picture of MacDonald given here when he comments that despite the latter's belief in the inevitability of society's evolution to collective forms of life, 'he never believed the working class would necessarily hasten this evolution. On the contrary he had long before concluded that the ignorance and parochialism of the working class could actually obstruct it. It was this that made his departure from the Labour Party in 1931 so easy.' - 'Arthur Henderson as Labour leader', International Review of Social History, 23 (1978), 79-101.
32. P. Snowden, Op. Cit., 50. In an almost identical statement MacDonald wrote that, 'in expressing disappointment with the results of parliamentary government, we must begin by admitting

The fact that the working classes had not as yet established their own non-capitalist press was, for Snowden, writing in 1921, further evidence that they were not yet ready for the 'conclusive contest' and the assumption of power:

A democracy which is not educated up to the point of organising all its resources for the class struggle is far from being prepared to bring that struggle to a conclusive contest, and it is certainly far from being educated to administer a new economic and social order. If the working classes would spend one-twentieth part of the money they now waste in drink and gambling on political and publicity organisation, the capitalist monopoly of the means of influencing public opinion would be quickly destroyed.³³

The arguments of MacDonald and others evidently contained many inconsistencies. They believed in the powers of political education yet apparently admitted man's irrationality and lack of intelligence, particularly in the mass. They stated that power should only be accepted if founded on conscious, 'educated' support, yet also justified their own political involvement as necessary for effective political education. Yet despite these contradictions it is clear that they retained, as it was necessary for their constitutional evolutionism that they should retain, a firm belief in the ultimate victory of rationalism through political education and propaganda. The conclusions as to the continuing irrationality of the electorate, for example, were made within general arguments on the need for still more of the type of rational political education which it was claimed Labour propagandists had been attempting since the later 19th century. Anxious as they were to assert the validity of evolutionary over revolutionary socialism, MacDonald, Snowden and others proclaimed the success of their propaganda so far; they declared the

that the first point to be made against it belongs not to itself, but to the masses. They have not been intelligent enough to use it.', Parliament and Revolution, 58.

33. P. Snowden, Op. Cit., 50-51.

confirmation, in the rise of the Labour Party, of educational evolutionism and its superiority over industrial action or coerced revolution on the Russian model.³⁴ Snowden's statements quoted above were made during a long argument refuting the case of the revolutionaries against those of the 'evolutionists'. Thus he rejected their arguments both of capitalist dominance of all channels of public opinion and of the failure of educational methods to replace the irrational with the rational mind. He was forced to admit, as he would not have done in another context, that

Working class leaders find little difficulty in securing a platform for their views in the capitalist Press ... the alleged subservience of democracy to capitalist influence and control is greatly exaggerated.³⁵

He also affirmed, as indeed he had to, that the Labour Party's electoral success was a response to its educational work, rather than to factors such as class loyalty and dissatisfaction with alternative parties:

The progress which has been made in the last generation in the education of the masses on political and social questions has been very great. The wonderful growth of the Labour Party in Great Britain in the short space of twenty years is encouraging evidence that educational work among them has been effective The progress, it is true, has been irritatingly slow to the impatient, but it is, on the whole, moving as rapidly as the evolution of those forces which are preparing for the new social order.³⁶

Political education and propaganda was therefore pronounced a

34. For one instance of the case against evolutionary theory see Note C, at the end of chapter, p.215.

35. P. Snowden, Op. Cit., 52.

36. Ibid., 52-3.

success. What was needed was still more. But despite Snowden's emphasis on patience and on the need for electoral understanding to parallel Labour's rise, the Party was as a whole anxious for electoral victory. It had now become, both by choice and of necessity, a national political force and had thereby entered the electoral race. It was therefore more than ever essential that, notwithstanding the continuing stupidity and gullibility of much of the electorate, its belief in the possibility of a constitutional victory should be seen to bear rapid results. Although a belief in the rationality of man remained a central and conscious tenet of the Labour Party's faith, and rational political education and propaganda one of its principal declared duties, electoral necessity induced a compromise in practice. Labour politicians utilised their own emotional catchwords and phraseology just as did Conservatives, none more successfully than MacDonal³⁷d himself. The Labour Party's attitude to organisation and publicity was therefore a response to the combination of its rooted ideological commitment to political education and propaganda, the rather different viewpoint brought to this task by its trade union element, the apparent capitalist control of the 'organs of public opinion', the continuing apathy and dull-wittedness of sections of Labour's potential vote and the acceptance and indeed emphasis of constitutionalism and the existing system of 'party government', with its natural accent on electoral politics. Whilst continuing to proclaim itself as a pure and uncompromising party of principle, Labour became also, both through its desire to integrate itself into the existing political fabric, and through its impatience to achieve the 'new social order', a party in the more traditional mould, with its own organisational structure, ambitions, and existence as a valid entity in its own right. Such a development was an unavoidable and obvious step both for party benefit and for the greater and more effective prosecution of political education and propaganda. Yet it led to a publicity organisation which was as much electorally as educationally orientated, as was indeed the entire party machine. It is to the details of that publicity organisation

37. See, for example, R.I. McKibbin, 'The evolution of the Labour Party', Oxford 1974, 130.

that we must now turn.

Prior to 1918 few in the Labour Party would seriously have considered describing it as a united, national party. As Arthur Henderson wrote, the 42 M.P.s returned to parliament in December 1910

were not a party in the accepted sense of the word, and some of them had not shaken off their allegiance to the historic parties. In the country, though we maintained our own electoral machinery and our own staff of organisers, the organisation was essentially a federation of local and national societies.³⁸

Propaganda - chiefly public meetings and some literature - was predominantly locally initiated, except at General Elections, when the unity of the Party was enhanced by a more thorough, common distribution of material produced by Head Office. The central organisation, small and run on a very tight budget, was concerned primarily with the stimulation of new Labour organisations in areas where none existed and with improving them where they did. Head Office's principal function between elections was not mass but organisational propaganda: the holding of conferences concerned with the organisation of the supporters of an expanding party, organisational tours by the National Agent and later by national 'Organisers', and the arrangement of by-election contests where there was adequate constituency support. These functions were to remain of primary importance and to take the largest single part of Head Office's budget throughout the period under consideration. Although local Labour parties appeared to grow quite remarkably rapidly during and after the First War³⁹, and although the Conservative and

38. A. Henderson, The Aims of Labour, London 1918, 15-16.

39. R.I. McKibbin, (1974), Op. Cit., 137-9. Note also his qualification as to the nature and strength of these bodies. As he concludes, 'The growth of constituency organisation ... was always variable, frequently makeshift, and not usually founded

Liberal parties had similar organisational tasks, it is important to bear in mind the considerable load imposed upon the central Labour organisation by the need merely to ensure that establishment and proper maintenance of its local bodies, particularly in rural and backward areas. This task was particularly important because of the crucial position of local parties in the Party's national organisation; they had not only to be largely financially self sustaining, but also to act as the Party's principal channels for mass propaganda, for most of which they themselves had to pay.

The continuing independence of large numbers of the local parties must also be emphasised, for it was to be an ever present source of difficulty to the central body trying to co-ordinate a national party. Local response to circulars from the centre was frequently minimal, and the NEC rarely found itself in a strong enough position, vis-a-vis local parties, to be able to issue anything so positive as a directive; it lacked the degree of control over its branches necessary for efficient national co-ordination. Such independence was largely due to the way in which the Party had grown out of local union and ILP activity, and to the continuing position of the well established trade councils and ILP groups in local party organisation. It was also to some extent a result of the constant tension existing between the party leadership and many in the vociferous rank and file as to the relative importance of ends and means. Conflict between the dual aims of the attainment of power and the implementation of a socialist state continued to be a central problem for Labour. Whilst the party leadership concerned itself with the rapid attainment and preservation of power, it perhaps failed to give the positive and radical lead expected of it by many.

The Party's development of electoral propaganda was therefore heavily influenced by the combined factors of continuing local party independence, the extent of its activity in backward areas, and party

on a stable individual membership. It is clear, furthermore, that the new model parties were slow to develop and that their real strength lay, as it had always done, in trade union branches ...' Ibid., 144.

finances, national and local. One consequence was a considerable variation in the extent of propaganda and organisation in different districts. Where the Party was entrenched, as in trade union dominated areas or where the ILP had a long tradition of activity, organisation and propaganda were perhaps unnecessarily intensive, whilst in rural and backward divisions it remained largely non-existent. In 1935, for example, in rural West Derbyshire, the Divisional Labour Party had an annual income of only £29, with organisational activity to match.⁴⁰ Although, for a party in which voluntary work was so important, local party finances are not necessarily accurate guides as to the state of local organisation, electoral expenditure does help to show the diversity of conditions between constituencies. Thus whereas in 1922, in solidly mining seats in Wales and in the Scottish ILP areas, the maximum permitted expenditure was on average almost reached, in large numbers of county and rural divisions it was rare for expenditure to exceed half the permitted maximum, and in many cases barely a quarter.⁴¹ Failure to persuade the unions to put into a central pool the funds they expended on their own seats left the Party with considerable problems, and in consequence it had continual difficulty in making its propaganda effort truly national in scope.⁴²

Comparisons also with the average expenditure of Conservative and Liberal candidates show how throughout much of the period, the Labour Party was operating on a very different financial scale:

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40. P.R. Shorter, Electoral Politics and political change in the East Midlands of England 1918-35, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge 1977, 84.
41. R.I. McKibbin (1974), Op. Cit., 148-9, 155-6.
42. The pooling of funds was discussed at the 1922 Labour Party Annual Conference, but with no results - Annual Conference Report 1922, 216-222.

Table 2.1 Comparison of average electoral expenditure of
Conservative, Liberal and Labour Candidates, 1923-1945.⁴³

Election	Conservative	Liberal	Labour
	£	£	£
1923	845	789	464
1929	905	782	452
1935	777	495	365
1945	780	532	595

Central funds were similarly in stark contrast to Conservative. In 1928 expenditure from the Labour Party's General Account totalled £48,600.⁴⁴ In the same year Conservative Central Office spent £106,000, whilst its total central party outlay was £248,000.⁴⁵ The annual income of Labour's General Account, from which all organisational, publicity and administrative expenses were paid, only exceeded £50,000 in 1925 and 1926, declined steadily thereafter to a low of under £40,000 and was only approaching its previous level in the two years before the war.⁴⁶

The administrative staff of the Party was likewise much smaller than that of its chief rival. In 1919 Head Office staff totalled 30, and its other national staff (excluding agents, who were paid for by the local parties), 17.⁴⁷ The Press and Publicity Department did not exceed ten in number, five being clerical, until after the Second

43. D. Butler and A. Sloman, British Political Facts 1900-79, London 1980, 229.

44. LPAR, October 1928. The general account excluded annual income and expenditure on literature, which was dealt with in a separate Literature Account. The Literature Account generally balanced when calculated over a period of years, Head Office printing slightly more than the local parties bought.

45. J.C.C. Davidson papers, party accounts.

46. Party Accounts contained in LPAR, 1918-39.

47. Labour Party National Executive Committee (NEC) Minutes series, Memorandum on Party staff, April 1919.

World War.⁴⁸ Even when, as part of Arthur Henderson's great scheme for the unification of the Labour Movement, the Press and Publicity Departments of the Labour Party and the TUC were combined between 1922 and 1926, the joint department's staff totalled only seven.⁴⁹

Of course the Party derived considerable advantages from its connection with the trade union movement, and co-operation over propaganda was close wherever it was possible. Several of the Party's campaigns were organised in conjunction with the TUC, particularly when union interests were directly concerned, as in the 'Mines for the Nation', 'Trade Union Defence' and 'Unemployment Assistance Board Regulations' campaigns. During General Elections TUC staff were made available to Labour Head Office, and the unions could be generous with their not inconsiderable funds in both election and inter-election campaigns. A considerable proportion of local parties remained dependent upon the assistance of union branches for organisation and propaganda work. Such co-operation was invaluable, but it was not always as much as the NEC would have liked. Despite the increased activity and influence of the National Council for Labour (the joint committee of NEC, TUC General Council, and PLP representatives) after 1931, co-operation and co-ordination remained on the whole informal and dependent upon the goodwill of the unions, who needed the Party far less than the Party needed them. Thus it was the TUC, unhappy with the unification of the Press and Publicity Departments, who withdrew from the experiment in 1926, although certain journals continued to be produced as a joint effort. Although the unions generally lent support to the Party's campaigns, co-operation was sometimes less than might have been hoped for, as in the 'Victory for Socialism' campaign of 1934-5 and the 'Call to Action' campaign of early 1933.⁵⁰ The Party could certainly not

48. NEC, List of Party staff, January 1936, shows Press and Publicity Department staff as eight, and a Literature Circulation Officer and one other had been added by 1939.

49. NEC, List of salaries of staff of Joint Press Department, c. 20 August 1923.

50. There had been no apparent active co-operation in the former by

afford to depend, for its continuing propaganda effort, upon union financial support which might not be forthcoming, or which could be withdrawn at any time. Even the annual affiliation fees were not always assured⁵¹, whilst the Party's financial weakness in the late 1920s and 1930s was an inevitable consequence of the unions' own difficulties arising from the Trade Disputes Act.

With all these obstacles Labour found propaganda of the capital intensive type used by the Conservative Party extremely difficult. Suffering repeated financial setbacks through the depression of the 1920s, following the Trade Disputes Act of 1927, after the 1929 election and in the wake of the 1931 crisis, frequently with a deficit in its General Account⁵², Labour learnt to harbour its resources, to use its money cautiously and to make full use of its other assets - its enthusiasm and voluntary workers. Thus in the 1929 election, in which the Conservative Party spent £297,000 from its central funds, Labour managed to raise £49,600 through its 'Bid For Power' fund (£100,000 had been the target figure), spent £15,400 in grants to candidates, £8,800 on subsidising manifestoes and literature sales, £4,400 on other administrative expenses, and still had a balance of £20,900 to transfer to its General Account in order

the unions by the time of the Party Annual Conference in October 1934, although the campaign had been running for six months - Annual Report 1934, Report on the Victory for Socialism Campaign. Similarly, although the TUC urged union branches to organise trade union propaganda weeks to coincide with the Party's membership drives in 1933, only in four areas were T.U. meetings actually combined with the 'Call to Action' campaign. - National Joint Council (NJC) Minutes series, Report of activities of TUC General Council, Labour Party Executive Committee and Parliamentary Labour Party, to National Joint Council, 21 March 1933 and 23 May 1933.

51. See note 106 below.
52. See, for example, NEC, Auditors' Report on 1926 Accounts, 19 July 1927; Memorandum on financial estimates for party in 1928, 7 March 1928; Final Report of the Economy Committee, 17 January 1933; Minutes of the Finance and General Purposes Committee, 21 February 1934.

to offset the effects on normal income of the Trade Disputes Act.⁵³

With funds so restricted, with its annual estimated income almost invariably wholly accounted for in advance by standing expenses such as organisers, propagandists and administration, the NEC was most unwilling to accept new financial undertakings. Indeed it was often unable to do so, unless it could be absolutely certain of full financial support from the local parties. As the Party's auditors commented in 1935,

The present position of yearly deficits and consequent limitations on all new efforts seems to us to be intolerable and unworthy of the movement.⁵⁴

But the majority of constituency parties, themselves operating on a minimal budget, rarely found it possible to lift their own annual incomes to any appreciable extent, even when called upon by the National Executive for extra effort. The financial patronage of the unions, beyond annual affiliation fees, likewise remained an uncertain and only occasional source of additional funds, invariably allocated in advance for specific campaigns.

What was remarkable about Labour's propaganda effort, given resources which to either of the other major parties would have appeared quite inadequate, was not that it managed to make any show at all, but that for size and complexity it bore extremely creditable comparison with the Conservative propaganda machine. Indeed the particular emphasis of Labour campaigning - its constant public meetings and demonstrations - led to much admiration and fear amongst opponents. Lloyd George described Labour as 'a great propagandist party', and told Asquith that 'The Labour Party alone has a machine

53. NEC, Statement of Accounts, 31 December 1929. This balance was subsequently somewhat depleted by post-election appeals from local parties for assistance for financial difficulties arising from the election.

54. LPAR 1935, 48.

fitted for the times'.⁵⁵ Arthur Henderson felt justified in boasting that

No party has carried on such continuous or extensive propaganda during recent years as the Labour Party.⁵⁶

Yet all too often the history of Labour propaganda work before the Second War, like that of the Labour Party itself, was, despite considerable achievement, one of unfulfilled hopes. Labour organisers and publicists planned on a hardly less ambitious scale than their Conservative counterparts, but almost invariably without the same results.

Publicity organisation before the 1914-18 war was minimal. There was no Press and Publicity Department at Head Office and propaganda production was irregular and unco-ordinated. Unlike the Conservative Party Labour employed no staff speakers, or 'propagandists' as they were always called. Only at election time was a special Literature Sub-Committee of the NEC set up to consider literature production, and it was only then that any really organised, large scale propaganda was undertaken.⁵⁷ By subsidising some candidates, encouraging others and supplying free copies of the party manifesto, however, the Labour Party was able to acquit itself very respectably, considering the limited number of seats it was contesting. In the first General Election of 1910 Head Office sent out over 5 million leaflets, 800,000 manifestoes, 44,000 double crown and 7,000 crown pictorial posters.⁵⁸ Bearing in mind that the total electorate within Labour contested constituencies numbered only just over 1.5 million, Labour propaganda in these 78 seats was therefore

55. Daily News, 2 March 1929; Lloyd George to Asquith, 20 August 1924. Quoted by P.R. Shorter, Op. Cit., 109.

56. A. Henderson, 'Labour's Army is Unconquered', Labour Magazine, November 1931, 292.

57. NEC, Minutes, 13 April 1910.

58. LPAR 1909-10, 6.

potentially very comprehensive. The Party's annual report was justified in declaring that

This department of the Party's activity is becoming more and more important.⁵⁹

Before the December 1910 election Head Office arranged for each contested constituency to be visited by a sitting M.P., although there was still as yet no serious attempt to establish the organised provision of voluntary and M.P. speakers to local bodies who requested them.

Only in May 1913 did a standing 'Labour Propaganda Committee' appear,⁶⁰ with reference to propaganda against the Trade Union Act of 1913. A plethora of committees was then created - a Joint Committee of the NEC and the parliamentary committee of the TUC, to consider Labour propaganda, a sub-committee of the NEC to liaise with the Parliamentary Labour Party about propaganda against the Act, and another sub-committee of the NEC actually to prepare that propaganda.⁶¹ The movement was anxious to make a real impact in this, its largest and most important non-election campaign to date. Certainly the campaign set the style for virtually every one until 1939, employing a series of large scale organisation conferences for party workers in order to stimulate them to local propaganda, an accompanying series of mass demonstrations and the sale and distribution of leaflets and pamphlets. The central feature of all would be the exhortatory organisation conference, followed by local propagandising through public meetings. The spoken word was held to be the best form of propaganda, not least because it was also the cheapest when undertaken by local volunteers, and 'star' speakers were much sought after from Head Office by local parties. Indeed the paramount position of the public meeting and other forms of verbal

59. Ibid.

60. NEC, Minutes, 6-7 May 1913.

61. Ibid.

publicity in Labour propaganda was made particularly evident by the use of the word 'propaganda', throughout the movement, not only to describe the general activity of publicity, but also to apply to the quite specific activity of speech making. In the National Agent's monthly reports to the NEC and in the Party's annual reports the section on 'Propaganda' referred exclusively to spoken word propaganda, whilst 'Publicity' denoted written, poster, and other forms. There was therefore a greater distinction between 'propaganda' and 'publicity' in the Labour Party than in the Conservative, although it was a differentiation of type and not of style or degree. Both words were also used in their generic sense.

Having learnt from this early campaign, and seeing the next election at most two years away in 1915, the NEC decided that

the necessity for propaganda as an accompaniment to that of organisation becomes particularly urgent ... this phase of Party activity should be dealt with more methodically than hitherto Provided the Chairman and members of the Parliamentary Party would undertake to place a number of their dates at the disposal of the Head Office a series of most useful conferences with all the local workers could be held in our present and prospective constituencies for the purpose of stimulating local interest in party organisation ... In the past Head Office has been inundated with requests for speakers which it has been unable to fulfil, and the haphazard way in which engagements have been made has led to serious overlapping in some centres and neglect elsewhere ... Another feature of the proposal would be the more systematic distribution of Party literature by our local organisations.⁶²

The extremely modest nature of these reforms indicated just how poorly organised had been party publicity and propaganda before. They

62. NEC, Report on Party Organisation in 1914 and 1915, 11 December 1913. This memorandum helps to point the distinction made above between spoken and written propaganda and publicity. The proposals were endorsed by the Annual Conference - NEC, Organisation Sub-Committee minutes, 24 March 1914.

also demonstrated once again how the party leadership's primary concern was with propaganda for the promotion of local organisation, through which then the electorate could be reached.

This priority was evident equally in the editorial policy of the Party's first newspaper, the Daily Citizen, as it was evident also in the pre-Odhams Daily Herald. Established in October 1912 the Citizen was very much the paper of the Labour Movement rather than a popular daily which happened to be owned by it and to support its politics. As such it reported the most turgid of Labour Party organisational news, but was allowed little opportunity to turn itself into a going concern, attractive to other than the dedicated party supporter. Although there was considerable argument as to the precise purpose of the paper⁶³ - either as popular propagandist and vote-catcher, or as a cohesive and binding force in the active Labour Movement - and although some concessions were made to popularity, the paper failed in both possible functions, for it folded early in 1915 and would have done so had war not come.⁶⁴

A deeper dilemma for the Board of Management of the Citizen lay in the question of to what extent putting a popular dressing, in the shape of sports and other features, around the Labour news was a tendency towards manipulation in the Northcliffe mould, even if the news itself was honest. With a strong belief in the existence of press manipulation spread throughout the Labour Movement, there was an understandable desire to be seen to be rejecting the popular style and methods of Fleet Street and to produce a distinctive paper in which, divorced both from tinsel and from ideological twisting, the truth would shine through. A belief in capitalist manipulation not infrequently led to the apparent discernment and declared rejection of the more obvious features of manipulatory technique in many areas of Labour propaganda. Yet at the same time an absolute conviction in

63. Labour Party annual Conference Report 1912, 78-80.

64. R.I. McKibbin, 'The Evolution of a National Party: Labour's political organisation 1910-24', D.Phil. thesis, Oxford 1970, 112-118.

the righteousness of the Labour cause equally frequently led to their retention, unconscious or otherwise.⁶⁵

Although the war put a temporary stop on all press, publicity and propaganda developments, it was to prove a stimulant to party organisation through its direct effect upon Arthur Henderson, the architect of the Party reorganisation and constitution of 1917-18. Following his forced resignation from the Government in 1917 Henderson turned with a remarkable thoroughness, as R.I. McKibbin has shown, to the reorganisation of the Party.⁶⁶ Knowledge of the coming Representation of the People Act, and experience of the violence of the Russian Revolution, combined in Henderson to produce a new sense of urgency and increased electoral determination.⁶⁷ He recognised in the war the growth of a new 'democratic consciousness' and argued that

[The War] has shown the need for drastic change in the composition and organisation of political parties ... The old party system has irretrievably broken down Political power is about to be re-distributed, not only amongst the electors under the Franchise Bill, but amongst the political parties in Parliament which will claim to represent the new democratic consciousness.⁶⁸

.....if Labour is to take its part in creating the new order of

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65. It would be difficult, for example, to distinguish any significant differences in persuasional techniques between Labour and Conservative spoken rhetoric, or between Labour and Conservative posters, although Labour, following the success of its pre-vorticist poster 'Forward! The Day is Breaking' by Gerald Spencer Pryse, developed a penchant for inspirational posters of considerable artistic merit and emotional power, posters of a kind which neither of the other parties really used. For Labour posters see pages 163-167 below.
66. R.I. McKibbin (1974), Op. Cit., 91-106.
67. J.M. Winter, 'Arthur Henderson and the Russian Revolution', Historical Journal 15 (1972), 770-771.
68. A. Henderson, Op. Cit., 20-21.

society it must address itself to the task of transforming its political organisation from a federation of societies into a national popular party, rooted in the life of the democracy, and deriving its principles and its policy from the new political consciousness.⁶⁹

As Frank Purdy declared at the annual conference in January 1918:

The Representation of the People Bill will effect a revolution in the methods of all political parties.⁷⁰

One necessary step towards the creation of a national party and the unification of organisation was inevitably a greater attention to, and centralisation of, control of party propaganda. The matter was quickly taken up when, in October 1917, for the first time a proposal was made to formally institute a Press and Publicity Department, primarily in anticipation of the next General Election, but also to affirm the position of the central organisation in the expanded national party. At first the new department was to be concerned chiefly with press relations, serving both the national and the local Labour press; it would

.... act as the medium through which Labour news could be circulated to the General Press of the country, and it might become the Organ through which accurate information regarding Labour Policy and criticism of public affairs by Party Leaders could be conveyed through the Local Labour Weeklies to the Organised Working Class Movement.⁷¹

Henderson admitted that so far the distribution of labour press news had been

69. Ibid., 15-16.

70. Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1918, 96.

71. NEC, Memorandum by A. Henderson, 16 October 1917.

.... anything but satisfactory: such news items are often picked up at random from various people who are supposed to be in close touch with the Movement, and the information so obtained is often inaccurate,⁷² sometimes biased, and not infrequently wilfully misleading.

It was hoped that the department might in time also become a 'literary section' for the production of party literature, although the NEC was assured⁷³ that additional expenses for this new development would be minimal. Indeed, as established the Press and Publicity Department had a staff of only three - the Director, Herbert Tracey, who was recruited by Henderson from the Christian Commonwealth, a secretary⁷⁴ and a messenger. In 1919 the staff was supplemented by the appointment of W.W. Henderson, Arthur's son and former lobby correspondent⁷⁵ of the Daily Citizen, as parliamentary correspondent for the Party.

It was hardly surprising that the problem of press relations was felt to be of such importance. Although the press was the greatest political communications medium available Labour had had no official paper since the demise of the Citizen, whilst relations with the Daily Herald during the war were far from cordial. As Ross McKibbin remarks, 'For a party almost obsessed by the needs of propaganda' the lack of a newspaper⁷⁶ 'was an obvious deficiency'. Yet at the same

72. Ibid.

73. The Press and Publicity Department rapidly did assume a general publicity role, and it was envisaged that it should become the sole channel for all party press releases and literature publications, even those emanating from other departments such as the International and Advisory Committees - see NEC, Memorandum by Henderson on Co-ordination, Section III - The Press and Publicity Department, 19 October 1920.

74. NEC, Re-organisation Sub-Committee, 25 October 1917; NEC, Minutes 14 November 1917.

75. NEC, Meeting of the Executive Section of the Joint Committee between the Parliamentary Labour Party and the Executive, 26 March 1919. For details of Herbert Tracey and William Henderson see Note D at end of chapter, p.215.

76. R.I. McKibbin (1974) Op. Cit., 222.

time the Party was unwilling to suffer again the considerable financial losses incurred with its first paper. Only slowly and reluctantly was it later to assume responsibility for the Herald. In the establishment of the Press Department it therefore hoped to infiltrate the existing press.

Early experience was most encouraging; by April 1918 it had become regular practice for news agencies - Reuter's, Central News; and Press Association - to keep in daily contact with the Department of their own volition. Accordingly Tracey and Arthur Henderson proposed the establishment of a regular weekly Labour News Service, to be provided to the news agencies for general distribution and to the Labour press, the politically independent journals and the Liberal and Unionist provincial and weekly press. It was hoped, somewhat optimistically, that shortage of news in the latter would encourage the printing of Labour news, and that

those circulating in industrial districts and rural areas might be easily seduced from their present allegiances before they became aware of what is happening.⁷⁷

The main aim, however, was

securing publicity for the party aims and plans without showing the cloven hoof of propaganda too clearly. News is the chief thing; Labour opinion can be insidiously propagated in journals which have formed the habit of printing the news supplied by the department's postal service.⁷⁸

It was hoped later to circulate news daily, direct to the national press, and even eventually to provide articles, interviews, manifestoes and letters to the editor. Henderson and Tracey believed with some justification that

77. NEC, Memorandum on Press Department, 17 April 1918.

78. Ibid.

the press generally will have a friendlier feeling for Labour propaganda if they get accustomed to expect a regular and plentiful supply of Labour news which costs them nothing.⁷⁹

The details of the Labour Press Service were finalised in September 1918 and it was fully operational by the following spring, servicing 180 Labour newspapers, journals and the press agencies.⁸⁰ During General Elections it became standard practice also to provide daily bulletins direct to the London and provincial press, and the annual reports of the Party showed considerable satisfaction with what was being achieved.⁸¹

Lacking the national newspaper support it believed its opponents to possess, Labour took particular care to cosset the press in so far as it was able. In all campaigns organised through the constituency parties the importance of liaising with the local papers was emphasised, whilst the value of organisation conferences and campaigns was seen to lie as much in the press coverage they received as in their impact upon the immediate audience. Thus when a series of sixteen regional conferences, mainly for party workers, was held during five months of 1921, it was recognised that

Quite apart from the immediate effect of the conferences upon our own movement, the publicity value of these conferences has been remarkable ... Each weekend we have had a pronouncement from one of the leading members of the Party upon current problems, and we have had an excellent show in the Sunday press each week. The value of this as an influence upon the public mind cannot be estimated, and the series of conferences has increased the standing and improved the prospects of the Party throughout the country.⁸²

79. Ibid.

80. NEC, Minutes of meeting with Fabian Research Department, 4 September 1918; memorandum on staff of Labour Party, April 1919.

81. LPAR 1924, 71-2; LPAR 1929, 51-2.

82. NEC, Report on Regional Conferences, 1 December 1921.

The value of providing advance copies of speeches was appreciated also by the late 1930s.⁸³ If Labour continued to object strongly to the lack of political balance in the press, it had to admit by 1939 that as regards straight reportage the situation had greatly improved:

There has been a steady development in the amount of press publicity obtained by the Party. Policy declarations, platform speeches, Executive communiques and statements, new publications, new candidatures, By-election information, Campaign activities, and general Party work are receiving notable attention in the national and provincial press.⁸⁴

But of course the Party remained generally far from satisfied with the coverage it received,⁸⁵ particularly after experiencing the onslaughts of 1924 and 1931. A press of its own was seen, both nationally and locally, as the only real solution. The Leeds Weekly Citizen, a local Labour paper, declared in 1919:

We remain in a state of lethargy and impotence from the press point of view ... What is wanted is a series of Labour evening newspapers, produced in the various large centres.⁸⁶

In the absence of a Labour national press the demand grew for a local one, and W.W. Henderson wrote that

the local journal is the greatest force we have, or can handle, or can build up to combat our newspaper opponents in the home.⁸⁷

83. LPAR 1937, 24.

84. LPAR 1939, 87.

85. See, for example, R.B. Suthers, 'Three Blind Mice - and Ananias', Labour Magazine, November 1931, 298-301.

86. Leeds Weekly Citizen, 10 January 1919, 2c-d.

87. Labour Organiser, January 1921.

In order to encourage the creation of local papers the format of the Labour Press Service was altered in 1921 to become a four-page copy, of which two pages were left blank for the printing of local news by local parties, the sheet then being distributed as a local newspaper.⁸⁸ Much effort was put into stimulating local enthusiasm for the project, which had to be locally financed, and initial results were most encouraging. By early 1922 local Labour Party papers, both established through the Press Service and wholly independent,⁸⁹ numbered about 55.

Yet, as with so much that the Party attempted, early hopes soon met hard reality. The demand for such purely political, propagandist sheets was minimal and confined solely to existing Labour supporters. This attempt to create a new local press was also being made at the very time that the provincial press as a whole was in sharp decline. Even those papers that managed to survive generally only did so as monthly editions with small circulations; the South Leeds Citizen was issued monthly to 6,000, the Sheffield Forward to 5,000. A year after the new Press Service had been started, it was admitted that

The Labour press development schemes formulated by the Department have been seriously affected by the financial stringency imposed upon the majority of local organisations in consequence of the world-wide industrial depression[rendering] it much more difficult, if not actually impracticable for local Labour Parties⁹⁰ to undertake the production of local Labour newspapers.

The scheme, which at best reached a monthly circulation of under 200,000, slowly declined, as table 2.2 indicates:

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88. The Conservative Party used an identical system, as did the Co-operative Citizen to which, after the demise of the Labour Press Service scheme, several local parties subscribed.
89. The Labour Organiser listed 55 local Labour papers between July 1921 and February 1922. It is unclear whether this was comprehensive.
90. LPAR 1923,39.

Table 2.2 Local Labour newspapers using the Labour Press Service as local paper, 1922 - 1925.⁹¹

Year	Weekly local Labour Papers using service	Monthlies	Independent Papers taking Stereo Service*
1922	4	8	8
1923	5	13	6
1924	6	4	2
1925	5	5	2

* The Stereo Service allowed independent papers to take items from the Labour Press Service without taking block orders of the service itself.

Indeed, by January 1924 the total number of local Labour papers was lower than when the scheme had been started, as many of the previously well established papers had also collapsed.⁹² In 1926 the project was abandoned as a costly failure,⁹³ and the press service reverted purely to its original role.

Thereafter the Daily Herald received the Party's full attention, with continual campaigns to boost Herald sales. Yet these campaigns still had limited success due to the political nature of the paper, which left it woefully unattractive by comparison with the popular press. Labour only gained a truly national newspaper after 1930, when Odhams, the publishers, took a major financial interest in the Herald and turned it into the largest circulation paper in Britain, through popularisation and the introduction of all the regular accessories of the popular press of the period, such as gifts,

91. LPAR 1922, 46-47; 1923, 40; 1924, 71; 1925, 71.

92. Editorial, Labour Organiser, January 1924.

93. NEC, Memorandum on Labour Party Press and Publicity Department, 24 February 1926.

competitions and insurance schemes. But by then, despite its constant support for the Party, it had become a paper which many party activists, who resented what was so obviously a compromise with capitalism, believed did not always act in the Party's best interests. Demands for greater loyalty and more political news by the Herald became not uncommon.⁹⁴ Having failed to create a truly committed press of any significance, Labour was therefore forced by electoral necessity to adopt commercial methods, a decision which the Labour leadership, more mindful of practical requirements⁹⁵ than many of the rank and file, accepted with some equanimity.

Like the Conservative Party Labour was determined to develop its own direct channels of mass communication, and leafleteering and pamphleteering were held to be vitally important,⁹⁶ particularly bearing in mind the lack of press support. In the first flush of reorganisation in August 1918 Arthur Henderson envisaged that some 50 million leaflets for sale to the constituencies and 9 million manifestoes for free distribution, would be necessary for the coming General Election, assuming Labour contested 300 seats.⁹⁷ These figures were out of all proportion to anything previously considered,⁹⁸ although no record survives of the numbers actually produced. Subsequent election leaflet and manifesto statistics show that Labour was determined to utilize mass leafleteering to the fullest possible extent:

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94. It should be added, however, that in general the Party leadership and the majority of supporters remained happy with the Herald's support.
95. W.W. Henderson had written in 1922: 'The chief fault of attempts to establish Labour papers ... lies in the belief that a paper to be a Labour paper, must necessarily contain column after column of solid propaganda matter. What are really wanted are successful newspapers' - Labour Organiser, April 1922.
96. See W.W. Henderson's speech to Lancashire Labour Agents, reported in Labour Organiser, February 1926.
97. NEC, Report to Organisation Sub-Committee, 27 August 1918.
98. LPAR 1919, 29, States only that 'millions' were sold.

Table 2.3 Labour Party General Election leaflet and manifesto production, 1922 - 1935.⁹⁹

Year	Leaflets (millions)	Manifestoes (millions)
1922	13-15 ^a	10.0 ^c
1923	20.5	3.0 ^d
1924	21.4	6.0 ^e
1929	43.0 ^b	8.9 ^f
1931	21	5.5 ^d
1935	13.1	5.4

- a. Large quantities of old leaflets were also distributed.
- b. 6.6 million of these were provided free by the Federation of Building Trades Operatives.
- c. Distributed free at the expense of the General Election Fund.
- d. Sold to local parties for distribution.
- e. 2 million provided free, the remainder sold. In addition the TUC provided 2 million copies of a special appeal to trade unionists.
- f. Sold, but very heavily subsidised, with a loss to the General election fund of £4,000.

These figures compared extremely favourably with those for the Conservative Party, particularly if some allowance was made for the lower total of constituencies contested by Labour. The free issue of the manifesto in large quantities made it a major piece of propaganda literature in its own right, as indeed it was becoming for the

99. LPAR 1919 - 36; Reports on General Election Literature, in NEC, 1918-35.

Conservatives.¹⁰⁰ Again this centrally produced literature was generally in addition to the candidates' own election addresses. With up to forty different leaflets and thirty different posters there was considerable specialisation of literature. Thus in 1923 six leaflets were aimed at women and mothers, two at ex-service men, two to agricultural workers, 'An appeal to teachers'¹⁰¹ was made, and two to 'brainworkers', in addition to many others.

Head Office also became increasingly concerned to improve both the presentation and the distribution of its literature. Neither had been particularly satisfactory, and during 1921 Egerton Wake, the National Agent, had been compelled to report that, owing to the lack of organisation of literature sales by local authorities, there was difficulty in getting party literature into the hands of the people.¹⁰² Considerable emphasis was still placed on the importance of the more solid 'pamphlet' type of literature, which was sold rather than distributed free, and the vain hope was to be expressed in 1925 that it should be possible to sell a minimum of 100,000 copies of each pamphlet produced, and 500,000 of each leaflet. Accordingly at Area organisation conferences during 1922 the local parties were informed that it was vitally important that they appoint literature secretaries and committees to deal with all literature purchases and sales. Yet three years later, despite 'the great importance of written propaganda to the Labour Movement as a means to some extent of counteracting the hostility of a vast hostile press', in practice 'our local distributive machinery is neither sufficiently adequate nor efficient'.¹⁰³ Head Office circulars about its publications frequently got no further than the local agent who

100. The Report of the Central Council of the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations, 1929, stated that over 8 million manifestoes were distributed for the election.

101. NEC, Circular on General Election Literature, 15 November 1923.

102. NEC, Literature, Publicity and Research Sub-Committee, 8 February 1921.

103. NEC, Memorandum on Literature Distribution, 15 January 1925.

received them, even where a literature secretary did exist.

But although another attempt was made to urge upon local parties the necessity of formal machinery for organising literature sales and distribution, the situation remained much as before. Head Office was faced with the problem of being able only to work through the voluntary, and often obstinately and politically independent, constituency parties, which were still in many cases merely the old trade councils under a new name. Henderson's dream of a united, model party organisation would take considerably longer to achieve than the extension of the franchise for which it was intended to cater. In the meanwhile, unlike Conservative Central Office, Labour did not have the option of circumventing such difficulties with alternative, capital intensive, publicity devices.

These problems, as well as the central party organisation's ultimate ambitions, were well illustrated by the Party's 'Victory for Socialism' campaign in 1934 and 1935. It had been reported in late 1933 that the number of local literature secretaries was still quite inadequate, and that a proposal to provide literature on a regular monthly basis had met with a very poor response. Nevertheless the NEC decided that if Labour was to make an impression in the next election it would have to undertake a long term national campaign, both to revive its local organisations and to publicise its policies.¹⁰⁴ This was certainly necessary, for although in by-elections the position of the Party was showing a considerable improvement, its organisation and financial situation were still precarious. In 1932

104. Head Office tentatively adopted the opinion that the election would be held in autumn 1935 or spring 1936, and by October 1934 was sufficiently confident of this estimate to warn all local parties to prepare for an election the following autumn. The funds of the Victory for Socialism campaign were budgeted to be fully expended by October 1935. Far from being unprepared for the 1935 election, as it later claimed, Labour had been preparing for it for at least a year, although its leadership problems, and the sharp timing of the election only two weeks after the Municipal elections, to which the Party also attached great importance, led to immediate pre-election difficulties for it.

it had had to draw on special reserve funds in order to remain solvent, and had reduced staff salaries by five per cent. Throughout the country the Party was seriously affected by the economic crisis. The By-Election Insurance Fund, set up in January 1933 in order to subsidise by-elections from regular contributions by all local parties, failed once to achieve solvency before 1935, an indication of the inability of large numbers of local parties even to raise their incomes by the few pounds (7/6d per by-election) necessary for this new expense.¹⁰⁵ By February 1934 the Party had not yet reached the stage where income balanced liabilities, and the Finance and General Purposes Sub-Committee of the NEC forecast a deficit of nearly £3,000 that year.¹⁰⁶

With a much reduced force of Agents - 136 in October 1933 compared with 169 in April 1929¹⁰⁷ - the Party had to reinvigorate and organise its local associations more than ever. Accordingly in October 1933 the NEC announced its 'Victory for Socialism' campaign, the stated aim of which was to double the Labour electorate and to increase its parliamentary representation from 51 to 400 M.P.s. At least £50,000 would be required for the campaign, which was not to be proceeded with unless £5,000 had been already obtained or assured.

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105. NEC, Final Report of the Economy Committee, 17 January 1933; Report on the first year of the By-Election Insurance Fund, 24 January 1934, in which it was declared: 'Parties are in the main anxious to meet their dues under the fund and realise their obligations; only their own financial difficulties prevent prompt payment'; Financial report for 1934, 23 January 1935.
106. NEC, Finance and General Purposes Sub-Committee, 21 February 1934. The power of the trade unions over the Party was made particularly evident in this context. The projected deficit was in large measure due to the T.G.W.U.'s decision to withhold £2,000 in affiliation fees in order to express its loss of confidence in the NEC's promotion of the Unions' political interests. This decision was in turn mainly the result of the NEC's imposition of Arthur Henderson as a parliamentary candidate upon the Clay Cross Labour Party, thereby violating traditional local party independence, and overriding the prior claims of the nominee of an affiliated body.
107. National Council of Labour (NCL) Minutes series, Report of monthly activities of the TUC, NEC, and PLP, 25 February 1936.

£20,000 was to come from the constituency parties by means of a monthly payment of 35/-, in return for which Head Office would provide a supply of leaflets 'in a style to attract attention and influence opinion'¹⁰⁸, sufficient for 'carrying a monthly Socialist Message into every home in the land'.¹⁰⁹ It was believed that

A systematic distribution of literature month by month leading up to the next General Election will have a profound effect on public opinion.¹¹⁰

Such a scheme would indeed have constituted a unique and impressive method of mass political communication had it been fully implemented. But of this the local parties were quite incapable. For the campaign as a whole the first £5,000 still had not been raised by March 1934, despite the offer from Odhams Press of free provision of one million leaflets a month for six months, a gift to the value of £1,000.¹¹¹ Moreover, of the 581 constituency parties sent details of the literature scheme in October, 366 had not replied by March, 56 had found themselves financially unable to take part, 36 had declared that they could only participate at a lower monthly contribution, and only 85 had accepted in full.¹¹² Although it was decided to introduce a graduated scale of contributions, only 48 more parties had entered the scheme by this means by the time it started in May 1934. Instead of the £10-12,000 annual income hoped for, allowing a monthly message to be issued to every one of the eight million working mens' dwellings in the country, only £2,200 per annum could be expected, permitting the publication of just over one million leaflets each month. By September the number of co-operating parties

108. NEC, Circular on Victory for Socialism Campaign, 3 October 1933.

109. LPAR 1934, 49.

110. NEC, Circular on Victory for Socialism Campaign, 3 October 1933.

111. NEC, Minutes, 1 March 1934.

112. Ibid.

had doubled, yet the monthly issue rose only to 1.7 million leaflets, the majority of these inevitably being taken by the financially sounder parties for use in areas which were already Labour strongholds.¹¹³ Indeed by November 44 parties had had to leave the scheme, mainly because of financial difficulties, and the total number of bodies taking part was beginning to decline.¹¹⁴

Recognising this the NEC appealed to stronger parties to subsidise backward constituencies who could not otherwise take part, but only two parties and three individual party members responded.¹¹⁵ Through the assistance of the former, Head Office was able to supply 2000 leaflets a month to ten backward constituencies and, with Odhams' gift as well, some 402 constituencies received some literature during the seventeen months of the campaign. But few had been able to undertake the regular, blanket distribution originally envisaged, and the total of 26 million leaflets issued in this period represented only 1.5 million a month, mostly to the same constituencies. When W.W. Henderson came to analyse the results of the 1935 General Election with reference to those constituencies which had taken part in the 'Victory for Socialism' literature scheme (and it is interesting that he contemplated such an analysis), he had to admit that the results were 'inconclusive'.¹¹⁶ Harry Drinkwater, editor of the Labour Organiser, was more damning. He declared that large numbers of leaflets had remained undistributed and that the 'Victory for Socialism' campaign had been an almost unmitigated failure. The Party's local organisational strength, membership and

113. LPAR 1934, 54. In May 1934 1,088,750 leaflets were issued to 151 parties, an average of 7,210 per party. In September 1,707,500 were issued to 308 parties, an average to the new co-operating parties of only 3,941, assuming numbers issued to the original parties remained constant. Clearly the rise in co-operating parties was only possible because they made use of lower scales of contribution.

114. NEC, Report on Victory for Socialism Campaign, 13 November 1934.

115. LPAR 1935, 46.

116. NEC, Research and Publicity Committee, 19 December 1935.

finances were still quite inadequate for such leaflet distribution, the propaganda value of which, in any case, he considered to be small. Such a direct approach to the elector would not work:

few persons are convinced by frontal attacks, but millions more by other means more subtle and more comforting to the convert.¹¹⁷

Unlike the Conservative Party Labour retained its faith in leafleteering. It did so because it recognised it as the only way of reaching the large section of the electorate who did not read a Labour paper or attend political meetings, and because it still saw its problem as financial rather than as a lack of local voluntary co-operation and enthusiasm. Given improved finances it was confident that it could create an effective method of mass propaganda through mass literature distribution, and W.W. Henderson wrote in 1936 that such schemes should no longer be of short duration, in 'campaigns'. Instead,

Phases of effort which hitherto have generally been regarded as "special efforts" must now be regarded as part of the normal activities of the party.¹¹⁸

Certainly it had greatly improved its literature system by 1939 - a Literature Circulation Officer had been appointed, over 800 local literature secretaries existed and leaflet distribution had risen to 6.3 million in 1937 and 6.6 million in 1938, not least because of the Party's Spain Campaign.¹¹⁹ But this still represented a regular monthly issue of no more than 550,000 leaflets to only 170 constituency parties, again largely those which were already organisationally strong. Dislike for and doubt as to the worth of

117. Editorial article, 'The Victory for Socialism Campaign - Did it Fail?', Labour Organiser, November 1935. Internal evidence indicates author.

