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FUNCTION OF INFORMATION SERVICES IN GOVERNMENT

THE debate in the House of Lords on January 31, on Lord Elton's motion, regarding the setting up of an organization to assume after the War the responsibility for spreading knowledge of the British Empire, a duty which is at present undertaken by the Ministry of Information, touches one particular aspect of the wider problem discussed in the Political and Economic Planning broadsheet on "Government Information Services" issued a couple of days later. The debate, in which others besides Lord Elton paid tribute to the work of the Empire Information Service, amply demonstrated the need for such educational work, as well as the opportunities, and Lord Samuel and Lord Hailey lent powerful support to Lord Elton's plea that plans should be made for continuing the work of this unit if the general work of the Ministry of Information should be brought to an end. There was division of opinion as to how best this could be achieved. Lord Elton and Lord Hailey both suggested a form of Empire Publicity Board, with strong independent representation, in association with that of Government departments, and though Lord Cranborne in replying for the Government pointed out weaknesses in such a proposal, he indicated that the importance of the question is fully appreciated by the Government and that it has been for some time under the urgent consideration of the departments concerned.

The *Planning* broadsheet is concerned with the more general aspects of the question and is a sequence to an earlier broadsheet on "The Future of Foreign Publicity" which has already been discussed in these columns. It was assumed in the House of Lords debate and also in the broadsheet on information services that the Ministry of Information will be terminated at the end of the War; and though this appears to be accepted as right and proper, there was strong support for the view that certain of its activities should be continued in some way under Government auspices. Powerful support is to be found for this point of view in two recent and important books. Sir Victor Wellesley, in "Diplomacy in Fetters", discusses the handicaps under which foreign policy is conducted by a democracy, and makes two points which are vital to the discussion of this subject. First, the danger which uninstructed public opinion represents in the conduct of foreign affairs; and secondly, that if the maintenance of a lasting peace is the chief objective of our foreign policy, it is essential that domestic policy should conform to the exigencies of foreign policy, and vice versa. Sir Victor proceeds to outline some constructive proposals, based on his experience as Deputy Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, to provide a new technique by which policy could keep abreast of modern requirements. With its details we are not concerned here, more than to emphasize that it involves more accurate intelligence on foreign affairs—not merely fact-finding—as a basis

for the determination of policy, and also the education of public opinion.

Mr. McCallum's "Public Opinion and the Last Peace" contains no such constructive proposals, but his review of the changes in public opinion with regard to the problems arising out of the Treaty of Versailles and the way in which these contributed to the disaster of 1939, demonstrates once again the dangers of an uneducated public opinion and also of the absence of clear, straight thinking on the part of statesmen and party leaders. Once again it is apparent that courage and honesty are the foundations of effective policy, and there could scarcely be more emphatic evidence of the importance of some official effort to guide public opinion as to what is involved in public measures and policies than in these two books.

The *Planning* broadsheet drives home the same lesson, though from another point of view. The conception of government as a positive and not a merely negative function plays in this, as in other *Planning* broadsheets, an important part in leading up to the conclusions which are drawn: the Government cannot perform its larger functions in the social and economic life of the community unless it has the right and means to make its purposes and methods effectively known. That need cannot be wholly met by full reporting of Parliamentary debates, and it is high time, in consonance with democratic principle, that fuller and simpler explanations be given to the great majority of people, who have a right to know why and what their Government has done, is doing and wishes to do. Explanation cannot be left entirely to the initiative of newspapers and book publishers: the administration is entitled in the public interest to take its own view of what requires explanation and by what means the explanation can best be given. Equally it is important that Government should be kept continuously aware of the citizen's point of view.

The P E P Group which has produced "Government Information Services" has admirably fulfilled its set purpose of adding to public knowledge of this important aspect of government, evaluating criticism and drawing up recommendations for the future. The history of Government public relations departments is briefly reviewed, and the lucid analysis of current criticism and of future activities leads to proposals for their future scope and organization which are concisely summarized. While there is nothing very novel in these recommendations—the Group agrees on the whole with the view that the end of the War should see the end of the Ministry of Information—the need is emphasized for an early decision by the Government as to the way in which certain of the functions of the Ministry are to be perpetuated. Just how the centralized responsibility for public information should be discharged in peacetime may be a question to which the answer can best be found in practice. The broadsheet shows clearly that the function of Government information is not exhausted even in the adequate performance by administrative departments of their own functions.

The first P E P recommendation is that Government information services should continue after the War through departmental units. Their functions should include the provision of news and information about administrative activity and the background of policy; public instruction on appropriate themes; and advice to their Ministries on public attitudes and opinions. To avoid misunderstanding and to keep present to the minds of the officers themselves the essential nature and the proper limits of their task, the term 'public relations' should be dropped and 'information' substituted. To provide technical and creative services, P E P recommends that a central publicity unit should be set up, attached to the Treasury, the Lord President of the Council or the Cabinet Offices, and operating under the general direction of a standing committee of departmental directors of information services. The unit would take over the work of such divisions of the Ministry of Information as films, publications, photographs, exhibitions and campaigns, and be responsible for buying space, time and commodities for all Government advertising. In the production of publicity, departments should be free to deal direct with private agencies where these exist.

