

FREE PRESS

Bulletin of the Campaign for Press freedom February 1980 : No 1

Depressing Outlook for the eighties

THE FIRST moves towards the launch of the Campaign for Press Freedom were made a year ago. They were prompted most urgently by the press and broadcasting coverage of last winter's industrial disputes.

It seemed clear that the free-booting of the press then did not constitute press freedom. The Campaign's first aim was to demolish the myths about press freedom and make sure others recognised the difference between the myths and realities.

Things have changed since then. Not that there is any less need to pursue that aim, but that there has been a change of government and with it a change of attitudes.

Only the unmasking of Blunt the mole ensured that the Protection of Official Information Bill has, at least for the time being, disappeared. The CPF had already planned and launched a concerted assault on this very nasty piece of legislation when Mrs Thatcher had it withdrawn. But her Government is still committed to replacing Section 2 of the Official Secrets Act and although the new Bill, when it comes, will be designed to allow us to unmask Communist spies wherever possible, there is no reason to think the rest of the Bill will be any less oppressive than its predecessor.

The Campaign will organise opposition to that too when it appears.

We have also had Mrs Thatcher's warning to the BBC that it should "put its own house in order" following Panorama's attempt to provide an insight into the problems of Ireland.

The official BBC response was to rule that in future all references to Northern Ireland should be referred upwards, and to hand untransmitted film meekly over to the police without even the hint of a fight. In so doing it set a precedent which ITN had previously resisted and avoided. National newspapers largely supported Government strictures on the BBC journalists, uncritically repeating the parliamentary allegation that they were "traitors".

It is depressing that within a few months of the Campaign's launch we look set to have less freedom than when we started. It is also a measure of the desperate need in the eighties for the job the Campaign sets itself.

Campaign steering committee: James Curran, Jake Ecclestone, Ken Fleet, Harold Frayman, Geoffrey Goodman, Stuart Holland MP, John Jennings, Bill Keys, John Lloyd, Denis MacShane, Michael Meacher MP, John Mitchell, Steve Radford, Donald Ross, Dave White.

INSIDE

"British journalism is not so healthy, nor our newspapers so many and so varied, that we can afford to tolerate this kind of economic banditry," says Jake Ecclestone reflecting on the closures at Times Newspapers : page 2

Press On – notes what this Campaign is up to : page 3

Encouraging alternative newspapers – two get our support : page 4

Campaign Meeting

Press Freedom

– from myth to reality

7pm Central Hall, Westminster
Thursday February 28

Speakers include

Bishop Colin Winter, Bishop of Namibia in exile

Tony Benn MP

Bill Keys, general secretary of Sogat

Admission Free

A mere matter of commerce

JAKE ECCLESTONE is president of the National Union of Journalists, Father of the NUJ chapel at The Times and a member of the Campaign steering committee. Here he takes a long look back at the 11 months suspension of five newspapers.

SOME YEARS ago *The Times* was described as "the daily house journal of Britain's active elite". It was an apt description, one which the editorial staff would take some pride in allowing. All the more strange, then, that the "elite" itself should have been so passive when deprived of the paper for almost a year.

The silence of Britain's intellectual establishment — their failure to mount even the mildest protest — in the face of the suspension of Times Newspapers between December, 1978, and November, 1979, rather calls into question conventional wisdom on the role of newspapers in our society.

If nobody particularly minded the disappearance of *The Times*, its sister Sunday paper and three weekly supplements, and the life of the nation went on much as before, what then becomes of the claim that newspapers underpin our democracy?

The usual view of the function of newspapers was well articulated in the opening paragraph of the abortive Press Charter. There, in March, 1977, the management of Times Newspapers had, as leading members of the Newspaper Publishers' Association, declared "their support for the principle of the freedom of the Press to collect and publish information and to publish comment and criticism." Furthermore, they accepted that it was "their duty to defend that freedom as an essential part of a democratic society."

Either the owners, managers and editors of Times Newspapers had changed their minds on such a trifling matter as what constitutes "an essential part of a democratic society" by the end of 1978, or — more likely — they decided that high sounding principles were getting in the way of the real object, which was to make money. A third possibility exists; that some of those who put their names to the Charter did not actually believe what they were saying.