118. NEC, Memorandum on the Literature Campaign, 21 May 1936.

119. LPAR 1937, 59; 1938, 85.

leaflet distribution, the effects of which were not so immediately apparent as they were at a public meeting or demonstration, remained widespread amongst the voluntary party workers.¹²⁰

Given this emphasis on party literature it would have been surprising had the Party not taken an increasing interest in the presentation of material, in order to make it more attractive. By 1928 it was becoming appreciated that pamphlets played little part in a General Election by comparison with leaflets, but that any which were produced should be

written in simple language and contain good telling points rather than solid argumentation.¹²¹

Arthur Henderson also argued that the quality of paper used for leaflets could be an important factor, and urged that the variety of leaflets produced should be restricted in order to allow a better finish.¹²² The value of illustrated layouts where possible was also appreciated and, like the other parties, Labour regularly reduced its poster illustrations to leaflet size for distribution.¹²³ Cartoons, bold type, coloured leaflets, photographs, were all frequent features of centrally produced leaflets by the late 1920s. Although the Party did not employ professional consultants to present its literature, it did have the full assistance of the illustrating and laying out staff of Odhams Press for the 'Victory for Socialism' campaign. This service may well have been used on other occasions, for Odhams were always most generous with their assistance.¹²⁴ The printers Thomas

120. See M. Hackett, 'Propaganda by Print', Labour Organiser, February 1938.

121. NEC, Research and Publicity Sub-Committee, 24 September 1928.

122. NEC, Minutes, 5 November 1928.

123. NEC, Research and Publicity Committee, 17 December 1928; NEC, Minutes, 12 July 1921. Copies of most Labour Party leaflets and pamphlets are held at the Labour Party Archives.

124. Odhams provided leaflets free or at cost price to the Party on

Summerbell also gave considerable help to local parties by preparing suitable layouts for election addresses, leaflets and posters.¹²⁵ Much thought went into the presentation of the 'Victory for Socialism' monthly message:

In view of the fact that the central aim of the scheme is to make a special approach to the millions of people who are not Socialists, it was decided that in the first part of the Campaign we should concentrate on a particular method of approach rather than rely upon variety of appeal ... the first monthly message ... is simple, direct, and capable of arousing sympathy, as the first step¹²⁶ towards creating conviction and enlisting active support.

For the 1935 General Election the NEC, possibly with the National Publicity Bureau's 'Popular Illustrated' in mind, sanctioned the production of a sixteen page illustrated broadsheet entitled 'What Socialism Will Really Mean to You', in a popular style for general distribution.¹²⁷ Although it had a limited issue of 237,000, Head Office was excited by the possibilities revealed. When, therefore, Labour's new 'National Campaign' in 1937 provided another opportunity, it produced 'Your Britain', a sixteen page 'pictorial presentation' of 'Labour's Immediate Programme' in colour and photogravure. As the Party's annual report remarked:

The wording, type, and lay-out of leaflets and posters have been considered with the greatest care, pictures have been extensively included, whilst in "Your Britain" we have introduced a new technique in national political publicity of which every member

innumerable occasions, usually with a Herald advertisement on the reverse, particularly for the annual agricultural campaigns.

125. Summerbell's advertised regularly in the Labour Organiser during the 1920s.
126. NEC, Report on Victory for Socialism Campaign, 25 April 1934.
127. LPAR 1936, 80.

of the Party can be proud "Your Britain" marks a turning point in Party literature.¹²⁸

In format it resembled Picture Post and was indeed a most attractive and popularly styled magazine. Once again, however, party hopes suffered a set-back because of economic reality. Such a production was only possible if it was sold rather than distributed free. Although one million copies of 'Your Britain' No. 1 were printed, only 750,000 were sold in eighteen months. Subsequent issues in 1938 and 1939 on 'Your Peace', 'Farming and Food' and the Municipal Elections, had sales of 580,000, 240,000, and 590,000 respectively, figures which in other respects were good for political literature which had to be sold.¹²⁹

Labour publicists were evidently as anxious as Conservative to attract people's attention and to use every possible means to put across their message. Posters were seen as particularly potent. Desiring to follow up the great success of the famous pre-war inspirational poster 'Forward! The Day is Breaking', by Gerald Spencer Pryse, the Party commissioned the same artist in 1921 to produce new posters.¹³⁰ The well-known cartoonists Will Dyson of the Daily Herald and Low of the Star, were also asked to advise and produce designs, and apparently remained closely concerned with the pictorial work of the Party for many years.¹³¹ Sizes were mainly double crown, although when a new poster scheme was introduced in 1920, 8-sheets were also employed on a limited scale.¹³² Thus in preparation for the 1922 and 1923 elections, in addition to eight

.28. LPAR 1937, 21, 23.

129. LPAR 1939, 84-85.

130. NEC, Literature, Publicity and Research Sub-Committee, 24 November 1921.

131. NEC, Literature, Publicity and Research Sub-Committee, 13 October 1920.

132. NEC, Literature, Publicity and Research Sub-Committee, 28 December 1920.

letterpress posters (including one with the slogan 'Safety First: Vote Labour and we shall have Safety all the time'), there were eleven coloured pictorial posters ranging from double-crown to 3-panel posters - three complementary pictures, probably double or quad crown, which produced one large poster, as in 'Yesterday', 'Today', and 'Tomorrow'.¹³³ Both in 1923 and 1924 the football analogy was used in posters depicting Labour footballers winning through, to the captions 'Use Your Head! Support your own team and vote Labour', and 'Labour versus the Rest'. By 1935 the value of children on posters had long been appreciated, and a photographed poster appeared that year of two young children appealing 'Vote Labour and Give us a Chance'.¹³⁴ The two most notorious political posters of the 1930s were both produced by Labour; one, depicting a baby wearing a gas mask, raised such a protest from National Government candidates in 1935 that it was boycotted by several billposting firms, who refused to display it despite financial loss.¹³⁵ The second, entitled 'War - Sower and Reaper', and in use from 1933 onwards, was equally powerful, as an advertisement for it in Labour Organiser indicated:

Death, white-skulled and shrouded in black, sows with one claw-like hand the seeds of war - tanks, machine-guns, aeroplanes, poison gas - and with a scythe in the other, rapaciously reaps the harvest of mangled young bodies, and of poisoned old ones in devastated cities. The whole of the background is flaming colour lighted by the fires of war.¹³⁶

All of these posters, however, were double-crown.

The particular emotional value of poster advertisement was used to the full, and consciously so. In the pages of the Party's

133. NEC, Circular for General Election literature, 15 November 1923.

134. These posters are all kept at the Labour Party Archives.

135. NEC, Research and Publicity Committee, 16 April 1936.

136. Labour Organiser, October 1933.

organisational journal, Labour Organiser, protestations as to Labour's purely rational methods of political education were less apparent than in more public papers, and Harry Drinkwater, the Editor, admitted in July 1937 that

Few posters put across a reasoned case, or make an appeal to reason. They are mostly an appeal to impulse, sometimes to passion, occasionally to hate A strict moralist would, we think, rule out the poster from political propaganda.¹³⁷

He nevertheless recommended that the Party do all it could to develop its poster work further. He was only reasserting what had been advocated even more openly in an article by a party agent in 1921:

A vast number of the electorate have little inclination to reason out political questions for themselves. They are swayed by impulses, prejudices, and catchwords. It is therefore necessary to put our point of view in as simple and striking a manner as possible, so that the man in the street may receive impressions that will influence his thoughts and induce him to support our cause at the polling booth.¹³⁸

Election figures for poster issue were as shown in Table 2.4:

137. Ibid., July 1937.

138. Ibid., March 1921.

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Table 2.4 Labour Party General Election poster issue, 1922-1935.

	Posters
1922	^a 204,695
1923	^b 86,000
1924	244,000
1929	311,000
1931	80,000
1935	205,110

a. Posters issued between 30 June 1922 and 30 April 1923,
mostly at election.

b. In addition large numbers of old posters were issued.

139. LPAR 1922-1936; Reports on General Election literature 1922-1935, contained in NEC papers.

Once again these figures bear comparison with those of the Conservative Party, the lower figures being partly explicable by the lower number of constituencies contested. By 1934 the Party was also beginning to use 16-sheet pictorial posters, although billboard hire charges prevented widespread use, and poster sizes did not approach those used by the NPB.¹⁴⁰

It is evident that had it had sufficient funds the National Executive would have considered undertaking large scale advertising on commercial lines, just as did the National Publicity Bureau. In 1929 estimates were received, presumably from advertising firms, for 'a poster and advertising scheme on a large scale'.¹⁴¹ Although the cost of £105,000 put it well beyond the Party's capabilities, the NEC did authorise the Elections Sub-Committee

to proceed with a Publicity Scheme on a large scale, if the financial situation permits.¹⁴²

Again in 1935 it was reported that a scheme for large scale newspaper advertising during the General Election period was being prepared by

140. NJC, Report on Campaign for Peace and Freedom, 23 March 1934.

141. NEC, Minutes, 26 April 1929.

142. Ibid.. This was in response to Arthur Henderson's request for authorisation to spend up to £15,000 on a last minute appeal to electors.

an advertising firm, but that costs would be prohibitive.¹⁴³
 Attempts in 1932 and 1933 to develop a scheme for the regular provision of 'wayside posters' to constituency parties also met with little success through lack of local response.¹⁴⁴

In consequence the Party's inter-election use of posters remained erratic. In some years none were produced or sold by Head Office, although in a few constituencies locally organised posters were displayed. Thus at Bermondsey and Romford in 1936-37 the local parties erected 200 and 300 double-crown poster boards respectively, outside branch and union headquarters and the homes of party workers, thereby avoiding the commercial renting of sites. Head Office adopted the idea and estimated that it should be feasible for a constituency to have a regular display of 100 posters for an initial outlay of £18 for boards, and a monthly cost of 15/- for posters.¹⁴⁵ These were expenses which many local parties could have afforded, yet few pursued the idea until 1938-39, when Head Office's sales of posters rose greatly as a result of renewed Head Office encouragement and increased campaign activity. This dilatory approach indicated not a lack of interest in poster use, but rather an unthinking belief that

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143. NEC, Research and Publicity Committee, 21 March 1935. Not surprisingly, when in 1936 a scheme was proposed by a Labour candidate for publicity estimated at £250,000 per annum, it was also rejected, but not before the Party Secretary, J.S. Middleton, had discussed the proposal with him - Research and Publicity Committee, 16 April 1936; A conference resolution in 1936 recommending the establishment of an advisory committee of 'experts' on press, publicity, research and public speaking, was similarly withdrawn after the NEC agreed to discuss the proposal with its sponsor - Annual Conference minutes, 216. Herbert Morrison, however, did make use of the voluntary services of such advertising and public relations professions for the 1937 L.C.C. elections and thereafter - see footnote 267 below.
144. NEC, Research and Publicity Committee, 19 January 1932. Of 6,000 organisations circulated with details of this scheme only 159 replied, with the sale of 879 double-crown posters; Research and Publicity Committee, 20 April 1932, 16 March 1934.
145. M. Hackett, 'Points on Poster publicity', Labour Organiser, November 1937.

such forms of publicity were unfortunately too expensive, as indeed they would have been if commercial billboards and large-size posters had been used. As we shall see with regard to the use of propagandists, and as was to some extent the case with leafleteering, disillusionment at the lack of party resources sometimes led local parties to do far less than they might have in these areas of publicity. Instead they concentrated on the frequent organisation of local meetings, a cheap, locally initiated and traditional method of propaganda.

Lack of money and of local support were the problems with which centrally organised Labour mass propaganda had continually to contend. Even where constituency support was sufficient to provide some financial assistance for a particular method of publicity it was rarely enough to allow Head Office to develop the system to a level adequate for comprehensive national coverage. This was the case with regard to the Party's use of full-time professional propagandists. In September 1921 a proposal had been made for the appointment of nine full-time propagandists, one for each organisational area. Head Office had also improved its list of available voluntary speakers and made arrangements with selected M.P.s for assistance in filling speaking engagements.¹⁴⁶ The national organisation had not previously been particularly efficient in this respect, for in 1919 a group of local Labour parties had suggested the creation of a Head Office bureau for the booking of party speakers.¹⁴⁷ Financial difficulties, however, again prevented the full implementation of these plans. Only three propagandists were appointed, the reduction being the result, as the National Agent stated,

of the necessity of safeguarding the financial position of the Party arising through the present economic depression.¹⁴⁸

146. NEC, Minutes, 6 September 1921, 18 October 1921.

147. NEC, Minutes, 2-3 April 1919.

148. NEC, Report on propaganda, 1 December 1921.

He reported the valuable work that the three were doing, each one generally spending a week in one constituency, addressing up to two meetings a day:

by this means the remote part of the divisions have been opened up and public interest created, and organisation stimulated, in a way that would have been impossible without this assistance.¹⁴⁹

It should be added that Labour propagandists were not infrequently also prospective candidates, and probably of a rather higher calibre in general than those of the opposing Conservative army. Yet despite the excellent reports which Head Office continually received, and despite the high regard in which propagandising was held¹⁵⁰, the number of propagandists employed in the 1920s never exceeded four and had been reduced by natural wastage to two in June 1929.¹⁵¹ The scheme to arrange M.P.'s speaking tours had also been seriously curtailed.¹⁵² Indeed, except for specific campaigns and for by-elections, when Head Office used every available speaker, the national organisation of speakers throughout the 1920s remained surprisingly haphazard for a party so concerned with the spoken word. Not until 1929 was a Propaganda Officer appointed to co-ordinate the Party's spoken propaganda.¹⁵³

Yet the spoken word was undoubtedly the most popular of the Party's methods of proselytisation. We have already seen that to a considerable extent the character of the Party organisation was determined from its local and industrial elements, and there can be no doubt that at this level a strong belief remained in the value of

149. Ibid.

150. See, for example, NEC, Report on Propagandists, 16 July 1924.

151. Two temporary propagandists were also appointed for the duration of the 1922 election campaign.

152. NEC, Report on propaganda, c. 2 May 1922 (contained in NEC, 5 April 1922).

153. NEC, Office Arrangements Committee, 16 July 1929.

the campaign, the public meeting and the mass demonstration. Such frequent and vociferous display of the unity and solidarity of the Labour Movement made an impressive show for participants and opponents alike, and certainly acted as a catalyst to the Movement's constituent parts. It stimulated organisation and encouraged voluntary participation.

The conclusions of recent studies of local party organisation during this period, for example in the East Midlands and Yorkshire, are significant in that they indicate far greater Labour than Conservative propaganda activity on a local voluntary basis.¹⁵⁴ P.R. Shorter's finding that 'the bulk of the work [of campaigning and propagandising] was done by the D.L.P.s themselves' shows clearly where the real strength of the Labour Party lay, in its voluntary workers.¹⁵⁵ The NEC recognised this fact and geared its main efforts to meeting the propaganda requirements of local party workers through a whole range of national campaigns and demonstrations in which organisational conferences and mass demonstrations addressed by national figures would be used to stimulate local parties to ever more local meetings, demonstrations and canvassing. Many campaigns promoted specific policies, such as the Mines for the Nation campaign of 1919, the Trade Union Defence campaign of 1927, the campaign against Unemployment Assistance Board Regulations (1935), for Holidays with Pay (1937), Anti-Hitler and anti-Fascist campaigns (1934) and the Spain Campaign (1937-39). Others took the form of regular Individual Membership campaigns, and campaigns designed to raise interest in the Party generally, such as the Call to Action, Victory for Socialism, and Labour's National campaigns of 1932 to 1939. At their best they could be most impressive. During the six weeks of the Mines for the Nation campaign 86 centrally organised demonstrations were held, with participants varying from only 120 to 7,500, as a result of which considerable press publicity was obtained. Following these, large numbers of local meetings were held

154. P.R. Shorter, Op. Cit., 123-128; B.C. Barker, Op. Cit., 237-8.

155. P.R. Shorter, Op. Cit., 125.

and no less than 15 million leaflets systematically distributed by local workers, at the expense of the Labour Party Central Fund, the TUC and the Miners' Federation.¹⁵⁶ Although such large scale leafleteering was never again achieved outside an election, the campaign itself was typical. Concentrated nation-wide effort was felt to be more effective and was certainly more impressive than continuous but isolated propagandising. As a circular for the 1934 Victory for Socialism campaign remarked, a campaign should be one

not of isolated and unconnected efforts, but of organised and co-ordinated activities in which every unit will feel and know itself an essential and related part of a great co-operative undertaking.¹⁵⁷

With such an emphasis on propaganda through the meetings of local parties, the success or otherwise of which went mostly unrecorded, it is difficult to assess the impact of these campaigns. The statistics for numbers of meetings organised were certainly impressive. In the autumn and winter campaign of 1932 it was hoped that the total number of meetings would approach 2,000¹⁵⁸, whilst for the six-month Call to Action campaign the following year 1,200 meetings were addressed by 500 volunteer and MP speakers booked through Head Office, and a further 800 meetings by speakers from the local speakers panels which Head Office was encouraging County Federations to organise.¹⁵⁹ Meetings in the Campaign against the Unemployment Board Assistance Regulations in 1935 numbered 'some thousands'¹⁶⁰, and during Labour's National Campaign a Socialist Crusade Week, in September 1937, and a Peace and Security Week, the following March, contained

156. NEC, Report on Mines for the Nation Campaign, undated (c. 25 February 1920).

157. NEC, Circular on Victory for Socialism, 3 October 1933.

158. NJC, Report of activities of TUC, NEC, and PLP, 22 November 1922.

159. LPAR 1933, 25.

160. LPAR 1935, 26.

2,000 and 1,000 meetings respectively.¹⁶¹ It is perhaps significant, however, that the campaign against the Trade Disputes Bill in 1927, which Egerton Wake described as 'probably wider than any previous effort made by the movement', was judged by J.C.C. Davidson, the Conservative Party Chairman, to be a 'complete fiasco', and that it indeed met with little success.¹⁶² The Peace and Freedom campaign of 1934 was an admitted failure, and the Victory for Socialism campaign was in almost every respect disappointing. Not 2,000 but 5,000 meetings had been hoped for in the 1937 Socialist Crusade Week.¹⁶³

Moreover, although campaigning was in general deemed to be effective, local response inevitably varied greatly throughout the country according to the pre-existing strength of the local organisation. In the Peace and Freedom campaign, whose vital task it was to refute Conservative accusations of Labour's 'totalitarian' tendencies, 21 public meetings arranged to stimulate local propaganda had mixed success. In some areas such as Newport, Swansea, Huddersfield, Lincoln, Burnley and Reading, attendances were considered to be good (although even at these numbers rarely exceeded 1,000, the maximum being 1,200). Elsewhere, despite considerable advance publicity through advertisements in the local press, circulars to local union branches and double crown and 16-sheet posters, attendances were 'very unsatisfactory' (Birmingham), 'disappointing' (Leeds), 'small' (Bristol), 'no marked enthusiasm' (Southampton), a 'complete fiasco' (Newcastle-on-Tyne), and two meetings had to be cancelled from lack of support.¹⁶⁴

In all such campaigns activity was weakest where it was most

161. Labour Organiser, February 1938; NJC, Report of activities of TUC, NEC and PLP, 22 March 1938.

162. NEC, National Agent's Report, 20 June 1927; R.R. James, Op.Cit., 297.

163. Politics in Review, 4 (1937), 123.

164. NJC, Report on campaign for Peace and Freedom, 23 April 1934.

needed, precisely because they depended so heavily on local support. Local organisational enthusiasm was widely seen as the only possible key to the problem, and in consequence those rural areas where it was almost wholly absent received much attention from the NEC. In early 1925 Head Office had identified 'The Real Problem' for electoral success as being the 192 County Divisions in which Labour did not hold a single seat, and at the Annual Conference three resolutions had demanded increased rural propaganda,

as we consider that there will never be a Labour majority in
 Parliament until this is done.¹⁶⁵

Egerton Wake agreed:

a Labour majority in the House of Commons cannot be secured until
 Labour wins a proportion of the county divisions ...¹⁶⁶

Already the Party's propagandists had been concentrating on the rural areas, and from 1927 onwards the Party carried on a regular annual agricultural campaign, intended primarily to encourage the development of local organisation. Financed from a special agricultural fund the campaign consisted of propaganda weeks in twenty to thirty constituencies each year, with leaflet distribution, an organisation conference and a public demonstration. Yet these efforts met with little obvious success. In 1934, for example, audiences at the 15 conferences ranged from 25 to 120, the latter being London. Several divisions actually rejected offers to participate in the campaign as being of no practical value.¹⁶⁷ Only in 1937-38 did the Agricultural Campaign Committee raise sufficient

165. NEC, Head Office report to Organisation Sub-Committee, 21 January 1925; Organisation Sub-Committee 21 May 1925.

166. NEC, Memorandum on Agricultural Campaign, 22 November 1926.

167. NEC, Agricultural Campaign Committee, 16 April 1934; Report on Agricultural Campaign, 20 December 1934.

funds to expand its effort to a reasonable extent, covering 78 areas with loudspeaker vans, holding over 2,000 meetings and distributing nearly 500,000 leaflets in the 1938 season. As with so much that had been achieved in the two years before the war, the fruits of the Party's labours would only be reaped in 1945.

The emphasis upon the spoken word, by which the Labour rank and file traditionally placed great store, and which possessed the advantages of cheapness, maximum group involvement and show, was reflected in the NEC's continuing efforts to co-ordinate general spoken work propaganda nationally. During the 1920s as we have seen, the central party organisation had been unable to contribute as much as it desired to this fundamental aspect of Labour propaganda. Nevertheless the staff propagandists visited up to 50 constituencies each for a week in any one year, whilst for by-elections large numbers of MPs and party leaders were sent by Head Office, though usually only to address one evening meeting each. Thus 22 MPs, including MacDonalld, spoke at Stowbridge in 1927, whilst in 1930 36 attended West Fulham, together with eight party agents drafted in from other constituencies. Cabinet ministers were not exempt from this duty, and J.R. Clynes, the Home Secretary, together with 19 fellow MPs, spoke at Shipley in the same year.¹⁶⁸ These were, of course, all indoor meetings, and it must be noted that even here, in a form of propaganda in which Labour prided itself, it was frequently outgunned by its Conservative opponents.¹⁶⁹ Similarly the National Agent was forced to admit later in 1930 that

It had been noticeable in recent By-elections that opposing parties have surpassed our efforts in the open air meetings. This is due to the very large number of professional speakers in the employment of the Conservative and Liberal organisations.¹⁷⁰

168. NEC, By-Election Reports, 23 February 1927, 20 May 1930, 27 October 1930.

169. See page 50 above.

170. NEC, Paddington By-Election, 26 November 1930.

This fact, however, only emphasised for him the lesson that 'the day of street meetings is by no means over'.

Labour responded as well as it could with 47 MPs and other speakers for indoor meetings at East Islington in February 1931, in addition to 'a large number' for open air work.¹⁷¹ The newly appointed propaganda officer, Morgan Phillips, was also at last bringing order to the organisation of centrally co-ordinated spoken propaganda, and in 1930 arranged 839 engagements for MPs, expenses being paid by the engaging body.¹⁷² Even here financial difficulties were encountered, however, for although Head Office was particularly anxious to encourage rural and marginal constituencies to take speakers, local parties frequently rejected them on the grounds that they could not even pay expenses. There was often more to such rejections than lack of money. Many local parties saw little value in taking an outside speaker, and little hope of attracting the unconverted elector to such meetings unless it was a cabinet minister or party leader,¹⁷³ and so turned down offers of anyone else.

With the decimation of Labour's parliamentary ranks in the 1931 General Election, however, the Party found itself with large numbers of ex-MPs available for use as propagandists at comparatively cheap rates. Although the two full-time propagandists had to be dismissed in 1932 because of the Party's financial difficulties, Head Office arranged part-time employment in the same year for eighteen ex-MPs, and nearly 1,000 meetings were thereby given at little expense to the constituencies.¹⁷⁴ For the Victory for Socialism Campaign the Party employed eleven temporary propagandists, several of whom were

171. NEC, Report on East Islington By-Election, 24 February 1931.

172. LPAR 1930, 6.

173. This was a continuing problem - NEC, Report on Propaganda activities, 22 January 1936, and J. Cutter, 'Those Propagandists', Labour Organiser, March 1936.

174. NEC, Report on propaganda and speakers' engagements, 27 April 1932; LPAR 1932, 29.

prospective parliamentary candidates, for six months, later extended to the General Election. Of these the five who were not returned to Parliament in 1935 were retained. By the mid-1930s, moreover, Head Office co-ordination of voluntary speakers was at last proving its potential. From 1931 onwards local party requests for speakers, both via Head Office and from the regional speakers' panels, increased each year, and by 1938 the Propaganda Department was supplying over 8,000 speakers annually.¹⁷⁵

In practice, therefore, the Labour Party continued predominantly to use traditional methods of propaganda. Yet although its financial situation precluded the use of propaganda techniques which were essentially capital intensive, it was just as anxious to make use of the new technology of film, loudspeaker, gramophone and radio as was the Conservative. Despite the (for Labour) considerable cost of £350, MacDonald, himself the Party's most valuable electioneering asset in the early 1920s, was provided with a Marconiphone loudspeaker van for a seven day tour in 1924.¹⁷⁶ Subsequently, in September 1928, the Research and Publicity Sub-Committee of the NEC investigated the possibility of purchasing portable loudspeakers. But although it was somewhat optimistically agreed to recommend purchase to the local parties, Head Office was itself unable to bear the expenditure.¹⁷⁷ In 1929 the NEC's interest was aroused by the use of relay systems by the Liberal and Conservative Parties for transmitting speeches simultaneously to several towns. But, with a caution born of the desire to use the Party's limited financial resources in the most effective manner, the NEC agreed with Arthur Henderson that reports on the Liberal relay from the Albert Hall

were not sufficiently satisfactory to warrant a similar relay for

175. LPAR 1939, 69.

176. NEC, Finance Sub-Committee, 24 November 1924.

177. NEC, Research and Publicity Committee, 2 November 1928.

the Party's demonstration.¹⁷⁸

By late 1933, however, the use of loudspeakers by the other parties, particularly at by-elections, could not be left unanswered. Already that year, for the first time, loudspeakers had been used at the May Day demonstration in Hyde Park, the speakers almost symbolically being united as a result to speak from the same amplified dais, where previously they had spoken simultaneously from a large number of platforms scattered throughout the Park.¹⁷⁹ The Research and Publicity Committee realized that, although occasionally a van had been hired by a local party for a by-election¹⁸⁰, more permanent arrangements were necessary, and accordingly a sub-committee was established 'to go into the question of mechanical apparatus of all kinds for election purposes'.¹⁸¹ It was recognised that

The loudspeaker has become an essential¹⁸² part of modern electioneering and mass propaganda equipment,

and once again local parties were circularised with details of a suitable portable system.¹⁸³

178. NEC, Minutes, 26 March 1929.

179. NJC, Minutes, 25 April 1933. The value of this did not escape Party organisers: 'It was very noticeable that the crowds did not wander as they did at the February demonstration, but were held by the amplifiers' - NJC, Report on May Day demonstration, 23 May 1933.

180. For example, at Kilmarnock in October to November 1933, and at Rutland and Stamford in December 1933.

181. NEC, Research and Publicity Committee, 16 November 1933.

182. LPAR 1934, 48.

183. NEC Minutes, 1 March 1934; Research and Publicity Committee 25 June 1934. The Party's very limited experience with such apparatus was demonstrated on this latter occasion when for the first time it encountered the problem of fees to the Performing Rights Society, for playing music over loudspeakers.

The response was significant. Within a year over 100 of the portable loudspeaker sets recommended had been bought by Labour Parties and Co-operative Societies, and 150 by November 1935, in addition to many systems purchased from other firms.¹⁸⁴ The Labour Organiser believed that in this respect Labour had been as well equipped as its opponents at the 1935 General Election.¹⁸⁵ Although it must be assumed once again that equipment was purchased principally by the more wealthy parties and co-operatives, it was notable that so many had found the not inconsiderable sum required for a loudspeaker (c.£30 - 40), yet that only 85 had in the same year consented to pay 35/- a month for 'Victory for Socialism' leaflets. The NEC's difficulty in gaining local co-operation was not merely a question of local finances; traditional local party independence continued to assert itself in preferences for specific types of propaganda, above all the spoken word and the public meeting. Although many party members proved unwilling to deliver party literature and argued that it was not read, they retained a faith in the public meeting and hence the loudspeaker. This faith was derived from the traditional place of speaking in non-conformist and Labour circles, from the greater appearance of show, size and class solidarity to be gained from a meeting, from the greater local independence provided by locally organised meetings than by centrally produced propaganda and from the proven effectiveness of Conservative and Liberal loudspeaker use in gaining attention.

By contrast with this development of local loudspeaker use in the better organised areas, Head Office's attempts to provide equipment for backward areas met with only gradual success. Although the purchase of loudspeaker systems for general use was considered in 1934 only one set was acquired,¹⁸⁶ for use specifically in the Party's annual agricultural campaign. Only in 1937 did the success of

184. Labour Organiser, July 1935; November 1935. By May 1936 over 250 sets had been purchased from Film Industries Ltd., the recommended firm - Labour Organiser, May 1936.

185. Ibid., January 1936.

186. NEC, Agricultural Campaign Committee, 17 May 1934.

this apparatus induce the Agricultural Campaign Committee to purchase a proper loudspeaker van, which was used at over 500 meetings in the twenty divisions visited that year. It was declared that

This type of propaganda, used with care, and with due regard to local circumstances, is the most potent, as well as the most economical means yet adopted by the Committee to convey Labour's message to the countryside.¹⁸⁷

The following year three more vans were acquired for the agricultural campaign, whilst in the South West a 'Bristol and District Propaganda Association' was formed in order to purchase a loudspeaker van for use in agricultural, Spanish, and council by-election campaigns in the surrounding constituencies.¹⁸⁸ The situation was clearly improving in the last two years before the war, no doubt largely as a result of the Party's reviving financial position, although Head Office still had only five vans at its disposal.

The gramophone was another propaganda weapon^a that party organisers considered. Widespread admiration in the British Labour Party for the achievements and organisation of the German Social Democratic Party had been reflected in publicity in 1928 when the Press and Publicity Department of Head Office requested of the S.D.P. details of its electioneering methods. It was informed that the 'so-called American form' of election propaganda was widely used and that 'election soap' (with slogans set into it), balloons bearing the inscription 'Vote S.D.P.', and six aeroplanes to scatter leaflets from the air were used. Also

cinematographs on lorries were very successful, going from place to place with an S.D. election film. In the same way the speeches of well known party leaders and the battle song of the workers on

187. LPAR 1937, 33.

188. NCL, Report of activities of TUC, NEC, and PLP, 21 June 1938, 26 July 1938; LPAR 1939, 69.

gramophone records were broadcast by means of loudspeakers.¹⁸⁹

Samples of soap, music and speech records and the election film were sent, and the Research and Publicity Committee agreed immediately to investigate the possibilities of records and films. Initial enquiries, however, persuaded the committee that the propaganda value of records would not warrant the financial outlay involved, and the matter was temporarily dropped.¹⁹⁰ Only the late offer by a firm to produce such records on a commercial basis, at its own expense, made it possible for the Party to proceed with recordings by MacDonald, Snowden, Thomas, Henderson and Margaret Bondfield, and in practice less than 9,000 were sold.¹⁹¹ Although W.W. Henderson reported to MacDonald that the records had been a great success¹⁹², the Party showed little further interest in actually investing in a propaganda medium of such obviously limited use. Only in 1934 was the gramophone again considered, and although the Research and Publicity Committee enthusiastically recommended the investment of £500 in records, the scheme was rejected on the grounds that the Party was unlikely to sell the 10,000 copies necessary to break even.¹⁹³ A firm which agreed to produce records of Labour songs such as 'The Red Flag', the 'Internationale' and 'England! Arise', soon found itself in financial difficulties through the extreme reluctance of local Labour parties to buy them.¹⁹⁴ Although the same firm later also produced records

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189. NEC, Letter from S.D.P. contained in Research and Publicity Committee, 25 June 1928.
190. NEC, Research and Publicity Committee, 2 November 1928. The cost would have been £500 for twelve recorded speeches.
191. NEC minutes, 26 March 1939; Report on General Election propaganda, 18 July 1929. The firm was the Columbia Gramophone Company, who made similar records for the other parties. The Party took a royalty of 2d. a record, and received £40 in all.
192. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/6/33, W.W. Henderson to H.B. Usher, 9 October 1929.
193. NEC, Research and Publicity Committee, 22 November 1934; Finance and General Purposes Sub-Committee, 18 January 1935.
194. NEC, Research and Publicity Committee, 21 March 1935.

of speeches by Labour leaders, the Party in general showed little interest, limiting itself, in view of its financial situation, to tried, trusted and cheaper methods of propaganda.

The Labour Party's experiences with the possibilities of film propaganda, in particular, demonstrated its interest in media which it really believed to be of propaganda value. Yet at the same time its continual and mainly unsuccessful attempts to use film, from 1919 to 1939, provided a good example of the difficulties, with regard to mass propaganda and mass communication generally, under which the Party laboured between the wars. The nature of those attempts also indicated its prevailing electoral interest, in practice, in mass communication. For the central Party's concern with film was limited, largely by financial necessity, to predominantly electoral use, although its various schemes for film usually also envisaged a more general application and a recognition that film had broader cultural and educative possibilities, as well as being a medium of entertainment.

The inter-war years were also ones in which, within the working class movement as a whole, there blossomed large numbers of unofficial cultural agencies, ranging from workers' theatre groups and book clubs to more formal bodies, such as the National Council of Labour Colleges. Such agencies were intent upon stimulating an identifiable, conscious and legitimate working class culture as a general background to and fundamental element in the political ascent of the working classes. Inevitably considerable interest was shown in the use of so potentially powerful a conveyer of cultural and educative concepts as film, and within this wider cultural/educational political movement many attempts were made to develop a left wing alternative to the dominant capitalist cinema, through the establishment of independent, small and frequently short-lived groups - workers' film societies, amateur film production bodies and film distribution systems. Within the Co-operative

Movement also attempts were made, at first through individual initiative and later more formally, to develop a positive educative role for film. Finally, from the late 1920s onwards there existed in the documentary movement, headed by John Grierson at the Empire Marketing Board and the G.P.O. Film Unit, a politically sympathetic if practically circumscribed group of professional film makers, anxious, as Grierson explained,

to use the cinema as an instrument of education and propaganda to assist that process of reconstruction which our modern society must undergo.¹⁹⁵

All these various political, educational and cultural elements were active in film use between the wars, and all at various times stimulated the official Labour Party's interest in film, particularly after 1936. Yet the inevitably dominant electoral emphasis of party propaganda restricted its immediate interest in films of a more purely educational and cultural nature, particularly given limited financial resources. Moreover the rather different political standpoint and aims of many of the people advocating such film use constrained their acceptability to the Party. In consequence contact remained comparatively limited between the two, and attention will here be given to these separate groups only in relation to their influence upon the Party's attitude to film.¹⁹⁶ Not surprisingly individuals involved in the various independent efforts criticised the Party for its apparent lack of interest in film, and for its seemingly outdated attitude to propaganda in general, such as its continued emphasis on the traditional techniques of speech and

195. Labour, February 1936, 125.

196. For further details of the various left wing film groups see T. Ryan, 'Films and Political Organisations in Britain 1929-1939', in D. Macpherson (ed.), Traditions of Independence, London 1980, 51-69; also B. Hogenkamp, Worker's Newsreels in the 1920s and 1930s ('Our History' pamphlet no. 68), London (undated). For details of the documentary film movement see R. Low, Documentary and Educational Films of the 1930s, London 1979, 48-170.

pamphlet. Such criticisms were for all practical purposes justified, but they neither credited party organisers with sufficient understanding of political requirements, nor made adequate allowances for the undoubtedly difficult position of the Party throughout the period.

Once again, however, as in so much else, many of the local parties remained laws unto themselves. If the central organisation's prolonged failure to develop film use was largely due to the lack of local response, several of the local parties found themselves identifying more closely with the aims of the various film groups of the left, and maintained a somewhat closer, though still limited, relationship with them than did the central party.

The NEC had not needed the S.D.P.'s letter of 1928 to arouse its interest in film. As early as April 1917 a letter from a party supporter, recommending 'the adaptation of the cinema to Party propaganda', had been considered and referred to the Organisation Sub-Committee for further investigation.¹⁹⁷ Only three months later a letter from a Mr. Underwood

suggested the possibility of carrying on propaganda by means of a travelling daylight cinema and invited inspection.¹⁹⁸

Although the Organisation Sub-Committee was enthusiastic and attended a demonstration of this early daylight cinema van, the matter went no further, presumably because of the inadequacy of the machine, or because of excessive cost, although no reason was recorded.

In 1919, however, proposals for 'adapting Cinema Films to the purpose of propaganda' went further when, in conjunction with the nationalisation of the mines campaign,

197. NEC minutes, 17 April 1917; Organisation Sub-Committee, 24 April 1917.

198. NEC, Organisation and Elections Sub-Committee, 23 July 1917.

Estimates were submitted for producing a film illustration life and labour conditions in mining areas [sic].¹⁹⁹

A scheme proposing the formation of a company to produce films which could be used by local organisations in local halls was eagerly approved by the Literature, Publicity and Research Sub-Committee. Although the NEC was more cautious, enthusiasm was sufficient for a Film Propaganda sub-committee to be formed of all those interested in the idea, including Arthur Henderson, Sidney Webb, George Bernard Shaw, Rebecca West and Francis Meynell.²⁰⁰ MacDonald also expressed interest. The committee considered the formation of a 'syndicate' which would have

the double object of producing films that could be used by the ordinary trade, but which would be more or less of a propaganda character; and secondly to produce other films for use in a portable projector which could be hired out or sold to local Labour organisations for propaganda, especially in rural constituencies.²⁰¹

Reports indicated that projectors could be obtained for between £50 and £70, and it was optimistically recommended that interested parliamentary candidates should agree to take projectors, to underwrite the film syndicate against financial loss on them and to organise series of paying shows in order to recoup their own expenses. Exhibition, therefore, would have to be a commercial proposition.

There was less optimism in a report on the possible use of existing commercial films suitable for Labour propaganda. Despite a

199. NEC, Literature, Publicity and Research Sub-Committee, 11 November 1919.

200. NEC minutes, 12 November 1919.

201. NEC, Minutes of Film Propaganda Sub-Committee, 18 December 1919.

thorough investigation it had been found that

the manufacturers of films have not made any films presenting directly or indirectly the Labour point of view. In one or two cases, the renting companies sent long synopses of so-called Labour photoplays, but on investigation, the underlying tendency of these photoplays proved to be contrary to the aims of the Labour Party.²⁰²

It was recognised that one of the items on the British Board of Film Censors' list of prohibitions was "conflict between Labour and Capital". Although there existed industrial series such as 'How a railway line is made' and 'Making a modern railway carriage', 'there is no propaganda in these'.²⁰³ The only conclusion possible was that the film syndicate would have to produce its own films.

Despite this problem the scheme was pushed ahead. It was planned initially to use commercial films which, whilst not propaganda, were capable of pointing a moral, such as 'Jo, the Crossing Sweeper', and 'Les Misérables'. Once the system of profitable distribution had been established, however, the Party would itself produce fully propagandist films. Accordingly, in March 1920, a circular was issued to all local Labour parties expounding the necessity of film propaganda.²⁰⁴ This deserves to be quoted at some length as evidence of the Labour leadership's awareness of and interest in publicity and modern techniques. Beginning with Sidney Webb's hallmark, a quotation from Heraclitus - 'The eyes are more exact witnesses than the ears' - it continued:

During the War the Cinematograph became a powerful instrument of

202. Ibid., Reports attached to minutes.

203. Ibid.

204. NEC, Circular on Labour Cinema Propaganda, March 1920. This circular was written by Herbert Tracey and C.W. Kendall, the scheme's organiser and original proponent, and was revised by Sidney Webb.

propaganda in the hands of the Government. The experience gained in this attractive and striking method of publicity is now being used by capitalist interests in various ways to undermine and check the progress of Labour throughout the country, and there is little doubt that unless effective measures are taken to counteract this new form of political warfare it may have serious consequences at election time.

The scheme was then explained and it was pointed out that

the Trade Unions at Seattle in the United States have definitely started a scheme similar to our own whereby it is hoped to convert many thousands to the principles of Labour. In Scotland the Scottish Miners' Federation has appointed a Committee for the purpose of manufacturing propaganda films; in fact, there is now a general movement throughout the country, not only amongst political but also religious, educational and industrial organisations, towards using the cinematograph as an adjunct to the ordinary and to many less attractive methods of propaganda.

In conclusion it was emphasised that this was

a scheme the possible importance of which to the Labour Movement can scarcely be exaggerated ... the Cinema is destined to play an increasing and ever dominating role in propaganda and educational work generally. Hence no time should be lost in utilising such a powerful weapon in the cause of Labour.

Yet the scheme went no further, and there is no evidence of any response from the local parties. Given central enthusiasm it can only be assumed that local interest and funds, upon which the whole proposal depended, were insufficient. Here once again was the problem for any national Labour organisation. Not sufficiently wealthy itself to undertake expensive or speculative propaganda ventures, it was dependent upon the support - financial and moral - of the local parties, themselves often dependent upon local union support, for the

success of propaganda schemes. When such support was not forthcoming there was nothing that the NEC could do about it.

The idea was therefore left in abeyance, and the Party found little opportunity of returning seriously to it until 1928, although in late 1926 Egerton Wake (the National Agent) made enquiries about the new phono-film device of which the Conservative Party was shortly to make such early use.²⁰⁵ Between 1928 and 1931, however, the possibility of film propaganda was again revived, very largely in reaction to the tremendous expansion of Conservative activity in the field. Early in 1928 William Mellor, Editor of the Daily Herald, brought to MacDonald's attention a recent talkie on disarmament by Lord Beatty, and urged that answering films should be made.²⁰⁶ Subsequently, at the initiative of the Gaumont Mirror 'film magazine', MacDonald and J.H. Thomas made their first talking films, of a non-political character, as part of a Gaumont series on famous personalities.²⁰⁷ Aroused by these new developments and by the growing fleet of Conservative cinema vans, the Research and Publicity Sub-Committee investigated the cost of film production and display from cinema vans, but once again found the costs prohibitive.²⁰⁸ Not surprisingly, therefore, when the editor of the Bioscope asked for MacDonald's views on the importance of 'the Cinema from the Political Standpoint, Its Possible Future as an Electioneering Agent and its sphere in Electioneering and Campaign Work', and reminded him of Conservative activities, he was rather curtly told that

Mr. MacDonald thinks that the Cinema can have an enormous propaganda effect but that he would regret very much if those in

205. NEC, Minutes, 8 October 1926.

206. MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/6/31, W. Mellor to MacDonald, 2 February 1928. MacDonald expressed willingness, but there was no further action.

207. MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/6/31, Correspondence between British Acoustic Films Ltd. and MacDonald, July 1928; the Bioscope, 1 August 1928, reported that MacDonald's talk was on 'flowers and anecdotes, seemingly tame subjects for a politician of so much oratorical vigour.'

208. NEC, Research and Publicity Committee, 25 September 1928.

control of it lent themselves to such a use. As it is, Mr. MacDonald has frequent complaints from various parts of the country that films with a political tendency are being exhibited.²⁰⁹

To compound the Party's difficulties a circular to local parties, requesting information on how interested the constituencies would be in political films, produced less than half-a-dozen replies.²¹⁰ Tentative enquiries to British Talking Pictures Ltd., as to the possibility of political film production, received the reply that²¹¹ owing to an existing contract such work could not be undertaken. It might have been pertinent that Albert Clavering was on the board of B.T.P., and that the existing contract was quite probably the Conservative one.

Faced with such problems the Labour Party was unable to counter Conservative film use at the 1929 election. Instead it attempted to create a lantern slide system by encouraging local parties to buy a recommended lantern and series of slides put together by Head Office. Although two such slide lecture sets, on mining and nursery schools, were prepared,²¹² the idea received little support and was quickly abandoned.

209. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/6/31, F. Fowell to MacDonald, 20 October and 30 October 1928; R. Rosenberg to F. Fowell, 24 October and 6 November 1928. MacDonald apparently did not on this occasion accept a distinction between commercial and non-commercial exhibition.

210. NEC, Research and Publicity Committee, 17 December 1928.

211. Ibid.

212. LPAR 1929, 51; the NEC, Research and Publicity Committee minutes, 22 February 1929, lists the slides in the Mining set:-
1. In the Mine, 2. A. Henderson, 3. Message, 4. Tory Action, 5. Coal field's distress, 6. Philip Snowden, 7. Message, 8. Herbert Smith, 9. Royalty Owners' Millions, 10. Levy on toil, 11. Sweating the miners, 12. Slow starvation, 13. Below the poverty line, 14-30. Pictures of coal mine, 31. Toll of toil, 32. Blood on the coal, 33-37. Pictures of coal mine, 38. Cheap labour, 39-41. Pictures of coal mine, 42. Miners' "Ghastly"

Electoral victory made Labour the first government in the era of the sound newsreel, and Arthur Henderson, in issuing invitations to the photographic press agencies to meet the new Cabinet, invited also the film newsreels, of which one, British Movietone News, had that week begun to produce sound reels.²¹³ For a brief period Labour found itself, by comparison with its previous position, reasonably well catered for in film coverage, particularly as Movietone's early editorial policy laid some emphasis on the film 'interview' - at that time simply the provision of screen time to eminent personalities to state their views. Thus in the last six months of 1929 the Government was given five such opportunities to state its position by Movietone.²¹⁴ Indeed MacDonal soon found the attention of the cameras excessive and told J.S. Middleton, the Party's Assistant Secretary, that he

must draw the line between pure advertisement and cheapness, and things that are really good occasions.²¹⁵

The Party also discovered that certain elements in the film industry were not unsympathetic to its general aims. The Ostrer brothers, for example, who owned Gaumont British, were Labour Party supporters until the 1931 crisis, although whether this affected the editorial policy of their newsreel, Gaumont Sound News (later Gaumont British News), it is at present impossible to assess.²¹⁶ They also owned

housing conditions, 43-49. miners' homes, 50. A Duke's home, 51-2. Miner's wife and children, 53. 'Making the best of it', 54. Message, 55. J.R. MacDonal - Our leader in the Fight for Right, 56. England! Arise.