With regard to themes, it is suggested that, as before the War, information units should undertake publicity on such questions as health and road safety, and should also provide information about new post-war measures and policies. Fuller background information should be given on subjects of general interest such as foreign affairs and public finance. Food and works relations publicity should also continue, the latter under the joint sponsorship of Government, employers' organizations and the trade unions, with considerable devolution of control to the level of industries and factories. If the inherent dangers and difficulties can be overcome, information services in this field might do something materially to improve industrial relations and to promote the closer integration of industry with the community it serves. Furthermore, information services should cover the general nature and methods of the Civil Service and its work. A fuller and wider knowledge of the facts and reasons on the part of the public would both be a safeguard against bureaucracy and prejudiced criticism of the Civil Service and accelerate any necessary or desirable changes in the Service itself. The more light is thrown on the purposes and methods of Government departments, the less likely are obsolete techniques, sectional habits of thought and indifference to the service of the public to survive. Moreover, it cannot be doubted that if considerable changes in the machinery of government at any level prove necessary to serve our new needs, public understanding and consent will be indispensable before such changes can be implemented.

With regard to departmental arrangements, the broadsheet urges that the head of the departmental branch should have sufficient status to give him access to the Minister, and adequate authority in negotiation and conference; a rank of at least assistant secretary is proposed. While the size and

diversity of the staff must depend on the size and work of the Ministry, in general large technical staffs should be avoided; a small highly-qualified staff able to use outside services, with a chief of high Civil Service rank, is preferred. The director himself need not be a technician, but should be well qualified to buy and control the technical services involved. Initially, directors might be chosen from outside, sometimes on a temporary basis; but in due course these posts could be filled by Civil Servants with the right aptitudes and some experience in information branches.

The broadsheet also directs attention to the value of close links between information branches, departmental intelligence units and libraries. In the Ministry of Health, these have from their inception been organically related, but in other Ministries relations are casual, and there may be no functional or administrative relation between public relations and the library, the statistical branch and the intelligence branch or any of them. Indeed the broadsheet goes so far as to suggest that if Whitehall had before the War been staffed with public relations branches which knew their business, the neglect of statistics and research which marred the administrative work of some Departments of State might in part have been corrected. At this point some clear thinking will obviously be required if the proposals are not to conflict with those which have been advanced by the Council of the Royal Statistical Society in its memorandum on official statistics and which, as the Prime Minister has announced, are now to be discussed with representatives of the departments concerned at a special meeting.

Another subject which calls for further consideration is the provision of information about public opinion. The first and most important source of such information is Parliament, but the Parliamentary interpretation of public opinion needs to be supplemented, as it has been during the War, by scientific surveys of public opinion. This need may arise from administrative considerations—the Requisitioned Land and War Works Bill is a glaring instance of the consequences of administrative neglect in this respect—and while these needs may sometimes be served by limited *ad hoc* inquiries, there is little doubt that more elaborate and fundamental researches may sometimes be required.

The broadsheet is emphatic that the Government should not be deprived of the use of scientific research in this field, but is hesitant as to the method and safeguards. The results of such studies should be published, though delay might sometimes be desirable. Tentatively, it is suggested that the right answer might be to encourage the formation of a social research council or institute under the aegis of the Lord President, financed by the State, but with independent scientific status. Such a body might align itself with the work of the universities and private agencies in this field and could take charge of the official research unit. The broadsheet rightly points out that the public opinion survey represents a new and important method of investigation in the social sciences, of which

the Government should not be wholly deprived; this should be sufficient answer to criticism about interference with civil liberties and spying into private affairs which have been made.

Local information services are important and should be remembered in connexion with the training of local staffs of central departments. The work of the Citizens' Advice Bureaux and the war-time local information centres should continue: the latter should cover the whole province of local government and should keep in touch with the local offices of the Government. Some regional co-ordination by the central Government of its own local information activities will probably be necessary, and the machinery for this could be attached to the central publicity unit.

Finally, reviewing the safeguards against the abuses to which Government information services might be subject, such as their use to press a Government case unduly against opposition, to give unfair advantage to a political party in power, to build up the personal reputations of Ministers, and to overweight the position of the executive *vis-à-vis* Parliament, the broadsheet points to the remedies in due publicity for the nature and operations of the information services themselves; the maintenance of proper codes and standards of conduct among the information staffs; responsible use of them by Ministers; and continuous vigilance by Parliament and the Press.

The careful examination of these dangers and safeguards in the broadsheets does not warrant pessimism as to their adequacy. Vigilance undoubtedly will be required, but an independent central publicity unit as suggested may be free from some of the dangers of departmentalism and be competent to make its contribution in that important field of policy-making which increasingly calls for the work of committees of Ministers dealing with wide general spheres. This is the reason for the suggestion that the standing committee of public relations or information officers should meet under the auspices of the Cabinet Office with a secretary provided by that Office, and that the central publicity unit should be similarly affiliated. Whether or not such developments in the direction of a Civil general staff come soon or late—for there is little doubt they will come—there can be no question that Government information services rightly organized and wisely handled have an important if not an indispensable part to play in the establishment of right relations between knowledge and power, the application of scientific and technical knowledge to public policy, the elimination of prejudice and passion and the harmonization of executive action and public opinion. Scientific workers who study this lucid broadsheet, with Lord Woolton's observations at the recent British Association Conference in mind, can scarcely miss the implications it holds for one of the central problems of to-day, namely, the question as to how best the results of scientific inquiry can be translated into public policy for the general welfare of the community.