The irony is, of course, that those who have expropriated the freedom of the press in Britain have been most strident in the condemnation of others who ask for that freedom to be shared around a little. Thus, the minority report of the Royal Commission calling for a National Printing Corporation is regarded as dangerous nonsense by Fleet St.

In any event, by April, 1978, the owners, directors and managers of Times Newspapers were responding to a series of strikes and production shortfalls — themselves a reflection of appalling industrial relations — by threatening to shut down until the workers were shipped into line.

Back in 1924, when a committee of trustees was set up to watch over *The Times*, Col. J.J. Astor wrote that the committee's sole object was "to ensure, so far as is humanly possible, that the ownership of *The Times* shall never be regarded as a mere matter of commerce to be transferred without regard to any other circumstance to the highest bidder, or fall as far as can be foreseen, into unworthy hands.

What happened at Times Newspapers was indeed a "mere matter of commerce." It was decided, as a calculated act of policy, to disregard the role of defenders of democracy in pursuit of profit. That profit was to be generated by the installation of new technologies which required a greatly reduced labour force, by the sweeping away of existing

agreements, and the wholesale restructuring of management-union relations: in effect breaking union power.

The question of whether newspapers, particularly socially valuable newspapers as are produced in Gray's Inn Rd, should be silenced for such ends does not appear to have ever been considered. The editor of *The Times*, Mr William Rees-Mogg was, throughout, a fervent advocate of a hard-line approach. Mr Harold Evans, the editor of *The Sunday Times*, apparently took a softer position, though he too supported the closure. Both men were given very large, low-interest loans by the parent company, International Thomson Organisation, in the summer of 1978, soon after the closedown strategy had been announced. Both men were and still are firm supporters of the Institute of Journalists, a spurious trade union much-loved by proprietors and editors since it never disagrees with them.

The essential conflict between those who see newspapers as commercial undertakings, with financial profit the objective, and those to whom newspapers are an important component of a healthy society, providing a range of information and reasoned comment and criticism, has been fudged for a very long time. The two fundamentally different approaches have rubbed along uncomfortably — the politically noble role giving respectability to the grubby.

Evans himself, over the thalidomide story, had run hard up against a government more amenable to the pressure exerted by a multi-million pound conglomerate than to social justice. To his undoubted credit Evans took on both government and the Distillers Co. and won — though perhaps the rarity of what he did is indicated by the repeated use of this particular example to justify the underlying health of our press.

Over the past 20 years when papers such as the *News Chronicle*, *Reynolds News*, and *Daily Sketch* were butchered on the altar of commerce a few people protested but not enough cared to save them. In any case, the cynics will argue, they were all losing money heavily. No such claims can be used by Times Newspapers to justify what they did, for even the lame duck of the company, Mr Rees-Mogg's Times, was showing a profit last year. And yet few outside the immediate circle of threatened employees and their trade unions raised more than a token wail — and some of those who had brayed most loudly when newspapers were halted by industrial disputes were now shamefully silent. Some, indeed, even applauded the bloodletting.

Whether or not the world of letters suffered by the absence of the Lit. Supp., or education lost by the suppression of the cool good sense of the two education supplements — and it would be difficult to argue convincingly that they did not — the fact remains that we have come to take our democracy so lightly that nothing was done to force management to reopen. Only the drain of millions of pounds and the realisation that the trade unions could not be broken did that.

British journalism is not so healthy, nor our newspapers so many and so varied, that we can afford as a society to tolerate this kind of economic banditry against our heritage. Either we need newspapers because they are "an essential part of a democratic society" and are therefore too precious to be controlled by one group or section, or they are not. If the latter, then the posturing and the humbug by those who own and edit them should be punctured.

Statement of Aims

- 1 To challenge the myth that only private ownership of the newspaper industry provides genuine freedom, diversity or access, and to generate public debate on alternative forms of democratic ownership and control
- 2 To carry out research into alternatives, including ownership by independent trusts or co-operatives, which would guarantee freedom from either state control or domination by major business conglomerates.
- 3 To encourage the creation of alternative newspapers of all kinds including a newspaper or newspapers sympathetic to the labour movement.
- 4 To encourage the development of industrial democracy in the newspaper, broadcasting and television industries.
- 5 To follow up the general principles contained in the Minority Report of the Royal Commission on the Press, including proposals for a National Printing Corporation to provide a competitive public sector in the printing industry and a launch fund to assist new publications.
- 6 To campaign for a reformed and reconstituted Press Council to promote basic standards of fairness and access to the press on behalf of the public.
- 7 To work for a reduction in legal restrictions on freedom of publication and increased access to official sources of information through reform of the Official Secrets Act and similar restrictive legislation and the introduction of a Freedom of Information Bill.