213. For details of this newsreel item see note E at end of chapter, p.216.
214. By comparison Conservatives received one, and that Lady Astor. Lloyd George and Lord Beaverbrook also spoke once each.
215. MacDonal papers, PRO 30/69/6/34, R. Rosenberg to J.S. Middleton, 6 May 1931. Paramount had asked for MacDonal to be present at the maiden flight of a new Imperial Airways airliner which they intended to film.
216. Gaumont Sound News reels for the period before 1934 are at present not available, whilst being catalogued by the National

one of the smaller Sunday newspapers, the Sunday Referee, which was known for its high-brow and generally left-wing viewpoint. It is rumoured, although there is no conclusive evidence of this, that in early 1931, when Gaumont British was in some financial difficulty, Isodore Ostrer offered the family's controlling shares to the Party. Even if this offer did take place it could not, of course, have been accepted, for GB's size, not least its cinema circuit numbering several hundreds (in the 1930s some 850 cinemas), put it quite beyond the Party's financial capabilities.²¹⁷

Despite this the NEC was anxious to extend its film coverage. Taking advantage of a certain sympathy on the part of the Paramount newsreel, it was entering into negotiations regarding General Election film propaganda (although whether through the newsreel or private exhibition is not clear), when the 1931 crisis brought its ambitions for film propaganda once again to a halt.²¹⁸

The breaking away of its leader in the National Labour Party, and its disastrous rout in the 1931 General Election, left the opposition Labour Party with little inclination or opportunity to undertake speculative publicity ventures. Not surprisingly it placed a comparatively low priority on trying to develop a propaganda medium which, powerful though it knew film to be, was financially extravagant and a publicity luxury which repeated efforts had failed to secure. In the wider field of coverage by the independent media the Party concentrated its efforts firstly on trying to ensure adequate broadcasting representation for itself and secondly in an

Film Archive. The items from Gaumont Sound News from 1929 to 1934 kept at Visnews are selected, being only a small portion of the original output. The Gaumont Sound News issue sheets prior to 1934 have not survived, and little can be gained from a study of the Gaumont film ledgers (which record all film shot) between 1929 and 1931.

217. M. Chanan, Labour Power in the British Film Industry, London 1976, 31.
218. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/6/34, J.S. Middleton to MacDonald, 5 May 1931.

attempt to counter the pro-National Government press, giving full support to the Daily Herald. Thus a Head Office circular reminded the local parties that

One of the prime factors in securing electoral success is a wise use of publicity,

and that wireless would therefore be a significant factor in the next election. The 'preponderating proportion' of political broadcasts which would probably be given to the National Government made it essential, however, that the movement should give full support to its paper, the Daily Herald, for

After the wireless the general newspaper press counts as the most effective method of reaching the multitude.²¹⁹

Between 1932 and 1935, therefore, both the TUC and the Labour Party took a full part in promoting the Herald's drive to achieve and maintain a readership of two million.

It was in relation to this readership campaign, and again in response to the continuing work of the Conservative Films Association, that in February 1933 the directors of the Herald declared that as an incentive to the movement to support the new drive for circulation, and in order to promote at the same time the latter's interests in backward areas, they would donate an outdoor cinema van for the joint benefit of the TUC and the NEC, when the Herald's readership reached two million.²²⁰ The Party and TUC General Council willingly accepted the proposal, and enquiries were made about the availability of vans and the cost of film production. But in both matters difficulties were encountered. The only second-hand van available was found to be rotten, whilst the annual running

219. NEC, Circular 'The General Election and the Daily Herald', February 1935.

220. NEC, Minutes, 22 February 1933.

costs as estimated by the General Council were alarmingly high: £625 a year for the upkeep of the van and employment of driver/projectionist, and up to £2,000 p.a. for the production of suitable (Trade Union) propaganda films, in addition to further expenses for the hiring of the entertainment, comedy and general interest films which were considered essential for the success of the project.²²¹ The TUC and NEC were left wondering at their ability to finance such a scheme, particularly if an ancillary set of portable equipment for indoor meetings, with the consequent necessary reduction of film size from 35 mm. to 16 mm., were also purchased. It was also recognised that the greatest difficulty lay in the actual production of

films dealing with the Trade Union and Labour Movement which would be of sufficient interest to attract and retain the attention of an audience.²²²

A group of sympathetic film producers, including Paul Rotha, offered to establish a film company on behalf of the movement, producing primarily documentary films for general exhibition. They believed that

providing that any apparent connection of the company with the two national bodies was avoided, sufficient profit would be made out of this venture to enable them to produce either free of charge or at very low costs propaganda films for the movement.²²³

Nevertheless both Party and TUC remained wary of committing themselves, despite this offer, and although the Herald attained its target in late 1933 nothing further had been achieved by March

221. TUC General Council Papers, Memorandum by Walter Citrine on 'Cinema Film in Trade Union Propaganda', 25 March 1935.

222. Ibid.

223. Ibid.

1935.²²⁴

These proposals had come at one of the Labour Party's worst moments financially, and when the unions were also undergoing a temporary fall in membership. Given its previous experiences the Party perhaps had a right to be cautious. At the same time it must be said that the estimates made were unduly pessimistic, particularly given the proposal of Rotha and others, and that as a combined effort between TUC, party and professional producers, and not dependent upon local finance to such an extent as previous schemes, this proposal would have had a better chance of success than most. Rotha was understandably irritated and frustrated when nothing came of it. Of his criticisms of the movement for excessive caution and an antiquated attitude to self-projection, the former would appear to be at least partly justified, particularly given developments over the following five years.²²⁵

Between 1934 and 1938 Ritchie Calder of the Daily Herald, Rotha, Donald Taylor and others in the socially conscious and sympathetic documentary film movement, made repeated efforts to persuade the Labour Movement to undertake film production of a documentary and propagandist character.²²⁶ Further progress, however, was only made at an extremely tardy pace. In 1935, largely in response to this pressure, but also in an attempt to revive the Herald scheme, a joint Film Committee of representatives of the NEC and the TUC General Council, plus enthusiasts such as Paul Rotha and Ritchie Calder, was

224. T. Stannage, Baldwin Thwarts the Opposition, London 1980, 68, states that Labour took delivery of this cinema van, and subsequently purchased another. This was not the case. The first was never acquired, the second was merely the Agricultural Campaign Committee's first loudspeaker unit.
225. See Note F at the end of chapter, p.217, for details of Party leaders' personal interests in film.
226. Ralph Bond was also apparently involved briefly. Earlier John Grierson had himself made similar proposals to the Party - F.Thorpe and N.Pronay, British Official Film in the Second World War, London 1980, 30.

formed. A definite plan of action was accepted, and agreement made to guarantee the interest (to the extent of £100 each by the TUC and NEC for five years) on the £4-5,000 loan which it was believed would have to be raised in order to create a successful and self sustaining venture.²²⁷ Once again, however, progress was delayed by the summer recess, the confusion resulting from the Party's leadership difficulties and then by the more pressing demands of the approaching General Election. Only in April 1936 was the scheme sufficiently advanced for a letter advertising it to be circulated to local parties. Signed by the Secretaries of the Labour Party and the TUC, it proposed the establishment of a central organisation to provide projectors and films for sale and hire to film societies, which should be established jointly by local Labour parties, trades councils, co-operative organisations and other related bodies. It declared that

the film has now become a weapon that can affect the minds of the multitude in a given direction without the multitude being aware of what is happening. It can create bias against which neither reason nor rhetoric can prevail. It can persuade and be understood by the ignorant as well as by the educated it is imperative that Labour should organise its own film propaganda without delay.²²⁸

It was hoped that by making such film societies open to other educational and cultural associations, and to the general public, the problem of preaching to the converted would be avoided.

Increasingly, between 1935 and 1937, the attention of the Labour Movement nationally was brought to the necessity of having its own

227. NEC, Research and Publicity Committee, 21 March 1935, 9 May 1935. The details of this 1935 proposal have not survived, but probably followed in general terms the scheme as circulated to local parties in 1936, described below. The Daily Herald scheme was abandoned.

228. TUC Press File, Circular on Labour Cinema Propaganda, April 1936.

film propaganda. At the party conference in October 1935 Rotha had given an exhibition of documentary films, and the following year a propaganda film conference was held in Edinburgh, prior to the party conference, to explain the Party's proposals. In connection with this film conference a circular was sent to all local parties explaining that

Party propaganda services have to be kept efficient and up to date, and the Party must be ready ²²⁹ to adopt modern instruments and to make use of modern methods.

In February 1936 an interview with John Grierson appeared in the Party magazine Labour, in which he discussed the educative concepts behind the documentary approach, and declared that

we cannot lecture into life a society so complex as we have it today, and the lecture method still so common is a Victorian conception unworthy of our modern instruments, and impotent in ²³⁰ the face of modern problems.

Film was the only solution. In a harder hitting article in the November issue Ritchie Calder cited the recent electoral gains of the Swedish Socialists, which he directly ascribed to their widespread use of mobile projectors:

It is a positive - a proof positive - argument for making the film one of our main propaganda mediums, for turning what threatens to be one of the most powerful weapons against us into ²³¹ a broadside in our favour.

Not surprisingly he, like Grierson and Rotha, stressed the importance of the documentary approach being used in addition to more directly

229. NEC, Minutes, 5 September 1936; Circular, September 1936.

230. Labour, February 1936, 125.

231. Labour, November 1936, 35-36.

propagandist films. The involvement in Labour's publicity effort of such film enthusiasts and exponents of the documentary and educational film inevitably led to a re-emphasis of such an approach, as did subsequent influences from the Co-operative Movement. Indeed to some extent this reflected a widely stated desire in the Party, after the 1935 electoral defeat, to return to education in the basics of socialism as the principal element of party propaganda, a desire which had been equally strongly expressed after 1931, but which perhaps was considered more seriously after the Party's second consecutive defeat.

Other factors in the mid-1930s also stimulated the Movement's interest in and determination to use film. The Spanish Civil War was to be significant in many respects, not least as an issue upon which the Movement could attack the apparent political bias of the cinema newsreels. There had been notably little official protest previously from the Labour Party, or even in the pages of the Daily Herald, although a belief in newsreel bias was widespread. Now, however, the Party's attention was drawn to the dangers and potential of propaganda film through the newsreel coverage of the war, which it increasingly came to see as heavily biased against the republican government.²³² This led in turn to the question of general newsreel coverage for Labour, and in early 1937, at Attlee's request, the newsreels were pressed for better and fairer treatment for the Party, only the third recorded occasion on which the Party had contacted the newsreel industry on its own initiative.²³³

232. NCL, Minutes, 22 December 1936.

233. NEC, Publicity, Research and Local Government Committee, 19 January 1937. The first occasion, in February 1933, was merely to request copies of newsreel film of the Hyde Park Unemployment demonstration of that month; the second, in March 1934, was a protest, via the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association, at a Movietone reel in which the Austrian Chancellor Dollfuss had referred to recent disorders as a 'Bolshevik Revolution'. Whether or not these were the only occasions on which the Party made official approaches to the newsreels, and this seems improbable, individuals certainly protested at newsreel bias and censorship - see pp. 638-639 below. There were also occasional references in the Daily Herald, e.g. 2 December 1933.

Developments in other areas of the Labour Movement and the political left also encouraged party involvement in film. Although so far the Party itself had had little success with its schemes for film, the late 1920s and early 1930s had seen the formation of a number of left wing film exhibition and production groups. For the most part they were shoe-string projects and of minimal significance as mass influences, although at the same time appealing to many of the cultural left. Their survival was only made possible by the use of the newly developed 16 mm. film systems, which allowed comparatively cheap production and projection, and which was to be the development that made Labour film use possible. Showing predominantly foreign films, mostly silent, the films that they themselves produced on 16 mm. film were almost invariably crude, amateur, silent and, by commercial standards, wholly unappealing, although commercial standards and techniques were not their objective.²³⁴ Apart from the ILP based Masses Stage and Film Guild, formed in 1929, and the independent, intellectual, Socialist Film Council of Rudolph Messel, which was presided over by George Lansbury, the majority of these groups were founded and dominated by individual communists such as Ralph Bond, Henry Dobb, Ivor Montagu and Charles Mann. They had their origins, as Trevor Ryan has argued

partly in ... the cultural export strategies of the Soviet Union, and partly in the theoretical responses of the left in Britain to the emergence of film and radio into political and cultural prominence.²³⁵

234. Workers' cinema was seen as a possible counter to and exposé of the manipulation intrinsic to the commercial, capitalist cinema. The value of the moving picture was felt to lie in its capacity of being seen to tell the truth, to show reality. This, the necessity of cheap production and the expectation that the audience would be itself socially and culturally in tune with what was represented on the screen, and therefore able to recognise and accept its truth, led to a concentration on realist techniques and subjects - the recording of workers' marches, demonstrations and strikes.

235. T. Ryan, Op. Cit., 52. For contemporary details of the Socialist Film Council see R. Postgate, in Labour, September

Groups such as the Federation of Workers' Film Societies, the London Workers' Film Society, the Film and Photo League, the Progressive Film Institute and most importantly Kino, were wholly independent and had no formal connection either with the Communist Party of Great Britain, or with Moscow. Nevertheless in general terms they worked within the political guidelines of the CPGB and Soviet cultural policy. There was in consequence little formal contact between them and the Labour Party.

Between 1933 and 1937, however, a major re-emphasis of Soviet cultural strategy, in order to emphasise Anglo-Soviet and Franco-Soviet amity in opposition to war and fascism, together with the growth of liberal, pacifist and popular front consciousness in the Western democracies, made possible the alignment of these otherwise disparate elements in a series of campaigns against common adversaries. The left wing film movements were themselves part of this development and, as Ryan states,

In this context, the political function of the films changed from agitation and recruitment for communist campaigns, to fund-raising for non-communist groups and gathering expressions of ideological support for more broadly based liberal campaigns.²³⁶

The films of Kino, both its main Soviet stock and increasingly its films relating to the Spanish struggle, and those of the Progressive Film Institute, began to reach a more general though still very limited audience. In the year 1935-6 Kino films were taken for some 30 shows by trade union branches and trade councils, 30 by co-operative societies, 20 by ILP branches and 20 by local Labour

1933. For a more critical and realistic assessment of its worth see P. Rotha, Op. Cit., 109-110, in which he states: 'He [Rudolph Messel] uses a few friends with cultured accents to speak dialogue for factory workers. It reminds me of what was once called the fashionable habit of slumming. In other words, they stink'.

236. T. Ryan, Op. Cit., 63.

parties, although it is not possible to assess whether these were several bodies giving just one exhibition each or only a few giving series.²³⁷ Neither the NEC nor the TUC General Council, however, took part in these developments, although even here relations improved in 1936 when a series of film shows were organised at Transport House, about once a month, showing largely imported films hired from Kino. In December 1936 consideration was given to the purchase of a film from Kino for the Party's prospective film library.²³⁸

Another section of the Labour Movement to take an increased interest in film at this time was the Co-operative Movement. Individuals in the Movement, notably Alderman Joseph Reeves of the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society, had been active in showing films of an educative nature, mainly to children, for many years. Moreover the Co-operative Wholesale Society had had its own film department since the 1890s, though for purely advertising films.²³⁹ In

237. Kino Annual Report 1936, contained in Kino News No. 2., May 1936. Also in early 1936 Kino approached Kensington Labour Party with the suggestion that it finance and produce two films on infant mortality and slums. This was agreed. - Left Review, April 1936, 415.
238. These shows were advertised in the Daily Worker. See for example the Daily Worker, 15 April 1936, 8, advertising a showing of 'The End of St. Petersburg', 'U.S.S.R.' and 'The Peace Film', on 18 April. The Labour Party's Publicity, Research and Local Government Committee, 15 December 1936, considered the purchase of 'Millions like Us', an American film which could only have come from Kino.
239. The C.W.S. made use of commercial producers such as Publicity Films Ltd. and G.B. Instructional for the production of many of these films - Labour Magazine, April 1930, December 1930. Rotha has written that instead of using its money on films of a socially and politically enlightening nature, 'The wealthy Co-operative movement squandered its money on having advertising pictures made by companies tainted by Conservative views.' - P. Rotha, Op. Cit., 280. The reason for this was obvious enough: the C.W.S. was primarily interested in selling its merchandise and remaining competitive, and as such found the commercial and popular style of commercial film advertising companies far more in tune with its requirements than the innovative but crude work of the early documentarists, which showed little prospect

September 1936, however, the National Association of Co-operative Educational Committees, largely at the instigation of Reeves, held a conference to discuss the use of film educationally in the Co-operative Movement, and resolved to create a national Co-operative Film Society to provide its member Education Committees with films. As Reeves told the conference, educationally the film was of tremendous importance, whilst,

As a medium for gaining new recruits for the Movement and as a popular means of arousing interest in the social possibilities of human co-operation there is no more effective medium.²⁴⁰

Although the C.W.S. refused to involve itself in the project, and although of the 250 member educative committees asked to donate £10 to the project only 37 initially agreed, the scheme rushed ahead by comparison with Labour's. Reeves was appointed Secretary of the new Co-operative Film Committee in March 1937, and the first co-operative film circuit had been established by June.²⁴¹ As with the left wing film groups the project was only made possible by the adoption of 16 mm. systems. By late 1937 about twenty co-operative branches possessed projectors, and the Film Committee was organising road-shows (hiring out both projectors and films for indoor meetings). In the first few months of operation over 300 film displays were given.²⁴² Moreover Reeves proceeded to persuade four London co-operative societies to finance a five year plan of film production, estimated at £1,000 p.a., although the mainstay of the films exhibited remained the commercial and GPO film libraries, independent

of ever appealing to a mass audience. But in any case, Rotha's statement was not strictly true. The Co-operative movement was to produce or finance a number of documentaries, both on its own work and on more general political themes.

240. J. Reeves, The Film and Education, London 1936, 3.

241. Co-operative News, March - July 1937.

242. NEC, Report of the TUC and Labour Party Joint Film Committee, attached to Publicity, Research and Local Government Committee, 22 July 1937.

producers, and distribution companies such as Kino. As those planning the equivalent Labour and TUC organisation admitted:

Quite shortly, while we have been discussing schemes, this particular movement has actually become effective, and upon precisely the lines recommended by us from time to time.²⁴³

These two very different elements, of left wing film groups and the Co-operative Film Committee, both had a significant impact upon Labour Party film use. Despite the joint circular of April 1936, the film conference at Edinburgh and the debate on film which had been carried on throughout 1936, the NEC and General Council were still very wary of committing themselves to an expensive central film organisation. They wanted first to be absolutely convinced that an effective distribution system would be created by the local bodies. The response to the circular had evidently not been particularly encouraging in this respect, for although

ample evidence has been received showing a general interest throughout the Movement in film propaganda ... At this stage there seems to be little likelihood of local Labour and Trade Union Organisations being able to buy projectors.²⁴⁴

The financial investment required was such that the central bodies were most unwilling to speculate on success. The development of the Co-operative distribution chain, however, proved the stimulus to action, for it was at last demonstrated that such a proposal could be made to work. More importantly a national means of exhibition now existed, or was being established, through the Co-operative projectors, for Joseph Reeves, who was equally anxious to develop a comprehensive Labour film movement, indicated that they would be made available to local Labour parties and union branches. Consequently in July 1937 the committee investigating Labour film use recommended

243. Ibid.

244. Ibid.

that a National Joint Film Committee of the TUC, Labour Party and the Co-operative Film Committee, be formally constituted in order to formulate and implement proposals for a national working class film movement, into which it was evidently assumed the Co-operative organisation would be absorbed.²⁴⁵

Matters at first still moved slowly, and by December the new NJFC still had not met²⁴⁶ as the General Council had failed to appoint representatives. From early 1938, however, the pace quickened. At the first meeting it was resolved to establish a central film library and office, and a working sub-committee of all those most interested - Reeves, Herbert Elvin,²⁴⁷ F.O. Roberts, H.V. Tewson and W.W. Henderson - was appointed. Independently the Spain Campaign Committee, established in 1936 to raise funds for refugee relief, concluded an agreement with Kino in December 1937 to exhibit its films of the Spanish Civil War, using the projectors of the Co-operative societies, as part of the 'Milk for Spain Campaign'. By February 1938 116 shows of Spanish films had been arranged, whilst wherever the film 'Spanish Earth', which was distributed both commercially and in 16 mm., had been taken by an ordinary cinema, the local Labour party had been asked to assist in publicising it and to take a collection for Spanish relief in or outside the cinema.²⁴⁸

In March the sub-committee of the NJFC reported. It argued that

245. Ibid.

246. NEC, Publicity, Research and Local Government Committee, 14 December 1937.

247. NEC, National Joint Film Committee (NJFC), 28 January 1938.

248. NEC, Spain Campaign Committee, 8 February 1938; LPAR 1939, 33. It should be mentioned, however, that 'Spanish Earth's' commercial exhibition was still comparatively limited. These arrangements were made by Joseph Reeves who, in addition to being Secretary of the Film Department of the NACEC, and to acting on behalf of the Spain Committee and Co-operative Union, was also on the General Council of Kino. By March the number of shows arranged in the Milk for Spain campaign had risen from 116 to 160 - NEC, NJFC memorandum, 24 March 1938.

with the development of an efficient sub-standard (16 mm.) sound film system a Labour Movement film organisation was now practicable. In urging immediate action it defended past delays:

For years, the Democratic Movements have been considering how to use the film for advancing their causes, but the large sums of money needed for film production has [sic] constantly stood in the way of progress in the absence of facilities for showing films of a special character of interest to audiences we represent, no good purpose would have been served in spending large sums of money in producing films which would not have been acceptable to the commercial cinema proprietors. These facilities are now available and are steadily increasing.²⁴⁹

There had previously been a limited number of suitable films; now, in addition to those the movement might produce, educational and travel films were available from Gaumont British Instructional and from dominion offices; socially telling films such as 'Enough to Eat' and 'Children at School' could be obtained from the Commercial Gas Association; the libraries of the GPO and Empire Marketing Board were available, as were the political films of Kino, the Progressive Film Institute, Unity Films and, shortly, of the four London Co-operative Societies. The Film Department of the NACEC was showing films to audiences of up to 800 at a cost of £4-6 a meeting, and had become virtually self-supporting after six months. The time was clearly extremely propitious.

This report was referred to the NEC and TUC who agreed, in April, to finance the establishment of the proposed film service, each giving £250 a year for two years. Even now only limited finances were granted, but on the strength of this Joseph Reeves was appointed as full-time Organiser-Secretary of the new body, which was to be called the Workers' Film Association. As such it was publicly unveiled in November 1938.

249. NEC, Memorandum of the sub-committee of the NJFC, 24 March 1938.

The W.F.A. had been slow and late in developing and, due to lack of co-operation from the C.W.S. and the Co-operative Union, was still far from being a national Labour Movement film organisation.²⁵⁰ Despite this in its first year it showed considerable promise, to the extent of making a profit slightly in excess of the original investment of £500. In spite of earlier fears that local Labour and Union branches would not purchase projection equipment, between 12 and 20 projectors were bought through the W.F.A., whilst 90-100 film shows, mainly of Kino and educational films, were given through film hire and road-shows. A library of nearly 100 films was acquired and close contacts maintained with commercial libraries and independent distributors. In addition, by encouraging individual unions and co-operatives to sponsor films, and by then commissioning the producing firm, the WFA was instrumental in the production of nine films, though none by Labour parties. Some of these, however, were silent, and only two were of significance - 'People with a Purpose', commissioned by the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society and produced by the Realist Film Unit under Ralph Bond, and 'The Voice of the People'. The latter, however, as the second film of the London Co-operative Societies' five year plan, would have been produced in any case.²⁵¹

In the production of election propaganda films of a more direct relevance to the Labour Party the WFA had little success. Proposals

250. Although intended to make full use of the facilities of the Co-operative movement, the WFA was formed before either the Co-operative Wholesale Society or the Co-operative Union had agreed to take part in the project. Perhaps understandably, despite Reeves's joint connection with the WFA and the NACEC, the C.W.S. rejected the proposal that its film service should be taken over by the newly formed WFA, and proposed instead that the WFA become part of the C.W.S. film service, representatives of the NEC and the TUC General Council merely having advisory positions on a consultative committee of the film service, which would remain in the control of the C.W.S. - TUC, General Council minutes, 22 March 1939. Although negotiations were continuing, no further progress in the matter had been made when war was declared.

251. NEC, Annual Report and Balance Sheet of W.F.A. for the year ended 30 September 1939.

understandably bitter:

in the 1930s the unions and the co-operatives, let alone the Labour Party, had an antiquated attitude to their public image. Lack of money was a threadbare alibi that became boring by its monotony Labour had no ear for such an imaginative approach to public service and public education. Labour did not even have an aesthetic approach, let alone a social one.²⁵⁵

Most recently one writer has declared that Rotha was not given the opportunity to make films for the Labour Movement

largely because the Labour leadership was foolish enough simply to leave the use of the medium to its opponents.²⁵⁶

Yet this is a less than fair assessment. The central Party had been attempting since 1919 to turn film to its purposes, but with conspicuous lack of success. The Party's wariness between 1934 and 1938 can only be fully understood if its previous repeated failures are known. These were failures not just in film use but in many other areas of propaganda which it not unreasonably considered, pound for pound, to be of greater electoral significance. Lack of money might have been a threadbare and monotonous excuse, but the Party had no reason to believe it was other than a totally justified one. It could not afford to speculate with its continuously precarious central funds. Nor had it received any indication before 1938 that the local parties, without whose financial support any scheme for film use would have been impossible, would be able to provide that support. Even in 1938 the immediate stimulus to action was the creation by the NACEC of a distributive system which could be used by Labour. This in turn had only become possible with the development of an efficient 16 mm. sound film system.

255. P. Rotha, Op. Cit., 280-281.

256. B. Hogenkamp, 'Film and the Workers' Movement in Britain, 1929-1939', Sight and Sound, 45 (1976), 75.

The argument that Labour lacked an aesthetic and social approach, however, is a telling one. For although it had long had a moral commitment to educational propaganda, and although after the defeats of 1931 and 1935 there was perhaps a return to the concept of long term social education, culminating in the essentially educative principles upon which Joseph Reeves finally established the W.F.A., the central Party's immediate concern for propaganda had nevertheless become and remained predominantly short-term and electoral. Its primary concern was to win votes, and it was only after the W.F.A. had been established, and with the prospect of a 1939-40 election, that the NEC agreed to invest heavily in film, and then for purely short-term propaganda. The P.E.P. enquiry into The Factual Film in 1947 (in which Rotha was closely concerned) concluded sadly that

No political party has so far made more than a trivial and superficial use of films. Perhaps this is inevitable because political parties are more concerned with ephemeral²⁵⁷ electioneering propaganda; nevertheless it is disappointing.

The Labour Party had always been an avowedly proselytising party. Its traditional weapons in the execution of this function had been the spoken word, the voluntary worker and the pamphlet. With only limited prospects before the 1918 extension of the franchise such tools had been adequate and effectively utilised, in large measure by the work of the ILP. With his 1918 reconstruction Arthur Henderson designed a national party organisation to serve a truly national party. Yet the new national facade hid a party which in many aspects, both locally and centrally, was only able gradually to adapt to the new circumstances. Henderson envisaged a national organisation capable of national propaganda, co-ordinating the propaganda work of the local bodies, integrated with the propaganda effort of the Trade Union Movement and ideally with its own press support. Yet in

257. P.E.P. (Dartington Hall) Enquiry, The Factual Film, London 1947, 161.

practice few of the Party's propaganda efforts met with the hoped for or deserved success, and only in the late 1930s was significant progress being made. A great deal of what was attempted - local papers, mass leafleteering outside elections, the employment of professional propagandists, the introduction of modern devices such as loudspeakers and gramophones and the use of film for propaganda - simply required too much of the Party financially, both of national resources and of local. The continuing independence of the local parties and their suspicion of central guidance was also a constant factor hindering national propaganda organisation. Faced with these difficulties party organisers, whilst attempting to develop new means of reaching the mass electorate, continued to make the fullest use of its strongest asset, the local party worker, and in continual campaigning developed a system intended to satisfy local requirements and regularly to stimulate local propaganda work.

Even here, however, there were mixed results, and only in the later 1930s did the Party begin to achieve a centrally controlled spoken propaganda and campaign organisation capable of making any impact upon the areas where local organisation was weakest. By then the problems of relying so heavily upon these traditional methods of publicity were beginning to show. For they depended too much on the interest of the electorate in politics being sufficient to draw them to political meetings, and were in sharp contrast to the techniques of which the National Government was increasingly making use. In 1931 packed and enthusiastic Labour meetings led the Labour Organiser, after the election, to conclude:

meetings do not win elections, and only touch the fringe of the crowd. One draws also the conclusion that our meetings consisted²⁵⁸ mainly of our own immediate supporters and enthusiasts.

By 1935 there was increasing comment at the decline in attendances at political meetings as a result of General Election political

258. Labour Organiser, November 1931.

broadcasts. Daily Herald columnist Hannen Swaffer was not the only person who, in accusing Labour of lacking popular appeal and colour, felt that its methods were out of date:

Labour propagandists have printed admirable pamphlets by the score. But few read them. Thousands of speeches are made, week after week. But they are made chiefly to Labour followers.²⁵⁹

Harold Laski admitted that 'We hear everywhere of listless and half empty meetings', and Maurice Hackett, the Party's Literature Circulation Officer, noted the 'falling off in attendance in recent years at public meetings'.²⁶⁰ Others criticised Labour's basic approach, and Mary Sutherland, the Party's Chief Woman Officer, believed that it was the poor quality of Labour's spoken propaganda that turned people from it:

The quality of the platform in recent years has not been up to the standard of former days ... Good people sometimes turned their backs on Labour and said they were not politicians because they had been listening to a lot of jargon from a Labour propagandist who used words of thirteen letters where words of four would have been much better.²⁶¹

The Labour Organiser similarly quoted the opinion of an 'Investigator':

We are still dominated too much by the soap box outlook ... Study the average Labour Speech, and you will find that it is rarely designed to impress the non-politically minded mass it is produced to satisfy opinion within the Party,²⁶² and get the cheers of supporters who like listening to a fighter.

259. John Bull, 24 October 1936.

260. Tribune, 16 July 1937, 8; Labour Organiser, January 1939.

261. Forward, 3 July 1937.

262. Labour Organiser, August 1937, 143.

The conclusion to be drawn seemed obvious to one writer:

Labour as a whole has a very poor appreciation of the values of publicity or publicity experts ... political conversion is being attempted by the Labour Party largely on mid-Victorian lines ... The vast appeal which is made by other publicists to the senses ... is a terrible force in society today Labour has not caught the spirit of the times and our publicity has hardly begun to change to modern needs.²⁶³

The way forward for Labour propaganda which many critics urged was very different from the Party's more public professions of rationalism. As early as 1924 an article had appeared in the Labour Organiser on the 'Psychology of political advertising', in which it was argued that although rational argument was necessary for the politically conscious,

It is probable that only a minority of electors have the capacity seriously to discriminate between policies from the point of view of intelligence, per se, without the admixture and influence of the primitive emotions care should be taken not to neglect appeals to the primitive emotions of the majority.²⁶⁴

The Labour Organiser reprinted this article as part of its campaign to encourage greater publicity effort after 1931. The sentiments it contained were echoed by the well known Labour agent and candidate, William Barefoot, in December 1931:

mass psychology must be scientifically studied. Sentiment is not unworthy. Labour's job is to make it a Socialist sentiment.²⁶⁵

263. Unsigned article on 'Publicity', Labour Organiser, September 1935.

264. Labour Organiser, June 1924.

265. Labour Organiser, December 1931.

Another contributor argued that

We too may practise that artistry which pulls the population and gives them impulses or inclination one way or the other. Herein we shall only imitate modern advertisers.²⁶⁶

Thus critics accused the Party of failing to recognise the modern propaganda requirements for a mass electorate. But neither this, nor the argument that the Party was too principled to undertake the popularisation of propaganda needed, were entirely justified. Whether or not Labour leaders and organisers necessarily understood the nature of mass publicity, they certainly appreciated the desirability of co-ordination of mass communication, and differed little from their Conservative counterparts in this respect. They were convinced of the power of mass propaganda and certainly not averse to presenting themselves as attractively as they knew how, and to making use of party 'image'.²⁶⁷ Of course Labour remained committed to the ideal of rational political education. Particularly after 1931 the Party leadership agreed with its more radical elements that it should never again accept power other than with a parliamentary majority and a popular mandate for the implementation of socialism, and that this could only be accomplished with an electorate fully comprehending of the socialist argument. One of the lessons which Arthur Henderson professed to have learnt from the 1931 election was that

If we are to recapture lost support and to gain new support to

266. Unsigned article on 'Publicity', Labour Organiser, September 1935.

267. Herbert Morrison at the L.C.C. was certainly very well aware of the necessity of 'selling' the London Labour Party, and created a team of sympathetic professional publicity and public relations men to devise and implement all propaganda for the 1937 L.C.C. elections. See B. Donoghue and G.W. Jones, Op. Cit., 207-210. This attitude he brought also to his role as campaign manager - officially chairman of the Campaign Committee - of the national Party, in preparation for the 1939 - 1940 General Election. As in so much else Labour hopes, whether justified or not, were frustrated by the Second World War which would ultimately prove such a boost to its fortunes.

the extent that will be necessary to place Labour in power, or to enable us to withstand similar combined assaults in the future, we must ensure that attachment to the Labour Party is by conviction rather than by sentiment.²⁶⁸

Yet such professions did not prevent the central Party from continuing to seek ways of presenting Labour's message as popularly and attractively as it was able, despite considerable difficulties, and in practice from remaining as committed to rapid electoral victory as ever. Inevitably, however, it found it difficult to make the fundamental characteristic of mass communication - that it was very much a one-way process from the few to the many, which thereby automatically favoured and emphasised the established and the central - compatible with the very far from centralised or centrally controlled organisational constitution of the Labour Party. Above all its chief hindrance to a successful utilisation of mass propaganda methods remained neither innate conservatism nor excess of principle, but simply the problem which it most frequently lamented - lack of money.

Note A.

Lack of surviving evidence prevents a discussion of Liberal Party publicity and film use. In 1929 the Liberals made use of almost every form of mass propaganda, with the exception of the cinema van, which the Conservative Party used. Lloyd George also utilised press advertisement extensively. The Liberal Party appears to have been the first British party to employ as Chief Publicity Officer a man with previous advertising and public relations experience. William

268. A. Henderson, 'Labour's army is unconquered', Labour Magazine, November 1932, 292.

Allison, who joined the staff in 1937, was a journalist on the Sunday Dispatch, the Daily Sketch, and Pearson's Magazine before joining the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, and subsequently Editorial Services, a public relations firm. - R.D. Casey, 'British Politics - Some lessons in campaign propaganda', Public Opinion Quarterly, vol. 8 (1944), 81. Hints of Liberal film use are too vague to allow any conclusions, and may well be false. Lloyd George was anxious to make use of film and considered the purchase of a newsreel, but without result. From these brief indications it is, perhaps, possible to suggest that Liberals were little different from their opponents in their attitudes to mass propaganda, and learned the hard way in 1929 that without a national organisation of local parties, in an efficient condition, large scale propaganda by itself could only produce limited results.

Note B.

The conviction that Labour propaganda was morally superior to Conservative, and eminently rational by comparison is well demonstrated in an article by MacDonald on 'How I won Aberavon', in The Nation and Athenaeum, Vol. 32, 309-10, 25 November 1922: - 'The registers of today contain an uncomfortably large number of voters who are interested in the excitement of elections, but not in politics, and whose votes depend on a catchword or a whim or a reputation. The existence of these electors makes stunt issues possible, and drives candidates more and more to fight upon sheer propaganda balderdash It looks as though this method of electioneering had [sic] come to stay, and the Party mainly responsible for this debasement in our political currency is the Tory Party ... These enormous masses of electors put a terrible strain upon the candidate who fights by purely educational means. But the results of my contest in Aberavon leaves me convinced that a high appeal is a paying one.' Yet see also S.G. Hobson, 'Pilgrim to the Left', London 1938, 38, '....the I.L.P. speakers were innocent. They always spoke of the appeal to the heart: their speeches were a blend of religion and sentiment - sentiment which generally lapsed into

sentimentalism'.

Note C.

The case against evolutionary theory was put, for example, by G.D.H. Cole, who, in urging economic action through guild socialism, used the same arguments against socialist success through constitutional political action that the evolutionists themselves recognised. His time-scale, however, was very different, judging that the reorganisation of society by a working-class government, through parliamentary methods, could not be achieved in less than a century and arguing: 'The period required to convert, in opposition to the whole force of money-directed education, propaganda and pressure, a majority of the people to a habit of sound political thinking is a sufficient reason against the practicability of social transformation by this means.' Although a Labour government could be secured quite soon without such a mass conversion, it could only achieve power if it had accepted in advance that it would not even attempt any radical social transformation. - G.D.H. Cole, Guild Socialism Restated, London 1920, 179. The evolutionist leaders of the Labour Party therefore found it necessary to assert the success of their policy of political education and propaganda, but only political victory would in any degree prove it.

Note D.

Herbert Tracey (1884-1955), although almost entirely self-educated, had become a Methodist minister 1904-1910, before turning to journalism. Assistant editor of the Christian Commonwealth 1911-17, Labour Party Press and Publicity Officer 1917-20, Labour Party Industrial Correspondent 1922-26, Head of TUC Publicity Department 1926-1950. William Watson Henderson (b.1891), educated to grammar school level, Editorial Secretary of the Daily Citizen, 1912-14, Parliamentary Correspondent of Labour Press and Publicity Department and Lobby Correspondent of the Daily Herald 1919-21, Head of Labour Press and Publicity Department 1921-1945, M.P. (Enfield) 1923-24, 1929-31. Created first Baron Henderson in 1945.

Brief descriptions of Tracey and Henderson are provided by W. Citrine, Men and Work, London 1964, 135. R.D. Casey in 'British Politics - Some lessons in campaign propaganda', Public Opinion Quarterly, 8, (1944), 77-80, argues that Labour Party staff publicists were almost invariably professionals recruited from journalism for their expertise. Whilst this was technically the case, the only two 'journalists' employed in the Press and Publicity Department until 1945 were Tracey and Henderson, the appointment of both of whom owed more to party loyalty, religious non-conformism and Arthur Henderson's patronage than to any previous experience. Like Ball and Gower at Conservative Central Office, both learnt their trade predominantly within the service of the Party. Working journalists and writers were occasionally employed on a voluntary basis to write specific leaflets and pamphlets, as they were in the other parties.

Note E.

This film of the first sound reel of a British Cabinet, in the garden of No. 10, Downing Street, has acquired a certain fame. In it Ramsay MacDonald introduced his Cabinet colleagues in a relaxed and impromptu manner to the camera. It was, for only his second screen appearance, a well pitched and modest performance. But the informality of the occasion serves to emphasise the almost revolutionary significance of this film, in which for the first time ever a mass audience was shown its newly elected government, and was able to see the Cabinet as a group of ordinary people rather than as a set of remote personalities. The rulers were being brought to the people to an extent never before contemplated. An editorial in the Bioscope took up this point: 'Here was a great Cabinet of State dragged out in all its unposed nakedness to a quizzical army of cameramen and introduced to the microphone one by one, with about as much formality as one introduces pet chickens in a farmyard. What a change from the days of the Gladstone Cabinet, when an artist was, after much discussion grudgingly admitted to the Cabinet Chamber where Ministers posed the better sides of their faces with the pomp

and gravity of a set of wax figures in Tussauds! I suppose this disilluioning informality is really a good thing. They tell me a bishop never loses his pontifical impressiveness until you have seen him in his shirt' - 19 June 1929. It was admitted, however, that 'Mr. MacDonald is an excellent film speaker' - Review of British Movietone news, 19 June 1929.

The circumstances of the filming require some clarification. Paul Wyand, the Movietone cameraman on this occasion, has written that 'One of the first people to appreciate the pack-'em-in value of "talking" newsreels was the then Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, who invited us to make a film in the garden at Downing Street. The film resulted in queues outside every cinema at which it was shown - not due to some awakening of the political consciousness, but because there was a newsreel with the additional marvel of sound'. - P. Wyand, Useless If Delayed, London 1959, 41. In fact Arthur Henderson was responsible for the invitation, which subsequently caused a certain furore when it was discovered that Movietone was an 'American' firm using German machinery, a state of affairs little conducive to British pride in early talking newsreels - MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/1/247, R.G. Leigh to Sir Robert Vansittart, 20 June 1929.

Finally, mention might be made of a somewhat bizarre reference to this film in Die Film Wochenschau Im Dienste Der Politik by Hans Joachim Giese, Dresden 1940, 78, a German propaganda work which uses this, and similar material, as evidence of British willingness to use film for propaganda purposes, particularly in the cause of re-
armament.

Note F.

On a personal level Party leaders were not so wholly uninterested in the possibilities of film at this time as the inactivity between 1933 and 1935 might have suggested. George Lansbury was president of Rudolph Messel's independent Socialist Film Council, an amateur group of little significance. Clement Attlee, not known for his interest in

such matters, briefly toyed with the idea in 1934 of writing and producing a film for commercial distribution, primarily to earn some money for himself, but also as possible propaganda: 'The general idea being the last war wherein two Balkanised despotisms simultaneously wipe out each other's capitals to the horror of the civilized world. Extremely realistic scenes of destruction to be filmed. War fomented by rival armaments groups who own the press of the two countries. Son of a chief armament monger sees wife and children killed most unpleasantly. Repentance of the chief armaments monger who gives away story of the workings of the ring to the D.H. [Daily Herald], just in time to turn general election. Follows creation of international world state, abolition of armaments etc. with a postscript some years afterwards illustrating new world conditions by conversations of members of world air communications at H.Q. aerodrome in Vienna. Love interest etc. can be added if necessary. Incidentally there is the end of Nazism as a Hitlerite dictator intent on war is stopped after 48 hours consideration by threat of international interference follows collapse of Nazism.' Attlee added: 'It might be quite valuable propaganda if done sufficiently crudely for the popular taste.' - Attlee to Tom Attlee, 18 October 1934. Quoted by W. Golant, 'The emergence of C.R. Attlee as leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party in 1935', Historical Journal, 13 (1970), 328.

CHAPTER THREE

Broadcasting and Politics: Hopes and Fears.

"An extension of the scope of broadcasting will mean a more intelligent and enlightened electorate."

J.C.W. Reith - Broadcast Over Britain, 1924

"Radio is a partnership between broadcaster and listener. There is no virtue and no value in transmitting programmes, however ideal on paper, to which people do not listen. Listening is a voluntary occupation and is unlikely to become anything else. It is useless therefore to lay down standards of what the listener ought to hear unless they bear some relation to what is likely to interest him and appeal to him."

Hilda Matheson - in the report of the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, on The Educational Role of Broadcasting, 1935.

"We made the mistake of thinking of radio as a new religion, when it was merely a new channel for the same water."

Lionel Fielden - The Natural Bent, 1960.

The British Broadcasting Company and Corporation were born into a political system already very conscious of the potentially revolutionary implications of a universal franchise, and increasingly aware of the power of mass opinion and the importance of mass persuasion. The popular press and the cinema had revealed apparently untold possibilities for mass media persuasion during the First World War. The political parties were increasingly making use of every means available to press their case, whilst espousing the educative ideal. That ideal, and its corollary of an educated and enlightened democracy, was in its turn being embraced ever more thoroughly with the development of universal state education, the expansion of public lending libraries and the work of an ever-growing body of philanthropic organisations committed to the cause of adult education and education for citizenship. Developments abroad were already calling into question the feasibility of a true and working democracy in mass society. The sides were lining up in a debate which was at the very heart of inter-war political thinking, that of freedom versus authority, together with the associated problems of education and propaganda.

These issues were considered in philosophical terms as well as in the course of practical decision-taking. The BBC was inevitably involved in both, and its staff, friends and critics all engaged in a wide-ranging discussion of such questions. The ideal, recognised as not yet attained, of an educated and enlightened electorate induced a major abstract and practical debate as to the dividing line between 'education' and 'propaganda'. Indeed inter-war thinking as to the BBC's political role, and action taken as a result both within and outside the Corporation, were to be dominated by the attempt to draw such a line.

The protagonists involved in this attempt - broadcasters, parties, government and individual politicians - were battling against the near impossibility, in practical terms, of making such a distinction. The debate was made even less meaningful by the fact that all felt themselves obliged to espouse the cause of 'political

education' and to abhor 'propaganda'. Yet the objectives and constraints they set themselves limited the degree of true objectivity that was possible. The BBC was to be no exception - the very least of which it can be accused is of holding a brief for constitutional democracy. Thus the complex problems inherent in the phrase 'political education' were to provide it with almost insoluble problems, both in conducting a meaningful debate about the basic issues involved, and in pursuing practical policies which had the approval of politicians, broadcasters and commentators alike. If the most obvious enemy to progress in political education by broadcasting was to be the conflicting interests of rival politicians, the root of the problem lay deeper, in the very concept itself. Perhaps for this reason various attempts to formulate precise regulations to guide the BBC in its commitment to this ideal were to fail, thereby emphasising the sense of one of the first of the many latin tags to be applied to the Corporation's position - 'solvitur ambulando'.