Sponsors

Neal Ascherson, Joe Ashton MP, Ken Ashton NUJ, Tom Baistow, David Bassett GMWU, Tony Benn MP, Ken Coates, Harry Conroy, Stan Crowther MP, Geoffrey Drain NALGO, Katie Doyle, Jacob Ecclestone, Udi Eichler, Moss Evans TGWU, John Golding MP, Geoffrey Goodman, Richard Gott, John Grant MP, Professor Stuart Hall, Professor James Halloran, Keith Harper, Dame Judith Hart MP, Roy Hattersley MP, Peter Hildrew, Professor Richard Hoggart, Stuart Holland MP, Professor Stuart Hood, Darcus Howe, John Jackson SLADE, Lord Jacobson, Lord Kaldor, Bill Keys SOGAT, Joan Lester MP, John McGrath, Michael Meacher MP, Eric Moonman, Lionel Morrison, Professor Robert Nield, Owen O'Brien NATSOPA, Dr Bikhu Parekh, Christopher Price MP, Lord Ritchie-Calder, Geoffrey Robertson, Paul Routledge, Alan Sapper ACTT, Vishnu Sharma, David Sheppard, Bishop of Liverpool, Neville Smith, Mervyn Stockwood, Bishop of Southwark, Mary Stott, Dafydd Elis Thomas MP, John Torode, Joe Wade NGA, Keith Waterhouse, Phillip Whitehead MP, Professor Raymond Williams, Colin Winter, Bishop of Namibia in Exile, Audrey Wise.

Press on

THERE ARE now 15 unions affiliated to the Campaign. In addition there are 27 union branches etc, 24 branch or constituency Labour Parties and seven other organisations.

The unions include SOGAT, NATSOPA, NGA and SLADE (from printing); NALGO, NATTKE, NUM, NUPE, UPW, USDAW, FTAT, Tobacco Workers, and COHSE.

THE FIRST 10,000 copies of the Campaign's first pamphlet, *Towards Press Freedom*, have all been distributed and a second edition is being printed. Copies available at 30p each (there is a discount on bulk orders) from the Campaign.

ARE YOU organising a meeting on the media? The Campaign can help by suggesting speakers and supplying pamphlets for your meeting. Contact us for any help you think we can provide.

FREE PRESS – this bulletin – is not only intended to keep you informed but to provide a forum for debate within the Campaign. Write to it and for it. This edition has been edited by Harold Frayman on behalf of the steering committee.

BOTH TUC and Labour Party conference endorsed resolutions broadly along the lines of the Campaign's aims. This is substantially thanks to the efforts of SOGAT, and its general secretary Bill Keys, who proposed the press resolutions at both conferences. TUC and Labour Party groups are now being asked to work out the details of Congress and Party policy. We'll keep you posted.

A MEMBERS' meeting will be held some time in March to be followed by the Campaign's first annual meeting soon afterwards. More info follows later.

ATTACKS ON THE Campaign have come (at least) from *The Spectator*, the *South London Press* and the research officer of the Freedom Association. If you know of other public attacks on the Campaign it will help us if you can both reply to the explicit criticisms and let us have a copy of both attack and reply together with information on whether the reply is published.

A WELSH bilingual version of the Campaign's introductory leaflet is being prepared by the Welsh Language Society, one of the Campaign's affiliated members.

FOUR CAMPAIGN supporters and sponsors – Tony Benn, Stuart Holland, James Curran and Roy Lockett – were the speakers at a Bristol conference on the media attended by 150 people at the end of last year.

THE PRESS COUNCIL – see Campaign Aim number 6 – is the focus of an investigation launched by the National Union of Journalists. If you have any evidence based on dealings with the council please send information and observations to the NUJ, Acorn House, Grays Inn Road, London WC1.

Making news in London & Rochdale

TWO NEW alternative weekly papers are to be launched with Campaign backing.

One in London, is a completely new launch. The other, in Rochdale, Greater Manchester, will be the conversion of an established monthly. The organisers of the East End News and of Rochdale's Alternative Press (EEN and RAP) approached the Campaign for support and after careful consideration of their plans the steering committee is asking Campaign members to support both projects.