Yet the inter-war experience of political broadcasting contained all too few solutions and all too many difficulties. That experience, as we shall see, was for the BBC one of repeated attempts to overcome seemingly man-made barriers to the fulfilment of a practicable ideal - the ideal of using broadcasting to bring closer a rational, working, representative democracy. For the Labour Party it was one of continual effort to obtain what it considered just representation on a medium the constitution and principles of which appeared ideally designed to put into practice Labour's educative professions, and the reach of which seemed to offer for the first time a real opportunity both to implement them and to counter Conservative and Liberal domination of the older channels of communication. The Conservative Party, for most of this period also the government of the day, understandably gave broadcasting a more guarded welcome, yet also sought to utilise it to maximum effect. These chapters will study the attitudes and reactions of the two principal parties and of the

1. BBC Archives (hereafter BBC), R4/2/3/12, Crawford Committee, comments by Lord Blanesburgh and J.C.W. Reith.

government of the day to this new channel for political communication, as well as the actual development by the BBC of a service of controversial political broadcasting. Firstly, however, we will look at early opinions on broadcasting and politics, and at the consciously political ideals of John Reith's BBC.

The BBC's high cultural purpose, its dedication to the aims of information, education, and entertainment, is well documented, not least in Lord Briggs' History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. To raise the general level of knowledge, understanding, cultural appreciation and even religious commitment throughout the nation were Reith's avowed aims. As he declared in December 1926, when the British Broadcasting Company was being wound up to make way for the new Corporation:

We have tried to found a tradition of public service, and to dedicate the service of broadcasting to humanity in its fullest sense. We believe that a new national asset has been created ... the asset referred to is of a moral and not the material order - that which, down the years, brings the compound ² interest of happier homes, broader culture and truer citizenship.

These three benefits which he offered were not couched in the vague, nebulous and generalised terms which were all too often used by the BBC's public supporters - for example in the letters column of the Radio Times. Reith believed that greater happiness could be the only possible consequence of freely available and uniformly high quality entertainment, of a broader culture and of increased individual knowledge. Culturally one of broadcasting's most valuable benefits would be not merely the raising of standards but the introduction to one social class of the culture of another, and the consequent broadening of the cultural choice of each individual. A fuller knowledge of social, cultural and political affairs would likewise lead to a deeper individual understanding of the nature and workings of society, and hence to truer citizenship.

2. J.C.W. Reith, Into The Wind, London 1949, 116.

Reith's concern for citizenship - the duties and responsibilities of each person within the state towards the whole - was a reflection not merely of his moral predilections, but of his conception of the very nature of broadcasting. For he quickly came to realise that wireless communication operated on an individual level, rather than on the mass, as was the case in the cinema. At its best a broadcast was a personal communication between the broadcaster and each individual member of his audience, and did not depend in any degree upon emotional interaction within the audience. The medium was a mass one in that communication could only be from the few to the many, but Reith and his colleagues continually emphasised and were constantly aware that the many were all individuals, listening as individuals or in only small family groups, in the home. As Asa Briggs has pointed out, 'There is no reference to "mass media" or "mass communications" in [Reith's book] Broadcast Over Britain or in any of Reith's later writings: there is rather an emphasis on the "public" or the series of "publics" which together constitute "the great audience".'³

The parallels between the relationship of the individual citizen to the state and of the individual listener to the greater audience were clear, and they were reinforced by the confident expectation that for the first time in the development of a mass medium membership of the audience and of the state could be synonymous, given the correct structuring of the broadcasting system. Thus the various largely non-political factors which led to the establishment of a monopolistic system both assured it of its politically unique character and guaranteed a political interest in its development. Viewed from this perspective the idea of public service broadcasting was more obvious than it might have appeared, and John Reith has, perhaps, received more credit as its originator than either the concept or his part in its perception warranted. Given a mass franchise in a democracy, with the resultant obligations of information and education laid both upon the state and upon all responsible citizens, and given the particular characteristics of a

3. A. Briggs, The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Vol. 1, The Birth of Broadcasting, London 1961, 239.

monopolistic broadcasting system, characteristics which it held in common only with the state itself, then the public service broadcasting ideal appeared to many people not as being remarkable, but as quite natural. Even before the BBC had been created, or Reith appointed, views were being expressed which may be seen as the first tentative steps towards the public service concept. In a meeting with F.J.Brown of the Post Office in March 1922, representatives of Metropolitan-Vickers Electrical Company, one of the first commercial firms to carry out experimental broadcasting, stressed the educational value of wireless and, interestingly, pointed out its potentially 'unifying effect' upon the state.⁴ In a statement in the House of Commons in August 1922 the Postmaster General, F.G.Kellaway, declared of broadcasting that

Within twelve months - I do not think I am too sanguine - it may become one of the most valuable sources of communication, within certain limitations, at our disposalFor individual communication it is, I think, impracticable, but for distributing forms of information of common interest to great numbers of people, it may indeed prove to be a most valuable resource both⁵ for education, and, possibly, for political propaganda.

There was no suggestion here that the PMG would permit the service to be 'prostituted' and used merely for base entertainment, as Reith later suggested had been a possibility before the creation of the BBC.⁶ Kellaway's vision was already of a high purpose for broadcasting, and he had previously stated that in his opinion⁷ 'the possibilities of this service are almost unlimited'.

Had the principal wireless manufacturers decided to organise

4. Ibid., opposite page 136.
5. H.C. Debates, vol. 157: col. 1954, 4 August 1922.
6. J.C.W. Reith, Op. Cit., 95, 99.
7. H.C. Debates, vol. 153: col. 1602, 4 May 1922.

themselves into two broadcasting groups, as for a time in July 1922 appeared likely, then the correlation of the broadcasting service to the state might not have been so apparent, although the interest of the armed services in wireless telegraphy would have ensured state involvement. But the unique character of a centrally controlled, monopolistic and potentially all-pervasive communications channel guaranteed that from its inception consideration would be given to the position that broadcasting might occupy in the state system and the democratic process. The role of broadcasting as a public service, and as a major factor in direct political education and persuasion, was amongst the earliest points raised in the Commons with regard to the new medium. In May 1922, in the very first ministerial statement on broadcasting, the Postmaster General speculated that the proceedings of the Houses of Parliament might be broadcast, whilst Sir Henry Norman, the chairman of the Wireless Sub-Committee of the Imperial Communications Committee, boldly declared that

I think one may say not merely as a matter of opinion but with the confidence with which one announces a certain fact, that before much time has elapsed, at times of political crisis the Prime Minister on the one hand, and the Leader of the Opposition on the other, will be addressing hundreds of thousands of people in the country simultaneously, by means of wireless telephony.

Amongst the first questions asked in the House were ones concerning the broadcasting of 'political copy, either generally or in particular during an election campaign', and the prevention of biased political news over the wireless.

An appreciation of the singular political implications of the new medium was not, therefore, confined to those who were responsible for its development. Although relatively few MPs took a serious interest in broadcasting in the years before it acquired a truly national

8. Ibid., Col. 1624.

9. H.C. Debates, vol. 156: col. 38, 3 July 1922; vol. 164: col. 238, 15 May 1923.

audience or a national status and authority, the debate as to its likely and potential political significance was extensive in the press, in various parliamentary debates and within broadcasting circles throughout the inter-war years. The discussion began before the appearance of John Reith but it was he who produced the first comprehensive vision for broadcasting, a statement of hope and purpose, both in his book Broadcast Over Britain and in various articles and speeches throughout his management of the BBC. If the broader public service aspect of this vision received most public attention this was because, as we shall see below, the BBC was more easily able to put such a philosophy into practice than it was to implement Reith's concept of its political destiny. Yet he was confident of that destiny, despite early obstacles, when he wrote Broadcast Over Britain in 1924:

There is little doubt that sooner or later many of the chains which fetter the greater utility of the service will be removed. It is probable that more debates will be held so that people may have an opportunity of listening to outstanding exponents of conflicting opinions on the great questions political and social which are today understood by a mere fraction of the electorate, but which are of such vital importance. I have heard it said that in the old days of limited suffrage two-thirds of the voters were students of politics, whereas today not five percent have any real knowledge of the principles on which they cast their vote. Whether this be so or not, it is admittedly a serious menace to the country that suffrage be exercised without first-hand and personal knowledge. An extension of the scope of broadcasting will mean a more intelligent and enlightened electorate.¹⁰

Thus broadcasting was seen as a solution to the newly extended and ignorant electorate, whose uninformed and irresponsibly given vote would be, and already was, a 'serious menace' to the wellbeing of the country. Wireless debates and speeches would give the elector 'first-

10. J.C.W. Reith, Broadcast Over Britain, London 1924, 112-3.

hand and personal knowledge' of the political options.

The argument was developed and re-emphasised the following year in the evidence that Reith submitted to the Crawford Committee, which was considering the future of broadcasting:

There is nothing exclusive about Broadcasting; it is common to all sorts and conditions of listeners, and brought to them at their firesides. There is no home, however favoured, to which broadcasting may not introduce some new and living interest. It is thus able to bring together all classes of the population, promoting a conception of service in all lines of human activity.¹¹

Broadcasting was, Reith argued, capable of "making the nation as one man", and he restated the case he had made in Broadcast Over Britain. Broadcasting could dispel ignorance and allow the facts of a case to be set out under 'ideal conditions',

thereby providing the essential basis on which reasoned and intelligent opinion can be formed. It enables men and women to ... hear the protagonists direct and make up their minds where formerly they had to accept the dictated and partial versions of others. A new and mighty weight of public opinion is being formed, manifestations of which are not lacking. It may be argued that there is a danger in this, as if a state of ignorance were preferable to one of enlightenment. The danger only arises where awakening interest is not supplemented by satisfactory answers to legitimate questions. The ignorance and indifference of electorates is proverbial, but both may be overcome.¹²

The full extent of Reith's vision, however, was best revealed in an article he contributed to The Nineteenth Century and After in

11. BBC, R4/2/2, J.C.W. Reith, Memorandum of Information on the Scope and Conduct of the Broadcasting Service, 1925, 3-4.

12. Ibid., 4.

November 1927. Entitled 'Broadcasting, The State, and The People', this article became the basis for his subsequent writings and speeches on the political role of broadcasting. So fundamental are these statements to an understanding of his beliefs and actions that it is worth looking at them in some detail. His case centred around the question of how to reconcile the theory of democracy with the fact of the real world:

No problem seems to exercise political minds to-day more seriously than that of how to impart to this word [democracy] one reasonably sure and well-understood meaning applicable to and operating in the world of men and women.¹³

Thus democracy was on trial, and had in many countries already been found chimerical:

What is looked for is the mode of linking the philosophy of democracy to the real world that goes on visibly around us ... some indeed have found it so difficult that they have given up trying for such a modifying and practical influence in the real world and have not unnaturally resorted to a counter-theory (as, for instance, dictatorship).¹⁴

The dilemma for democracy, therefore, was how to turn theory into practice in the face of encroaching fascist and communist totalitarianism. The new and unique phenomenon of broadcasting, appearing at this very time when democracy was being questioned as a result both of external and internal development, introduced a new element into the situation, and Reith posed the question

What significance this new thing may bring to the long search for the tempering factor that will give democracy (for the first time under modern conditions) a real chance of operating as a living

13. J.C.W. Reith, 'Broadcasting, The State, and The People', The Nineteenth Century and After, November 1927, 667.

14. Ibid., 668.

force throughout the community.¹⁵

Existing methods of communication between the governors of the nation and the community itself were both inadequate and developed almost or quite up to the highest pitch of which they were inherently capable. Even the parliamentary system divided the nation geographically and separated the rulers from the ruled by introducing an intermediate representative, the MP. As for the press, the price of a free and pluralistic fourth estate was not only that the danger of an unelected influence upon the electorate was increased, but also that no particular press organ reached the whole community:

If the parliamentary system of nation-working divides the elements of the community geographically, the Press system divides them on the basis of opinions and prejudices. And the problem is not to find bases of subdivision, but to integrate.¹⁶

As for public meetings they were merely quasi-theatrical partisan displays whose effect was merely to produce 'powerful oscillations of feeling that are by no means permanent', whilst the most common form of political communication, general gossip and friendly argument, was as often as not 'an argument in the dark, ignotium per ignotius.'¹⁷

For Reith the conclusions to be drawn from this catalogue of the failings of British democracy in general and of the existing means of communication in particular were clear. For communication was the very nervous system of democracy:

That the nervous system of the modern democracy is imperfect few could deny. The above brief survey of its elements as they existed before the coming of broadcasting shows, more or less convincingly, that they could not in their very nature produce a

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 670.

17. Ibid., 673.

perfectly harmonious system ... What is lacking is, as has been said before, some integrating element, and it is suggested that, rightly understood and employed, a national Broadcasting Service will eventually become just that integrator for democracy.¹⁸

Thus broadcasting created the opportunity to put democracy into practice in a mass society and to make it a reality. Indeed Reith recognised a double benefit from the new medium. On one side the BEC's impartial portrayal of the community would assist the politicians' understanding of society, for

the broadcast programme must... cover more and more of the field of social and cultural life, and therefore become a more and more faithful index to the community's outlook and personality which the statesman is supposed to read.¹⁹

On the other side wireless would

familiarise the public with the central organisation that conducts its collective business and regulates its inner and outer relations.

Reith's vision for the political role of broadcasting clearly comprehended far more than a national system for communicating factual information and balanced partisan opinion, revolutionary though such an innovation might be. His belief that wireless could help to unite the classes and the nation, its integrating power, was a central and fateful element of his thinking. Broadcasting would not

18. Ibid., 671. See also Reith's speech at the Cambridge University Summer School in 1930 (BEC Archives): 'The problems today are therefore not of sub-division but of integration. We are concerned with the unity of the nervous system of the body politic. That it is imperfect few will deny. I suggest that broadcasting is the integrating element, and that rightly understood and applied a national broadcasting service will supply the integrator for democracy'.

19. Ibid. 668.

merely represent the governed to the governors, and communicate the statements and actions of the latter back to the electorate; it would also actually bring rulers and ruled closer together in a firm bond tempered by understanding:

Experience has shown that the art of broadcasting is above all the art of establishing a quiet and secure linkage between the speaker or actor and the individuals of the fireside audience. And it is not the printable scheme of government, but its living and doing, not the reading of the names of the leading figures in it, but the conveyance of their personal values "across the table", that will interlock governors and governed, the holders and the sources of power, in a real ensemble.²⁰

Paralleling yet again in its particular characteristics those of government, broadcasting would thus knit society more securely than ever before.²¹

Through two further unique qualities broadcasting would alter still more the conditions of political communication. By its impartiality it would give the electorate for the first time the opportunity of reaching objective decisions based on balanced evidence. Reith saw the obligation to be impartial as both a legal and a moral one, and it was the latter which weighed most heavily:

Unlike other modes of reaching the citizen directly [broadcasting] is bound to impartiality, not merely by the terms in which most states permit it, or will in the future permit it, to operate, but still more because it cannot abuse the confidential footing that it has obtained on every man's hearthrug.²²

20. Ibid.

21. Reith acknowledged that this particular characteristic of broadcasting was as applicable to a dictatorship as to a democracy.

22. Ibid., 673.

He rather over-confidently argued that because

Impartiality in controversial matters (which does not mean a fearful avoidance of them) is imposed on or assumed by the Broadcasting authority. The Service is therefore trusted by all classes and by most shades of opinion.²³

Finally Reith developed further his argument that the singular techniques of broadcast presentation would aid the objective communication and comprehension of political issues and even alter the very way in which politicians carried out their task of informing and persuading the electorate. Reith, puritan and puristical, whose ambition for seven years before joining the BBC had been to become a politician despite his lack of any strong partisan leanings, had rapidly become disillusioned by the sordid realities of politics when he had acted as the political secretary to Conservative MP Sir William Bull in 1922.²⁴ The scheming and manoeuvring of that year left him with a low opinion of existing political morality. Although he did not express it in these terms, Reith believed that broadcasting by its very nature could now raise the moral tone of political communication, and perhaps thereby of politics per se. He explained the present widespread opposition to the broadcasting of politics as the result of a misunderstanding of the fundamental differences between existing forms of political communication and broadcasting:

We are accustomed ... to associate controversy with heated crowds, exaggeration, misrepresentation, and unreasonableness generally, and we think of broadcast 'politics' as differing only in degree and not in kind from platform politics. Nothing could be further from the facts ... It is a medium that, if it is to be

23. J.C.W. Reith, 'Broadcasting and a Better World', Spectator, 22 November 1930, 765-6.

24. A. Boyle, Only The Wind Will Listen - Reith of the BBC, London 1972, 116.

used successfully must be used soberly. It has a wider and more continuous audience than either the parliamentary machinery or any particular part of the Press machinery, yet it holds its listeners purely as individuals and families and not as vibrating atoms in a crowd ... [Thus] if the existing technique of political propoganda and argument is excluded by the conditions, statesmen will find it necessary to develop another technique in its stead.²⁵

Such a technique would owe little to parliamentary or soap-box oratory, and might, Reith hoped, rely more on the detailed exposition of facts and figures.

It would not be too great an exaggeration to say that Reith saw in broadcasting a possible panacea for the evils both of politics and of mass franchise democracy - an 'integrator for democracy'. Provided that this new 'integrating element' was correctly understood and applied,²⁶ democracy could be a viable alternative to dictatorship. This was the vision, the excessively simplistic vision, of a man fired by idealism and the conviction that he was, quite literally, 'predestined' to achieve a great work. His biographer, Andrew Boyle, describes this 'prophet and practical mystic of broadcasting' as having the 'romantic vision and imaginative aspirations of the Celt', a man whose idealism was a 'white hot flame'.²⁷ Less kindly, C.P.Snow wrote of Reith's²⁸ 'megalomaniacal or God-drunk vision, or both combined'. For Reith's idealism, inextricably linked with his complex and tortuous religious position, dominated him, unmoderated by a bitter contempt for the capabilities of most of his fellow men. His confident hopes

25. Reith (1927), Op.Cit. , 673.

26. Notoriously autocratic in his personal modus operandi, Reith actually favoured the somewhat Fabian notion of a 'democratically born autocracy' - Ibid., 671.

27. Boyle, Op.Cit., 153, 164.

28. Financial Times, 16 November 1972, 14.

for the political implications of broadcasting were buoyed by a complete self-assurance with regard to his own abilities. Broadcasting could be made to lift the nation's levels of culture and to make democracy an integrated reality because he was in control of it. It could fulfil its political role only

by preserving its professional independence alike against the "frown of the threatening tyrant" and the "ardour of the citizens bidding evil".²⁹

His task was to maintain that independence. In his upright and principled hands the danger of such Olympian independence as he sought being abused by the controllers of broadcasting would be avoided:

The possibility of the doctor himself turning poisoner can only be prevented by securing a high and conscientious type of man or woman for the profession.³⁰

He was able to reiterate this point before the Crawford Committee as part of his argument for independence of action for the BBC. Questioned by an obviously sympathetic Lord Blanesburgh he urged that

there must be a great deal of responsibility and confidence vested in the broadcasting authority.

Blanesburgh: You have to trust the man at the wheel?

Reith: You have to trust the man at the wheel.

Blanesburgh: And probably with more effective results than if you were to attempt beforehand, either by express liberty or by express prohibition, to curtail his liberty of action?³¹

Reith: I do not think there is any other plan feasible.

29. Reith (1927), Op. Cit. , 674.

30. Ibid.

31. BBC, R4/2/3/12 - Verbal Evidence to Crawford Committee, 13th Meeting.

Reith's naive ambitions, perfectly comprehended and carried through, would have raised broadcasting and his own personal power above the level of petty power politics to a position of almost supernal might and justice. Reith was not unaware of this, and he welcomed and believed himself capable of undertaking the task allotted to him by his vision. For he well knew that there was more to broadcasting than simple communication. At the conclusion to his lecture at the 1930 Cambridge University Summer School he referred again to the concept of broadcasting as an 'integrator', and took the analysis one stage further:

Integration is a process not of gross summation, but of ordering and valuation. And broadcasting is, and in its nature must be, not only the collector but the selector of material. And therein lies its supreme responsibility.³²

Reith might be confident of his own capacity to understand and apply the new medium to the political system, but his were not the only abilities or opinions involved. As we shall see, he was soon to learn by experience that others, both politicians and electorate, did not share his qualities. Nor, indeed, did those in power feel sufficiently certain that he himself possessed them to give him their wholehearted support.

Nevertheless Reith was far from alone in his vision. His subordinates in the early BBC - individuals of the calibre of C.A. Lewis, P.P. Eckersley, Hilda Matheson and David Cleghorn Thomson - did not need his idealism to inspire them. Yet although their widely differing views as to the manner and practical details of broadcast development showed them to be considerably more than Reith's unquestioning and hand-picked disciples, the ultimate objective was described in very much the same terms. Thus Cecil Lewis, the Deputy Director of Programmes, pointed in 1924 to the universal appeal of broadcasting:

32. BBC - File of Director Generals' speeches and articles.

From palace to slum people are listening. It is the most democratic form of entertainment ever invented by man.³³

Like Reith, Lewis believed that this quality would help to unite the different elements of society:

It would appear that the wholesale distribution of services covering almost every phase of human endeavour ... will have the effect of bringing all classes of society into closer touch with their neighbours, and so fostering that mutual trust and understanding which is essential for the well-being of a great democracy.³⁴

Hitherto the majority of the electorate had had their judgements prepared for them, ninety per cent. of the populace living on the opinions of the other ten. Here was the opportunity for the man in the street to hear, absorb and judge for himself; here was his chance to live at first hand.³⁵ Lewis had a simple confidence both in the latent ability of the audience and in the power of broadcasting to raise the morality and practice of politics:

It would appear also that this opportunity to take part in the life of the nation, to hear great men speak of their country's affairs, to become a witness of all that is said and done, will raise the tone and increase the feeling of responsibility among those that are so placed on trial before their fellow men. Against this loss of privacy must be balanced the inestimable advantage of having a true and unbiased record of what has passed placed in the ears of the public, who will not be slow to recognise those who have their country's interests truly at heart.³⁶

33. C.A. Lewis, Broadcasting From Within, London 1924, 47.

34. Ibid., 174.

35. Ibid., 129.

36. Ibid., 174.

Not surprisingly, like Reith, he considered it

essential that broadcasting should become a public service, on whose integrity and impartiality in all controversial matters, the public may rely absolutely.³⁷

These sentiments, like Reith's, were utopian and, like Reith, Lewis took far too much for granted. He expected too much of the politicians, of the public and of the broadcasters. There was no hint of irony, nor any recognition of the possibilities of mass media abuse, in his comment,

when [politicians] appreciate the fact that the microphone, like the camera, cannot lie, and will always bring to the peoples' ears what they have said, their sense of fair play will make them clamour for the public to be their judges, and the microphone will become just as important an instrument, as much to be studied and inconvenienced as the camera and cinematograph are today.³⁸

These were arguments which placed emphasis on the distinguishing of honesty from corruption. The electorate would recognise those who did not have 'their country's interests truly at heart', and the good would be acclaimed. The trap, however, into which such sentiments might fall was that of equating recognition of honesty with recognition of truth. The politicians of all parties might be honest but they could not all be correct in their opposing analyses of political problems. The danger of Lewis's view was that honesty and truth might be considered synonymous; once broadcasting had exposed what was false the choice of policy for the electorate would then be obvious. Thus there was a potential and unrecognised element within this analysis which threatened to deny the pluralistic tradition of British politics. The stress which the BBC founders laid upon 'reason' as the essence of successful democracy, and their antipathy

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid., 129.

to party politics, contained this hidden barb; for it was also an emphasis which the critics of the democratic system used in order to reject the whole concept of a pluralist society.

Hilda Matheson, Director of Talks from 1927 to 1932, did not expect so much from broadcasting and, as we shall see below, had an acute perception of the limitations and dangers inherent in the new medium. Nevertheless her general attitudes and hopes were familiarly Reithian. She shared Reith's fear that modern political developments had found existing political machinery inadequate, and that the democratic system was under threat. Her antipathy to party politics was a not uncommon feature of BBC senior staff ³⁹ :

In most countries the old lines of party demarcation are not wholly relevant to the problems of today, and this sense of misfit sends many people to throw in their lot with short cuts of violence or to shrug their shoulders at politics. ⁴⁰

The picture of society which she painted was a pessimistic one. She described the

general sense of fear and distrust, internally between classes, externally between nations..... On the one hand is a dead weight of half-educated, uneducated, or even illiterate populations, little trained to think, little able to adapt themselves to rapidly changing circumstances. They are peculiarly open to emotional appeals, easily stampeded, easily cowed, and easily credulous ... On the other hand, the better educated are themselves oppressed by a sense of impotence, in the face of a ⁴¹ growth of knowledge with which it is impossible to keep pace.

39. Reith himself, after his appointment to the BBC, did not vote in elections. According to Andrew Boyle party politics 'left him cold' - Boyle, Op. Cit., 222.

40. H. Matheson, Broadcasting, London 1933, 98.

41. H. Matheson, in The Educational Role Of Broadcasting, the report of The International Institute of International Co-operation, Paris 1935, 151.

A growing recognition of the need for new kinds of education, new forms of social, economic and political life, had led people to question whether the traditional means of spreading information and knowledge were adequate for the new conditions.

Matheson argued that broadcasting could alter this situation in various ways. It could provide, side by side, an objective statement of the facts of an issue and a subjective argument on the proposed policies:

People have seldom had the opportunity to see - set side by side - the objective analysis of a situation and the proposed political resolutions - the report of the laboratory research men and the remedies of the bedside physicians.⁴²

To provide that opportunity would be to 'form the bridge between national politics and the wider background', thereby demonstrating the relevance of party politics to real life. Properly utilised, broadcasting could also counter the baser elements of human nature, of party propoganda and of the popular press, and thereby raise the moral tone of politics. It could even, perhaps, turn criteria other than mere demagoguery into the necessary perquisites for political leadership and power:

broadcasting can focus attention on the important as distinct from the trivial elements in politics, which often have greater headline value. When political leaders come to the microphone it is usually to discuss a major not a minor issue; those who listen are brought into direct touch with the business of responsible government, and they may hear debated the opposing principles rather than the tricks of parliamentary tactics ... The microphone has a curious knack of showing what is real and what is unreal, what is clear and what is woolly... what is sincere and what is an appeal to the gallery... it seems not unlikely

42. H. Matheson (1933), Op. Cit. , 98-9.

that the influence of broadcasting will be definitely against the demagogue and in favour of the thoughtful statesman.⁴³

Like Reith and Lewis, Matheson saw broadcasting as a unifying influence and a force for the moderation of partisanship in politics:

Listeners are under no obligation themselves to listen to views which enrage them; but if they do so, a growth of tolerance appears to develop which may be of great value in the practical art of self-government.⁴⁴

Following his resignation as Chief Engineer to the BBC in 1929 Peter Eckersley became one of its most astute critics. Yet it was not the theories but the practices of the Corporation with which he found fault. In his opinion it was these latter that had prevented the achievement of ideals which, as late as 1940, he still believed to be attainable. For he argued that broadcasting should be

in politics the rostrum for contending political theory, in sociology a means to show the community to the community, and in art the patron of the artist.⁴⁵

Writing in wartime he saw the present turmoil as a heaven-sent opportunity to reform and rebuild society. Broadcasting could help enormously towards 'true reconstruction'. 'Why should not we try to make democracy a reality?', he asked.⁴⁶

Another perceptive critic of the BBC in the later 1930s was David Cleghorn Thomson, formerly its Northern Regional Director. In his

43. Ibid.

44. International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, Op. Cit., 160.

45. P.P. Eckersley, The Power Behind The Microphone, London 1940, 155.

46. Ibid., 187.

book Radio is Changing Us Thomson assessed the impact and potential of broadcasting from a cultural and structural point of view rather than a purely political. His criticism of BBC policy was sharp and forceful; yet when he turned his attention to the possibilities of broadcasting, his beliefs differed hardly at all from those which Reith had expounded ten years previously:

Radio can... enable us to see ourselves as others see us, and prevent the world from living in water-tight compartments separated by class and national barriers of wealth and distance....It can help to educate good citizens in the best sense, men and women of rare quality, whose range of human experience has been generously widened and whose sensitivity of perception has been greatly increased.⁴⁷

Some people felt that the church had abandoned its duty to control morality in political and business matters, as it had to give a lead in patronising the arts:

In both these spheres the opportunity of the radio to give a lead, and to help in the fostering of democratic leaders, is unique.⁴⁸

The idealism of those who created the early BBC was very marked. The sense of purpose with which they were filled was quite specific and a conscious, even dominant, influence upon their daily decisions and actions. They worked for the creation of a state which was fostered not only culturally and educationally by broadcasting, but also politically. Broadcasting would become not merely an aid to the political system, but an integral and essential part of it, its central nervous system, directing messages from brain to body and body to brain, linking and binding all parts in a stable and united whole. It is perhaps not surprising to learn that with such a model in

47. D. Cleghorn Thomson, Radio Is Changing Us, London 1937, 18.

48. Ibid.

his mind Reith found the actual details of politics as practiced uninteresting, his political aspirations notwithstanding.⁴⁹ Despite his exceptional abilities in organisation, man-management (his dictatorial reputation being not wholly justified) and diplomacy, Reith was to find the 'whole horrid technique' of practical politics impervious to and seemingly unaffected by his efforts.⁵⁰

Yet the rise of broadcasting also inspired and reinforced the idealism of many politicians and others not professionally involved in radio. Like Reith they looked to it to lift them out of the depressing realities of an apparently ignorant and unintelligent mass franchise society. Between July 1922 and March 1926 no fewer than ten questions were asked in the Commons advocating the broadcasting of political matter. In the debate which followed the publication of the report of the Crawford Committee on Broadcasting, a small but vociferous minority of MPs had their first real opportunity to make known their views on the new medium. A Liberal MP, Mr. Ellis Davies, argued that, with audiences at political meetings dwindling, the only way to compel the attention of the electorate was for politicians to broadcast at them. His confidence as to the ease of organisation of political broadcasting was, for a partisan politician, rather naive:

As to whether time and opportunity could be distributed impartially, [the Postmaster General] has appointed people of ability who, like the Judges, can be depended upon to be impartial. I see no difficulty at all in allowing the Corporation, through the Government, to decide what proportion of time and what particular speakers may broadcast.⁵¹

Ian Fraser (Conservative), later to be a governor of the BBC, stressed that controversy was the breath of life, but rather

49. A. Boyle, Op. Cit., 222.

50. C. Stuart (ed.), The Reith Diaries, London 1975, 213, 29 November 1936.

51. H.C. Debates, vol. 199: col. 1595, 15 November 1926.

compromised his case by suggesting that a political broadcasting policy could be found which would be

a happy mean somewhere between the negative policy that is now being put forward, and the plea that the Hon. Member for North Battersea (Mr. Saklatvala) should speak.⁵²

In a speech primarily on adult education Major Oliver Stanley (Conservative) argued that highly controversial subjects could be explained quite impartially by objective speakers, rather than by opposing disputants, whilst Frederick MacQuisten, also Conservative, felt that the broadcasting of Parliament would lead to a purge of incompetent MPs and an improvement in the quality of the people's representatives.⁵³ Most forceful was Leslie Hore-Belisha who saw in broadcasting the opportunity to create a direct democracy:

the science of broadcasting makes real democracy possible for the first time in this country. The representative system is a makeshift system and is not the system which we intended to have. It is the system we have because we cannot get real democracy, for real democracy presupposes all the citizens meeting together as they did in Athens and hearing speeches. Now for the first time by means of broadcasting you can get the whole community associated with your Parliament and give it the power to hear speeches.⁵⁴

Not surprisingly the early Radio Times contained many articles on the broadcasting of politics, and as we shall see Reith used the journal as a weapon in his attempt to persuade the GPO to permit controversy on the air. Eminent men were invited to contribute their thoughts on the new medium, and many did so. In December 1923 the

52. Ibid., col. 1601, 15 November 1926.

53. Ibid., cols. 1609, 1630, 15 November 1926.

54. Ibid., col. 1629, 15 November 1926.

former Postmaster General, Sir Laming Worthington-Evans, commented approvingly on the fact that the man in the street could now hear the statesmen 'whose words and actions influence his life',⁵⁵ whilst the senior Labour politician J.R. Clynes wrote of broadcasting:

Used rightly for the common advancement and recreation of the people, who is to set bounds to the positive good which may accrue from it? Through it a people might hear its national business discussed and transacted, and who more fitted to hear it than those millions of ordinary men and women who constitute the nation?⁵⁶

The following year Clynes contributed an article in which he described the broadening in recent generations of peoples' interests and outlooks, the decreasing provincialism of society and of nations and the widening of community interest. Increased education and the work of the press were largely responsible, but

Broadcasting is another such force, coming with appropriateness into a gregarious, de-provincialised world, and certain to accelerate the widening of common interest which is one of the leading characteristics of our time.⁵⁷

Similarly in an article in October 1928 entitled 'The world a market place again - Broadcasting is restoring the Greek ideal of Democracy', the writer Gerald Heard stated as facts the rather dubious contentions that radio had made information available to all and that everybody was therefore now qualified to play their part in a direct democracy. He advocated a regular broadcast 'symposium' of anonymous protagonists discussing affairs of importance rationally, allowing the listener to reach his own conclusions:

55. Radio Times, 21 December 1923.

56. Ibid., 452.

57. Radio Times, 18 July 1924, 133-4.

Some such discussion, only restricted by the absolute honesty with which the speaker advances his argument, and the absolute toleration ... with which the rest hear him out, is... the only way in which may be met an essential need of Democracy.⁵⁸

Absolute honesty and absolute toleration were unreasonable expectations, and it is not surprising that, in general, writings on the subject in the 1930s brought to it a more balanced view than did those of the previous decade. Yet a more critical approach, as in the case of Matheson, Eckersley and Cleghorn Thomson, implied no less an idealistic vision. What all these commentators, apologists and critics alike were agreed upon was that broadcasting's unique features should be used not merely for entertainment, not in a purely trivial way, but that the BBC should apply the incalculable power and influence which people attributed to it to meeting society's recognised need for cultural and democratic enlightenment. The position of wireless was compared with that of the cinema:

Anyone who has considered the almost complete prostitution of the cinema as an educational force, and its unhappy effect on the youth of today, cannot fail to appreciate the vital importance of directing to better ends the almost equally potent force of radio.⁵⁹

Yet, looked at from a different viewpoint, what was being proposed was the abuse of one of the populace's means of entertainment. For the potential of broadcasting as a mass political and educational influence depended primarily upon its power and popularity as a medium of entertainment. It was evident that its political and educational value, like that of the cinema, depended not primarily on its ability to reach the entire electorate, nor on its absolutely impartial position, but on its power to attract a mass audience by the simple inducements of music, reviews and popular

58. Radio Times, 26 October 1928, 221-2, and 4 January 1929, 7.

59. A.H. Morse, Radio: Beam and Broadcast, London 1925, 78.

personalities. As was to be pointed out on many occasions, that a broadcast political discussion was capable of being heard by the electorate gave no assurance that the electorate would listen. The size of the audience for political programmes would depend very much on their being placed within the context of an entertainment medium. Even then the 'off' switch, and not the broadcasters, would remain the ultimate arbiter of the nation's tastes. The format of a political programme, its ability to entertain as well as to instruct and its position in relation to programmes of more obvious entertainment value, were to be critical factors in the fight for the listeners' attention. The report of the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation on The Educational Role of Broadcasting, written in 1935, touched faintly and unknowingly upon this, and in one passage came closer than most advocates of political and educational programmes to an implicit recognition of the limitations of broadcasting when considered solely by itself. The word 'education' was, of course, being used here in a general rather than a particular sense:

Broadcasting, which attracts the public by its recreational programmes, can happily awaken an interest also in things of the mind, without scaring listeners by its intellectual ambitions. The educational role of broadcasting consists essentially in arousing this latent curiosity in the listener, in encouraging it to pass from a state of potentiality to definite and practical action.

The important role of broadcasting would be not so much to provide the information on which a decision could be made (although it would do this also), as to arouse the listener's curiosity and encourage in him the desire to make decisions, and to make them from a position of knowledge. Yet even here the implications were passed over, and the report's conclusions on politics and broadcasting encapsulated the essence of the vision already rehearsed by so many advocates:

60. International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, The Educational Role of Broadcasting, Paris 1935, 17-18.

Broadcasting furnishes the average citizen with an opportunity of coming into direct touch with the leaders of public opinion and of following every stage in the development of the major problems on which the life of a nation depends. It can thus contribute very largely to the promotion of the citizen spirit all schools of thought must be granted a hearing; politics in the true sense should be barred; what is required is a series of objective statements on the political situation, accompanied by the reasons which seem to militate in favour of the different solutions advocated Broadcasting will thus contribute to the enlightenment of public opinion by stressing, outside the public assembly halls - where all personal judgement is lost in the crowd - the real scope of current problems.⁶¹

It was one of the ironies of political broadcasting that its contribution to the political process relied in practice on the obvious merits of broadcasting as a medium for popular entertainment. In advocating its use in order to raise the political consciousness of the ignorant and emotional electorate its supporters were tacitly accepting the fact that democratic politics and the citizen spirit needed, and possibly always would need, the assistance of the showman to make it work. In the debate on the Crawford Committee report in the Commons Mr. Ellis Davies decried the fact that in one constituency a short time before there had actually been a Punch and Judy show in order to attract an audience to a political meeting. Yet in suggesting that 'The Postmaster General should consider, if we cannot get our audiences to meet us, whether we should be able by broadcasting to get at them', he was merely bringing up-to-date and institutionalising the puppet entertainment as a necessary element of mass franchise democracy.⁶² For although they might hope that people would listen to political broadcasting out of a sense of democratic responsibility, its advocates could not dispute that the majority of wireless owners - and it was the politically uninterested

61. Ibid., 22.

62. H.C. Debates, vol. 199: col. 1595, 15 November 1926.

majority which they wished to reach - bought sets either for their novelty or for their recreational value. It was but a comparatively short step from accepting the near indispensibility of entertainment for politics to recognising that if a non-politically motivated audience was to be gained for a political programme then the programme itself, and even the politicians and other speakers involved, would have to take account of the needs of entertainment.

It was a small step, but a crucial one, for to have taken it would have been to accept much of the mores of the emotionally grounded partisan politics which so many of the 'political educators' abhorred. Reith and his colleagues, having justified the case for broadcast politics in such vehement and confident terms, were forced because of the nature of their argument to try to prove their thesis deprived of the principal feature which gave broadcast programmes their mass appeal - their capacity to entertain. Political programmes would either have to attract an audience on their own merits as political programmes or to compromise themselves in attempting to stimulate interest by means not strictly relevant to or desirable in the political process. It was this narrow, and it might be argued non-existent, path between failure through lack of an audience and failure through the compromising of principles, that Reith, his colleagues and his heirs had to tread.

Yet as we have seen, hopes and objectives were high and not confined to broadcasters. The possibilities of broadcasting seemed so tremendous that even criticisms were confined to the dangers inherent in the new medium - to what its positive effects might be, bad as well as good. Criticism which might simply have refuted all these idealistic expectations was not considered. After all, broadcasting was too large a development to be introduced into society for there not to be a significant effect, and this was felt to be as true politically as it would be culturally. The early criticisms of broadcasting, from a political standpoint, were therefore concerned with ways in which certain of its inherent features might endanger the progress towards the democratic goal which was otherwise the

anticipated consequence of the new medium. The fears aroused as a result of these criticisms were extremely strong, and must go a long way to explaining why the early BBC had so little success in persuading the government of the day that such an innovation as broadcast politics should be permitted. Cecil Lewis's views were particularly graphic and alarming:

Broadcasting is a national detonator. A spark at the microphone, in the shape of a chance word or phrase, is enough to set the whole nation aflame. A speech delivered by a great orator might produce the most far-reaching results. The power, the force that is being unleashed is gigantic. Its guardians, like chemists with some new high explosive, are gradually coming to understand it, they make experiments and watch the reaction, they weigh it and sift it, calculating the amount required to blow up the world At any moment a false move, a risky experiment, and it may all go off, hoisting them with their own petard. That this terrific medium ... should degenerate into becoming the mouthpiece of political party propaganda, or of any faction in the country who have axes to grind, would be to drag a great force for national education, welfare and amusement into the gutter.⁶³

It is perhaps difficult to imagine just how potent a force broadcasting was then felt to be; yet as with attitudes towards propaganda and the popular press a sufficiently strong statement and repetition of belief helped to confirm the fact. Sir Frederick Sykes, under whose chairmanship sat the Committee on Broadcasting in 1923, later wrote of his approach to the task in these terms:

If [broadcasting] became partisan, or still more, if it became even suspected of being an instrument of the Government, half the influence of the service would be destroyed. In any case it was

63. C.A. Lewis, *Op. Cit.*, 140. Note, however, that this alarming prospect did not deter Lewis from advocating experimentation and broadcast politics. Like Reith his confidence in the integrity of the early broadcasters was complete.

obvious that broadcasting would affect the very bases of society. When a single voice can simultaneously address not only a nation but the whole world, and can induce millions of men to think at one time a thought dictated by an external will, it is clear that the whole course of history must be transformed.⁶⁴

Peter Eckersley, in 1940, had a rather more subtle and less sympathetic understanding of the influence of broadcasting than Cecil Lewis:

Broadcasting is a powerful medium of propaganda. It is oracular and yet friendly. It is not what is said but the way in which it is said that influences its listeners. There is no need to say things directly over the air: the attitude of mind revealed in day-to-day behaviour is itself powerful propaganda. Political beliefs need not be imposed: they can be made to grow out of men's minds by suggestion.⁶⁵

Another early staff member of the BBC was Lionel Fielden, a talks producer under Hilda Matheson. In his memoirs he expanded on Eckersley's point by talking of the power of the producer. Although he was writing in 1960, his view, that had he been politically committed he could have boosted the cause in which he believed without direct mention of it, was perhaps one of the fears uppermost in the minds of those responsible for initially banning the BBC from dealing with political matters. Fielden argued that although the talks producer was merely a cypher for the BBC,

his tastes will gradually sway millions. They will not of course do so in one broadcast programme or even a dozen, but if (and this is difficult) the thousand odd programmes produced by a man or woman over, say, two years, could be examined, the drift of

64. Sir Frederick Sykes, From Many Angles, London 1942, 320. It should, perhaps, be noted that Sykes was writing his memoirs during the Second World War.

65. P.P. Eckersley, Op. Cit., 154.

that producer's tastes and belief and influence would become evident Whatever rules you may make, in the last resort public opinion will be formed by the men who actually produce programmes.⁶⁶

Although politicians might retain a fair measure of control over programmes which consisted merely of their talking, it was programmes about politics by commentators which would provide the greatest opportunity for misuse. Once allow the BBC to consider politics as a legitimate part of its brief, and all programmes, even those not obviously political, might assume new aspects.

Fielden was also less sure that the microphone's apparent ability to expose hypocrisy and insincerity was not rather a tendency to reveal unfortunate mannerisms and techniques of speech which had little to do with the sincerity or understanding of the politician concerned. Broadcasting flattered some politicians but deprived others, such as Lloyd George, of the stimulus of an audience which they found so necessary for their style of oratory.⁶⁷ It was hardly surprising that politicians whose whole experience was of public meeting speaking should shy at a new method of verbal communication which demanded such very different techniques. When Ramsay MacDonald, in his first General Election broadcast in 1924, chose merely to relay a speech from one of his public meetings, his reasoning was rational if unsound. He was simply attempting to carry into broadcasting a technique of speaking and an occasion at which he knew he excelled. It failed, and Stanley Baldwin's quietly spoken studio talk became the model for future occasions; yet soft-speaking could be just as much a rhetorical device as theatrical oratory. Broadcasting seemed to expose the false and hollow in politics, when in reality it merely demanded that politicians bring into play new and more subtle ways of demonstrating their integrity and sincerity.

66. L. Fielden, The Natural Bent, London 1960, 104-5.

67. Ibid., 112.

Qualities which at first sight appeared to favour democratic progress might, therefore, upon closer examination, do nothing of the kind. What the disciples of broadcasting hailed as its unifying effect upon society could equally be interpreted as a potentially dangerous force for increased standardisation. As Hilda Matheson wrote:

Illustrations are not wanting throughout the world of the way in which broadcasting may be used to secure standardisation of thought, of opinion, of mass emotion towards a person, or a political theory. It is an unrivalled means of creating one mood in a nation at a given moment, a perfect instrument for propaganda against this or that.

And again:

Broadcasting may spread the worst features of our age as effectively as the best; it ... is a huge agency of standardisation, the most powerful the world has ever seen. Standardisation is inseparable, it would seem, from material progress.

A wholly free forum for the expression of the widest possible range of individual views was, Matheson felt, necessary if broadcasting was not to check individual thinking and encourage the spread of standardised opinion with all its dangers. She recognised that this was a rather 'heroic' remedy to the problem. But it was also one that created its own problems. The provision of the listener with such an abundance of information, such a variety of alternative opinion, could be self-defeating. As Harman Grisewood has pointed

68. International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, Op. Cit., 165. Like Fielden she recognised that excessive overt propaganda was self-defeating. However, 'When this has been realised by the ardent propagandist, it is not difficult to diminish direct appeal or exhortation, and to substitute subtle and indirect suggestion, which may animate every item from dance bands to children's hours with the same purpose.- Ibid.

69. H. Matheson, Op.Cit., 17-18.

out,

for impartiality to be a virtue it must be freely exercised in relation to some particular end.⁷⁰

Yet this would require the judgement of a lively mind, of a listener prepared to listen impartially to all the diverse and contradictory evidence put before him, and then to make a decision. The danger would be that listeners might become so habituated to the impartiality of the wireless and so confused by the amount of evidence and opinion from which they had to reach a coherent and objective decision, that they might find themselves unable to make such a judgement, and even become indifferent. Writing from his position as Director of Talks, Grisewood argued that

In the past, few had enough capacity and courage to seek out all the profusion of discomforts and trials that await the enquiring mind. But now this cornucopia of discomfort is poured out before us all. Strong stomachs are required for the vast and varied intellectual repast provided by the full yield of our proliferous age ... [The BBC's] responsibility - as things are - is provision. The listener's⁷¹ no less onerous responsibility is assimilation.

Matheson's solution was the prescription of the perfectionist, impracticable not only as far as the capability of the audience but also as far as the capacity of the medium was concerned. For as we shall see the one, and then two, broadcasting channels of the BBC, predominantly seen as media for entertainment, were not felt to be capable of bearing more than a very limited amount of political programming. The phrase 'Freedom of the Air' was and always would be a delusion, for at the best of times the policies and activities of even the major political parties received a degree of attention which

70. H. Grisewood, Broadcasting and Society, London 1949, 47.

71. Ibid., 50-51.

today would be considered quite inadequate in order to provide the listener with a reasonable understanding of current affairs. As for minority groups the question of the coverage they should receive was a source of continual controversy throughout the inter-war years.

Restricted air space, therefore, was to render impossible the diversity of opinion, the freedom of the air for all views, which people such as Matheson and Eckersley considered so essential. Their attitude in this matter was, of course, yet another reflection of their antipathy towards established party politics, yet, as they would discover, the combined factors of audience capability and broadcasting capacity would confirm and ultimately strengthen the party system. Matheson might complain that 'The unquestioning acceptance of a case, as put by a party, a government, a newspaper, is a habit which appeals strongly to ordinary human laziness and intellectual inertia', and the BBC, in some of its early talks series, might attempt to give listeners a wide range of evidence and opinion; but the demands of time and of the audience for ready made solutions or simple and polarised alternatives would automatically reassert the dominant positions of the leading political parties.⁷² In trying to find a solution the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation acknowledged this fact:

Broadcasting is often, and sometimes rightly, accused of developing that intellectual passiveness that has already taken root among the masses and of inducing the people to accept ready made opinions as they would Gospel truths. Unless it is used with forethought, broadcasting may have that effect, especially as it appeals only to the sense of hearing, and therefore encourages listeners⁷³ to relapse into a state of purely receptive activity.

72. International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, Op.Cit.,160.

73. Ibid., 17.

The only answer, as Hilda Matheson knew, was one that laid a tremendous responsibility upon the broadcaster, a responsibility which she and Reith were ready to accept:

Just because broadcasting may so easily encourage this passive acceptance of what is heard, a special responsibility lies upon those who direct it to use to the full its ability to provoke thought and discussion.⁷⁴

Given the correct approach and the 'right handling at the hand of responsible people', fears as to the dangers of political broadcasting would, she believed, prove groundless. Unfortunately for the BEC others did not share her confidence, either as to the correct approach, or in the responsibility of the people concerned.

One final and related danger was recognised as inherent within broadcasting, as within all mass media. As a means of communication it was a one-way track. In response to G.K. Chesterton's opinion that it was a good thing for the masses to listen to the words of Lord Curzon, David Cleghorn Thomson suggested that it would have been as equally valuable for democracy if Curzon had, by means of radio, been able to listen to the voice of the people.⁷⁵ Hilda Matheson's argument that a dialogue could be established by the creation of listener discussion groups and by contact between broadcaster and audience, teacher and taught, was hardly realistic for large scale application.⁷⁶ In this respect, as in many others, broadcasting offered, for the time being, no significant departure from the existing media.

Contradictory evidence and conflicting objectives resulted in a multitude of opinions, of varying optimism or pessimism, as to the

74. Ibid., 160.

75. D. Cleghorn Thomson, Op.Cit., 18.

76. International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, Op.Cit., 166-7.

impact of broadcasting on politics. What was commonly agreed, however, was that that impact would be considerable once broadcasting was allowed to extend into the political arena. It is therefore necessary not only to note the scope of the 'Reithian' vision for political broadcasting, but also to consider the extent to which the political community paid heed to the possibilities, powers and dangers of broadcasting in its early years, together with the degree to which this affected actual development. The necessary acquittal of the early BBC from the accusation of excessive caution and lack of vision with regard to broadcast politics, inevitably leads to responsibility for slow progress in this field being laid largely upon the politicians. Reasons are not hard to find; while broadcasting was still in its infancy interest amongst MPs was limited to only a few enthusiasts. Despite its potential, broadcasting could not for many years be considered a truly national medium. Not until 1926 did wireless licences exceed two million, and not until 1933 did even half the nation's families have licensed sets. Ian Fraser, one of the principal exponents of broadcasting in the Commons, complained in December 1926 that MPs were too concerned with their many other interests and political duties to be themselves radio listeners, whilst their attention had not been drawn to broadcasting either by press coverage or by letters from constituents criticising the BBC, there being little or nothing to criticise.⁷⁷ Consequently they had little knowledge or understanding of it. Yet this general ignorance of broadcasting amongst MPs, understandable as it was, should not be over-emphasised. Indeed one of the areas in which more than just the enthusiasts took an interest was in the question of broadcasting and politics. It is necessary, therefore, to turn now to actual broadcasting developments in the 1920s insofar as they related to politics, and to analyse the reaction of the political community to them.

77. Radio Times, 31 December 1926, 1.

CHAPTER FOUR

Broadcasting and Politics: Early Arguments, 1922-1926.

"Tell the BBC and 'the authorities' what they know very well already: that my speech, like all my speeches, will consist from beginning to end of violently controversial arguments on questions of public policy, and that the only undertaking I will give is to use my own best judgement as to what I ought or ought not to say."

George Bernard Shaw - 15 July 1926.

The life of the BBC between 1922 and 1928 was seemingly dominated by two events, the General Strike of May 1926, and the transmogrification of company into corporation at the end of the same year. The impact of the General Strike has been considered in detail by many writers, its effect upon the BBC by universal consent tremendous. It provided it with a national audience which for the first time began to appreciate something of the value of this revolutionary development in national communication. It has been argued that it awoke politicians to the potential of broadcasting. More than anything else, it awoke John Reith to the sad truths of political reality, to the facts of political pressure and the tenuous nature of BBC independence.¹ Boyle has argued that the Strike 'shook the small world of John Reith to its foundations' and that

His destiny had cheated him: the earlier grandiose design of a model broadcasting service, independent in fact as well as name,² had been severely tested and found wanting.

The reasonableness of this conclusion will be considered later.

Yet significant as the General Strike was it should not be allowed to blot out surrounding developments. It must be seen in the context of a steadily growing sale of wireless sets and licences, an increasing political interest in broadcasting and constant pressure by Reith to extend the bounds of broadcast programmes. Not least it must be seen as just one, admittedly prominent, incident in the process of defining the BBC's position vis-a-vis the state. In the development of controversial broadcasting, and of broadcast political communication, the General Strike must likewise be set in the context of preceding events.

Given the fears of political abuse of broadcasting that were already forming, it is perhaps surprising to note that in the British

1. A. Boyle, Only The Wind Will Listen - Reith of the BBC, London 1972, 207.

2. Ibid., 215.

Broadcasting Company's first Licence of 18 January 1923, no injunction was laid down prohibiting the broadcasting of matter of a controversial political nature. Indeed nowhere in the Licence is there any mention of 'Controversial Broadcasting'. The prospectus of the new Company told potential shareholders that the broadcast service would provide

news, information, concerts, lectures, educational matter, speeches, weather reports, theatrical entertainment and any other matter which for the time being may be permitted or be within the scope of the said Licence.

Already, a few days before the formal creation of the Company in October 1922, Colonel Simpson, the Deputy Managing Director of Marconi, had argued that a summary of the Prime Minister's speech at the Manchester Reform Club should be broadcast. It was, however, significant that he considered it necessary to ask the permission of the GPO before going ahead with such a broadcast.

Clearly from the very beginning of the broadcasting service there was an implicit understanding that controversial matter should be referred to the Post Office for approval. But that there was no actual formulated ban on such broadcasting was made clear by the GPO's solicitor, R.W. Woods, during the hearings of the Sykes Committee on Broadcasting in 1923. Asked by Lord Burnham whether the Licence would allow the Postmaster General to interfere with any broadcast by prohibiting, for example, political or religious speeches, Woods argued that the BBC was subject to no controls other than the ordinary common law, which applied equally to newspapers:

I do not think there is anything to prevent the Broadcasting

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3. A. Briggs, The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Vol.1, London 1961, 127.
 4. BBC Archives (hereafter BEC), PPEG, F.A. Simpson to W. Noble, 13 October 1922.

Company from broadcasting political speeches or religious matter if they choose to also [sic]. LORD BURNHAM: Take a concrete example: last night I think Lord Birkenhead was broadcasting in the London area. Would it have been possible for the Post Master General to have stopped his speech being broadcasted? WOODS: No I do not think so. LORD BURNHAM: No matter how much he might have objected to it? WOODS: I do not think so.

Such were the de iure rights of the BBC with regard to political affairs and other controversial broadcasting. The Postmaster General, it was agreed, might intervene if he believed the standard of programmes to be of an unreasonably low level, and might also concern himself in relations between the BBC and press with regard to broadcast news. But in concentrating on standards of broadcasting and on protecting the press against competition from the new medium, the GPO had quite missed the far more delicate issue of controversy. The consequence was a curious situation which came to an end in 1927 with the formation of the Corporation. The BBC had greater de iure right to broadcast controversial matter than it was ever again to enjoy. As F.J. Brown of the Post Office put it, the BBC had the legal freedom to be 'as partisan as it pleases about political or economic or other questions'.⁶ Yet in practice it knew that its every action was being watched and that, as Brown added, if it did behave in a partisan manner 'I am quite sure that the Licence would never be renewed'.⁷ From the very earliest months of the BBC it was made quite apparent to it that Licence renewal was dependent upon 'good behaviour', and that 'good behaviour' was determined according to the criteria of the government of the day. Hence the practice throughout this period of automatically referring any doubtful matter to the Postmaster General, and hence de facto powers of censorship for the PMG which in effect he lost in 1928, when the ban on controversial broadcasting was lifted.

5. BBC, R4/6/2/1, Sykes Committee, second meeting.

6. Quoted by A. Briggs (1961), Op.Cit., 169.

7. Ibid.

The nature of the Postmaster General's power of censorship was again well brought out in the hearings of the Sykes Committee. Indeed the latter was remarkably acute in its perception of many of the fundamental problems that would be faced in the future, particularly considering how little experience of broadcasting it had to go on. It is therefore worth looking at its discussions in some detail. In them the issue was raised of a broadcast a few days previously relating to the current London building strike. This broadcast, which Reith claimed to be an impartial appeal for arbitration, was objected to by a Labour Whip, C.G. Ammon, who asked the Postmaster General what he was doing to ensure that any broadcast political matter or industrial news was given in an unbiased manner.⁸ The reply was significant and hardly accorded with R.W.Woods' view:

I think it is undesirable that the Broadcasting service should be used for the dissemination of speeches on controversial matters and I have had the attention of the British Broadcasting Company called to the incident'.⁹

Reith's paraphrase of the intention behind the Postmaster General's statement, when questioning Woods, was more significant:

... it seems to be admitted that there is no actual censorship laid down in the Agreement. Could the Solicitor, perhaps, then tell us why the Postmaster General said in the House the other day that he had communicated with the Broadcasting Company to the effect that they should not transmit, I think he said, controversial matter?¹⁰

Woods correctly denied that the Postmaster General had expressed

8. BEC, R4/6/2/1, Sykes Committee, second meeting.

9. Ibid.; H.C.Debates, vol.163: col.300, W. Joynson-Hicks, 24 April 1923.

10. BEC, R4/6/2/1, Sykes Committee, second meeting.

himself in that form, and it was left to Sir Charles Trevelyan, the Labour representative on the committee, and to Reith, to clarify how both the BEC and the PMG interpreted the legal and the actual situation:

TREVELYAN: the point at the present moment is the legal one, that there is not legal censorship. That is only a censorship on understanding that the Postmaster General thinks it is unwise to publish this. The Broadcasting Company says, "Certainly we are very anxious to work with you and do what you think right."....
 LORD BURNHAM: not censorship, an influence REITH: the Broadcasting Company would, I think, be inclined to interpret influence as instruction: they wish to be very careful.¹¹

The uneasy situation of the BBC was emphasised by Sir Henry Norman who pointed out to Woods that clearly the Company did not have complete freedom under the common law in the way that the press did:

the Postmaster General would not think of writing to "The Times" and saying I am sorry you printed this speech of Mr. Ammon's, please do not do it again?¹²

There were two issues at stake here - the ability of the Postmaster General to censor controversial programmes, and the right of the BEC to broadcast them. Yet one remark by Reith during this discussion seemed to make the whole question a theoretical one. For he emphasised that

The Broadcasting Company have never, I think, broadcasted anything controversial, and, of course, they are taking very great care not to. Whether they are prevented from doing it or not, they obviously would not do it.¹³

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

At first sight this appears a strange comment for Reith to make, not least because it was not quite true. The explanation for such an ambiguous statement lies in a fuller understanding in the primary concerns of the Sykes Committee and of its individual members. It must after all be asked to whom it mattered whether or not political controversy was broadcast? The issues under consideration were actually rather different - whether a broadcasting company could be partisan, and whether a partisan company might challenge the press in adopting its most fundamental characteristic, editorial freedom. Without that freedom, and severely restricted in its broadcasting of news as a result of press influence, it was felt that the BBC would have less chance of threatening the established media. The protection of the press was Lord Burnham's first consideration.¹⁴ Trevelyan, as a Labour politician, was primarily concerned to ensure that the BBC, a monopolistic commercial combine, could not add itself to the ranks of the already overwhelming Tory and Liberal media. Each was certainly anxious to define the rights and freedoms of the Company, and neither could have been satisfied to hear Woods' statement of the BBC's legal freedom. It was in order to reassure the committee that the Company had no desire to be partisan that Reith made his remark, not that it had no desire to broadcast controversy.

Reith, as a member of the Committee, was in a good position to make his views known. Sir William Noble and Mr. A.M. McKinstry, commercial directors of the Company, were not in such a position, and their outlook was fundamentally different from Reith's. Broadcasting to them was essentially an adjunct to wireless set production, a means to a profitable end, and their primary concern was to avoid any controversy, either with the press or the public, that might endanger the profitability of the venture. In questioning

14. Burnham was chairman of the Newspaper Proprietors' Association. Other members of the Sykes Committee were: Sir Frederick Sykes, J.J. Astor (proprietor of The Times, and Conservative MP), Sir Henry Norman MP (a radio amateur), Sir Charles Trevelyan MP, F.J. Brown and Sir Henry Bunbury (both of the Post Office), Field Marshal Sir William Robertson, W.H. Eccles, and John Reith.

them the Committee investigated the root questions of editorial control, the inevitability of selection of material and the nature of controversy. Again it was Trevelyan who was most acute, in a question which appeared very much as an attack on the commercially all-important monopoly:

by your exclusive possession of broadcasting you are in a different position from newspapers, where there is a whole variety of newspapers of various opinion, and the public, therefore, have a certain variety of choice. In the case of broadcasting, as long as you have the exclusive possession of the Broadcasting Stations, you can control the whole of what is issued. You realise that you are in a different position and the public, therefore, can be a little more anxious as regards the exercise of your rights than for that of the newspapers?¹⁵

Noble, anxious to assure press interests that the BBC would not and could not emulate the editorial freedom of a newspaper, insisted that this was ensured by the Company's agreement to broadcast only news supplied by the four news agencies. Trevelyan, not surprisingly, was more concerned with the public's view of the BBC's editorial position, and McKinstry hastened to reassure him with a statement which had rather more positive intent behind it than Reith's earlier:

The Broadcasting Company wish to keep away from controversial matter and has endeavoured to do so: we do not wish to have the Broadcasting Stations used for propaganda which will excite one¹⁶ section of the population and be very distasteful to another.

He felt that any form of controversy would antagonise some interest group, most importantly the press:

15. BEC, R4/6/2/2, Sykes Committee, third meeting.

16. Ibid.

we think, therefore, that it is better for the Broadcasting Company to keep away from controversial matter. Political matter is very controversial.¹⁷

Trevelyan was not satisfied. Both he and the Chairman, Sir Frederick Sykes, saw that it was neither so easy nor so wholly desirable to avoid controversy. Moreover it was made clear both that the BBC had already broadcast at least one avowedly controversial programme, and that people's views as to what was controversial differed. Trevelyan asked the directors whether they could conceive of a situation where the public would welcome not partial propaganda but balanced statements from both sides on great public questions: 'I am not at all sure that everybody would be in favour of absolutely excluding controversial questions.'¹⁸ Yet at the same time he indicated two basic problems - firstly that the public might be unwilling to trust such statements if issued from a commercial company rather than from a public body, and secondly that, as in a recent apparently militaristic broadcast by an army General, what was seen as uncontroversial by some might be considered extremely so by others. Sir William Noble's replies were pertinent and prophetic:

if you are going to make every man of importance in the country who wishes to speak, and has something to say, put down in writing just what he will say, and censor it before he says it, you will kill all interest in that kind of broadcasting Furthermore I submit this, that even the most fair-minded statement made by the most fair-minded man will be objected to by some one in the enormous audience.¹⁹

Trevelyan agreed and posed the dilemma that was to remain for as long as the company existed, and beyond:

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

I am only trying to face up to the difficulty, because I agree with you that if you are going to exclude everything which everybody thinks is doubtful, you are going to make yourselves very dull and I am wondering what kind of satisfactory public control there might be over ²⁰ broadcasting without interfering with what you are doing under it.

At the next meeting of the Committee, at which Noble and Mckinstry were again questioned, the precise editorial position of the BBC and the nature of controversy were again examined, this time by Sir Henry Norman. He was told that the General Manager, with the authorisation of the Board, was responsible for deciding in the end whether a certain topic was controversial or not. But, he argued, that there were such decisions made indicated clearly

that there is a censorship exercised on behalf of the British Broadcasting Company as to what is, and what is not, controversial as regards the public? In other words the Broadcasting Company is not simply - I use the word in no derogatory sense - a machine like a printing press or, to put it more poetically, it is not merely "a trumpet set at Shakespear's lips to blow", but it is in some sense ²¹ a body possessing editorial responsibility? NOBLE: That is so.

The discussion was confused on many occasions by Noble and Mckinstry's failure to appreciate that the committee was not just concerned with news items and the agreement with the press; but at the same time this meeting did bring out yet one or two further inconsistencies in the BBC's position. For example, Norman referred again to the building strike broadcast. This had been given by the editor of The Builders' Journal, a magazine subsidised by the Ministry of Health. ²² Norman suggested that, irrespective of

20. Ibid.

21. BBC, R4/6/2/3, Sykes Committee, fourth meeting.

22. The editor, B.S. Townroe, happened also to be a former Conservative candidate. His talk concluded: 'If broadcasting is

whether or not it was controversial, any such statement by a man occupying a position of public responsibility on any question must be considered to be news. The implication was that by broadcasting such a studio talk the BBC was itself creating news, and therefore infringing the press agreement by not taking all its news from the agencies. This point was also made by a later witness, Sir Roderick Jones, the chairman of Reuters:

if the Broadcasting Company become news providers as well as news carriers, it is bad..... I agree, an occasional ²³ speech here and there is not a matter to worry about. But no more!

Finally, Lord Burnham picked up Norman's points about news, controversy and editorial responsibility. Was it not in fact 'practically impossible', he asked Noble, to broadcast news without getting into controversy? Noble concurred. That being the case, Burnham argued, some ultimate responsibility for the censorship of such broadcast controversy would have to be established in parliament. The BBC was itself, as had been shown, supposedly editorially responsible. Yet in practice it acted under the authority of the Post Office. The Postmaster General's only real sanction, however, lay in his powers to withdraw the broadcasting licence, and this would be far too severe a penalty to impose for the inevitable minor day to day breaches:

I am driven back to the position that the British Broadcasting ²⁴ Company is not a mere conduit, but is itself responsible?

not merely a pastime but can also convey a wireless message, surely it is only commonsense tonight to suggest that both sides should agree to arbitration ... so that the nation may be protected from the threatened tragedy.' - BBC, R34/881/1. Reith told the Committee that the broadcast was only permitted after the script had been submitted in advance and various deletions made.

23. BBC, R4/6/2/5, Sykes Committee, tenth meeting.

24. BBC, R4/6/2/3, Sykes Committee, fourth meeting.

His conclusion was that news (in the broad sense) could therefore be uncensored. Noble qualified this:

uncensored, if you like, but certainly censored and censored strictly by the Company.²⁵

Much of the discussion of these issues during the hearings was confused and reflected the confused situation that existed. Theoretically quite free to broadcast controversy, yet in practice admitting the authority of the Postmaster General, the BBC denied intent to be controversial yet admitted the inevitability of being so. By the strict letter of the agreement with the press it could not initiate news, and therefore could not broadcast newsworthy talks: but in practice it was recognised that this would have been an unreasonable restriction on its freedom. Yet despite confusion the Sykes Committee was remarkably prescient in its discussion of the various problems the BBC would have to face on the slippery path of controversial broadcasting. Asa Briggs has pointed out how a draft of the only surviving working paper of the committee asked all the right questions on the issue of the monopoly. It also asked very pertinent questions on the broadcasting of news (and newsworthy items):

(24) Is it possible to distinguish between controversial and uncontroversial news? (25) If not, is it sufficient to leave the discretion as to the issue of news to the licensee? Will the taste and choice of the listening-in public be the best safeguard for fairness and veracity?²⁶

The evidence submitted to Sykes with direct regard to the broadcasting of politics ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous. Two submissions nicely reflected hopes and fears as to the potential of broadcasting in this respect, and its likely impact on the democratic system. Particularly optimistic were the views of the

25. Ibid.

26. BBC, R4/6/4, Sykes committee, unsigned draft paper.

National Association of Radio Manufacturers:

The Broadcasting service holds great possibilities of bringing those responsible for Government in closer touch with the populace and nothing should be allowed to stand in the way of this condition being brought about. Parliamentary debates should be broadcasted so that the people can be better informed and given the opportunity of taking greater interest in governing matters. New governing regulations and Acts of Parliament could be broadcasted in concise form, so that all would be easily acquainted with these matters.²⁷

By contrast Lord Riddell of the Newspaper Proprietors' Association feared for the future of the smaller newspapers, and, by extension, for the unity of the whole democratic mechanism:

nothing could be more deplorable than to injure the smaller newspapers throughout the country which are essentially part of the body politicThey are the organs of public opinion: they are the organs of criticism, they are carried on very often at very moderate profit and if you are to kill them off by robbing them of the greater part of their most valuable sale, the result is going to be very serious.²⁸

In a somewhat lighter vein he also opposed the broadcasting of parliament, with this decidedly risible argument:

Is it a good thing to deflect the whole population from their private duties to listening in? It might have a most prejudicial effect. If the debates from the House of Commons, for example, were being broadcasted, people would be seduced from their ordinary labours to listen to these delectable things. It is a

27. BBC, R4/6/5, Sykes Committee, precis of written evidence.

28. BBC, R4/6/2/4, Sykes committee, eighth meeting.

most serious aspect.²⁹

The report of the Sykes Committee, presented in August 1923, recognised the defects and inconsistencies in the existing situation. It considered it right that there should be an agreement with the press regarding news broadcasting, but thought that the existing restrictions should be gradually relaxed. It denied that the Post Office exercised any form of positive censorship, but agreed that the Postmaster General had intimated his opposition to broadcast controversy and that the Company had rightly been cautious. It appreciated that while the Postmaster General remained the final arbiter of what should or should not be broadcast, his position was a politically difficult one. A recommendation was therefore made to set up a Broadcasting Board, free from any suspicion of political bias, to advise him on such matters. Despite difficulties, however, the Committee clearly favoured an extension of controversial broadcasting and acknowledged the impossibility of avoiding it:

We do not consider that it is desirable to maintain any system of censorship. Nor do we think it necessary to exclude everything which is controversial: indeed, there are few subjects on which controversy may not arise. It would obviously reduce the interest of broadcasting if it were necessary to exclude everything which might have a political bearing.³⁰

The report tentatively suggested that broadcasting might hold social and political possibilities 'as great as any technical attainment of our generation'.³¹

The BBC had indeed been highly circumspect before Sykes, but it had not been as wholly passive as McKinstry's evidence suggested. The building dispute broadcast had been considered controversial by

29. Ibid.

30. Cmd. 1951 (1923), The Broadcasting Committee Report, 32.

31. Ibid., 6.

Labour, perhaps an interesting comment not so much on the objectors as on the background and outlook of the BBC officials who passed it as entirely unexceptionable. This was the earliest proof to Reith of what was to become a standard, if singularly unhelpful, BBC defence that partisanship was in the eye of the beholder. It could equally well have been concluded, from a different viewpoint, that impartiality was in the eye of the producer, the BBC.

If the building dispute broadcast was the earliest to be unintentionally controversial, the earliest recorded political affairs broadcast was, rather startlingly, a debate on communism, between Sir Ernest Benn and a communist, J.T.W. Newbold, which took place in February 1923.³² Cecil Lewis later described this as an early outside broadcast of a communist meeting from the Kingsway Hall which ended with the singing of The Red Flag.³³ From the start the BBC made positive decisions, as of course it had to, as to what might be broadcast without reference to the GPO and what might be controversial. The effects of this division of programmes and system of referral were curiously contradictory. Referral, more often than not, resulted in complications, objections and cancellation. Yet because the BBC demonstrated in its referral a proper caution and sense of responsibility, it was possible for programmes deemed non-controversial to delve into potentially controversial political topics, such as communism and also foreign affairs. The distinction between political affairs broadcasts per se and political affairs broadcasts that proved themselves to be controversial is a useful one here. In recognising that the Postmaster General was primarily anxious to exclude the latter the BBC, though cautious, took the opportunity tentatively to experiment in the former. In January 1924 Vernon Bartlett, later to be a regular and controversial broadcaster, gave a talk on the potentially contentious subject of the work of the League

32. Daily News, 23 February 1923, 7b

33. C.A. Lewis, Never Look Back, London 1974, 68. In fact it was organised by the Industrial League and Council, on the motion 'that Communism would be a danger to the good of the people'. The Red Flag was, however, sung by communist supporters.

of Nations.³⁴ This was to be the first of many broadcasts on foreign affairs given throughout the life of the Company by eminent and political figures. Thus a monthly broadcast survey of the international situation was begun by the British Institute of International Affairs in October 1924, J.R. Clynes broadcast on 'World Peace' and Lord Robert Cecil talked on 'The Price of Peace'.³⁵

Vernon Bartlett's regular weekly series, 'The Way of the World', was to start as an objective explanation of foreign affairs in January 1928, over a month before the ban on controversial broadcasting, by then official, was lifted. On the domestic front a broadcast debate from Newcastle in June 1924 tackled the motion 'That independent working class education on industrial questions is essential for the workers'.³⁶ It must be said, however, that in few of these tentative experiments were live issues discussed. There was an emphasis on the theory rather than the practice of politics, on the ideology of communism or the role of the League of Nations.

Reith explained his attitude to controversy in the Radio Times in October 1923. Quoting Victor Hugo that 'there were two privileges of the English - freedom of speech and conscience, and the prudence never to practise either', he suggested that there was a moral in this applicable to broadcasting,

with certain latitude in the interpretation, of course I do not infer [sic] that we contemplate blasting forth into controversial fulminations or anything of that sort, but just that there is a power of wisdom in the old Latin tag - Festina lente.³⁷

34. V. Bartlett, I Know What I Liked, London 1975, 65.

35. Radio Times, 29 August 1924.

36. Radio Times, 25 June 1924. Compare this, incidentally, with Reith's comment in Broadcast Over Britain, London 1924, 153: 'It has been said that the industries of the country suffer from the ignorance which prevails concerning them. If that be so then there are means at hand whereby the ignorance may be dispelled.'

37. Radio Times, 26 October 1923.

But where it was a matter of proposing broadcasts which had to be referred to the Postmaster General, there was effectively no progress of any kind. Reith's desire freely to extend the scope of broadcasting into political affairs was repeatedly frustrated. In February 1923 his ambitious request to broadcast the King's speech at the opening of Parliament was turned down, and this refusal was to be repeated at least three more times before November 1925³⁸, despite the undoubted vigour with which Reith pressed his case. Indeed the whole question of broadcasting Parliament was thoroughly discussed between 1923 and 1928 in relation to the King's speech, the Budget and generally, and Reith used all the means at his disposal to concert pressure upon the Government. Thus in November 1923 a debate was initiated in the columns of the Radio Times to drum up support for Parliamentary broadcasting. Following a letter supporting the idea, and the report of another in the Evening Standard opposed to it, an unsigned article was printed claiming to discuss the question 'from several points of view', but actually taking an entirely favourable line. Rather disingenuously it claimed that because the BBC's Directors had not yet discussed the matter the Company itself had no views on the subject. But it called upon Peter Eckersley, the BBC's Chief Engineer, to prove the technical feasibility of the idea, produced arguments for Ministers that it would enable them, even when at work in their offices, to keep abreast of developments on the floor of the House, and included a message to MPs:

If any Members of Parliament read this article perhaps they would be good enough to give the subject more serious consideration than they at first intended to do and realise that sooner or later Parliamentary Broadcasting must be reckoned with The public does want to hear the great ones of the earth and to form its own judgement about them. The whole future of wireless telephony will be largely³⁹ determined by the amount of first-class speaking transmitted.

38. BEC, PPPOP, 1923 - 1925.

39. Radio Times, 2 November 1923, 'Should Parliament be Broadcast?' by 'The Pressman', 23 November 1923.

In the same issue Reith appealed for public support against the refusal to allow the broadcasting of either the King's speech or the Cenotaph ceremony:

Nothing will sooner break down the present hesitancy on the part of those responsible for these functions than an emphatic and overwhelming expression of public sentiment in the matter.⁴⁰

In early 1924 he returned to the attack, using the ploy of publicly revealing continuing negotiations in order to influence public opinion for the future. He admitted it was a platitude to say that by the time that edition of the Radio Times appeared the King's speech either would or would not have been broadcast: 'But there is occasionally a great deal behind even a platitude'.⁴¹ In August an article by S. Graham supported parliamentary broadcasting by emphasising how much calmer and fairer an opinion the listener would gain of politicians⁴² by listening at home rather than by attending political meetings. A more novel argument was put forward by W.W. Burnham of the National Association of Wireless Manufacturers in a letter to Ramsay MacDonald, then Prime Minister. He felt sure that such parliamentary coverage, by attracting considerable interest in broadcasting, would raise the sale of radio sets, boost the wireless industry and so reduce unemployment.⁴³ Later in the year Reith made a personal, direct approach to the PM, by now Baldwin, to have the King's speech broadcast, arguing that

the value of the broadcasting service is, I think, generally appreciated, and we believe that it is capable of exercising a considerable and beneficial national service.⁴⁴

40. Radio Times, 23 November 1923.

41. Radio Times, 18 January 1924.

42. Radio Times, 22 August 1924.

43. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f2, W.W. Burnham to J.R. MacDonald, 4 April 1924.

44. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f7, Reith to Baldwin, 24 November 1924.

The appeal brought a friendly response from Baldwin, and Reith visited him at Downing Street to press his case, but without result.⁴⁵

Repeated failure did not deter Reith, and in 1926 he turned his attention to the Chancellor's Budget Speech. Once again the Radio Times was used in the agitation, editorialising that

all those who are striving to keep this lusty young giant Broadcasting as a sort of perpetual Peter Pan who may never grow up, declare in a dismal chorus that to broadcast the Budget Speech would "open the floodgates and obliterate the landmarks," and inevitably lead to red ruin and the breaking up of laws. But the antediluvians cannot, of course, have it their own way for ever.⁴⁶

Calling upon the public to appeal to their MPs and the press, it also persuaded such eminent men as Keynes, T.P. O'Connor, the Father of the House, and the Shadow Chancellor, Philip Snowden, to express their views. Keynes declared that it would be

an immense loss to the cause of political education in this country if, in these days of declining public interest in political meetings, and of declining publicity for reports of political speeches, broadcasting is to take no part whatever in spreading political information and political argument.⁴⁷

O'Connor found it difficult to understand why anyone should possibly object to parliamentary broadcasting, whilst more guardedly (and perceptively) Snowden agreed that Budget and other occasional

45. C. Stuart (ed.), The Reith Diaries, London 1975, 91, 3 December 1924. For arguments against parliamentary broadcasting see Daily Mail, 26 March 1925.

46. Radio Times, 19 February 1926.

47. Radio Times, 26 February 1926.

speeches might be broadcast, but opposed the general broadcasting of parliament,

at least until the proceedings of Parliament are more calculated to inspire admiration and respectI want the public who never visit the galleries of the House of Commons, to retain their reverence for the Mother of Parliaments.⁴⁸

The Radio Times claimed that an 'extraordinary amount of interest' had been aroused on this question, and printed letters praising the BEC for 'making possible another step in the advancement of the democratic spirit'.⁴⁹

Using the articles by Snowden and Keynes for support Reith appealed to the GPO for permission to broadcast the budget speech, and received a blank refusal. Moreover, when the BEC arranged for the Labour MP, William Graham, to broadcast a talk on 'Budgets', F.W. Phillips of the Post Office requested an advance copy of the script for approval, lest it be controversial.⁵⁰

Reith had an inordinate respect for and love of the traditional and formal set-piece event, which boosted his already strong desire to have the opening of parliament and the budget speech broadcast. Not himself in favour of complete parliamentary broadcasting, he felt that the coverage of important debates would bring the public into contact with politicians and the active working of government. Perhaps this was a naive assumption, but it was one that was not unreasonable at a time when parliament remained the hub of the Empire.⁵¹ Nor was it to fade and die with him. In any case the broadcasting of parliamentary debates would have been one of the few

48. Radio Times, 12 March 1926; 5 March 1926.

49. Radio Times, 19 March 1926.

50. BBC, PPBB, Reith to GPO, 3 March 1926; Phillips to Reith, 9 March 1926; Phillips to Reith, 27 March 1926.

51. J. Margach, The Anatomy of Power, London 1981, 55-64.

means whereby the BBC could have undertaken political affairs broadcasting without laying itself open to accusations of editorialisation or partisanship.

Reith's repeated attempts to persuade the Government on this matter were indicative of his hope that its concern was to prevent controversial rather than political affairs broadcasts. Unfortunately, extreme caution made the two virtually synonymous as far as the Government was concerned, at least for the moment. This being the case Reith was almost as unsuccessful in his more general requests to be allowed a degree of political affairs broadcasting. In November 1923 he argued that so long as, in any debate, opposing views were stated with equal emphasis and lucidity, then the BBC could not be accused of bias:

A debate on such a subject as Tariff Reform might also be of considerable interest, and would perhaps be permissible ⁵² if the exponents of each side were of similar calibre and quality.

The Sykes Committee had recommended that a broadcasting board be set up by the Postmaster General to assist in the formulation of policy. Reith was dubious as to the value of such a body and quickly became disillusioned by its deliberations. Nevertheless he argued his case strongly when, in April 1924, the PMG asked it to consider the desirability of changing GPO policy ⁵³ in refusing permission for controversial political broadcasts. In reply to the view that existing policy was reasonable and had worked well, he argued that

52. Radio Times, 30 November 1923.

53. GPO Archive (hereafter GPO), Post 33-M15956/1924 Broadcasting Board Papers, file 13, paper no. 3, 2 April 1924. The composition of the Board was as follows: Sir Frederick Sykes (Chairman), F.J. Brown (GPO), Reith, Guy Burney, Sir Francis Ogilvie, W. Payne, Lord Riddell, A.A. Cambell Swinton, Fred Bramley (TUC), and F.W. Phillips (Secretary). Dr. Marion Phillips, the Labour representative, was only appointed in November 1924, by which time the Board had ceased to meet.

all subjects are in some degree controversial and that any exclusion of controversial matters tends to reduce the interest and value of broadcasting.⁵⁴

But despite such arguments the Board's final recommendation to the Postmaster General went only a small way to giving Reith what he wanted. Although lengthy it is worth quoting:

So far as political speeches are concerned, if the present rule were abandoned, the difficulties of deciding on what occasions and in favour of what speakers permission should be given would be so serious and the power that would be vested in those responsible for these decisions would be so great that the Board do not see their way to recommend any alteration in the general policy at present adopted, although any exceptional case might be specially considered Apart from political speeches, the Board recognises that most subjects are, in some degree, controversial, and whilst recognising that it is difficult to differentiate, they feel that the maintenance of too strict a policy would reduce the interest and value of broadcasting. In deciding, therefore, what is controversial and what is not, the tendency should, it is considered, be in the direction of gradually giving greater freedom rather than less.⁵⁵

Reith found far more to dislike in the first part of this recommendation than to like in the second.

What it is important to note here is the differentiation between the broadcasting of political speeches and of other ordinary programmes which might, of course, have included political affairs programmes that did not contain speeches. This is not to suggest that such programmes of political commentary or description were

54. GPO, Post 33 - M15956/1924, file 14, 14 May 1924.

55. GPO, Post 33 - M15956/1924, file 12, F.W. Phillips to PMG, June 1924.

contemplated even by Reith. The point is that no one at this stage, including the BBC's General Manager, imagined that political affairs programmes which did not consist of the politician talking would ever be more than a minor part of political affairs broadcasting. Their prime concern - as with the broadcasting of parliament - was with direct political statements, direct communication from elected to elector. Given the respect with which government, parliament and political leaders were then held, given the BBC's desire to strengthen and become a new integral and integrating part of the democratic machine, yet without challenging the supremacy of parliament or becoming a mere extension of the press, and given the way in which the press jealously guarded against the BBC's rivalling it in every respect, this was not so very surprising. Reith wanted the BBC to be something fundamentally different, participating in and perfecting the democratic process rather than emulating the press in its partisanship or in its role as the people's watchdog. He wanted the BBC to become the nervous system of the body politic rather than the antibodies which guarded against its abuse. It is interesting to note that as a straight purveyor of speeches the press did not initially consider the BBC to be a rival. At the Sykes Committee hearings the three press representatives, when asked for their attitude to the outside broadcasting of speeches, either admitted that they had not considered the matter or stated that there could be no objection.⁵⁶

Reith was extremely anxious that the Company should retain de iure freedom, that it should be formally bound as little as possible. He was concerned, perhaps to excess, with the view that the BBC should never be seen publicly to have been in any way controlled by the government of the day. It may be argued that this led him to the dangerous doctrine of preferring informal pressure to formal sanctions, but given his paramount concern to have the BBC seen as politically aloof and independent, this was an understandable, if not

56. BBC R4/6.2.4, eighth meeting; R4/6/2/5, tenth meeting. See also A. Briggs (1961), Op.Cit., 263, for press agreement regarding broadcast speeches, in September 1924.

wholly excusable, attitude. The effect of this concern was to be most evident, of course, during the General Strike, and was to be manifested again in various incidents in the 1930s, but it first tentatively appeared in 1924. Thus in a letter to F.W. Phillips, Secretary of the Broadcasting Board, commenting on the minutes of the third meeting, he wrote:

On the question of broadcasting speeches and controversial matters, you say at the beginning that the Post Office had requested us to avoid these speeches. This may be a small point, but I do not remember anything like this having⁵⁷ been done; we avoided them of our own volition from the start.

The previous month, in response to a question in Parliament, he had written to Phillips:

Mr. Hudson's question states that "the contract between the BBC and the Post Office excludes political propaganda." there is no such clause in any agreement we have with the Post Office⁵⁸ although we have always refrained from doing so, as you know.

Despite the latter assurance Reith continued to struggle for greater de facto freedom, and between 1924 and 1927 the Postmaster General was constantly reminded that both Sykes and the Broadcasting Board had recommended just this.⁵⁹ In November 1923 the BBC proposed without success that the three party leaders should make broadcast speeches before the General Election.⁶⁰ In August 1924 Reith boldly suggested a broadcast debate on a current political topic, between party leaders and under the chairmanship of the Speaker of the House of Commons. But the Labour Postmaster General,

57. BBC, BBM, Reith to Phillips, 20 May 1924.

58. BBC, PPEG, Reith to Phillips, 11 April 1924.

59. See, for example, c.7 letters from Reith to GPO during this period, in BBC, CB 1923-1928.

60. BBC, PPEGEB, Reith to GPO, 15 November 1923.

whilst agreeing that such a debate might be innocuous, felt it would lead to a demand for others which would be less so. Showing a fundamental misunderstanding of the BBC's position he stated that many of the public would resent doctrines repugnant to them being broadcast by any agency controlled by the government in power, even if the other side were given. Listeners might well resort to oscillation:

the potentialities of broadcasting for propoganda [sic] purposes are so considerable that the Postmaster General considers that it would be necessary for him to consult the Cabinet or his colleagues before agreeing to a proposal of this kind.⁶¹

Reith took this hint of a possible Cabinet discussion seriously and, having waited for one month to allow for such consultation applied again:

I feel very strongly that the utility of broadcasting as a medium of enlightenment is prejudiced owing to the ban upon such matters. People have to take the views which are given them either in the Press or from the Party with which they are connected and practically never have an opportunity of hearing all sides of a question from the lips of the exponents of them, and they will not take trouble to read what is written. I submit that broadcasting in this way might be a national service of great value.⁶²

Here was a clear statement of ideals from Reith. Six days later the announcement of the General Election put paid to the idea of any such debate, but opened the way for his one and only positive success during this period, agreement that the three party leaders should

61. BBC, PPEG, W.E. Weston to Reith, 19 August 1923. Oscillation was a means by which early radio receiving sets could be used to interfere with the reception of other nearby sets.

62. BBC, PPEG, Reith to F.J. Brown, 3 October 1924.

each broadcast once before the poll.⁶³ During the campaign the BBC agreed not to broadcast any other matter of a political nature, and when it appeared that Lord Linlithgow's speech to the National Union of Farmers might be broadcast, F.J. Brown of the Post Office wrote to remind Reith of this agreement.⁶⁴

Following the election Reith returned to the attack. He was concerned, of course, not just to gain greater freedom for the BBC but also firmly to establish it as a recognised and integral part of the system. If the idea of 'the establishment' has since assumed undesirable connotations, it certainly had few for Reith in the 1920s before the name had been invented. Reith himself wanted to be part of the established order, and he wanted the BBC to be part of it,⁶⁵ yet above it also. For these reasons he was anxious to involve senior politicians and other leading figures in broadcasting. The rear guard action of the press actually assisted him in this by making broadcasting early on an issue in which senior politicians might reasonably take an interest. Reith's previous contacts with the Unionists were also of value. He encouraged the broadcasting of talks and of speeches from outside occasions by men such as J.R. Clynes, the Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon, and the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, whose speech at the Lord Mayor's banquet was broadcast without complaint in early November 1923.⁶⁶ In 1924 outside speeches by the Labour Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, Lord Parmoor, the President of the League of Nations, Earl Balfour, Tom Shaw (Minister of Labour), J.H. Thomas, Austen Chamberlain, Lloyd George and Churchill were all broadcast, even though few if any contained political matter. In addition the King was given a wireless

63. BBC, PPBG, Brown to Reith, 6 October 1924; Reith to Brown, 7 October 1924; BBC, PPGEB, Reith to Brown, 7 October 1924; C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 90, 11-12 October 1924.

64. BBC, PPBG, Brown to Reith, 21 October 1924. Linlithgow did not speak.

65. See pp. 310-312 below.

66. Radio Times, 26 October 1923, 22 February 1924.

set and the Archbishop of Canterbury shown the potential of broadcasting. Whenever possible Reith cultivated politicians. Meeting by chance Joynson-Hicks, the outgoing Conservative Minister of Health and former PMG, late in December 1923, he 'Expatriated⁶⁷ to "Jix"' on the advantages of unified control for broadcasting. From his first meeting with Baldwin, prior to the 1924 General Election, he developed a personal friendship with the Conservative leader and used it to urge the cause of broadcasting. Reith later recorded that at another meeting with Baldwin about the possibility of broadcasting the King's speech, in early December 1924, Baldwin asked many questions about broadcasting:

he seemed to be genuinely interested; I delighted at the opportunity⁶⁸ of telling him about the BBC, its policy and intentions.

Another good friendship was to arise out of Reith's first meeting with Ramsay MacDonald in March 1925. So well, indeed, did they get on that a week after their first meeting Reith took his mother to have tea with the Labour leader at the House of Commons.⁶⁹ Later that month John and Muriel Reith dined alone at No. 10 with the Prime Minister and Mrs. Baldwin, and Reith 'did some useful work for Broadcasting'.⁷⁰ By the end of 1925 it was clear that Baldwin had considerable regard for Reith.

Reith was personally gratified by this close contact with senior

67. C. Stuart, Op Cit., 132, 30 December 1923.

68. J.C.W. Reith, Into The Wind, London 1949, 97.

69. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 91, 5-13 March 1925.

70. Ibid., 91, 27 March 1925. Baldwin and Reith swapped anecdotes about the nature of power. The previous week, when Baldwin was in a hurry, he had been driven down the wrong side of Piccadilly. This, he suggested was power. Reith said that from his study he could give two orders - 'SB' and 'All transmitters' - and could then talk to millions. This, he felt, was also power. The distinction Reith did not make was that Baldwin could and did legitimately use his power. Reith could never have used his.

politicians. Well aware of the need for good public relations, he also knew that the highest level of PR was personal friendship. In December 1924 he appointed W.E. Gladstone Murray as BBC Director of Publicity to replace W.C. Smith, who went as publicity officer to the Liberal Party. Briggs describes Murray as being on close terms with the press, a number of MPs and with 'key people' in government and administration.⁷¹ In March Reith himself made the first of many appearances at Westminster to meet and talk to a group of MPs about broadcasting.