RAP has been publishing for eight years and currently has a circulation of around 7,000 a month. It runs its own press for a large number of alternative journals and a bonus for freedom (and ease) of publication.

EEN is an entirely new venture to be promoted by a readers' co-operative. The Campaign has taken a nominal £10 share and is represented in the co-op by John Jennings.

The steering committee was not only concerned to establish that these ventures were being planned so as to stand a reasonable chance of success. Members also wanted to be sure that if ventures supported by the Campaign became successful enough to make an operating profit, some of this money would be ploughed back to expand the alternative press further.

The EEN has indeed incorporated into its own statement of aims a commitment to support and encourage initiatives similar to its own throughout the country.

In Nottingham the National Union of Journalists is paying wages to its members who are publishing the weekly Nottingham News.

A collection for all three of these papers will be taken at

the Campaign's public meeting on February 28.

But the Campaign is not itself about to become the banker for the alternative press, nor is it trying to launch new papers out of its own funds. Please use every opportunity, as an individual, in your union, your party or anywhere else, to raise support for these papers — particularly if they circulate in or near your area. Send cash and help direct to them, not to the Campaign.

The East End News, incidentally, has set itself a target of £15,000 and nothing will happen unless this target is reached.

East End News
c/o Mike Jempson
111 Matilda House,
St Katherine's Way,
London E1

Rochdale's Alternative Paper
230 Spotland Road
Rochdale
OL12 6QD

ENTHUSIASM FOR launching new papers is definitely in the air. *The Dundee Standard* is already publishing. Although the *Hull News* ran in to difficulties after only two issues as a weekly, its supporters have not given up and are now working on plans to start a monthly.

We know of plans afoot in Bristol and Newcastle-upon-Tyne at least for new papers.

Please let us know if you are planning a local initiative. The Campaign is well-placed to act as a clearing-house for information and advice on the launch and management of new papers. Only if papers approach the Campaign, as EEN and RAP have, can it "encourage the creations of alternative papers of all kinds."

BL attacks right to publish

THE steering committee of the Campaign for Press Freedom have condemned the dismissal of one trade unionist and the disciplining of two others by the management of British Leyland.

The Committee say that they are reluctant to intervene in industrial relations matters and wish to confine their comments to the issue of freedom of publication. The stated reason for the disciplinary action was, however, the publication of a pamphlet. This is a clear attack on the right to publish and must be universally condemned by all who are concerned with freedom of the press and freedom of expression.

Actions of this kind, allowed to pass without comment, could lead to further attacks on free speech both in industry and in society at large.

We do not believe it is without significance that the development has come almost simultaneously with an attack by Michael Heseltine, Environment Secretary, on the BBC's reporting of the Lambeth anti-cuts

march in which he appeared to suggest that press criticism of the Government was against the national interest.

(Statement issued December 1979.)

Aims into action

THE question of how the Campaign should best be organised is being considered by the steering committee which would welcome members' comments.

The suggestion at the moment is that there should be seven "aims groups", each with its own convenor and organising group. Each would be responsible, subject to the direction of the Campaign through the committee, for the prosecution of its aim.

Together they would be expected to make sure that we make progress on all seven aims.

Campaign members would, of course, remain members of the whole campaign. But they would also be able to indicate those aims they were most concerned to be actively involved in following up and would then receive correspondence, details of meetings etc, related to the aims named.

Information on the activity of all

the aims groups would be carried regularly in the *Free Press*

The steering committee is concerned that those Campaign members who wish to play an active role should be able to do so and we think this is one way of doing it. Please let us know what you think.

Membership

INDIVIDUAL membership of the campaign costs £3.

ORGANISATIONS can affiliate for an annual fee at the following rates, depending on size of membership. Less than 1,000 — £5; Between 1,000 and 10,000 — £10; Between 10,000 and 50,000 — £15; 50,000 to 100,000 — £25; more than 100,000 — £50.

Write to John Jennings giving your name, or the name of the organisation and its secretary as applicable, and your address. Cheques should be payable to Campaign for Press Freedom.

Free Press is free to members of the Campaign for Press Freedom, published by the Campaign, 274-288 London Road, Hadleigh, Essex SS7 2DE, and printed by the Russell Press Ltd (TU) Nottingham.