Such public relations exercises, of course, were increasingly concerned with Reith's desire to push the public service concept and the change from commercial company to public corporation. But as the notion of political affairs broadcasting formed an important part of that public service ideal Reith continually pressed for greater broadcast freedom. Throughout 1925, however, he was hindered by the success of his own labours. The rapid growth of broadcasting made it clear that further government consideration would have to be given to the general question of the BBC's future. The likely appointment of a new broadcasting committee provided the GPO with a good excuse for not venturing out into the dangerous waters of controversial broadcasting. A request in March to broadcast an Oxford Union debate on the King's speech was rejected and when, in May, Reith suggested again a broadcast debate, specifically on unemployment, he was told that the whole question would be considered by the forthcoming broadcasting committee, and should therefore be held in abeyance for the time being.⁷² Despite a statement by Baldwin in the House that a Select Committee would be established to consider the broadcasting of parliament, this too was postponed pending the major broadcasting committee, which it was then decided would not consider this

71. A. Briggs (1961), Op. Cit., 296.

72. BBC, PPEG, Reith to GPO, 27 March 1925; Reith to GPO, 16 May 1925; GPO to Reith, 28 May 1925.

particular question.⁷³ Reith made the Crawford Committee on Broadcasting the excuse for appealing yet again in September 1925, arguing that, because the Committee's recommendations would not be implemented until January 1927, a new policy was needed immediately:

we urgently require to develop new lines, and to keep opening up fresh fields ... The Service is being badly prejudiced.⁷⁴

The fear that broadcasting might be losing impetus and running out of initiative was to reappear in 1928.⁷⁵ Between October 1925 and March 1926, however, while the Crawford Committee was sitting, no progress was to be possible, although Reith did attempt to have the King's speech broadcast.⁷⁶ It was also during this period that Winston Churchill made his first impact upon the BBC, by making political references in a supposedly non-political outside broadcast speech. Reith's determination not to be cowed by the resultant protests was clear from his defence of the decision not to fade Churchill out in mid-speech.⁷⁷

Why was there apparently such considerable government resistance

73. H.C.Debates, vol.182: col.428, I. Fraser, 25 March 1925; vol.182: col.1339, Lt. Cdr. Kenworthy, 1 April 1925; vol.182:col.1814, Lt. Cdr. Kenworthy, 6 April 1925; Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f.15-16, G.E.P. Murray to Sir R. Waterhouse, 30 October 1925; Waterhouse to Murray, 19 November 1925.

74. BBC, CB, Reith to GPO, 15 October 1925.

75. See pp. 321-323 below. Already in 1924 the BBC Control Board had complained in similar vein that 'restrictions are depriving us of the assistance in our programmes of many eminent men, men who have achieved a national position by the strong line they have taken in various movements.' - quoted by A. Briggs (1961), Op.Cit., 269.

76. BBC, PPBG, Reith to Sir Evelyn Murray, 15 October 1925.

77. BBC, PPBG, Hon. V. Phillips to BBC, 26-27 October 1925; A. Briggs (1961), Op. Cit., 270, quotes Reith in a letter to Gainford: 'there is always a great public demand to hear public men, and Churchill is perhaps a better draw than any other Minister or ex-Minister ... I think that our staff were well-advised in not switching off Churchill in the middle of his speech.'

to the development of political affairs or other controversial broadcasting? Taken in context the tendency is not very surprising. The years between 1922 and 1926 were uneasy ones politically, full of change and seeming instability, with the appearance of the first Labour Government and its rapid demise. This was not an obvious moment for any government to give its consent to a controversial and unprecedented experiment. Other matters, far more pressing than the infant BBC, dominated the political stage for both the newly led and deeply split Conservative and the minority Labour governments. If the strong Conservative Government of 1925 could have conceded greater freedom, there was no urgent reason for it to do so, particularly with the clear need for a broadcasting committee, the likelihood of fundamental changes in the structure of broadcasting and the firm prospect of at least a five year term in which to consider and implement any recommendations.

It must also be remembered that between 1922 and 1926 the BBC was still a private company. Although it was not really feared that its Directors would abuse their monopolistic position if broadcast politics were permitted, there was simply no precedent for a commercial company to pursue the high-minded, selfless and, above all, impartial policy envisaged by Reith. The BBC was not yet a national institution. Not until it became one could such ideals truly appear plausible and legitimate. Besides it was still very much an infant finding its way, with an audience of still less than two million licence holders. Although it was rapidly growing, it was not yet the medium which no politician could afford to ignore. Despite Reith's efforts only a minority of MPs had yet shown an interest in broadcasting, and many noticed it only to deplore its likely influence. When in March 1926 Baldwin was informed that the important 1922 Committee of all Conservative back-benchers was 'unanimously' opposed to the broadcasting of parliament, this was one vote which he above all Conservative leaders could not afford to disregard.⁷⁸

78. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f20, G. Rentoul, MP, to Baldwin, 15 March 1926.

Cecil Lewis put his finger on a significant factor when he ascribed political reserve over broadcast politics to

prejudice - the difficulty that every new invention has to face,⁷⁹ particularly in a conservative country like ours.

It had taken Reith himself some time to grasp the revolutionary nature of broadcasting. Many of that pre-broadcasting generation of politicians, such as Asquith, it just passed by.⁸⁰

Politicians had not only their own innate conservatism to consider, but also the very pragmatic, even mercenary, conservatism of the press. If it was still politically safe to ignore broadcasting, the press was an interest group whose feelings had very definitely to be soothed. From the very beginning of the broadcasting service governments showed themselves most sensitive to the views of the press, such that when, in 1929, the BBC first published The Listener, the PM personally involved himself in calming ruffled feelings. Controversy, almost by definition, suggested potential rivalry with the press, and it was therefore only cautiously to be considered.

Government policy is not infrequently linked to party interests. This was particularly true of the Conservative Party's attitude to broadcasting throughout the 1920s, and was well brought out by a letter from the Conservative Postmaster General, W. Mitchell-Thomson, to Baldwin early in 1925. In yet another attempt to extend the boundaries of political affairs broadcasting Reith had suggested the possibility of ministers broadcasting from the studio about the work of their departments:

It would serve a useful rational purpose to have the work of

79. C.A. Lewis, Broadcasting From Within, London 1924, 129.

80. J.C.W. Reith, (1949), Op Cit., 130.

public departments better known and appreciated.⁸¹

Mitchell-Thomson's advice to Baldwin revealed his awareness that party interests would not be best served by extending political affairs broadcasts:

My own view is that it would be extremely important to keep this new and potent medium of broadcasting outside the political arena as far as possible ... It seems probable that even if addresses by Ministers were at the outset confined to non political topics, they would in time tend to trespass on the political field. We should then be asked to approve rejoinders being broadcasted by the opponents, and the precedent⁸² would no doubt be exploited to the full by future Governments.

The Conservative Party recognised for the most part that such a medium, if used for political affairs broadcasting, would probably redound to the advantage of the opposition, because it would provide Labour with the mass communications outlet that it currently lacked. Even if quite impartially controlled it would contribute proportionately more to Labour's means of access to the electorate than to the Conservatives'. The opposition of the 1922 Committee to parliamentary broadcasting has already been mentioned. Between 1922 and 1925 only four parliamentary questions were asked by Conservative MPs about politics and broadcasting, two of which were concerned with the danger of broadcast propaganda, and two favouring greater freedom.⁸³ It had been a Conservative government that refused Reith's first application in 1923 to broadcast three election

81. Baldwin Papers, Bal.65/f9, Quoted in letter from W. Mitchell-Thomson to Baldwin, 19 January 1925.

82. Ibid.

83. H.C.Debates, vol.164:col.2003, Sir Walter de Frece, 5 June 1923; vol 182:col.1339, Sir Walter de Frece, 1 April 1925; vol.187:col.1144, H. Williams, 4 August 1925; the fourth was Ian Fraser's request on 25 March 1925 to have parliamentary debates broadcast. As a blind MP Fraser took a great personal interest in broadcasting, served on the Crawford Committee, and later became a BBC Governor.

speeches.

This is not to suggest that the Party was completely hostile. In October 1923 its Principal Agent, Admiral Sir Reginald Hall, had expressed to Reith his hope that Baldwin's forthcoming speech at Plymouth might be broadcast.⁸⁴ Baldwin himself, apart from his general friendliness, showed an unusual interest in broadcasting techniques, took Reith's advice in 1924 to broadcast from a studio rather than merely to relay a public speech, and visited the BBC's studios the day before he broadcast in order to learn exactly what was involved. Before he broadcast he dined at the Savoy with Reith and then, according to the latter,

gave an excellent twenty minutes talk, which will, I expect win the election for him.⁸⁵

But despite these few small signs of individual interest the Party could hardly be said to have taken any positive note of the existence of broadcasting.⁸⁶ The Labour Party's interest was greater, though equally variable. The parliamentary question on the building dispute broadcast in April 1923 had been raised by a Labour Whip, C.G. Ammon, and the following month Reith admitted that the Labour Party were showing 'considerable hostility' to the BBC.⁸⁷ His public relations work with Ammon and Herbert Morrison, however, made them 'very friendly'.⁸⁸ Morrison, typically, was very quick to take an interest in broadcasting and submitted, and may well have written, evidence to the Sykes Committee on behalf of the London Labour Party. Briggs has pointed out that this was the only evidence

84. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 90, 20 October 1923. It was not.

85. Ibid., 90, 15-17 October 1924.

86. Chamberlain, for example, when Minister of Health, refused Reith's offer to broadcast a speech on housing policy, to be given at a non-political dinner - BBC, PPEG, Reith to GPO, 27 January 1925; F.W. Phillips to Reith 31 January 1925.

87. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 89, 31 May 1923.

88. Ibid., 89-90, 21 June 1923.

to press for the end of the private company and the full public ownership of broadcasting, but it is also interesting to note the reasons given for this proposal:

Already accusations have been made that announcements and subjects of a party political or anti-Labour character have been radiated and, however true or untrue these allegations are, it is nevertheless obvious that in view of the subtle and obscure character of modern commercial publicity, the extension of that psychological treatment of political and industrial questions in connection with broadcasting work involves great dangers to democracy. Without hesitation our submission is that such a monopoly, in view of its character and importance, should be in public hands and that there should be public accountability either for inefficiency or for political or class misuse of the great publicity powers of modern wireless.

Revealing to the full the new post-war awareness and fear of propaganda and mass psychology, the first remarkable thing about this memorandum was that it was written at all, and so early in the life of broadcasting. The second interesting point is that it struck at the heart of the problem for broadcasting - not simply the control of overt political propaganda, but the 'subtle and obscure', the 'psychological' influences that broadcasting could not avoid bringing to bear upon the existing political system and class structure.

Others in the Party also showed an interest. It may be of some slight significance that of the small number of parliamentary questions on politics and broadcasting between 1922 and 1925 eight were by Labour MPs, most complaining about or seeking to guard against BBC bias, and half urging political affairs broadcasting. J.R.

89. BBC, R4/6/3, memorandum of evidence submitted by the Executive Committee of the London Labour Party to the Sykes Committee.

90. H.C. Debates, vol.156: col.38, 3 July 1922; vol.163:col.300-301, 24 April 1923; vol.164:col.238, 15 May 1923; vol.168: col.585-586, 16 November 1923; vol.172:col.259, 8 April 1924, vol.172:

Clynes also demonstrated interest,⁹¹ by broadcasting and writing articles for the Radio Times. In contrast, however, Ramsay MacDonald showed a bad lack of awareness of the new medium, admitting in December 1923 that he was much too occupied to give more than passing attention to radio and maintaining what Briggs describes as a Garbo pose.⁹² Although the Conservative Postmaster General, Worthington- Evans, had written to MacDonald in late 1923 suggesting that a Labour MP be appointed to the Broadcasting Board in order to represent Labour interests, it was only in November 1924, long after the Board had ceased to meet⁹³ and effectively to exist, that Dr. Marion Phillips was appointed. However, it must also be said that it was MacDonald who, in the heat of an election and with the urgent need for publicity before him, was the first Prime Minister to approve General Election broadcasts, in 1924. His own, relayed direct from a public meeting in Glasgow, Reith described as 'quite hopeless:⁹⁴ it will do him considerable harm'.

On the whole neither of the two major political parties (nor the Liberals) had yet taken any great interest in broadcasting. The reasons were largely the same as those which led to Government inaction, with, on the Conservative side, an added party interest in maintaining the existing political communications system relatively unaltered, or at least in not encouraging the development of media it

col.1169, 15 April 1924; vol.175:col.2632, 11 July 1924; vol.185:col.508, 17 June 1925. Thus of 15 such questions 8 were by 6 Labour MPs, 4 by 3 Conservative and 3 by 1 Liberal, J.M.Kenworthy, who in November 1926 transferred his allegiance to the Labour Party.

91. See p.244 above.

92. Radio Times, 21 December 1923; A. Briggs (1961), Op. Cit., 271.

93. GPO, Post 33-M15956/1924 Broadcasting Board, file 11.

94. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 90, 15 October 1924. Reith had warned that 'it was a mistake to append an invisible audience of millions to a visible audience of two or three thousand'. - J.C.W. Reith (1949), Op. Cit., 96.

could not influence or control. Reith later wrote of the BBC that

it had naturally in its first year made no great impact on public life and affairs It was regarded as a medium for entertainment in a narrow sense The Savoy Hill conception of the part that broadcasting could play in national and international affairs was far ahead of public opinion.⁹⁵

With little obvious progress as far as political affairs broadcasting was concerned the Radio Times was left to make a decidedly hollow defence of the British system against American accusations of excessive caution. News had been received that an Australian political party was buying a radio station, and that American socialists were buying air-time:

the caution of which we are accused has at least the merit of preserving the British listener from an orgy of special pleading such as is envisaged in the recent reports received from the United States....while avoiding all partisan bias we are still able to provide a forum for the expression of authoritative opinion on questions which command public attention.⁹⁶

But perhaps a more realistic view, which pointed one of the major hindrances to the development of current affairs broadcasting and hinted at the frustration felt by the BBC management, was provided by Cecil Lewis:

The limitations of our News Service have often been discussed. The effect upon the service is far reaching, for it tends to give the impression (particularly to the staff) that topicality is banned - or at least, not encouraged. So-called Topical Talks,

95. J.C.W. Reith, (1949), Op. Cit., 95.

96. Radio Times, 16 October 1925.

started with the idea of being a little more up-to-date, were the outcome of ⁹⁷this: but, for various reasons, they have not been too successful.

The evidence which Reith presented to the Crawford Committee on Broadcasting, in 1925, rehearsed all the arguments that he had been using with the Postmaster General and others for the previous three years. His ⁹⁸general statements of vision have already been discussed. His particular arguments reflected his frustration and sense of enchainment:

While appreciating the immense potentialities in this opportunity for helping towards the aim of a more informed and enlightened democracy, the BBC have been cramped and restricted in pressing towards its fulfilment. Only when they have been freed from the chains which now impede or nullify progress in this sphere can one of the chief functions be realised the present rigorous censorship without regard to the eminence of the talker is hampering the due development of one of the most important sides of the work and deterring ⁹⁹prominent men from making as much use of the Service as they might.

He suggested that by regularly arranging debates on political and other controversial topics, and by giving leaders of opinion the opportunities to place their case before the public, a great service would be rendered. He assured the committee that

little danger would be incurred so long as the necessary safeguards for impartiality were provided and discrimination

97. C.A. Lewis, 'Building better Programmes', Radio Times, 8 January 1926.

98. See p.227 above.

99. BBC, R4/2.2, J. Reith, Memorandum of Information on the Scope and Conduct of the Broadcasting Service, 4.

100

exercised in the choice of subjects.

The freedom that Reith sought was supreme. In response to questioning by Lord Blanesburgh, at his first appearance before the Committee, he argued that it should be left to the Executive of the BBC, 'a man who is above Party politics', to decide to a very large extent what should or should not be broadcast. Upon Blanesburgh's likening him to a judge, however, Lord Crawford intervened with a sharp comment that the Committee would never recommend that the Chief Executive should have the independence (or pension) of the judiciary.¹⁰¹

Reith's view that the BBC could become the universal and universally accepted means of impartial communication on political matters was indicated by his vision of the future of news gathering and of the press. He suggested that when the broadcasters were eventually allowed to broadcast events as they happened the transmission of news would become virtually spontaneous. Newspapers would then tend to become primarily organs of opinion and comment, and more useful thereby to the public than they were at present.¹⁰²

The implications of this idea were considerable, for if interpreted logically it suggested a division, by media, of fact and opinion. The BBC would provide the former in the shape of up to the minute news and statements by experts and politicians, the latter interpreting these facts and political statements in line with their view-points. The public would hear the unbiased facts and judge the newspaper's interpretation accordingly. In this way broadcasting and the press would become complementary, though with broadcasting filling the more fundamental and central role. This was a vision for the far future, as unacceptable to the press of 1925 as it would be to today's broadcasters. A very different model was provided by Hamilton Fyfe,

100. Ibid., 4. Reith's handwritten emphasis. Beside the underlined passage Reith wrote: 'Necessary for confidence in intelligence and integrity of those responsible'. Belief in the BBC's integrity was all-important. This was perhaps indicative, despite his desire for controversy, of Reith's own essentially circumscribed and establishment outlook.

101. BBC, R4/2/3/1. second meeting. See also p.234 above.

102. BBC, R4/2/2. Supplementary Memorandum of Evidence, by Reith.

the Editor of the Daily Herald, in his evidence. Whilst deploring the slide of the press into scandal, gossip and public entertainment, he felt that wireless would now relieve newspapers of the need to appease the baser instincts by itself supplying such material. The press would revert to its proper role as a serious medium of news and intelligent opinion.¹⁰³

Considering the serious issues involved, the Crawford Committee paid remarkably little attention to the question of controversial broadcasting. The overall future of the BBC, its transformation from Company to Corporation, was naturally of foremost importance. The Committee's conclusions on controversy were perhaps predictable, therefore, and endorsed the cautious line of 'solvitur ambulando':

We are unable to lay down a precise line of policy or to assess the degree to which argument can be safely transmitted But, speaking generally, we believe that if the material be of high quality, not too lengthy or insistent, and distributed with scrupulous fairness, licensees will desire a moderate amount of controversy in this and in other problems the Commissioners [BBC Governors] will do well at the outset to act with firm and consistent circumspection.¹⁰⁴

Reith and Reith's biographer, Boyle, have painted W. Mitchell-Thomson as a PMG whose hostility to the BBC was second only to the PMG of the 1930s, Sir Kingsley Wood. In the case of both the picture is too strong. Mitchell-Thomson certainly proved a tight-fisted controller of the BBC's purse, but his recommendations on broadcast controversy to Baldwin and the Cabinet, following the Crawford report, could hardly have been bettered by Reith. Indeed it may be wondered whether he really needed Crawford's very mild recommendations to stimulate him to act on this matter. It is clear that the proposed constitutional changes were as significant in the

103. BBC, R4/2/4/3. Written evidence of Hamilton Fyfe.

104. Cmd.2599, Report of the Broadcasting Committee 1925., paragraph 15.

determination of the future of broadcast controversy as any specific counsel by the Committee. Immediately following the presentation of the report in March 1926 Mitchell-Thomson told the Cabinet of its recommendations. He admitted that until that time the Government had effectively barred controversy. However:

The exercise of any form of censorship is an extremely difficult and invidious task, and I think there is much to be said for relieving the Government of this responsibility. But attacks will be made upon the impartiality or discretion of the [Corporation]; the broadcasting of a partisan speech, whether on a political or industrial controversy, will certainly provoke criticism from some section of the public; and the Postmaster General will be pressed to exercise a veto.¹⁰⁵

The only way to avoid placing the PMG in the impossible position of having to determine what should or should not be censored, assuming controversial broadcasting was permitted, would be for him to decline responsibility for any aspect of the Corporation's programme policy:

I should be glad to know if the Cabinet agree with me that - (a) controversy should not be entirely barred: (b) that it should be within the control of the [Corporation], and (c) that the Postmaster General should decline to accept responsibility for or to review the [Corporation's] decisions or arrangements.¹⁰⁶

Boyle's implication that Mitchell-Thomson was responsible for the

105. Baldwin Papers, Bal.64/f196-203, Report by PMG on Crawford Report, March 1926.
106. Ibid. It should be noted that in his desire not to involve the PMG in BBC policy-making Mitchell-Thomson was following closely the view of Sir Evelyn Murray, the Secretary of the Post Office, in his evidence to Crawford: 'the Corporation should enjoy a large measure of independence and should not be subject either in its general policy or its choice of programmes to the detailed control and supervision of the Postmaster General, from which would follow the corollary that the Postmaster General would not be expected to accept responsibility or to defend the proceedings of the Corporation in Parliament.' - Quoted by A. Briggs (1961), Op.Cit., 328.

continued ban on controversial broadcasting is therefore mistaken.
107

Nor can the role of the BEC in the General Strike be seen as an influence for greater freedom upon the Postmaster General. His recommendations were first stated before the Strike, and were recapitulated in similar terms afterwards. In July 1926 Mitchell-Thomson wrote to Baldwin asking for a decision on this question which had clearly not been dealt with by Cabinet in March. It is worth quoting this memorandum at length, because it makes clear the Postmaster General's attitude, the considerable extent to which he felt the new Corporation could be trusted, and the importance of the commercial nature of the old BEC in hindering greater broadcast freedom:

I am convinced that if the Postmaster General or any other Minister is required to exercise any kind of censorship, he can only do it on the rigid line of vetoing all controversy as is done at present. He would be placed in an intolerable position if he were required to determine upon his own judgement which controversial broadcasts were to be admitted and which were to be barred. If, on the other hand, the determination is left to the Corporation, it is evident that the practical difficulties of giving equal opportunities to both sides of a controversial question will be considerable At the same time It seems a drastic curtailment of the potentialities, educative and otherwise, of broadcasting, if all matters of controversy, which necessarily cover nearly all the important questions of the day, are rigorously barred, and it will tend to accentuate the complaints, which are growing, that the non-musical portions of the programmes are too colourless and insipid. So long as the broadcasting service was controlled by the wireless manufacturers the ban upon the controversial matter was justifiable and necessary. But the establishment of a new Corporation of a quasi-public character and independent of commercial interests affords an opportunity of giving the programmes a wider scope There

107. A. Boyle, Op.Cit., 208.

will be no doubt occasions on which the action of the Corporation in admitting or rejecting particular speeches will arouse criticism, but I think that the new body may be trusted to proceed with discretion, to feel their way gradually and to keep in step with public opinion.¹⁰⁸

He proposed a clause in the new BBC Licence giving the PMG the power to prohibit the broadcasting of particular or general matter, and specified editorials as an example of what he had in mind. Clearly this was not intended as a censorship clause.

The Postmaster General was therefore favourably inclined to the idea of controversial broadcasts and to trusting the BBC to act sensibly. Two weeks previously he had announced in the House that the major recommendations of the Crawford Committee were being accepted.¹⁰⁹ Yet the outcome was to be very different from that hoped for by Reith. The issue did not go before Cabinet until 27 October, and when it did the Cabinet agreed

that the Postmaster General should not include in the Licence to the new Broadcasting Corporation, for the present, any provision authorising them to permit the broadcasting of matters of controversy: but that the Corporation should be left to do its best to improve the existing broadcast programmes without such powers.¹¹⁰

It was, however, agreed that after an experimental period of six months the PMG might report on progress to the Cabinet.¹¹¹ On 15 November, during the Commons debate on broadcasting, Mitchell-Thomson therefore announced the decision not only to prohibit editorialisation, under

108. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f33-35, Mitchell-Thomson to Baldwin, 26 July 1926.

109. H.C. Debates, vol. 198:col.448, 14 July 1926.

110. Cab.23/54(26); Cab.24,C.P.355(26).

111. He did not until early 1928, when the BBC approached him yet again.

the Licence clause mentioned above, but also broadcasts on political, religious or industrial controversy. Clearly he had met opposition to his proposals of March and July in Cabinet, and it may be wondered to what extent this ministerial wariness was due to the awakening of senior politicians to the power and influence of broadcasting as a result of the General Strike in May. The precise nature of Cabinet opposition does not, unfortunately, appear to have been recorded, but Mitchell-Thomson's explanation of the decision suggests both government interest and circumspection:

our view is that this subject as yet has received quite imperfect consideration at the hands of the public in general we are maintaining the existing restrictions because we do not want to start introducing political controversy into this new service without very careful consideration and the fullest discussion in the House and in public.¹¹²

The Assistant Postmaster General, Viscount Wolmer, equally emphasised that the Government's mind was not closed on this subject but that they had decided that, in the early days of the new and in itself innovatory Corporation, a further and probable source of controversy should be excluded.¹¹³ The response to this decision in the House was predominantly hostile, but the Government's caution was not wholly unjustifiable, given the other controversial changes that were being made to the whole character of the BBC.¹¹⁴

The imposition of a ban on controversial broadcasting, under clause 4 of the Licence, was to have constitutional effects lasting well beyond its removal, and resulted in a permanent point of difference between the constitutions of the BBC and the commercial broadcasting authority, the ITA (later the IBA). In recommending that the BBC be given greater broadcast freedom Mitchell-Thomson had

112. H.C. Debates, vol.199:cols.1581-82, 15 November 1926.

113. Ibid. col. 1641.

114. Ibid., cols. 1583-1638. See also pp 242-243 above.

suggested the inclusion, in the Licence, of a clause expressly binding the BBC to ¹¹⁵act impartially in the presentation of controversial issues. This clause was omitted when it was decided to ban controversy under clause 4, and could not be reinserted when the ban was lifted in 1928. Subsequently no government considered it necessary to confirm in writing what had been established in practice. But when the new and untried Independent Television Authority was created it was considered desirable to include just such a condition in the Television Act, in contrast to the BBC, which by then had very definitely ¹¹⁶become the known and trusted quantity which it had not been in 1926.

It has been possible to chart the course of controversial and political affairs broadcasting up to the demise of the Company with hardly a reference to the General Strike, and indeed, except as an example to all concerned of the delicate relationship between government and BBC, and as a lasting sore to the Labour Party, the Strike was not of the primary importance to our story that it might appear. The event was just so extraordinary, the role of the BBC in it so wholly divorced from either previous or subsequent experience, that it has attracted such an interest as to lift it quite out of context. This is not to deny its importance in the early life of broadcasting. It demonstrated both the BBC's potential as a purveyor of news and its limitations as an impartial and entirely apolitical organisation. It illustrated Reith's determination never to be officially controlled by government, or by express order to be directed to do something he did not wish: but at the same time it revealed the compromises to which this concern for appearances could lead. Last but not least it showed the unashamed support of Reith and the BBC for the principles of moderation over extremism and discussion over confrontation, and, ultimately, their backing for the state over what, in Reith's opinion, endangered it.

115. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f33-35, Mitchell-Thomson to Baldwin, 26 July 1926.

116. The Television Bill, 1953-54 (127), vol.iii, 487, clause 3(1).

It is not necessary here to detail the events of the Strike as they effected the BBC, nor to analyse the BBC's position in any great detail. Briggs, Symons and others have already covered the ground well.¹¹⁷ Between the 3rd and the 12th May the BBC was the only major national communications system working. During this period it broadcast regular news bulletins on the situation, taking both government and TUC statements as well as agency news. It broadcast statements and appeals by the Prime Minister and developed its own form of editorial, appealing for calm during the crisis. The news was mostly truthful, but was selected, and the general tenor was one of support for government, for moderation and conciliation. The BBC truly worked as a unifying and integrating element within the nation, and Reith saw it as 'an organisation within the constitution'. Churchill, placed by Baldwin in charge of the Government's propaganda sheet, The British Gazette, strongly urged commandeering the BBC. Baldwin, however, confident of Reith's trustworthiness and impressed by his arguments that the BBC could be a more powerful conciliator if it remained semi-independent, managed to prevent the extremists in Cabinet from carrying the day.

Reith saw the BBC as a unifier, an upholder of the democratic system and defender of the constitution, whilst like many others he regarded the Strike as a direct attempt to impose the will of the trade unions over that of the Government in a wholly undemocratic manner. Again like so many others he was perhaps unduly impressed by the Astbury ruling in the High Court that the General Strike was illegal. There could be no question of the BBC being impartial as between democracy and undemocratic force, or between legality and illegality. Impartiality depends on one's position, and Reith's was almost completely with the Government as representing the national interest on this issue. He accepted that the Government could either commandeer the BBC or legally require it to broadcast anything it specified; but in any case, as he wrote in a famous justification

117. A. Briggs(1961), Op. Cit., 360-384; J. Symons, The General Strike, London 1957, 177-182; M. Tracey, The Production of Political Television, London 1977, 142-156.

after the Strike was over:

since the BBC was a national institution, and since the Government in this crisis were acting for the people, apart from any Emergency powers or clause in our Licence the BBC was for the Government in the crisis too.¹¹⁸

He felt that the BBC had a clear duty to assist in maintaining essential services, and appeals were therefore broadcast for volunteer strikebreakers. The BBC also had a duty to encourage the preservation of law and order, and a memorandum written during the Strike stated that

we should make a particular point of emphasising statements calculated to diminish the spirit of violence and hostility.¹¹⁹

Reith's sympathies and his general approach to the Strike have been well summed up by Symons and Tracey. Symons points out that Reith might have sympathised with the miners' claims:

but although, like many other liberals, he might have supported the miners against the coal owners, he was certainly not prepared to support the strikers against the government.¹²⁰

Most recently Tracey interprets Reith's statements during and after the Strike thus:

What Reith was doing was defining the BBC as an "organisation within the Constitution" and thereby effectively defining impartiality - for specific institutional and ideological reasons

118. Reith to Senior Staff, 15 May 1926. Quoted by A. Briggs (1961), Op. Cit., 365.

119. BBC, NA, memo probably by Reith although signed by Lord Gainford, 6 May 1926.

120. J. Symons, Op. Cit., 178.

- in such a way as to make it synonymous not with a particular party line but with a particular political and moral order.¹²¹

When the BBC concluded its announcement of the end of the Strike with Blake's 'Jerusalem' and a message from the King, this typified the BBC's position:

To turn to such established features of an established order was a metaphorical sigh that the crisis had passed and that the political and moral order¹²² with which the BBC had identified throughout remained intact.

Yet was this stance either surprising or reprehensible? It was one which the BBC has pursued ever since, particularly with regard to the situation in Northern Ireland. The BBC was indeed a national institution: if it was to have any political raison-d'etre these would have to be to tell the truth and to act in the national interest. Yet these two aims could quite clearly conflict, and where the truth was a matter of opinion and where the issue involved was one of the national interest, it was for the BBC to make the unenviable decision of where precisely truth and national interest lay, and whether they were compatible. An interesting example of the nature of such decisions had occurred less than two months before the Strike. It reveals that Reith and his colleagues did not need the events of May to appreciate and determine the position of the BBC vis-a-vis the national interest. In its meeting of 11 March 1926 the BBC Board of Directors had discussed news:

It was pointed out that certain of the news broadcast contained an announcement which was inimical to the interests of British trade and the Managing Director undertook to ask Reuters [who provided the BBC with news] as a general rule to exclude

121. M. Tracey, Op. Cit., 151.

122. Ibid., 155.

announcements of contracts placed abroad.¹²³

This incident should not be over-emphasised. It was during the life of the Company when all the Directors were business men; nor is it known whether this undertaking was carried out, or for how long. Nevertheless its significance cannot be denied - Reith was agreeing to a selection of news not on the grounds of newsworthiness but of the national interest. If one equates truth with a journalistic definition of newsworthiness based on public interest in an issue, then it must be accepted that Reith was party here if not to a fabrication of the truth then at least to a minor falsification of it.

The same was to be true of events during the General Strike. Reith sidestepped the issue, arguing that

as the government are sure that they are right, both on the facts of the dispute and on the constitutional issues, any steps which we may take to communicate the truth dispassionately should be to the advantage of the Government.¹²⁴

The BBC throughout was certainly careful to distinguish between news agency, government and TUC originated news, yet its fundamental attitude to the Strike was far closer to what the Government would have considered the truth than to what the strikers would have done. The BBC's view of the true state of affairs was, and would always be, coloured by its view of the national interest, even during the Suez crisis when it was seen to act contrary to the government line. It was inevitable and quite legitimate that it should be so: for where truth was open to interpretation the national interest was the only yardstick for its own interpretation of truth which the BBC could use. Not to have done so would have been to set itself up as opposed

123. Gainford Papers, BBC Board Minute Book, 11 March 1926.

124. BBC, NA, memo probably by Reith although signed by Lord Gainford, 6 May 1926.

to the national interest and in consequence hostile to the people it was created to serve.

The only charge, therefore, to which the BBC was possibly open was one of too closely equating national interest with the government line. Yet here, quite apart from his natural tendencies, Reith was placed in a position where he could really do nothing else, given the constitutional relationship of BBC and Government. Reith agonised over the consequences of this relationship, and was greatly hurt that the Government did not completely trust the BBC to act in the national interest. Yet his primary concern was to avoid being commandeered, to prevent the BBC from being seen as under government control. He considered it 'cardinally important ... to maintain the BBC tradition and preserve its prestige', and felt that it would have been

a calamity if public confidence in the BBC had been dissipated¹²⁵ through actions, negative or positive, during the Emergency.

This was the first major evidence of Reith's determination that the BBC should be seen not to be constitutionally bound to the Government. As already shown, however, this determination did not originate in the Strike: it was a natural consequence of Reith's ambitions for the service, and later incidences of the BBC's readiness to submit to unofficial pressure rather than be directly ordered, cannot be traced back to the events of May 1926.

Two further issues need briefly to be considered: the reaction of the Labour and Conservative parties to BBC actions during the Strike and the BBC's development of 'editorials'. Conservative reaction was divided. Hard-liners such as Churchill deplored what they saw both as a wasted opportunity to put out government propaganda, and as an anti-government stance in the BBC's broadcasting of TUC communiqués and other non-official news. Whether or not this damaged the BBC's

125. Reith to Senior Staff, 15 May 1926. Quoted by A. Briggs (1961), Op. Cit., 365.

chances of gaining Cabinet approval for controversial broadcasting in the new Licence it is impossible to say. By contrast Baldwin and J.C.C. Davidson had nothing but praise for the BBC, whilst the Executive Committee of the National Union sent a verbal message of thanks to Reith for the BBC's work during the Strike.¹²⁶

By contrast the Labour Party was united in its objection to BBC policy, though the outcome of these protests was in some respects to the BBC's benefit. From 5 May onwards Reith had received constant requests by the Party to permit one of its number to broadcast. William Graham, Charles Trevelyan and Hugh Dalton all visited Reith and MacDonald wrote and phoned to him. Reith personally considered the idea a good one and believed that it could do only good, but he felt constrained to seek Davidson and Baldwin's opinions and they proved too strongly opposed to the idea for Reith to go against them. They argued strongly that such a broadcast would only reinforce Churchill's demands to have the BBC commandeered. Reith explained to Graham and MacDonald that the BBC was not a free agent and, following the end of the Strike, wrote to express his hope that they did not blame either himself or the BBC for its actions. But he had to admit to his diary that the BBC was 'properly in bad with the Labour Party'.¹²⁷ Graham considered the BBC's broadcasts hopelessly one sided, and MacDonald, after calling the BBC biased, concluded:

We have become so accustomed to unfair play in publicity that we are beginning to take it as an ordinary experience, but I regret that this new form of publicity seems to have already yielded to tendentious propaganda.¹²⁸

As the events of May receded, however, Graham, MacDonald and other

126. NUCUA, Executive Committee meeting, 8 June 1926. Was it perhaps, verbal because they recognised that it would be impolitic to have such an expression of thanks generally known?

127. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 97, 18 May 1926.

128. MacDonald to Reith, 17 May 1926. Quoted by Boyle, Op.Cit., 205. See also article by Ellen Wilkinson, Radio Times, 28 May 1926.

Labour leaders became more friendly towards the BBC. They came to appreciate the BBC's difficulties, and the outcome was an altogether closer and more intimate association between Reith and MacDonald, and a greater interest by the Labour Party leadership in broadcasting. Reith visited MacDonald at his London home and MacDonald spent the evening at Reith's.¹²⁹ Amongst Labour's rank and file, however, memories of the BBC's role continued, and were to contribute to renewed animosity after 1931.

The 'editorials' stemmed directly from Reith's never ceasing desire to extend BBC freedom to deal with controversial issues, which continued unabated throughout 1926 quite irrespective of the Crawford Committee or the General Strike. In late April B.E. Nicolls, the London Station Director, had proposed to Reith that outside speakers, including Labour leaders, might be permitted to give brief talks on the need for calm. In the event these talks started quite non-controversially as internally written appeals. After the end of the General Strike, however, but while the miners were still out, they became more controversial. This was the result of close liaison between BBC Director of Publicity Gladstone Murray and J.C.C. Davidson, and was not wholly approved by Reith, for he recognised that the conciliatory line taken would be objected to by Cabinet hard-liners. Murray saw the editorials as a chance to develop BBC influence and freedom gradually, but although Reith agreed he felt that the development should be even slower.¹³⁰ When in late May the editorials over-reached themselves and Mitchell-Thomson demanded to vet every script before transmission, Reith ended the experiment.

For a brief while he hoped that the effective ban on controversy would not be reimposed, now that the BBC had proved itself, but the Post Office quickly clamped down again.¹³¹ On 28 May Reith wrote to the GPO suggesting that representatives of the employers and workers

129. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 98, 3 October 1926; 22 December 1926.

130. Ibid., 138, 25 May 1926.

131. Ibid., 139, 26 May 1926.

of the Federated Associations of Boot and Shoe Manufacturers of Great Britain might broadcast on how industrial peace had been maintained in their industry for thirty years by putting all disputes to arbitration. This proposal was immediately rejected.¹³² In July Reith appealed again to be allowed to develop controversial broadcasting, hoping thereby to influence Mitchell-Thomson's recommendations to Cabinet regarding Crawford. The Postmaster General had not needed to be influenced, but Reith still did not achieve his aim.¹³³ When in August the Industrial Peace Union applied to have one of their public meetings broadcast, the BBC referred the matter to the GPO merely for confirmation of the decision already taken that such a broadcast would not be possible.¹³⁴ In November, however, the Post Office had to reject yet another appeal, this time to be allowed to broadcast speeches from the Hull Station by candidates in the forthcoming Hull By-Election.¹³⁵

From the controversial broadcasting point of view, 1926 was a momentous year more for the results of Crawford than for the effects of the General Strike. The outcome of both for the immediate future of controversy was disappointing but understandable. Boyle saw the Strike as a climacteric for the visions of John Reith:

the General Strike cost Reith his innocence. Henceforth he became less unworldly. His eyes moved towards the establishment, on the sound principle that what a man could not defeat he must join.¹³⁶

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132. BBC, R34/881/1, Reith to Sir Evelyn Murray, 28 May 1926; F.W. Phillips to Reith, 1 June 1926.
133. Reith to Mitchell-Thomson, 6 July 1926. Mentioned by A. Briggs(1961), Op.Cit., 359.
134. BBC, R34/881/1, Carpendale to Reith, 16 September 1926.
135. BBC, PPEGEB, correspondence regarding Hull by-election, 1-3 November 1926.
136. A. Boyle, Op.Cit., 203.

Evidence both of Reith's ambitions for broadcasting's democratic role, and of his continued pressure for broadcast controversy, do not bear out the first proposition. Nor is it possible to see the situation of the BBC during the Strike more as a future influence upon than a symptom of its delicate relationship with government and of its position in the state. Of course memories of the Strike would for long influence the views and decisions of those who were involved, but fundamentally the outlook of the BBC in such a unique situation was predetermined, and Reith never disputed that he would have acted in an almost identical manner whether or not government pressure had been applied. Reith's eyes did not turn to the establishment - they were already there, quite deliberately seeking to place the BBC (and himself) within and as a perfecting agency for the established form of the democratic state. Membership of the establishment did not necessarily imply uncritical approval of it, and Reith, who could never have been uncritical for long, found almost everything to criticise.

CHAPTER FIVE

Broadcasting and Politics: First Progress, 1927 -1929.

"On broad principles our policy might be interpreted as combining the liberalism of Mr. Baldwin with the innate conservative caution of Mr. MacDonald. This means a little more than the forum, it means a control just a 'little to the left'; which after all, is faithful reflection of collective aspiration."

W.E. Gladstone Murray, BBC Assistant Controller
(Information), 6 March 1928.

Between 1923 and 1938, when he left the BBC, Reith was constantly involved in the round of party and national politics. Some reference has already been made to his character and outlook, but so central was he to the development of political broadcasting that it is necessary to fill out briefly the picture so far given.

Biography, diary and innumerable pen-portraits by former colleagues, all agree that Reith was a highly complex man. He gave the impression of being an extreme autocrat and could be most objectionably arrogant and snobbish. His diary reveals at times the most unattractive vanity and sense of his own superiority. It contains such comments as:

What a curse it is to have outstanding comprehensive ability and intelligence, combined with a desire to use them to maximum purpose,

and,

I am much burdened with a sense of my own ability, and this is not conceit.¹

Yet at the same time his self-hatred could be almost unbearable. Not only did he consider that he was condemned to eternal damnation, but he also believed himself a complete failure in life:

I have been such a ghastly² mediocrity compared to what I wanted to be and could have been.

A BBC governor of the 1930s, Mary Agnes Hamilton, later wrote a most perceptive and essentially sympathetic description of Reith, in which she described him as

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1. C. Stuart, Op.Cit., 142, 21 January 1927; 147, 14 January 1929.
 2. Ibid., 123, 24 November 1935.

a most baffling mixture of the large and the small In John Reith's case, a shy and intensely self-conscious creature is condemned by the fact of being over six foot six in height to inescapable prominence. Someone once remarked on the absurdity of saying that, on a difficult occasion, one feels small: what one actually feels is unduly large. John Reith's efforts, at times, to behave as though he were not there are pathetic.³

The product of a strict Calvinist and Scottish manse upbringing, Reith had at one and the same time a deep respect and reverence for tradition and traditional institutions, yet a profound disregard for many of his fellow men who in themselves represented just those traditions and institutions. He had a disproportionate respect for academia and suffered a decided sense of inferiority for not being himself university trained. Yet it was a sense of inferiority in formal education and background, never in intelligence. Although he rapidly established himself and was honoured with all the accoutrements of the establishment - a knighthood, membership of the Athenaeum and the recognition of the eminent - he was too self-conscious, too introspective, too sensitive and too well aware by turns of his inferiority and superiority, to be ever wholly at ease. He was proud to be a man who had reached the top on merit alone, yet feared that this fact might in some way diminish him and his power. The trappings of power meant a great deal to him and ritual, ceremony and uniform were his delights.

Reith felt a great affinity with and liking for the two major political leaders of the age, Ramsay MacDonald and Stanley Baldwin. MacDonald also was a Scot, while Baldwin shared Reith's celtic spirit. All three in their own way were idealists and romantics. All three spoke in general, visionary terms. MacDonald, the illegitimate and wholly self-educated son of a Scottish crofter, was even more of a self-made man than Reith and, like Reith, sought the comfort of

3. M.A. Hamilton, Remembering My Good Friends, London 1944, 284.

establishment recognition without ever really finding it. Like Reith he had never been to university. Baldwin, despite his wealth, was equally such a departure from the normal political mould - quiet, comfortable, retiring, apparently simple and straightforward - that again he gave the appearance of not being wholly of the system. In politics he appeared a self-made man, having reached the top apparently without trying to do so, yet holding on once there with a tenacity which excited the admiration even of his enemies. Reith admired both leaders for their eminence and their vision, if not for their minds and actions. Between 1923 and 1937 the BBC was to know no other Prime Minister than these two, and Reith's regard for them was to be of extreme significance. Even when he did not respect the individual leader he had a respect for the office of Prime Minister which was undoubtedly to influence his response to government pressure. Reith saw himself as a public servant (though not a civil servant) and so bound to serve in whatever way was required. This was at no time more apparent than in 1938 when he left the BBC, at the specific request of the PM, Neville Chamberlain, to go to a job he unreservedly disliked, as chairman of Imperial Airways.

Reith's idealistic vision has already been discussed.⁴ His political understanding, beliefs and ambitions were a vital element of this vision. In view of the innumerable occasions when he was described as autocratic and dictatorial, with the implication that this was the form of rule he favoured, the first question to be asked is whether he was a democrat. Like most rational people of the period he had strong and sincere qualms about the practicability of democracy and the sense of the electorate. He queried whether the electoral process secured the best possible rulers, 'aristocrats of character and intelligence'. Moreover his knowledge of his own abilities and belief in his own divine predestination to achieve great works, led him to the notion of a 'democratically born autocracy', with himself as the autocrat.⁵

4. See pp.226-235 above.

5. J.C.W.Reith (1949), Op. Cit., 170; see p.233 above, note 26.

Yet his autocratic dreams remained democratically based and did not prevent him from working to improve and perfect, if possible, the democratic system. Certainly he had autocratic ambitions for himself; as Mary Agnes Hamilton put it:

he is one of those who never grow out of the illusion Carlyle denounced so passionately: the illusion that the universe is made for them. Not perhaps to make them happy, but to give them scope. John Reith's powers are ⁶ great, but no one has the scope that he thinks he should have.

Reith knew he could run everything better than everyone else, but this led to a daydream of himself not as a dictator but as a successful if autocratic democratic leader. For mental superiority in such circumstances would be democratically recognised. In the corridors of power he hinted at semi-autocratic posts abroad: 'Hankey told me yesterday that Sir John Reith fancies himself as Ambassador in ⁷Washington, or as Viceroy in India', wrote Thomas Jones in his diary. But Reith's own comments make it evident that his fantasies were of still higher things. In his autobiography he mentioned MacDonald's comment, after the 1929 election, that he was having difficulty in making up his Cabinet to everyone's satisfaction: "'maybe you'll find out for yourself someday what it's ⁸like'". The previous year Lord Riddell of the Newspaper Proprietors' Association had told Reith that 'he thought I would be ⁹Prime Minister one day'. Reith's naive belief in his own ability to set the world to rights was compounded by a comment of Lloyd George's in 1931:

He said that he could cure unemployment in the country in a year

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6. M.A. Hamilton, Op. Cit., 285.
 7. T. Jones, A Diary With Letters, London 1954, 176, 8 March 1929.
 8. J.C.W. Reith (1949), Op. Cit., 120.
 9. Ibid., 129.

if I was seconded with him I could not help feeling upset as a result, feeling that I had lost so much time up to date.¹⁰

Earlier Baldwin had tried to disabuse Reith of his simplistic view of politics, but Reith also remembered the latter part of his comment:

"No matter how much imagination or vision or energy the Prime Minister may have, it's like being stuck in a glue pot. Perhaps you'll find that someday".¹¹

These ambitions were largely fantasies. Reith wrote his diary very much as a way of letting off steam, without caring much about the truth or sense of what he said, whilst his autobiography was essentially an exercise in self-advertisement. Nevertheless they do indicate his innermost illusions, his egotism and the dreams he entertained. For dreams they were. Reith was too much of an individualist to be a successful minister, particularly in the subordinate posts he was given by Churchill during the early stages of the war. He was also too independent and too rebellious ever to have been a loyal party man. Above all he was simply too much of a dreamer ever really to grasp hold of and cope with mundane political realities, unlike Baldwin and MacDonald who were always politicians first and foremost.

Reith's diary demonstrates his superficial approach to politics. Initially drawn to the Liberals he then came to feel that the Labour Party might best represent his own viewpoint. Consequently he applied to J.R. Clynes in 1920 with a view to becoming a Labour MP. Yet Clynes' coolness offended and discouraged him, and by 1922 he had given up the idea. With the political crisis of October 1922 Reith immediately contacted Conservative and Unionist Central Office. Yet when Sir William Bull asked him a few days later to be his personal assistant he transferred his support from the new Conservative

10. C. Stuart, Op.Cit., 109, 15 October 1931.

11. J.C.W. Reith (1949) Op. Cit., 129.

government to the coalition Conservative group headed by Austen Chamberlain. Later in the year he told Chamberlain that he had always been a Liberal, but that he approved his line.

Once he joined the BBC, Reith's personal political ambitions were put in abeyance, but he continued to express his opinions in his diary. The superficiality of his approach is revealed by a comment before the 1924 election and following MacDonald's broadcast, which Reith considered a technical failure:

I hope the Unionist party have a really decisive majority as otherwise things are so unsatisfactory. I have been having some sympathy with the Labour lot, but not now, having been much put off by MacDonald's speech.¹²

Between 1926 and 1929, however, Reith developed his friendship with Ramsay MacDonald and, having helped both the latter and Baldwin in the preparation of their broadcasts, was favourably disposed towards the new Labour government. Yet the deteriorating political situation and the inability of the Government to handle it quickly disillusioned him, and the crisis of 1931 found him solidly behind the MacDonald/Baldwin coalition. As ever this support did not last and, in the absence of what he considered any reasonable opposition party, he was reduced to a general condemnation of all politics and politicians. This and his simplistic view of what politics involved was indicated when he wrote:

I reflect sometimes on politics. The whole horrid technique should be abolished. Government of a country is a matter of proper policy and proper administration, in other words efficiency.¹³

It might be argued that Reith saw one of the BBC's principal

12. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 90, 28 October 1924.

13. Ibid., 213, 29 November 1936. See also 211, 6 June 1936; 213, 15 December 1936.

duties as being to distinguish between what was rational and what was irrational - certainly between what was objective and subjective. The irrational elements of argument from both left and right were to be resisted and, through the encouragement of rational statement, shown for what they were. Reason and objectivity seemed attainable and, as already stated, it was perhaps too easy to equate these with the perception of truth and right action. Like Cecil Lewis Reith saw politics too much in black and white terms. In this respect there was a fundamental flaw in his avowed support for the British democratic tradition, for the pluralistic approach, although it is doubtful whether he recognised it as such, despite his autocratic temperament and concern for efficiency. Yet in spite of Reith's much quoted diary entries, fantasising about the possibility of himself becoming a dictator, he did not reject the pluralist form of democracy, but rather gave its various elements a different balance. His vision was possibly of an idealised pluralistic system, in which the electoral decision received a greater emphasis than was in practice granted and in which inter-election pressure politics were played down in deference to the concept of national unity. Such relative emphases will certainly be observed when we look at BBC policy during the years that Reith was its Director General.

Politically speaking Reith's stance, whilst non-party, was in practice somewhat right of centre. For although he was primarily concerned to promote reason over irrationality, his definition of what was 'reasonable' or rational was necessarily linked to his respect for certain forms of established authority. Reith's position was inevitably a determinant upon that of the BBC. The result was a greater regard for the 'reasonable' mainstream centre of the two major parties and a dislike for the more radical elements of both. This redounded to Labour's disadvantage in 1931 and created innumerable difficulties with regard to the whole question of broadcasting minority viewpoints. It also led not unreasonably, and despite Reith's frequent disapproval of government policies and actions, to a considerable regard for the wishes of the government of the day. For the Government, in addition to having the ultimate

authority over broadcasting, had also been democratically elected, was in itself the representative of the state and had the practical day to day job of governing. The BBC has always been accused of being unduly influenced by the fact that the government had the authority and power to put pressure on the broadcasters: such an argument fails to take account of the absolutely legitimate BBC view that the government of the day, of whichever party, was worthy of respect simply because it was the embodiment of the state and the director of its fortunes. Reith was always conscious of this fact and it was certainly to influence his actions.

At the end of 1926 the old Company was brought to a close and the new Corporation created. On 11 January the Secretary of the Post Office informed the BBC of the Postmaster General's requirement, under clause 4 (3) of the Licence, that it should not broadcast 'speeches or lectures containing statements on topics of political, religious, or industrial controversy'.¹⁴ Reactions to the ban when it was first announced had been mixed. The Times had called it logical and 'calculated to prevent trouble', whereas the Daily Chronicle regretted that no attempt would be made through broadcasting to stimulate the interest of the citizen in politics.¹⁵ The press was more vehement in its condemnation of the Licence clause which made the ban possible:

This vast machine of broadcasting, growing so rapidly to enormous dimensions, and so capable of beneficent or malevolent manipulation, may be converted by the Government of the day under the terms¹⁶ of the Charter at any moment to purely propaganda purposes.

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14. BBC, PPBG, Secretary of GPO to BBC Board, 11 January 1927.
 15. The Times, 16 November 1926; Daily Chronicle, 16 November 1926.
 16. Daily News, 13 November 1926. The item continued: 'is there much doubt that a harrassed or discredited Government would be

Another point about the new Corporation, picked up by some papers, was that its Governors were none of them broadcasting experts. The Glasgow News wondered whether between them they owned a crystal set.¹⁷ However, the most pertinent (and extreme) comment came from the Communist Sunday Worker whose verdict was that

the board consists of capitalists, landowners, Tories and empire touts - with the sugar of a "Labour" representative well calculated to make the Workers vomit.¹⁸

The kernel of truth in this accusation was undeniable and was only confirmed by the fact that, although the Governors were not appointed to represent specific interests, Ethel Snowden was certainly seen as the Labour representative and was appointed accordingly.¹⁹ For Labour to be marked out for particular representation was not to show it special regard: it was rather a recognition that Labour supporters were only a small minority within that class of people from which such governors were usually chosen. This awareness had already been demonstrated when in 1924 a Labour representative had been appointed to the PMG's Broadcasting Board, although none had been appointed to represent Conservative or Liberal interests. Neither was in need of specific representation.²⁰

sorely tempted on slight provocation to use its powers and to turn its broadcasting apparatus into a thinly disguised variation, through an infinitely more effective medium, of the "British Gazette". See also Liverpool Echo, 12 November 1926.

17. Glasgow News, 13 November 1926.
18. Sunday Worker, 31 October 1926. Quoted by A. Briggs, Governing the BBC, London 1979, 168.
19. J.C.W. Reith (1949), Op. Cit., 114: 'The PMG had to find a representative of Labour and a woman; he said he had done well to find them in one person'.
20. Asa Briggs (1979), Op. Cit., 31, has pointed out that, between 1927 and 1979, of the politically active governors of the BBC, 19 were Conservative or Unionist, 8 Labour, 7 Liberal, 1 Liberal and Conservative, 1 National Labour, 1 National Liberal and one former Liberal M.P. who became a Labour peer.

For the first time the BBC's position with regard to controversial and political affairs broadcasting was clearly defined. Moreover the PMG assured the House that

it is my desire to interfere as little as possible with the Corporation's responsibility in deciding whether a talk should or should not be excluded on the ground that it is of a political or controversial character.²¹

The Post Office did, however, indicate that the ban might be queried when the BBC had gained practical experience of its new situation. In a memorandum to his senior staff in January 1927 Reith carefully stated the position as he saw it. He thought that the BBC had now both greater autonomy and greater responsibility. Because the ban was quite specific, it was no longer necessary to obtain the GPO's permission for every outside broadcast speech. But, being specific, Reith did not have any qualms about cautiously advising the abuse of both its letter and its spirit. The PMG had banned any form of broadcast statement on any issue that was considered controversial; Reith interpreted this as a ban on controversial statements on any such issue. He stated that the prohibition need not apply to statements of fact even on such red-hot topics (in religious controversy) as prayer-book revision. Statements of fact on political matters, such as the situation in India and China, were also permissible, although these were also controversial.

In abusing the spirit of the ban Reith knew that he could trust the GPO to turn a blind eye:

There have been many occasions on which, when I referred a matter to the Post Office by telephone, they have said they would rather not be consulted, which means that if we did refer it officially they would probably have to turn it down, but that if we managed to get away with it all right they would not take the initiative

21. H.C.Debates, vol. 203: col. 2004, 16 March 1927.

in raising objections.²²

He also recognised that it was the GPO which had to apply the ban, and therefore recommended that in cases of doubt about a political talk it should not be the Post Office which was asked to advise, but the government department whose area it was. Of course it was very necessary that all remotely political talks should be acceptable to the relevant government department. Reith's advice was therefore a mixture of boldness and caution, and almost all factual talks given on political subjects steered well clear of domestic controversy. It was to be generally easier and safer, for most of the BBC's pre-war existence, to broadcast on Imperial and foreign affairs than on domestic, although even on the former it was to be very far from simple, as we shall see.

The first non-controversial talk on an obviously controversial domestic topic was an eye-witness account and summary of the budget given by The Times' former editor, Wickham Steed, in April 1927.²³ Straight talks of this kind, however, avoiding all controversy, were clearly only of limited interest, and the Talks Director, Hilda Matheson, was soon trying to deal in a more interesting manner with more contentious issues. Thus she enquired of Reith in early March:

would there, do you think, be any objection to a friendly discussion on the possibilities of industrial peace and co-partnership, between, for instance, Citrine, the secretary of the TUC and some friendly Capitalist or employer? I am sure it could be handled without giving offence.²⁴

Reith, however, recognising that this was scarcely a borderline case, referred the question to Sir Evelyn Murray of the Post Office, with

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22. BBC, CB, Reith to R. Eckersley, Stobart and Matheson, 30 January 1927.
23. BBC, PPBB, correspondence, February - March 1927.
24. BBC, TDD, Matheson to Reith, 8 March 1927.
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the inevitable result.

Despite tentative efforts to circumvent the prohibition on broadcast controversy, 1927 was a frustrating year for the BBC's senior staff, and Reith summed up the general feeling in his report to the Board in July:

Today ... the BBC is silent on many vital problems of immediate and urgent interest to the country. Many subjects also have had to be handled inconclusively and in an almost platitudinous way, stopping short where real interest begins. On some subjects when a talk is proposed there is hardly anything worth saying by the time it has been censored. Our senior staff feel strongly that the present state of affairs is unfortunate in that the BBC is prevented from exercising as useful and beneficial influence as it might do. On most vital problems today the majority of people are either left in ignorance or else have to take the dictated version prescribed by their newspaper.²⁵

Attempts to find politically non-controversial topics for debate became steadily less successful, and one debate at least was cancelled for not being sufficiently emasculated.²⁶ The problem of finding speakers willing to debate on such irrelevancies as 'that prophecy is a dangerous thing', or 'that the present generation is too superficial', soon became insuperable. In February 1928 Matheson informed Roger Eckersley, the Director of Programmes, that although two dates had been reserved for broadcast debates,

I have tried with absolutely no success to secure speakers for these dates, or indeed for any other dates, on our present restricted lines. The truth is that we have about exhausted the

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25. BBC, BGP, Director General's report for Board, 4 July 1927.
26. The Times, 25 January 1928, 10e: 'owing to a difference of opinion arising from the application of the official ban on the broadcasting of controversy, the speakers in a debate to have taken place on January 30th decided to withdraw'.

supply of non-controversial subjects on which it was possible to get up any kind of debate, and, still more serious, we have about exhausted the supply of people of any standing who are willing to talk on our present terms ... I have only come to this conclusion with great regret.²⁷

Reith was conscious that there was continued support outside the BBC for controversial and political affairs broadcasting. Ian Fraser continued in press and parliament to advocate the broadcasting of parliament and the budget, whilst in The Times Philip Guedalla voiced his belief that 'controversy should be broadcast with a single unofficial safeguard - fair play'.²⁸ Above all Reith had found an ally in the Chancellor, Winston Churchill, who requested in 1927 that his budget speech be broadcast. Reith would have been happy to oblige. Later in the year Reith met Churchill again, and Churchill expressed himself passionately on the subject.²⁹

Encouraged by this support Reith drafted a letter to the Postmaster General in September 1927, although for reasons that are not clear it was not until the following January that this letter, very slightly amended, was sent. In it Reith emphasised that a review was necessary after a year of experience, and repeated the arguments used in his report to the Board. He cited developments in broadcast controversy abroad, particularly in Germany, where he claimed it was

27. BBC, TDD, Matheson to R.Eckersley, 21 February 1928. Eckersley was Assistant Controller (Programmes).
28. Daily Despatch, 31 March 1927, and H.C.Debates, vol. 202: col.1574, 22 February 1927; vol. 213:col.872, 15 February 1928. Contrast, however, the comment of the Northern Daily Mail, 22 February 1927, on parliamentary broadcasting: 'In these days a country is fortunate that has no politics, or, in other words, which has a political machine which functions so smoothly and efficiently that no one need worry much about it. What this country needs at the moment is fewer, not more speeches'; The Times, 21 January 1928, 11e.
29. J.C.W. Reith (1949), Op.Cit., 128; C. Stuart, Op.Cit., 99, 14 June 1927.

actively encouraged, and stated that experience showed the broadcaster himself to be the most effective self-censor. The letter argued that

the Corporation has been aware that it is not only falling behind enlightened practice in other countries, but that it is also attracting a growing volume of substantial criticism from its listeners.

However, it stressed the BBC's appreciation of its responsibility and of the need for caution if controversy were permitted:

it is obvious that both the choice and the treatment of subject would necessitate most careful consideration. There could be no expression of views contrary to the interests of the State, or on subjects likely to offend religious or moral susceptibilities. Subjects would require to be presented in such a way as to ensure adequate safeguards for impartiality and equality of opportunity.

As further support for his argument Reith enclosed a copy of the conclusions of Sir Henry Hadow's committee on broadcasting and adult education.

Mitchell-Thomson was unimpressed by Reith's foreign examples, but accepted that criticism at home was growing. His recommendation to Cabinet was therefore for a removal of the ban in stages, allowing pre-arranged debates, but maintaining the ban on single speeches and lectures on controversial topics:

This would enable public feeling to be tested in the matter and would go some way towards satisfying the demands which are made. At the same time this course would not be open to the most formidable objection which is levied at the general admission of

30. Cab.24,C.P. 36 (28), Reith to PMG, 16 January 1928.

controversial speeches, namely, that if a policy obnoxious to certain sections of listeners be broadcast, the broadcasting of a reply some days or weeks later does not repair the damage.³¹

Hearing that the matter was being discussed, sympathetic MPs began asking parliamentary questions and lobbying for support.³² Within Cabinet, however, the BBC's friends were of the very highest and in little need of backbench pressure. Reith already knew that Baldwin trusted and had a great regard for him and his work. In addition Churchill's ardent desire to propagandise made him a passionate advocate of broadcast controversy, and of single speeches in addition to debates:

Controversy is the soul of British life and I really do not see why politicians should not be allowed to express their controversial views through the agency of the broadcasting apparatus. Of course they are no longer allowed to do so through the Press.

Thus at the annual Civil Service dinner in early February, which was itself broadcast, he argued that

this great and wonderful new invention ... will enable the leading political figures to impart exactly that guidance to the vast mass of intelligent listeners which they ought to receive and which I confidently believe they wish to receive.³³

His somewhat radical proposal was for an hour each night to be given over to broadcast political and party controversy, time being allocated according to party strength in the Commons.

31. Cab.24,C.P. 36 (28), Memorandum by W.Mitchell-Thomson.

32. H.C.Debates, vol. 213:col.872, 15 February 1928; vol.213:col.1051-2, 16 February 1928.

33. The Times, 11 February 1928, 12 b.

It may briefly be wondered what had happened to questions of party advantage, since broadcast controversy would be likely to assist the Labour Party in increasing its means of communication proportionately more than the Conservative. Politicians in the constant heat of the fight do not always see the true situation. Particularly when in government a party is placed on the defensive and the barbs of the Opposition appear sharper and more numerous than the weapons of defence. Churchill in particular always suffered from a conviction of his opponents' propagandistic advantages, but he was not the only one. Ian Fraser had written to Baldwin early in 1927 stressing the party advantage of broadcasting occasional parliamentary debates:

6) From the Conservative Party point of view, I believe broadcasting gives us an advantage over our opponents. Without doubt Labour Party speeches and propaganda reach a wider audience than is touched by Conservative efforts, and there must therefore be thousands who, in a fair broadcast, would hear all sides of the question who at present hear only the Socialist argument. 7) much credit will accrue to the Government which permits this new and interesting experiment to be made.³⁴

His support for the broadcasting of the budget debate also had a party political aspect, namely that, as Chancellor, Churchill's powerful oratory and presentation was 'an important psychological consideration'. Above all, only by this means would the Government be certain to have its case presented truthfully to a wide audience:

broadcasting as a medium of transmission from the speaker to the listener is bound to be truthful, whereas the newspapers, which are the only medium available at present, distort and colour their presentation of the case.³⁵

34. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f38-43, Fraser to Baldwin, 3 February 1927.

35. Ibid.

The Government was indeed receiving a rough ride from the press between 1927 and 1928, and the feeling that its traditional source of support and communication was deserting it may have led to greater readiness to consider the idea of political affairs broadcasting. But in any case other arguments in favour of the experiment would have overridden all but major party objections. For the BBC did have a strong case - it had proved itself to be trustworthy and responsible, whilst Reith had won the support and respect of senior politicians of all parties. By contrast the ban on controversy had been generally seen as emasculating the service and reducing its potential, and the ever growing number of listeners was demanding a change. Not least of the Government's considerations was the fact that Reith had steadily eroded away the very real influence of press interests on broadcasting freedom and policy. Newspapers could still protest at the prospect of broadcast controversy, but their power to prevent it was greatly diminished.

On 5 March 1928 the ban was withdrawn and a statement made by the Prime Minister to that effect in the Commons. The secretary of the Post Office informed the BBC:

After full consideration, His Majesty's Government are of the opinion that the time has come when an experiment ought to be made in the direction of greater latitude ... His Majesty's Government rely upon the Governors to use the discretionary power now entrusted to them strictly in the spirit of the Report of Lord Crawford's Committee. The responsibility for its exercise will devolve solely upon the Governors and it is not the intention of the Postmaster General to fetter them in this matter.

Press reaction was mixed. The Morning Post was horrified, The Times and Telegraph were reserved, whilst the Manchester Guardian

36. Prem.1/127, Sir Evelyn Murray to BBC, 5 March 1928; H.C.Debates, vol.214: col.812, 5 March 1928.

fully approved.³⁷ The BBC's press statement, however, was suitably calm and cautious. Controversy would be introduced gradually and experimentally with no fundamental change in programme policy:

Controversy, political and economic, will be admitted on clearly defined occasions with adequate safeguards for impartiality and equality of treatment, the subject being dealt with in such a way that the main opposing views can be presented clearly contrasted and linked as closely as possible. Debates and discussions will be the normal procedure and the removal of the restriction is not to be interpreted to mean the immediate introduction³⁸ of indiscriminate controversy in Talks and Outside Broadcasts.

Within the BBC the lifting of the ban provoked a fierce discussion of its implications, and this revealed divided opinions about the speed and extent of developments. Reith himself was clearly determined to move with caution - he more than anyone else was aware of the opposing forces watching for unbalanced partisan statements or other errors of judgement. His caution was shared by Roger Eckersley, who thought³⁹ that 'the need for circumspection and a quiet start is obvious'. Both, however, were aware that an excess of caution would be unfortunate. They believed that extremes should be avoided. Nevertheless,

It will be impossible, if we are to be outspoken, for us not to irritate on occasions: we must certainly be prepared for criticism, more, probably, than we have ever had before, but it will be the natural⁴⁰ outcome of a policy which must be provocative to be successful.

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37. The Morning Post, The Times, Telegraph, Manchester Guardian, 6 March 1928.
38. The Times, 2 April 1928, 25a.
39. BBC, CB, R. Eckersley to Reith, 8 March 1928.
40. Ibid.

One of the primary sources of speeches, since the creation of the BBC, had been outside broadcasts taken from dinners or other occasions. In the past the body organising the function had approached the BBC which, having extracted a signed agreement from the speaker not to be controversial, had broadcast almost any such speech if the speaker was sufficiently eminent. Eckersley recognised that in future the BBC would have to be more selective, so that particular interests were not over-represented in this way. It would even be possible, he pointed out, for a controversial outside broadcast speech to be answered within a few days with a studio talk by an opponent of the views stated. Although the written agreement to abstain from controversy would no longer be required, he felt that it would be necessary to devise some safeguarding formula, and he suggested the rather dangerous one

that there could be no expression of views contrary to the interests of the State, or on subjects likely to offend religious or moral susceptibilities.⁴¹

As for debates Eckersley suggested a slow start, and put forward as possible subjects 'The return to the gold standard and its effect on national prosperity' (Churchill versus J.M. Keynes), 'Is the minimum wage desirable or practicable?' (James Maxton versus a young Conservative), and 'Is the Surtax fair or workable?'. However, the most interesting section of his analysis of controversial and political affairs broadcasting was a paragraph on talks which he did not consider controversial at all:

freedom to handle controversy does not lessen the necessity for continuing to present non-controversial and non-partisan statements on current affairs.People have come to regard with respect fair minded descriptive or explanatory talks by the leading experts, which are altogether different from anything they get in the ordinary daily newspaper.⁴²

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

He gave as example a talk the previous Monday on the Egyptian crisis, and clearly had in mind programmes such as Vernon Bartlett's regular talks on foreign affairs, which had been started in January. Thus one of the strands of broadcasting that eventually produced modern current affairs programmes, the explanatory exposition of the facts of a situation as one man saw it, passed through this discussion of 'controversial' broadcasting without even being considered controversial. Such talks were to be the mainstays of political affairs broadcasting, at least as far as foreign affairs were concerned, throughout the inter-war period. Yet Eckersley failed to consider them more closely not because he was unappreciative of their political affairs importance. Quite the contrary - such talks were the direct result of Reith's decision in 1927 to misinterpret the letter of the ban. Yet at their best they were considered one of the highest forms of political affairs broadcasting - as neutral as one man's exposition could make them, short yet cogent, attractive and interesting to a wide body of listeners, yet dealing with matters that were undeniably politically controversial, if only rarely of relevance to domestic party politics.

Roger Eckersley represented the more cautious school of thought within the BBC. At the opposite extreme was his brother Peter, the Chief Engineer. If Roger came close to believing that nothing should be broadcast which might endanger the state, Peter, by his passionate defence of the rights of minority pressure groups, came equally close to putting the status quo on trial:

Whatever we may believe, it is important to realise that the minorities of to-day are the majority of tomorrow and that without minorities progress in industrial, social and religious affairs would never take place. In this connection I was horrified to hear it said that we would never have a Communist speaking. I think this is a most insidious doctrine, first because Communism is a very large force in the world with many serious people, secondly because if believers in the present regime are so sure of its worth and consequence, they should have

no fear.⁴³

His view of the BBC was of a balanced Hyde Park of the air:

Our policy should be that we are the lessors of a debating hall, we are public spirited enough to allow into this debating hall any people - so long as the subject chosen does not offend against ordinary decency - and we do not mind how positive a statement is upon the one hand, as long as an opportunity is given for a statement upon the other hand, as vigorous and as negative.⁴⁴

He argued that in any future General Strike both sides should be allowed to broadcast equally, whilst he rejected the idea that the Corporation should be editorially biased in favour of even such a desirable concept as industrial peace.

This last view was directly contradictory to that of Gladstone Murray, the Assistant Controller (Information), who saw the democratic missionary role of the BBC in more positive terms. His comments are worth quoting at length, both for their frankness and for the way in which they did indeed accurately reflect the BBC's position and outlook in early 1928. Warning against the danger of 'playing safe', he saw the BBC as impartially providing a forum for discussion. Its attitude in providing this forum, however, could not be entirely detached from reality:

We are bound to have a policy. We cannot afford to be a variation of a gramophone sound box for example, the outstanding need of the day at present is for concerted progressive co-operative industrial effort. All the best minds of employers and of labour are now engaged in preparing the way. We should take advantage of

43. BBC, CB, P. Eckersley to R. Eckersley, W. Gladstone Murray, H. Matheson (Control Board), 6 March 1928.

44. Ibid.

our new freedom to help develop a favourable atmosphere for this movement and quite consciously to ally ourselves with the side of progressive co-operative endeavour and against the side of destruction. On broad principles our policy might be interpreted as combining the liberalism of Mr. Baldwin with the innate conservative caution of Mr. MacDonald. This means a little more than the forum, it means a control just a "little to the left"; which after all, is faithful reflection of collective aspiration.⁴⁵

Murray saw the BBC, therefore, as aiming at a 'faithful reflection of collective aspiration', a very different concept from that formulated some thirty years later of the BBC as a mirror on society as it was. 'Collective aspiration', to the middle class, educated intelligentsia that comprised the BBC's production staff of the late 1920s, meant industrial and political harmony at home and international peace. The latter in particular was a cause that the BBC was to champion, with its frequent reports from the League of Nations, close contacts with the League of Nations Union, its first motto ('Nation shall speak peace unto Nation'), various experimental broadcasts and talks by foreigners, and appallingly didactic and moralistic stories in Radio Times.⁴⁶ From the very beginning the Corporation showed itself to have an editorial line, and one that was not as uncontroversial as it supposed.

Hilda Matheson's reaction to the lifting of the ban was entirely practical. She recognised new possibilities for debates, discussions and outside broadcasts, but expressed concern at the dangers of concentrating on those formats which stressed adversary disputation:

If we limit our talks which deal with matters of controversy to debates and discussions we shall rule out a lot of people who

45. BBC, CB, W.E. Gladstone Murray to Control Board members, 6 March 1928.

46. See Radio Times 1928 Christmas Issue, for its story, 'A Story of the future - "Nation shall speak peace unto Nation"'. .

find the debate form artificial or restraining, and many others who cannot be squeezed into being merely the opposite of some other view.⁴⁷

She hoped that it would be possible to invite distinguished people who had a distinctly individualistic viewpoint, such as Bernard Shaw, to broadcast without the necessity for a directly opposing reply.

The vitally important question of the development of political affairs broadcasting technique will be discussed later. A brief word, however, on talks, debates, discussions and symposia is necessary here, firstly to avoid terminological ambiguity, and secondly to explain why such stress was laid on these forms of broadcasting. The BBC used each of these terms sometimes generally, sometimes in fairly well defined senses. However, when used specifically, each term meant something different. A talk was a single statement without reply either immediately or the following week. A debate was, as in a debating chamber, argument between two or more individuals speaking alternately within one programme. 'Discussion' was used vaguely and often referred to single programme debates, but also meant a series (perhaps weekly) of talks on one subject, with a different speaker for each programme putting a different point of view. Finally 'symposium' was also a vaguely used term, and could be applied to discussions; more particularly it referred to the type of series Hilda Matheson had proposed, where eminent people gave general statements of their outlook, without necessarily taking an argumentative or mutually contradictory stance. It could also be used for series on a particular subject which contained a mixture of factual talks by experts and partisan statements of opinion by politicians.

To minds accustomed to modern current affairs, documentary and magazine formats of political affairs programming, such techniques as formal debates and protracted discussion series appear exceedingly crude and clumsy. Yet this was not nearly so apparent in 1928. The

47. BBC, CB, H. Matheson to R. Eckersley and W. Gladstone Murray.

BBC had two existing models of political affairs communication upon which it might pattern itself - the press and the public meeting in all its forms. To most of those who composed the senior staff of the Corporation the larger part of the press was anathema. There was a general BBC antipathy towards the journalistic outlook, which was associated, not surprisingly, with bias, editorialisation, haste and sensationalism. Even the quality press, which aspired to straight news reporting and distinct and separate editorialisation, provided the BBC with no alternative pattern for political affairs broadcasting. Far more obvious a model for broadcasting than the written tradition of political communication was the spoken. Indeed, before broadcasting, all notions of 'talks' were bound up with public meetings, debating societies, lectures and public and parliamentary speeches. Politicians and other leading figures whom the BBC invited to broadcast certainly did not see it as a journalistic exercise, but simply as an extension of their public speaking commitments. For if the public meeting in all its forms was in decline by the 1920s, it was still a highly important means of communication, with a long and impressive tradition behind it, and it was so regarded by all politicians and others who had lived most of their lives without the wireless. This included those who had created and were responsible for developing the BBC. They saw broadcasting as a replacement, an infinitely superior replacement, for the public meeting, and one which eliminated the manipulative opportunities offered to speakers at public meetings by mob psychology. As already mentioned, the early BBC made great use of outside broadcast speeches from functions, and this practical example of the link between broadcasting and the spoken tradition was a further influence upon Matheson and her colleagues. It was therefore to this tradition rather than to the journalistic that the BBC initially looked.⁴⁸

For these and other reasons the Corporation did not immediately

48. See pp.487-508 below for a fuller analysis of political affairs technique development.

start broadcasting on current political affairs once the ban had been lifted. Indeed it was as cautious as anyone could have wished. Vernon Bartlett's broadcasts and other talks on world affairs continued, but little else appeared to be done. Nevertheless, behind the scenes much was happening. From the beginning there was recognised a division between programmes which the BBC was prepared to arrange on its own initiative and under its own complete control, and those for which consultation with the major parties proved necessary. It was inevitably the latter which were to provide most of the problems. When discussing either type it is necessary to remember that the other was going on, or being negotiated, at the same time, and where the parties complained about programmes of the first type an absolute division became impossible. Despite this it is probably most sensible to discuss separately those political affairs programmes in which party involvement was high, and those in which it was incidental; for there can be no doubt that one of the biggest factors in the development of political affairs broadcasting was to be the interest of the parties, and this tends to obscure other and more subtle influences and developments. Programmes in which party involvement was incidental or the result of complaints will be considered first.

Reith's first idea was an obvious one, to see whether permission would now be given for broadcasting the budget speech.⁴⁹ He was not to be successful in this. Indeed the whole question of parliamentary broadcasting was one to which there was considerable resistance from MPs of all parties, and both Baldwin and MacDonald took note of their objections.⁵⁰ Churchill strongly favoured the budget broadcast idea and, on being told that this was not possible, proposed that he should broadcast a factual explanation of the proposals on the night following the budget. He assured Reith that it would be wholly uncontroversial.⁵¹ Reith fully supported the proposal and did not

49. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f46, Reith to W. Mitchell-Thomson, 14 March 1928.

50. H.C.Debates, vol. 192:col.866, 22 March 1926; vol.214:col.1136-7, 7 March 1928; vol.215:col.2447, 27 March 1929.

51. BBC, PPBB, Reith to Clarendon, 13 April 1928.

Proposals were put in hand in April for a number of slightly more political and controversial debates than had before been possible, and in May the first of these took place with Sir Ernest Benn and ILP leader James Maxton debating on 'Riches and Poverty, are they necessary?'. This was hardly topical controversy, and the Controversy Committee's desire to avoid currently hot topics was shown by their decision not to arrange an industrial debate between the Co-operative Movement and the National Traders Defence League. It was felt that as these two bodies were at daggers-drawn, a debate between them would stir up feeling rather than contribute to any useful conclusion.⁵⁶ This was a policy which implied that broadcasts should not be given if they might be antagonistic, a potentially dangerous view if caution were carried too far. Once again, however, it must be remembered that, traditionally, debates consisted of formal and rather general motions to be talked to, and that there was no precedent for topical debates on up-to-the-minute news. Certain subjects, it was considered, lent themselves to generalised and detached debate, whilst more immediately topical issues would only be debated in an emotional and unhelpful manner. The BBC's desire for objectivity and calm analysis perhaps led it to look with disfavour upon the debating of issues of the moment. Lacking a dominating and powerful news service with an emphasis upon immediacy, the early BBC laid far greater stress upon the importance of the political issue than of the political event. Given such a viewpoint, hot topicality was far less paramount than it was to become. In any case, with the subject for debate being chosen and announced weeks in advance, up-to-the-minute topicality was simply not possible. The topics that were chosen were politically controversial and even topical, but with a greater stress than was later to be the case, perhaps, upon political fundamentals.

Having said that, the early subjects for debate, following the first, tended to be political but not really party issues - 'Road versus Rail' (Col. Moore Brabazon, MP, and J.H.Thomas, MP), 'Scottish

56. BBC, CC, minutes, 12 July 1928.

Nationalism', 'The Channel Tunnel' and 'Is Disarmament practicable?'.⁵⁷ A series of programmes aimed at new women voters included debates on 'Does protective legislation protect women wage-earners?', 'Should wages be supplemented by family allowances?' and 'Can women influence legislation more effectively by joining party or non-party organisations?'.⁵⁸ The second of these, between Eleanor Rathbone and D.H. MacGregor, touched on party politics in that Labour was currently considering the idea. In general, however, these early debates avoided specifically party issues because it was known that the parties would object, because it was hoped that specifically party political debates or discussions would soon be arranged and perhaps also because the BBC mentality was anxious to step outside the confines of mere party debate and to demonstrate that political controversy could be non-party.

Despite this, Matheson and her colleagues showed themselves most anxious to experiment, to propose more partisan debates and to attempt greater topicality. There was certainly no lack of ideas in the Talks Department of the late 1920s. One proposed debate agreed by the Controversy Committee was on housing problems, between the Minister of Health, Neville Chamberlain, and a Labour leader. This

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57. Brabazon was Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Thomas the railwaymen's leader. The Radio Times assured its readers that, 'This discussion of one of the great problems of the day cannot fail to be thoroughly interesting, as lively as it is well informed and "controversial" in the best sense of that comprehensive word'. - Radio Times, 24 July 1928. Following the debate Truth commented: 'Listeners might well have expected - perhaps hoped - that the talk would have developed into a heated wrangle and ended in sounds of a personal combat, followed by the announcement that the police had taken charge of the combatants. So far from that the debate proved to be a first rate comic turn. The combatants addressed one another as "My dear James" and "My dear Brab", used no rhetoric more violent than genial banter, and gave listeners the impression that they must be sitting at a table with drinks and smokes, and chaffing one another across it.' - Truth, 1 August 1928.
58. The speakers for the last were Dame Caroline Bridgeman and the Countess of Galway.

was never broadcast, perhaps because Chamberlain would not agree.⁵⁹ Another minister approached to take part in a broadcast debate was the Chancellor, Winston Churchill, who was asked to defend the Government's financial policy following statements by Lloyd George and Philip Snowden. Churchill was less keen on such a debate than he had been on giving single talks, and refused.⁶⁰

All the debates mentioned were scripted and vetted. Matheson's explanation of this fact had nothing whatsoever to do with the need for caution or political censorship. She argued that the limited amount of time available to any broadcast speaker made a carefully prepared, arranged and timed script essential if he was to make all his points, and in a suitable order. At the same time it was necessary to retain the flavour of an impromptu talk, and considerable alteration might be necessary to a script before it was suitable for broadcasting:

Many manuscripts submitted require something not unlike translation before they can hope to sound as if they were spoken to a person and not delivered to an assembly.⁶¹

From 1929 a further justification for previewing scripts was that talks could then be printed in the following week's edition of The Listener. There is no doubt, however, that opportunity was also taken to ensure that a speaker was not intending to say something improper, or to talk away from the subject on which he had been asked to speak. When properly applied this was quite legitimate editorial control, but critics during the 1930s were to use such vetting of scripts to accuse the BBC of censorship.

Although Matheson and her successor as Talks Director, Charles

59. BBC, CC, minutes, 25 October 1928.
60. BBC, CC, minutes, 11 October 1928; BBC, WSC, Matheson to Churchill, 12 October 1928.
61. H. Matheson, Broadcasting, London 1933, 77. Quoted by A. Briggs (1965), Op.Cit., 125-6.

Siepmann, favoured scripted broadcasts, that did not prevent them experimenting with unscripted debates of a more currently topical nature. Unfortunately, because these were experimental they were not extensively publicised, and so little is known about them. Following an early experiment in unscripted debate in 1927, the first of these programmes to be mentioned, after the ban on political controversy was lifted, was in September 1928.⁶² Reith asked Roger Eckersley about 'the [J.H.] Thomas-Blumenfeld' fifteen minute debate, clearly on current political issues, in which he considered that Thomas had hogged the microphone.⁶³ Eckersley admitted that both this and a previous unscripted debate had been rather one-sided, but felt that to be too cautious, and to prepare such debates too much, would kill their interest:

I believe in the spontaneity of it and therefore like to think that these sort of programme items should not be given too much publicity or too much preparation - in fact should not be treated necessarily as controversial occasions.⁶⁴

Matheson's comments equally showed her general approach and that these debates were an attempt to handle current issues:

I think there is a definite place for short discussions of a quarter of an hour if they are either a conversation on current events or an argument on a single small issue ... It really comes down to this: that it is at present impossible to lay down any hard and fast rules about these discussions. Different subjects and different people seem to require different handling; but we really are making an effort and spending a lot of time in trying all sorts of ways. I fully realise the importance' of it.⁶⁵

62. BBC, TDD, Matheson to Reith, 1 February 1927.

63. BBC, TDD, Reith to R. Eckersley, c. 17-18 September 1928.

64. BBC, TDD, R. Eckersley to Matheson, 19 September 1928.

65. BBC, TDD, Matheson to R. Eckersley, 20 September 1928.

In response to a letter complaining of J.H. Thomas's statements in this debate, that Labour was sure to win the next election, it was emphasised that for topical discussions to carry conviction they should be impromptu:

Although these discussions are only in an experimental stage, there is already evidence that they are recognised ^{as} ⁶⁶ imparting a new element of vitality and interest to programmes.

Matheson was also anxious to develop talks of the factual and explanatory type, talks which were politically significant because they had 'the general cultural ⁶⁷ function of raising the level of information and intelligence'. To this end 'popular' talks series were arranged on finance in the modern world, rates, the machinery of government, the daily work of an MP and an LCC member and, as already mentioned, talks for new women voters. A series on 'Tendencies in Industry' was broadcast, with speakers ranging from Lord Melchett (Chairman of ICI) to Walter Citrine (talking on the attitude of organised labour), and from Walter Elliot, MP, to Sir Herbert Samuel. These talks, in addition to those on foreign affairs by Vernon Bartlett and others, were all given in 1928. Matheson claimed that such talks were possibly the most important type of political affairs ⁶⁸ broadcasting done by the BBC. Impressed by Vernon Bartlett's weekly talks on 'The Way of the World', the Controversy Committee boldly discussed the possibility of a similar series of talks on home affairs, and in early 1929 Matheson announced that Gerald Barry would indeed talk each week ⁶⁹ on politics, personalities, social events and other domestic news.

There was evidently much experimentation and a determination to

66. Printed in Patriot, 11 October 1928.

67. BBC, PPBGE, Matheson to R. Eckersley, 20 December 1928.

68. Ibid.

69. BBC, CC, minutes, 8 August 1928, 8 February 1929.

develop new forms of political affairs and other controversial broadcasting in the first year after the removal of the ban. Caution was, however, very evident and certainly limited possible progress. Not surprisingly proposals by the Communist Party and the Imperial Fascist League, that each be allowed to broadcast, were rejected.⁷⁰ Similarly a suggested talk on the International Co-operative Movement was turned down on the grounds that the movement was now definitely political.⁷¹ It was also clear that many of the programmes broadcast did not really live up to the hopes for them. A letter in the Radio Times in July called for completely impromptu talks now that the ban was removed: 'more speaking and less reading'.⁷² Another writer admitted that the controversial debates had 'not proved really exciting'.⁷³ Although some topics for the impromptu debates broadcast did arouse emotions, others did not deserve to be considered controversial. After a particularly anodyne example Lionel Fielden wrote that

it proves conclusively that we cannot stage unrehearsed debates unless the subject is violently controversial and each speaker so partisan that a hot discussion along one line is assured.⁷⁴

Hilda Matheson pointed out that one reason why there had been relatively few good political debates or discussions was that senior politicians had been too busy to undertake them. She might have added that many ministers were willing to broadcast statements on newly passed legislation, but saw little value in providing the opportunity for themselves and their policies to be publicly criticised.⁷⁵ Gerald Barry's weekly talks on home affairs, initially intended to

70. BBC, CC, minutes, 11 October 1928, 29 November 1928.

71. BBC, CC, minutes, 13 December 1928.

72. Radio Times, 13 July 1928.

73. D. Edge, in Radio Times, 28 December 1928.

74. BBC, TDD, Fielden to R. Eckersley, c. 24 July 1929.

75. BBC, PPBGEB, Matheson to R. Eckersley, 20 December 1928.

parallel Bartlett's on foreign, only occasionally touched on political matters, and rarely in anything more than the most superficial manner.

Political affairs broadcasting, therefore, made a slow and cautious start, but one which to those involved in early experimentation did not appear so. Both they and politicians had a firm belief in broadcasting's potentially explosive power and influence, and accordingly treated it with respect. This attitude was summed up in the comment of the writer Gordon Oakes:

when one realises that the broadcasting machine has become an enormous power for good and evil, one cannot but recall Nietzsche's Superman and wonder whether the species⁷⁶ has not arrived in the shape of the Programme Department staff.

The BBC was conscious not only of the power of broadcasting but also of that of watchful politicians. It had to recognise party and government interest in its wholly independent programmes, in political but theoretically non-party ministerial broadcasts and other speeches, and in the most difficult area of all, party political broadcasting. The Corporation was still in a proving period and had to act with care. As late as April 1929 Ramsay MacDonald could publicly state that when Labour was returned to power it would have to 'recast the control of the BBC ... the plan adopted has been dictated by the Government'.⁷⁷ Inevitably it was ministerial broadcasts that caused most trouble with the Labour opposition. Protests at Churchill's budget broadcast in 1928 have already been mentioned and, in view of this and the closeness of the General Election, it was decided in 1929 only to broadcast an eye-witness account of the budget speech and a news summary of its proposals. In November 1928 H.S. Lindsay, secretary to the Parliamentary Labour Party, wrote to protest at a projected broadcast speech by Walter

76. Radio Times, 28 December 1928.

77. Forward, 13 April 1928.

Elliot on the Western Highlands and Islands Transport Services Bill.⁷⁸ Reith described this speech as a ministerial explanation of the results of the Select Committee enquiry into the problem, on the basis of which the bill had been drafted: it was therefore impartial and non-party.⁷⁹ Such a pettifogging approach to a politically controversial bill was treated as such by Lindsay. If Elliot was talking on the report as a minister and not as a party politician, what, he asked, would be the BBC's reaction to the proposal that MacDonald should speak as Leader of His Majesty's Opposition, and not as a member of the Labour Party, on the Official Opposition's approach to the West Highland transport problem?⁸⁰ Reith denied the talk was partisan and emphasised that had Labour been in power the same attitude would have been taken. Nevertheless Lindsay's point, that a statement on a controversial issue currently passing through parliament could not be considered ministerial, was reasonable. Hilda Matheson admitted that ministerial broadcasts, even on Acts already passed, were not impartial:

of course all such talks are to some extent tendencious, however rigorously censored. The mere fact of explaining the Act in question is an attempt to get a little credit.⁸¹

When, at the end of the year, Neville Chamberlain proposed a ministerial broadcast on the details of his De-rating Bill, the Controversy Committee agreed that this was a controversial issue that could only be dealt with by a debate.⁸²

The Committee's discussion of ministerial broadcasts, in early 1929, was therefore an interesting mixture of common sense and

- 78. BBC, PPBMB, H.S. Lindsay to Reith, 15 November 1928.
- 79. BBC, PPBMB, Reith to Lindsay, 16 November 1928.
- 80. BBC, PPBMB, Lindsay to Reith, 20 November 1928.
- 81. BBC, PPBMB, Matheson to R. Eckersley, 20 December 1928.
- 82. BBC, CC, minutes, 20 December 1928.

political pragmatism, both prompting caution. The Minister of Agriculture had asked to talk on egg marketing:

this raised a point regarding the desirability, particularly at the present moment with an election in sight, of ministers personally sponsoring subjects, which, though they had actually become law, had only recently passed out of the realms of acute controversy. The very fact of a minister dealing in person with such matters would again raise the controversial issue and would set a precedent which might be still more regretted under a future government which might be without a powerful press.⁸³

It was agreed that such talks should always be given by a civil servant and that ministers should only broadcast in discussions or if the subject was wholly non-party. Yet although the function of ministerial broadcasts was gradually to be taken over by the news bulletin, they remained a regular feature of broadcast political affairs throughout the period under consideration, and incited constant criticism from both sides as to BBC bias.

If the Labour Party was only beginning to be aware of the significance of ministerial and non-party political broadcasting, the Conservatives were very much alive to it. Most of their protests reflected a party mentality rather than a partisan BBC. Nevertheless such protests made it quite clear to the Corporation that even balanced and fair political affairs broadcasting could be misinterpreted and so endanger its hard won progress. Even before the controversy ban was lifted J.C.C. Davidson, now Party Chairman, was complaining to Reith about a series on 'Has farming a future?'. He felt that the speaker, J.W. Robertson-Scott, had a decided leaning towards the policy of land nationalisation and state control of agriculture. Whether or not he was a professed socialist he was advocating socialist policies and ignoring government actions. Such talks

83. BBC, CC, minutes, 1 February 1929.

do not appear to present a really thoughtful contribution to the very difficult agricultural problems of the day, and anything which tends to confuse the public as to the real difficulties would be an additional embarrassment to the Government in their very serious task of helping agriculture to pass through its present critical stage.⁸⁴

Reith denied that the talks were biased, but admitted that the BBC would occasionally make mistakes:

I am sure criticism is bound to come periodically as we normally have fairly well informed men dealing with the various subjects, and the more eminent they are the more likely it is that they will express some opinion or another which is not held by everyone.⁸⁵

A query about bias in the news bulletins was also summarily dismissed by Reith.⁸⁶

By early 1929, however, the conviction was growing within Conservative Central Office that the BBC had a left wing bias. A broadcast conversation between former Labour minister Arthur Ponsonby and his daughter, on 'The new enfranchisement of the young', aroused the attention of Joseph Ball. He told Davidson that it

contained dangerous socialistic propaganda - dangerous because insidious and difficult to detect. Miss Matheson, the Director of Talks who was formerly in MI5, has the reputation of being of Socialistic tendencies, and I have definite evidence that she is in communication with the League of Nations Union on the subject of counter propaganda to a rather good boys' book on the Navy. I

84. BBC, PPBAPB, Davidson to Reith, 13 March 1928.

85. BBC, PPBAPB, Reith to Davidson, 11 February 1928; also 15 March 1928, 24 March 1928.

86. BBC, PPBAPB, Reith to Davidson, 21 February 1928.

suggest that it is no good writing to Reith, but that we should get him beaten over the head by the Postmaster General.⁸⁷

The 'close association' of the BBC and the League of Nations Union was a source of some disquiet to the Party. The LNU was supposedly non-party, but had frequently, according to Pembroke Wicks, Davidson's personal adviser, shown definite pro-Liberal tendencies. Wicks took up Ball's point about the BBC/LNU connection, pointing out that both Vernon Bartlett and Gladstone Murray were members of the Publicity Committee of the LNU. He also explained that Hilda Matheson had written to the LNU drawing attention to propaganda in favour of a bigger navy in the boys' book 'The Wonder Book of the Navy'.⁸⁸

Where possible Ball was anxious to prevent potentially adverse broadcasts being given, and he was quick to notice that in a BBC press release in April a series of talks on 'Trade Tendencies in the Industrial North' included one by Professor Henry Clay on the 'Human effects of trade depression.'⁸⁹ This talk was due to be given on 21 May, during the General Election campaign. Having determined that Clay was a Liberal, Davidson complained to Reith that 'I do not see how any talk on such a subject can avoid being largely, if not entirely political'.⁹⁰ Reith assured him that it would not, but his close contact with Davidson led him to compromise the BBC's independence in this matter:

[Clay's] talk will be sent in here a week or more before it is due to be given, and I will see it myself, and if you like I will send it privately to you.⁹¹

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87. Conservative Central Office papers (CCO), CCO4/1/23, Ball to Davidson, 6 February 1929.
88. CCO, CCO4/1/23, Pembroke Wicks to Davidson, 21 February 1929.
89. CCO, CCO4/1/23, Ball to R. Topping, 15 April 1929.
90. CCO, CCO4/1/23, Davidson to Reith, 24 April 1929.
91. CCO, CCO4/1/23, Reith to Davidson, 25 April 1929.

Davidson did like, and both he and Joseph Ball read the script and agreed it should not be broadcast. As with the Ponsonby broadcast they could not find positive objections,

but it is open to the general criticism that it does not mention any of the bright features in the situation as it exists today. It gives an account which, I think, is unduly depressing, and there is little doubt that if it were written by a supporter of the present Government a fairer and more favourable exposition of the subject could be given.⁹²

Vigilance and pressure had their reward. Clay's talk and another, on the problem of the Tyneside, were postponed until after the election, and Clay was asked to revise his script. Reith explained that the revision was because it was unduly depressing and written in a bad broadcasting style.⁹³

In 1928 Churchill's budget broadcast had aroused Labour protests; in 1929 Wickham Steed's eye-witness account of the budget led to complaints from incensed Conservatives. Sir Patrick Gower asked to see the script, and Reith, admitting that it had not been vetted in advance, sent it to him with the assurance that

an entirely different impression is gauged from reading it than from hearing it, his references to bribery and so on being obviously in inverted commas as spoken and the tone sardonic. I believe Mr. Wickham Steed is a great admirer of the Chancellor.⁹⁴

Gower and Ball, however, were unimpressed and considered the talk so 'outrageous' as to justify a formal letter from the Prime Minister to the BBC's chairman, Lord Clarendon. The complaint, which was at the

92. COO, COO4/1/23, Davidson to Reith, 13 May 1929.

93. COO, COO4/1/23, Reith to Davidson, 14 May 1929.

94. COO, COO4/1/23, Reith to Gower, 17 April 1929.

talk's facetiousness, was said to be non-party but was drafted by Gower:

it seems difficult to believe that such a flagrant misrepresentation of the scene, circumstances and speech in the House of Commons should have been possible ... The annual presentation of the National Balance Sheet is one of the most serious occasions in the House of Commons, and I cannot but regret that the first account of it over the wireless should have been couched in a spirit of levity amounting almost to ridicule. The last thing I am sure that you would want is that a wrong impression of the proceedings of Parliament should be conveyed to the general public, and while I fully appreciate the difficult task with which the British Broadcasting Corporation is confronted, I hope sincerely that steps will be taken to check such statements in the future before they are delivered.⁹⁵

Davidson's own opinion was that the talk was 'quite incredibly biased and vicious'⁹⁶ from a party point of view, and hostile to the Government. Reith and Clarendon could only accept such a prime ministerial protest, particularly since it was clear that there were reasonable grounds for complaint. Reith admitted that the tone of the talk had been unsuitable, and Clarendon told Baldwin that the BBC recognised the talk to be

our responsibility and we are very sorry. It is interesting that complaints were also received from the other side!⁹⁷

The protest which raised the most interesting questions about the political influences of broadcasting, and which showed the Conservatives to be well aware that such influence could be subtle,

95. COO, COO4/1/23, Baldwin to Clarendon, undated draft letter.

96. COO, COO4/1/23, Davidson to Baldwin, 18 April 1929.

97. BBC, PPBB, Reith to J.D.B. Fergusson (Treasury), 28 April 1929; Clarendon to Baldwin, 2 May 1929.

concerned a series in the Autumn of 1929. This was 'Points of View', the first of Hilda Matheson's symposia, in which G. Lowes Dickinson, Dean Inge, George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, J.B.S. Haldane and Sir Oliver Lodge each stated their philosophies of life. This series cannot technically be considered as coming under the heading of 'political affairs', but the political implications of the discussion that surrounded these programmes make it desirable to consider them. Following the first in the series, by Lowes Dickinson, it was reported to Joseph Ball as having been 'an exposition of the rankest and most poisonous socialism'.⁹⁸ Ball pointed out that whereas Dickinson, Shaw and Wells were Socialists none of the others in the series were Conservative propagandists. He therefore suggested a letter to The Times, as previous complaints to Reith and Clarendon had, in his opinion, brought no result. Rank and file Conservative complaints at this first talk were such that Davidson wrote to Reith to ask for a transcript. In Reith's absence his deputy, Admiral Carpendale, replied to assure Davidson that this was not a party political series in any sense, 'though politics, in the broad sense, are likely to be mentioned' as part of the speakers' statements of their philosophy.⁹⁹ Davidson's retort was an obvious one:

In this series of six talks it is clear that the balance is very heavily weighted on the side of Socialism. I do not contend for one moment that the BBC is not within its rights in asking eminent men of science and letters to contribute talks on general subjects, but the point I wish to emphasise is that if politics, even in the broad sense, are to be permitted to fall within the scope of these discussions, then arrangements ought to be made to secure fair and equal representation, not only of the Socialist and Liberal, but also of the Conservative point of view.¹⁰⁰

He also took the opportunity to complain of the number of ministerial

98. COO, COO4/1/23, memo by J. Ball, 1 October 1929.

99. BBC, PPBAPB, Carpendale to Davidson, 3 October 1929.

100. COO, COO4/1/23, Davidson to Clarendon, 9 October 1929.

broadcasts since Labour had come to power, and asked what steps were taken to ensure that non-controversial talks were not coloured by the political views of the individual broadcaster and 'utilised as a means of subtle political propaganda'.¹⁰¹

Davidson's complaints were in part valid, in part unsound. Protests about ministerial broadcasts had little or no justification, and even Clarendon, weak-willed and former Conservative minister as he was, considered them 'ridiculous'.¹⁰² As he pointed out, there were just as many opportunities for ministerial broadcasts when the Conservatives were in power as subsequently, but ministers had not always taken them up. Moreover, as he (or rather Carpendale, who drafted the letter) very pertinently stated, the Conservatives' 'general attitude to broadcasting facilities was surely definitely negative' in 1928 and 1929.¹⁰³ But with regard to Davidson's complaints about the 'Points of View' series, Carpendale and Clarendon's protestations of innocence were unsatisfactory. The majority of the speakers concerned did have a progressive philosophy, and if only Dickinson, Shaw and Haldane made statements of a very broadly political nature, it was undeniable that there was no counter-balancing conservative philosophy.¹⁰⁴ The Listener admitted that,

taken as a whole, unorthodoxy and novelty have been the principal characteristics of the ideas put forward; and consequently there may not be a few listeners who have sighed for the inclusion of a champion of perfect orthodoxy and unimpeachable conventionality, in order to round off the representative character of the gathering ... but it has to be remembered that the value of the

101. Ibid. For Conservative complaints regarding ministerial broadcasts see The Times, 8 - 10 October 1929, 17 October 1929.

102. BBC, PPBMB, Clarendon to Carpendale, 25 October 1929.

103. See pp. 357-359 below.

104. In Radio Times a 'working mother' replied to Shaw's talk: 'Why does Mr. Shaw make his home in England? Surely Russia should be his place' - Radio Times, 25 October 1929.

series lies in the degree to which it could bring new ideas, and not old ones, to the ears of the public.¹⁰⁵

This was the kernel of Conservative complaints: such a broadcasting policy, by its very nature, introduced new thoughts to people, and new thoughts encouraged change.

Politicians generally were becoming more alive to the potential of broadcasting. Although he had no hand in the removal of the controversy ban MacDonald had fully supported it, having himself felt the ban's restrictions.¹⁰⁶ Early in the following year he received intimations of the Baird low definition television system. Robert Williams, the General Manager of the Daily Herald, told him that already Conservative and Liberal leaders had seen the new device, and he strongly urged MacDonald to go and see it:

these influences over the ether, vocal and visual, are destined to make enormous headway, and you owe it to yourself, as leader of the Party, to see what can be done. If television can amplify the work of the Daily Herald, and other Party organs, together with the magnificent work you and your colleagues do on the platform,¹⁰⁷ we shall still keep the world safe for democracy.

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105. The Listener, 13 November 1929, 640. See also Note A at end of chapter, p.374.
106. MacDonald's speech at the Burns centenary dinner was broadcast on 5 January 1928. Asked to pledge himself not to be controversial he replied, via his secretary, 'that so far as he is concerned he has no intention of dealing with controversial matters but that if the Postmaster General, in whose judgement he has no confidence whatever, thinks that he is violating his pledge, Mr. MacDonald wishes to make it perfectly clear that he himself retains the right to define what controversy is'. - R. Rosenberg to Sir R. Blair, 19 January 1928. As MacDonald himself told Blair: 'I am very anxious not to be quoted by the Postmaster General as one who has surrendered to his conditions'. - MacDonald to Blair, 23 January 1928. Both in MacDonald papers PRO 30/69/6/31.
107. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/6/32, R. Williams to MacDonald, 17 January 1929.

The following month Herbert Tracey, writing in Labour Magazine, saw broadcasting as the solution to the press combines and monopolies:

from the point of view of public policy, the ban on the broadcasting of controversial discussions is sheer folly. With proper arrangements to ensure fair play and absolute impartiality as between the BBC and the parties in matters of current controversy, the dangerous consequences of newspaper monopoly can be counteracted.¹⁰⁸

On the Conservative side Ian Fraser was still pressing for a greater degree of political affairs broadcasting, and stressed the party advantage:

if you are alone, as you are when listening, you are in the right position to be appealed to by reason, for you are not subject to the emotional effect of being in an excited and largely partisan crowd. The tory case is more reasonable than emotional; the case put by Lloyd George and Ramsay MacDonald is the reverse; consequently our case stands a better chance through the microphone than does that of either of the two parties I am sure Mr. Baldwin cannot realise the extraordinary effect of his voice and the intimate and personal touch which he creates with the ordinary listener in his own home. He has the knack, which few have learned, of talking to a million individuals personally,¹⁰⁹ rather than to an imaginary audience of a million.

J.C.C. Davidson and others who were concerned with party strategy agreed with Fraser as to the power and importance of broadcasting, but their conclusions were to be rather different.

The area of political affairs broadcasting which absorbed most

108. Labour Magazine, vol.VII, no. 10, February 1929, 445-447.

109. Baldwin papers, Bal.65/f54-5, Fraser to L.C.S. Amery, 19 November 1928. Amery forwarded this letter to Baldwin with the comment that it contained 'a great deal of good sense'.

attention, and which caused most difficulties for Reith, was undoubtedly that of broadcasts by representatives of the political parties themselves. Here the different approach of the three parties became apparent. The Labour Party quickly showed its anxiety to broadcast. Eight days after the ban's removal Arthur Henderson wrote to Reith with a request that MacDonald's forthcoming speech at the Kingsway Hall be broadcast.¹¹⁰ Reith very properly replied that as the BBC had a duty to be impartial such broadcasts would only be possible if the other two parties were given similar opportunities. It was too late to broadcast MacDonald's speech, but he promised to contact the other parties in order to arrange such talks.¹¹¹ Optimistically it was proposed that they should begin in May, all party broadcasts in a series being given within one month of each other. Davidson's response to this proposal, however, immediately necessitated delay:

I would venture to suggest that before any isolated engagements are undertaken it would be to the benefit of all concerned if the British Broadcasting Corporation could draw up rules of general application which would enable the various political parties to know the scope of the privileges to which they will be entitled, and to make their plans accordingly.¹¹²

Roger Eckersley therefore set out proposals for one half hour broadcast every fortnight while parliament was sitting, each party having one opportunity every six weeks. By this scheme the Liberal Party received an equal opportunity to each of the other parties, whilst the government of the day obtained no overall advantage.

But before the idea could be put to the parties Winston Churchill, who had already played an important roleⁱⁿ having the ban removed, made a significant and fatal intercession. Having called

110. BBC. PPBPPB, Henderson to Reith, 13 March 1928.

111. BBC, PPBPPB, Reith to Henderson, 15 March 1928.

112. BBC, PPBPPB, Davidson to R. Eckersley, 29 March 1928.

Reith to No.11, Downing Street to discuss the budget broadcast, he made another point regarding party political broadcasts. Reith was impressed:

[Churchill] feels most strongly that it would be unfair to run our political speeches in series of three as this means only one chance in three for the Government of the day. He is most emphatic that the Government of the day ought to have a one in two chance he thinks it would be very unfair that the people who at the moment are carrying the burden of affairs, should only have a one in three chance. I must say that I quite agree with him.... whatever is agreed now would apply irrespective of the Government in power.

Thus the government of the day, in addition to ministerial broadcasts and inevitably greater news coverage, would also receive greater opportunity for political self-justification. The arguments for and against this procedure were finely balanced. In favour of it was the view that both opposition parties would inevitably be attacking the Government more than each other. Against it was the fact that, in the thin dividing line between government and party, defence of policy was a party task, and such broadcasts would be party ones. One party would therefore have greater opportunity than either of the others. Reith's agreement with Churchill reflected his identification with 'government' and led him for once to ignore party sensitivities. It was, of course, quite coincidental that the government of the day was Conservative, but it was unfortunate, for it added to Labour's growing belief in BBC bias.

On 19 April Reith submitted his proposals to the three parties. As an introduction to party political controversy he offered three equal broadcasts in succeeding weeks on the understanding that these would be used for a general statement of party policy. During the period of a General Election similarly, exactly equal opportunities

would be offered. As a routine arrangement throughout the year, however, he proposed fortnightly broadcasting in the ratio of one government spokesman to each opposition one. In addition a budget statement and the Prime Minister's annual speech at the Lord Mayor's Banquet would be broadcast, whilst 'other explanations of government intention' might be transmitted without being regarded as controversial occasions involving opposition replies.¹¹⁴ Potentially the most dubious proposal in this letter was the last, but it was quickly forgotten in the succeeding argument about speaker ratios. The Conservative Party was delighted with the immediate advantage offered to them. Patrick Gower called it 'a very good arrangement', and Davidson told Baldwin that the proposals were 'obviously completely satisfactory from the point of view of the Conservative party'.¹¹⁵ He wrote to Reith that they

meet with my entire approval, and I am very grateful to you for the kindly consideration which you have given to my previous letter.¹¹⁶

The Labour Party, although understandably less happy about the proposals, were sufficiently keen on the idea of political broadcasting to agree in principle to them, asking only for an all-party conference to discuss details.¹¹⁷ The Liberals, however, objected strongly not only to the ratio but also to the budget broadcast being considered uncontroversial. They also raised the question of who would decide which explanations of government intention might be broadcast without opposition reply. Hilda Matheson's reaction to this was caustic:

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114. BBC, PPBPPB, Reith to Henderson, Davidson, Sir Herbert Samuel, 19 April 1928.
115. COO, COO4/1/22, Gower to Davidson, 25 April 1928; Cab.24,C.P. 158(28), Davidson to Baldwin, 12 May 1928.
116. COO, COO4/1/22, Davidson to Reith (drafted by Gower), 1 May 1928.
117. BBC, PPBPPB, Henderson to Reith, 4 May 1928.

How like the Liberals to make a big fuss because they are a small party. I hope we shall stick to our own proposals.¹¹⁸

J.C.C. Davidson was determined that the BBC should have no option, and asked Baldwin for a Cabinet ruling on the subject before the all-party conference. Armed with a Cabinet instruction to 'stand firm in support of the original proposals', he was able at this meeting on 21 May to stymy completely any compromise proposals by the Liberal Party and the BBC.¹¹⁹ The Labour Party, however, was now beginning to have doubts about its original acceptance, and, following a National Executive Meeting on 23 May, H.S.Lindsay informed Reith that it now saw the matter in a different light. Previously Arthur Henderson and Labour Chief Whip Tom Kennedy, who had agreed to the proposals, had done so in a belief that such broadcasts would consist of criticism of the Government. It was now felt that such critical talks would bring broadcasting into disrepute, and that speeches should rather be constructive and expository only. This being so Labour completely changed its position and, going beyond the compromise now put forward by the Liberals, proposed absolute equality for each national party.¹²⁰ Reith, however, did not believe it possible to confine speeches solely to constructive matter, or to base any arrangement on the substance of the broadcasts, because in practice it would be impossible to exercise any real control over content. He therefore resisted the proposal.¹²¹

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118. BBC, PPBPPB, H.F. Oldham (for Samuel) to Reith, 3 May 1928; note by Matheson on memo by R. Eckersley to her, c. 7 May 1928.
119. Cab.23/29(28); BBC, PPBPPB, Minutes of All Party Conference on Political Broadcasting, 21 May 1928. Samuel proposed a rota of 7:5:5, the BBC one of 3:2:2.
120. BBC, PPBPPB, H.S. Lindsay to Reith, 24 May 1928. This proposal, of course, although advocating constructive talks only, restricted them to the three major parties, and omitted the Communist Party, even though it had a member in Parliament.
121. COO, COO4/1/22, Gower to Davidson, 25 May 1928.

In any case the Conservatives knew themselves to be in a strong position and were little inclined to give way, for they realised that political broadcasting was not of critical importance to their party. Sir Patrick Gower's arguments, which Davidson presented to Baldwin and Cabinet, are worth quoting in their entirety:

(1) The proposals originally submitted represented the unbiased views of the British Broadcasting Corporation, which is an independent body. They meet with the acceptance of the two parties forming an overwhelming proportion of the House of Commons, and the fact that objections are raised by an insignificant body numbering some forty members is not sufficient justification for upsetting an arrangement which has been accepted by a vast majority. In this argument I am ignoring the fact that the Labour Party was subsequently induced to support an arrangement which was more advantageous to them because it is the uninfluenced decisions of the various parties which ought to be weighed in the balance.

(2) On the merits of the proposal it must be recognised that the Government of the day is in a special position as compared with the other two parties. They bear the responsibility of government. Their function is action, whereas the function of the Opposition parties is criticism. It is obviously right and proper that the Government of the day, which owing to its position is especially a butt for criticism, should have equal opportunities with the other two parties for answering such criticism, more especially as any misrepresentations of Government action or Government Policy may have a harmful effect from the national point of view.

(3) If we maintain our previous attitude it would be extremely difficult for the British Broadcasting Corporation to go back upon their original proposals.

(4) If the British Broadcasting Corporation do attempt to go back upon them, and there was a failure to reach any agreement, the fact would not be detrimental to the Conservative Party. A very large section of the Press of this country is Conservative,

and from a Party point of view it would be better to have no political broadcasting at all than to give the opposition parties an advantage.

(5) If the British Broadcasting Corporation adhere to their original proposals, the Liberal Party might try to make a fuss in Parliament, but it would be extremely difficult for them to achieve any great success in their attempt because the Labour Party would be faced with the fact that they had agreed in principle to the original suggestions.¹²²

It was the fourth point which Davidson emphasised in his letter to Baldwin and Cabinet:

the Labour Party has a powerful organisation in this country but no Press. The Liberal Party is well equipped with funds, has a fairly powerful press, but a poor organisation in the country. The Conservative Party, on the other hand, has the best and strongest organisation of the three parties, and is supported by a very large section of the Press. In such circumstances it is clear that it is to the advantage of the other two parties to have a system of political broadcasting, as it provides them with better opportunities of propaganda than they enjoy at present. Some advantage would accrue to them even if the original proposals of the British Broadcasting Corporation were adopted, but that advantage would be enormously increased if the proposals were modified in the direction suggested by the Liberal Party. I am quite confident that if a failure to reach agreement resulted in the abandonment of the whole idea, there would be little regret entertained by Conservative Members.¹²³

The Cabinet discussion of the issue raised yet another objection. It was pointed out that the logical consequence of absolute equality between the parties would be that the more opposition parties there

122. COO, COO4/1/22, Gower to Davidson, 23 May 1928.

123. Cab.24,C.P. 174 (28), Davidson to Baldwin, 24 May 1928.

were in the Commons, the greater would be the broadcasts given to them relative to those accorded to the Government. Cabinet determined to stand by the original proposals. But it went further than that, and demonstrated just how powerful a persuader it had in clause 4 (3) of the Licence, for it agreed

that a hint should be given privately to the appropriate authority in the British Broadcasting Corporation that if any other course was decided on the permission for the broadcasting of controversy would be withdrawn.¹²⁴

Davidson conveyed this 'hint' in person to Reith, and reported smugly to Joseph Ball that, 'I rather think we shall hear no more of controversial broadcasting'.¹²⁵

Such a use of Cabinet power demonstrated two things. Firstly it showed to Reith the limits of his freedom and that the Government would seriously contemplate acting on matters it considered important. This incident was perhaps more significant in this respect than government threats during the General Strike, for it was the first real example of the BBC/Government relationship in action since the creation of the Corporation. It revealed to the BBC that the Government considered clause 4 (3) to be a usable weapon and not just a passive deterrent to be used only in the very last resort. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the BBC's attitude to government pressure was determined by its belief that in its threat to use clause 4(3) the Government might not be bluffing. Secondly it demonstrated that the Government had not in its own mind fully worked out the nature of its relationship to the BBC, that it was not wholly free from the mentality of control and political advantage feared by much of the press when the Corporation was established. For if there were sound, impartial reasons for insisting on the original

124. Cab.23/31(28), 6 June 1928.

125. COO, COO4/1/22, Davidson to Ball, 8 June 1928. Ball's response was 'Good!'.

proposals, there were also very strong party ones; and that it was Davidson, the Party Chairman and not a Cabinet member, who conveyed the 'hint' to Reith, suggests that on this occasion the Cabinet was acting as much as the head of the Party as the head of the state. Later the threat to use clause 4 became increasingly tied to the government objection to programmes that they would not be in the national interest. Such an excuse could not really be used on this occasion.

Faced with such a clear Cabinet statement of intent only three months after the removal of the ban, Reith could only accept discretion to be better than valour. For once it was Lord Clarendon who tentatively continued to press for a compromise. He pointed out that the BBC Board, which contained Labour and Liberal representatives, would not be at all happy at the news of the Cabinet's hint, and he tried to argue party advantage in permitting political broadcasting:

As a party man I am really rather apprehensive about the future if the ban on political controversy is once more re-imposed, for if we fail to reach agreement now, in my view Labour will when it comes into office remove it again, and so secure a good deal of kudos, and furthermore the Conservative Party will, if no leader comes to the microphone, lose a very valuable medium before the General Election for explaining its principles and policy to a vast audience.¹²⁶

Such appeals were to no avail, and on 28 June Reith informed the parties that the BBC had reluctantly decided party political speeches could not be broadcast, no agreement having been possible.¹²⁷

During the remainder of the year the BBC worked cautiously to establish its other forms of controversial and political affairs

126. COO, COO4/1/22, Clarendon to PMG, 8 June 1928.

127. BBC, PPBPPB, Reith to three parties, 28 June 1928.

broadcasting, thereby making it more difficult in the future for any government to reimpose the ban. It did not broach again the subject of party political broadcasting. As the date of the General Election approached, however, both the BBC and the Labour and Liberal parties grew increasingly anxious that broadcasting should play its part. Shortly before Christmas 1928 Sir Herbert Samuel approached the BBC once again to arrange party broadcasts, both before and during the election.¹²⁸ The BBC's reply emphasised that it did not consider it worth taking the initiative until it was clear that the parties would agree on a procedure.¹²⁹ Two days previously, however, Hilda Matheson had reported to Roger Eckersley on plans for covering the General Election. Interestingly, in view of later events, there was no suggestion in her memorandum that the BBC should abstain from political coverage during the campaign. Indeed quite the reverse was so, for she suggested an extra five minutes on the news so that political speeches could be fully covered. She also proposed that if the parties came to no agreement then the BBC should itself arrange 'ad hoc debates on the principal issues', with the best speakers it could get.¹³⁰ The same day Eckersley and Gladstone Murray visited J.C.C. Davidson and Joseph Ball to discuss the whole question. Davidson pleaded that in opposing political broadcasting his only concern was the good of the Corporation:

he adhered to the view that on the larger ground of the public interest in the maintenance of a good broadcasting tradition,¹³¹ this innovation would not be a good thing.

Ball signified his 'complete indifference' to Samuel's complaints, whilst Gladstone Murray said he thought that Samuel was so anxious that he 'would take anything that he could get'.¹³²

128. BBC, PPBGEB, Samuel to Reith, 20 December 1928.

129. BBC, PPBGEB, Carpendale to Samuel, 22 December 1928.

130. BBC, PPBGEB, Matheson to R. Eckersley, 20 December 1928.

131. BBC, PPBPPB, Gladstone Murray to Carpendale, 21 December 1928.

132. COO, COO4/1/22, memorandum by J. Ball, 20 December 1928.

The double standards of Davidson's concern for the BBC became apparent, however, over his interest in a proposed debate on Neville Chamberlain's De-rating Bill. This arose out of a request by Chamberlain to the BBC that he broadcast an impartial explanation of the Bill. Conservative anxiety to explain and justify this unpopular piece of legislation, which was far too close to an election for comfort, made both Chamberlain and Davidson amenable to the BBC's proposals for a three party debate on one night. This would consist of three twenty minute talks followed by a ten minute reply by the government spokesman, the psychologically important final word therefore remaining with the Government.¹³³ Thus the first party political debate to be broadcast, on 22 January 1929, between Sir Kingsley Wood, Arthur Greenwood and Ramsay Muir, was very much by government permission as a result of their desire to explain an unpopular measure. In its letters to the Liberal and Labour parties the BBC did not mention that the original proposal for the subject had been Conservative, and Samuel complained that the topic chosen was automatically to the Government's advantage.¹³⁴ The debate itself received an inevitably mixed reaction. The Morning Post declared that listeners wanted entertainment, not politics, and most papers found it tedious.¹³⁵ By contrast it elicited from the Manchester Guardian an optimistic declaration of faith in democracy now that such means of democratic education were available.¹³⁶ Predictably The Listener had nothing but praise:

it represents a new epoch in the development of political education.One was principally impressed by the calmness, logicity and reasonableness of manner of the speakers, so different from those appeals to prejudice and passion which are usual on platforms. Perhaps this marks the first step towards a

133. Unfortunately the BBC file on this debate has not survived.

134. BBC, PPBGEB, Samuel to Carpendale, 7 January 1929.

135. See Radio Times, 22 February 1929 for other press comments.

136. Manchester Guardian, 25 January 1929 - editorial, 'Mechanised Politics'.

fundamental change in the art of political propaganda.¹³⁷

Samuel immediately proposed a similar debate on unemployment, the key issue in the Liberal campaign, whilst Arthur Henderson for the NEC argued for straight speeches rather than debates, and, by diverting Reith's attention to the method of presentation, attempted to obscure the fact that he was proposing a ratio of absolute equality for such speeches. His suggestion of an hour a fortnight before the election and an hour a week during it was not enough for Samuel, who urged weekly speeches before and even more during.¹³⁸ Ramsay MacDonald, who invited Reith to lunch in order to discuss political broadcasting - 'the Labour Party being so dependent on the wireless' - admitted to him that 'the Labour Party were ready to agree to almost anything'.¹³⁹ Reith used this evident Liberal and Labour eagerness to hint that it was up to them to change their minds on the original proposals, his hands being tied.¹⁴⁰ At a meeting between MacDonald, Reith and Clarendon on 26 February MacDonald at first tried threatening that he would publicly attack the BBC for not permitting political speeches, and, when that failed, asked whether the BBC would go ahead despite Liberal protests if Labour agreed to the original proposals:

it was clear from what he said that he was willing to agree practically anything as he felt they were the Party that had most to gain by the microphone in that they possessed only one small newspaper [He said] the Conservatives do not want it at all, as they have so much faith in their Press.¹⁴¹

137. The Listener, 30 January 1929, 98.

138. BBC, PPBG, Samuel to Carpendale, 24 January 1929.

139. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 14 February 1929, 100.

140. BBC, PPBG, Reith to Samuel, 30 January 1929; PPBGEB, Reith to Henderson, 13 February 1929 and Reith to Samuel, 22 February 1929.

141. BBC, PPBGEB, record of meeting by Reith, 26 February 1929.

The pace was now quickening, and MacDonald personally started negotiating with Samuel and Davidson. A debate in the Commons, however, merely provided an opportunity for all concerned to express their commitment to political broadcasting - on their terms. Lloyd George and H.E.Crawford mentioned the American Presidential elections and broadcast speeches there, but only Philip Snowden contributed anything unusual to the debate. He strongly supported the idea of political broadcasting. Nevertheless he did not hold out such great hopes for its importance as others. There were still only 2,500,000 wirelesses in Britain, and this was no more than twenty percent of the electorate (he ignored ^{the fact} that each set would be heard by more than one person). Moreover not everyone would be listening at the same time - indeed he doubted whether it would be more than twenty percent of potential listeners. Nor could a party's case be effectively stated in a speech of twenty minutes or half an hour. The speeches would cancel each other out and none of the parties would gain thereby. They would only have provided temporary amusement for the listener. Snowden's arguments were in favour of continuous political broadcasting rather than just at the time of a General Election, but he raised issues which were to be resurrected after the war in an increasing ¹⁴² criticism of the whole value of party political broadcasts.

On 8 March MacDonald informed Reith that he had been unable to obtain agreement, and urged him to accept a majority opinion. He accepted that Labour would, 'under a very decided protest', be prepared to agree to the 2:1 ratio, and believed that with their ¹⁴³ hands forced in this way the Liberals would also come round. Reith informed Samuel of this, and two weeks later both Liberals and Labour agreed formally to accept the proposals that had originally been made the year previously. They emphasised, however, that

142. H.C.Debates, vol.226:cols.61-142, 4 March 1929. See also the Daily Chronicle editorial, 'To Aid Democracy. Use the Wireless!', 5 March 1929.

143. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/5/40, MacDonald to Reith, 8 March 1929.

agreement was only until the election and that it could not be considered a precedent for the future.¹⁴⁴ Reith's formal proposals were for two series of broadcast speeches on the 2:1 ratio before the dissolution of parliament, and two sets of three speeches during the campaign, one of these sets to be specifically by women MPs for women voters.

Yet agreement had anything but been reached. The Liberals protested strongly about the proposed length of the broadcasts, the order of speaking and that one election series of speeches would be by and for women. The Conservatives felt that enough had been conceded in agreeing to any broadcasts at all, and objected that there should be four opposition election broadcasts to their two. MacDonald objected to the order of speeches and to the BBC's decision, in response to Conservative protests, to omit the women's series. He told Reith that he was being drawn to the belief that the BBC was adjusting the arrangement in order deliberately to handicap Labour.¹⁴⁵ The BBC's decision to cancel one of the election series had been taken in the belief that it would make general agreement easier, but it was also an unfortunate fact that it coincided with Conservative wishes, and MacDonald picked this up:

the whole thing has a most unpleasant savour in my nostrils. It may all have been perfectly innocent, but I really must say that an innocent creature has never been cursed with a more sinister countenance.¹⁴⁶

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144. BBC, PPBGEB, Samuel to Reith, 22 March 1929, and H.S. Lindsay to Reith, 26 March 1929; Labour Party papers, NEC minutes, 26 March 1929.
145. BBC, PPBGEB, Samuel to Reith, 27 March 1929; MacDonald to Reith, 2 April 1929; and Davidson to Reith, 28 March 1929.
146. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/5/40, MacDonald to Reith, 8 April 1929. It is an interesting comment on their relationship that despite his anger MacDonald signed this letter 'With kindest regards'. It was while this argument was continuing that MacDonald made his comment about the need to recast the control of the BBC - see p.342 above.

Reith assured him that the Conservatives had had to make concessions too, and that the BBC Board had insisted on two pre-dissolution series despite Conservative demands for one only. He wrote that

My conscience as to having acted with absolute impartiality is clear. I believe I have done everything any mortal could do to meet the different points of view.¹⁴⁷

Of the truth of this there can be no doubt. The negotiations were quite appallingly complex and emotional, and Reith had no prospect of pleasing anybody. Nevertheless he did everything that could be expected of him and, in response to MacDonald's anger, even managed to persuade Davidson to accept a second women's election series again. Davidson, however, insisted at first that the Conservative speaker should come last in both series, and threatened that if the other parties would not agree to this, 'I am afraid that it will be necessary to reconsider the whole matter afresh'.¹⁴⁸

No one who reads through the full correspondence of these negotiations can doubt that Reith's achievement in gaining final agreement between three excessively jealous and suspicious political parties was a herculean one. Whether the end result was worth the effort was in itself a matter of controversy. The Controversy Committee was certain it was not:

the political broadcasts up to date had been lacking in interest, were not fulfilling the functions for which they were intended, and were not good programme value It was felt that such broadcasts, instead of concerning themselves with vague generalities should provide the opportunity for each of the political parties definitely and constructively to tackle particular issues and to educate the vast electorate in political

147. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/6/32, Reith to MacDonald, 9 April 1929.

148. BBC, PPBGEGB, Davidson to Reith, 18 April 1929.

and parliamentary issues. It was felt that a great opportunity
was being lost¹⁴⁹

By contrast Lord Linlithgow, in The Times, attributed a significant change in electioneering to the power of wireless. He observed how attentive public audiences now were, and argued that this new mood and 'new capacity for close and silent attention' was the result of broadcasting's educative influence:

broadcasting has already done much to aid in arming the
electorate against quackery and humbug.¹⁵⁰

The Times itself approved these views, whilst The Listener had its usual laudatory editorial, stating that

methods of electioneering are to-day in a state of transition, that the old methods of appeal have lost their potency, and in particular that the public meeting is rapidly declining in attractiveness the recent broadcast political addresses have made a substantial contribution to the difficult task of habituating the public to hear views which they dislike as well as those which they like - a mental discipline uncommon in the case of either newspapers or political meetings. If this is so, we are advancing a step further towards the day when reason will be the deciding factor in political issues.¹⁵¹

Inevitably press comments on the speeches themselves were influenced by the content and by each paper's political persuasion.

149. BBC, CC, minutes, 19 April 1929. See also PPBPPB, draft letter (not sent), H. Matheson to the three party chairmen, 25 April 1929.

150. The Times, 20 May 1929, 11c.

151. The Times, 21 May 1929, 15 d; The Listener, 29 May 1929, 752. In the Radio Times, a listener commented that, 'Viewing the situation through spectacles of three distinct colours is apt to alter one's former perspective.' - Radio Times, 28 June 1929.

Lloyd George's was considered both very good and very bad, Churchill's as the best and the worst. Baldwin was thought generally dull, Neville Chamberlain, Snowden and MacDonald good. From the inside Reith's views were rather different; Snowden and Churchill he considered excellent, Baldwin good, MacDonald strained, bitter and ineffective and Lloyd George poor, whilst Chamberlain he took to task for saying that he had not prepared for the broadcast: 'I asked him what more important he could have had to do all week'.¹⁵²

A myth has grown up that only Baldwin took any great care over his broadcasts. This was not so. Lloyd George made considerable preparation and even had a dress rehearsal to a group of friends the evening before the broadcast.¹⁵³ He also insisted that his final broadcast be in the same week as MacDonald's and Baldwin's. This resulted in Baldwin broadcasting, contrary to original intention, on the eve of the election. Likewise Neville Chamberlain, despite what he told Reith, had thought hard about how to present himself, and left an interesting record of his experience in a letter to his sister:

It is a very curious sensation, sitting alone in a room and talking to a microphone, knowing that you are being heard by listeners who may number millions, but unable to obtain the faintest indication of the impression you are making. It was a great relief when it was over to find the BBC people quite enthusiastic. They said every syllable was clear and distinct, pace and tone excellent, matter and manner the best they had had yet. I am very pleased for I did take a good deal of trouble both in preparation and delivery to appear reasonable and fair and at the same time convincing on the merits of our case.¹⁵⁴

152. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 102, 16 April 1929.

153. A.H. Booth, British Hustings, 1924 - 1950, London 1956, 83.

154. Chamberlain papers, NC18/1/651, Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 27 April 1929.

Churchill similarly was fully alive to the importance of these broadcasts. As early as the end of March he was urging Baldwin to decide who should broadcast for the Conservatives, and argued that only well known people should be used, in order to draw large audiences:

The opportunity is of immense importance and, having regard to the unwieldy character of the electorate, no personal consideration should stand in the way of using it to the best advantage.

He therefore rejected Davidson's interesting proposal that the working man chairman of the Unionist Association should broadcast. Churchill told Baldwin that he was trying to get another broadcast on the night following his budget speech: 'Last year it helped enormously'.¹⁵⁵ Before he broadcast he had Reith to dine with him.¹⁵⁶

Undoubtedly, however, it was Baldwin who was most alive to the special character of broadcasting. Before his first broadcast he wrote to ask Reith about the nature of the audience:

I want to classify my potential listeners e.g. what proportion may be working class? Does wireless go to the workman, or is the workman listener an exception, or would he be likely to listen at a club or pub?¹⁵⁷

155. Baldwin papers, Bal.36/F.109-110, Churchill to Baldwin, 29 March 1929.

156. C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 103, 30 April 1929.

157. BBC, LRP, Baldwin to Reith, 13 April 1929. Quoted in C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 102. Reith replied that radio was listened to by all classes, but probably by a greater proportion of lower middle class and settled working class people: 'You will have every sort of individual listening to you, and a large proportion of working class people, mostly in their homes, not in clubs or pubs. The workman and his wife will certainly be there, but so will the ordinary middle-class fellow and his, mostly at the fireside'. - Reith to Baldwin, 14 April 1929. Quoted in C. Stuart, Op. Cit., 102.

A new wireless set had just been installed at Chequers, and Baldwin listened to it frequently over the weekend before his broadcast. He also rehearsed beforehand with Thomas Jones.¹⁵⁸ He was quick to recognise that impression rather than content was what mattered in broadcasting, just as on the platform. This led him to take the unique step of speaking for less than his allotted time of half an hour. Whereas MacDonald had to be told that 'Half an hour on end is about the limit of really effective listening time for the average hearer by wireless', and actually spoke for thirty-eight minutes, Baldwin informed Reith that he might speak for only fifteen minutes¹⁵⁹ in his final broadcast, and in the event spoke for twenty-three.¹⁵⁹ Reith helped both MacDonald and Baldwin with their broadcasts, but his assistance to Baldwin was significant, for he wrote the final two memorable and thoroughly Baldwinesque paragraphs, concluding:

The personal note does not come easily to me, but as I am speaking to you, my fellow countrymen and women, mostly in the quietness of your own homes, in every corner of the land, may I put it to you this way:- you trusted me before: I ask you to trust me again.¹⁶⁰

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158. Thomas Jones, A Whitehall Diary, vol.II, London 1969, 180,182.
159. MacDonald papers, PRO 30/69/5/40, Reith to MacDonald, 30 April 1929; COO, COO4/1/22, Davidson to Reith, 28 May 1929; BBC Programme Records, 28-29 May 1929.
160. Baldwin papers, Bal.199/f214-216, undated draft broadcast (as given). Following the broadcast Baldwin had many letters of congratulation. A 'flapper' told him that if only other politicians would realise that they were speaking to 21 year olds, 'and deliver their speeches in the same strain as yourself, then the children (because that is all we are) would have a better opportunity of choosing a party for themselves instead of following Father's footsteps'. Another listener contrasted Baldwin and MacDonald's broadcasts: 'The one so clear and kind the other so vaporous and critical the contrast impressed me more than I can say'. Having expressed his admiration for Baldwin another listener commented that 'Every word uttered was sincere, and, if I may be pardoned for saying so, without any recriminations...' - Bal.38/f5-6,12,62, 29-30 May 1929.

Another myth to have developed since 1945 is that before the war the BBC's desire for impartiality, and its inherent caution, led it completely to refrain from broadcasting any potentially political items during the election, party broadcasts excepted, and not even to report the progress of the campaign as it developed. This was simply not so in 1929, and indeed the BBC showed remarkable boldness in its determination to use standard news values rather than the need for absolute balance as its criteria for coverage. Reith ruled that election speeches should be treated as other news and judged on their news value. He felt that although the BBC should avoid showing undue partiality to any one party that did not mean it had to be over anxious to give equal space to each.¹⁶¹ Regional station directors were assured, regarding local news, that

there is no reason through fear or accusations of partiality, to omit political news, such as the adoption of candidates, accounts or announcements of political meetings and speeches and other matters of a similar kind. These subjects have a considerable news value at the present time, which will increase until the General Election.¹⁶²

Towards the end of the campaign News Editor E.C. Henty analysed the BBC's news reportage for Reith. Between 9 April and 22 May (parliament having been dissolved on 10 May) 17 Conservative, 15 Labour and 15 Liberal speeches had been reported. In terms of news lines broadcast before the dissolution this meant respectively 145, 55 and 146, the extremely low Labour figure being a consequence of the late start of its campaign. Since the dissolution the figures had been Conservative 131, Labour 149, Liberal 80, giving totals respectively of 276, 204 and 226 lines of coverage. Henty explained that although it had been possible to balance the number of speeches broadcast, the length of the speeches had been more difficult, and he

161. BBC, NBPB, memo by E.C. Henty, 10 April 1929.

162. BBC, NBPB, E.C.Henty (for Director of Talks) to Station Directors, 17 April 1929.

pinpointed a significant problem for the Corporation in all its inter-war news coverage:

we have found that the Conservative speeches are reported by the [press] Agencies very much fuller than the Labour speeches, presumably owing to the fact that the Agencies cater mainly for Conservative newspapers. So often the only extracts from Labour speeches reported are vitriolic remarks about Conservative or Labour leaders, which we have had to omit.¹⁶³

This was to be a recurring and recognised problem until the BBC was permitted to develop its own news service. Henty emphasised, however, that although the parties had not been given equal space, the BBC had been careful not to load the scales against any one of them.

As for the broadcasting of other potentially political matter or of programmes which might have had political implications, Vernon Bartlett and Gerald Barry continued to broadcast throughout the election period. Only a week before the election a speech by Baldwin was broadcast from the Empire Day Rally in Hyde Park, together with massed bands and a religious service. The speech was non-party, of course, but the potential influence was nevertheless considerable.¹⁶⁴

Similarly on 14 May a speech by Neville Chamberlain had been broadcast from the annual meeting of the National Federation of Women's Institutes. Of this Chamberlain wrote that his intention had been to convince the audience of his own sincerity, and that he had been given a remarkable ovation at the end, which was also broadcast. He admitted that the speech had not been as unpolitical as he had promised it would be:

I did manage to drop one or two allusions to the Party's

163. BBC, NBPB, E.C.Henty to Reith, 23 May 1929.

164. It is interesting to note that the Radio Times carried a picture of Baldwin to advertise this item. In 1928 and 1929 Baldwin's photograph appeared at least five times in Radio Times, those of other politicians hardly at all.

achievements or programme without appearing to be partisan.¹⁶⁵

No Labour politician appeared in such non-party broadcasts after the dissolution, although Ernest Bevin of the T&GWU and TUC General Council (but not an MP) broadcast on 'Accidents in Industry' on 8 May.

With the removal of the ban on political controversy and with the 1929 General Election the BBC entered properly into the business of political communication. The fundamentals of development in the 1930s could already be seen - a BBC seeking to experiment and expand this aspect of its national role, but with a deep sense of responsibility, a respect for government and the 'national interest', and a knowledge of the Government's real power over it; on the political side an anxious, eager and frustrated Labour (and Liberal) Party already suspicious of BBC motives, particularly in its lower levels where personal acquaintance with Reith could not reassure it as to the Corporation's soundness; and on the Conservative side an astute and aware leadership, playing a tactical game and, until May 1929, holding most of the advantages. Yet once again there was in the ranks a growing suspicion of BBC bias, which was to surface between 1929 and 1931. Throughout the BBC, the three parties and the press, however, there was one common belief, and that was that broadcasting could provide a political propaganda and education channel of unrivalled power, and that it could and would fundamentally change the political process. For good or ill broadcasting had indeed entered into politics.

165. Chamberlain papers, NC18/1/654, Neville to Ida Chamberlain, 18 May 1929.

Note A

The continual association of broadcasting policy with the attainment of the democratic ideal is well illustrated by this Listener editorial of 13 November 1929, which continued:

To-day we are in some danger of losing our own democracy because the vastness and complexity of our civilisation offers so few possibilities of personal contact between those who think and rule and those who act and obey. By bringing those leaders of thought to the microphone and inducing them to bare their inner philosophy before us all, broadcasting is restoring the somewhat frayed faith of the man in the street in his leaders ... We feel sure that in due course the series will come to be looked back upon as a landmark in the growth of the contribution of broadcasting to the education of democracy.