

NATURE

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CENTRAL AND LOCAL GENERAL INFORMATION SERVICES

AS the Royal Society Conference on Scientific Information closes, it is not inappropriate to consider the wider questions of the diffusion of information in general. The debate in the House of Commons on May 13 on the Civil Estimates for the Central Office of Information covered a wide field; from one point of view it was of interest on account of the statement which it drew from the Lord President of the Council, regarding information services and publicity organisation of the Government. That statement should do something to dispel the confusion which, as the debate itself indicated, still persists between a fact-finding organisation and that concerned with the dissemination of the information collected. Of the first the Economic Information Unit is typical, being concerned to supply the Government with information on the broad facts of the economic state of the nation and the economic problems of the world in relation to Great Britain.

While the Central Office of Information also deals with economic policy and exposition, working with the chief planning officers of the Central Statistical Office, with the Economic Section of the Cabinet Office and with the economic Departments of State, the research aspect of its work is less pronounced than in the Economic Information Unit, and the emphasis is rather on exposition. There can be no serious question about the need for the research aspect of information or intelligence work: the questions are rather whether there is enough of such fact-finding as a basis for policy, whether the departments are as active in this field as they should be, how best to correlate the work of the individual information units which clearly the departments must possess, and whether the work is of the highest quality and its results made known throughout the whole organisation of government with the swift efficiency that is desirable. It is on the aspect of dissemination that criticism has centred. Is that dissemination sufficiently effective to avoid unnecessary duplication? Does it reach the official who needs it sufficiently promptly? And does it reach the general public in a way that ensures their co-operation and understanding of the issues involved?

On the internal aspects of dissemination little was said in the debate. Criticism centred rather on the weakness of the relatively small amount of Central Office of Information publicity directed towards the general body of the public. Some of the criticism is obviously to be discounted. Every step taken by a party in power to direct and control the sources of public information is naturally watched with healthy suspicion. However anxious a Government may be to avoid using departmental channels of publicity for propaganda, it is never easy to avoid the danger; further, public relations officers can, in the nature of things, easily become a cloud of witnesses for the defence of Ministers.

There can be little doubt that the Central Office of Information justifies its existence, and that the

departmental information services and public relations officers are doing valuable work. The importance of such services was well indicated in a recent broadsheet issued by Political and Economic Planning. None the less, they call for friendly but searching scrutiny; while there may be much to praise, there is still room for improvement in the standard as well as the cost of the work, and Mr. Herbert Morrison seemed not indisposed to admit the importance of quality.

It can be taken as common ground, as Sir D. Maxwell Fyfe indicated, that each Minister should be responsible for the information policy of his own department with the aid of a small but highly trained information staff; that there should be adequate means for the co-ordination of both home and overseas information services so as to ensure consistency of policy and presentation; and that a central Government agency should carry out on behalf of departments most of the technical and production functions. What is at issue is rather the use made of these organisations, and the quality of the work. In particular, there is the question how far the work of informing the public, for example, in foreign affairs, should be left to Government publicity organs rather than to the Press. That question may well be the fundamental factor behind much of the criticism directed against the shortcomings of Government publicity organisations, and the criticism would be less sharp were it not for the way the Government's economic policy is cramping the free discussion and reporting of public affairs in the Press.

To complete the picture which the Lord President of the Council gave on May 13, it is necessary to turn to the statement Sir Stafford Cripps made on June 1 giving the membership of the Panel on Technical Information Services and its terms of reference. Under the chairmanship of Dr. A. King, of the Lord President's Office, the Panel is to review existing information services for distributing scientific and technical information, to consider what improvements can be made to ensure a rapid and wide dissemination of such information to industry and to make recommendation to the Committee on Industrial Productivity accordingly. That is only one aspect, and a highly specialized one, of the question, and indeed goes beyond the field of Government publicity in the strict sense; but it will be surprising if the Panel does not comment on the way in which the Government's newsprint policy retards the free dissemination of scientific and technical information through the scientific and technical Press.

It is true that certain concessions have been made and the position is easier than it has been. No scientific man, however, can be satisfied with the present position of the scientific and technical Press in Britain, whether in respect of periodicals or of books. The suspension of periodicals in the fuel crisis of 1947 is only one of a number of Government actions which engender distrust of its good faith in regard to freedom of communication; nor can scientific and technical publications be sharply distinguished from the general body of the Press. It is precisely because the Government has such a poor

record in this matter that so much bitterness has been manifest in recent debates on the supply of newsprint and of books.

The Government, in fact, has still to show that it is sincere in the support which it gave at Geneva to freedom of information. The effect of the present situation is well displayed in an article in *The Fortnightly Review* of June by W. C. Andrews. This article deserves to be studied by everyone concerned with the preservation of freedom of communication. Mr. Andrews shows why newsprint cannot be treated as just another material commodity, and some at least of the current criticism of Government information services is inspired by resentment of the apparently lavish supply of paper at their disposal in the face of the drastic curtailment of the space available for public discussion and comment in the independent Press as compared with a decade ago. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that this restriction, even if it is due to economic motives alone, is an effective form of censorship. Important events are reported imperfectly or not at all, and the formation of sound opinion is severely handicapped. Nor is that all. Mr. Andrews indicates how adverse are the repercussions on the functioning of democratic institutions, for example, local government; and the interim report of the Consultative Committee on Publicity for Local Government presented last autumn might well be studied afresh from this point of view. The Committee was agreed that much more needs to be done to stimulate publicity at both national and local levels, and it emphasizes, like Mr. Andrews, that the problem is mainly one of widespread lack of knowledge leading to apathy. The report is, in fact, like his article, a commentary on the aphorism of Junius which Mr. Andrews quotes: "The liberty of the press is the palladium of all the civil, political and religious rights". Local authorities have an undoubted duty to make information public by the most suitable means, and some of them have been justly criticized for failure to do so.

The report suggests that every local authority should review all its channels of communication with the public of its area and consider how these can be improved and extended. It does not advocate the expenditure of large sums on centralized publicity. Rather the Committee believes that local authorities can carry out consistent and effective publicity without elaborate machinery and heavy expenditure. It does hold, however, that much more could be done to educate officials of all grades in the right way of dealing with members of the public, and that the public relations spirit should permeate the whole organisation, members as well as staff. It insists also that one of the main needs is the fullest possible use of the facilities offered by the local Press for supplying regular information to the local people. No policy for improving publicity for local government can, in its opinion, be effective unless every effort is made to secure the co-operation of local newspapers.

This section of the report is of particular interest for it is here, as Mr. Andrews indicates, that Govern-

ment policy has proved most hampering and is indeed tending to frustrate the functioning of democracy. Opportunity for public comment and debate is essential to secure action in accordance with the facts of a situation and not on lines dictated by prejudice or vested interest. It is just as true at the local as at the national level that scientific and technical factors must be explained to the public. A closely related matter is the control of nationalized industries. The recent resignation of Sir Charles Reid from the National Coal Board has given warning of the danger that due weight may not be given to the technical factors in the reorganisation of this nationalized industry; unless some means of public discussion are found, there is real danger that a fresh set of sectional interests and prejudices will arise to obstruct the technical reorganisation that the public interest demands.

If the scientific man or technical expert, such as the mining engineer, is to be given the executive authority he needs to carry out the technical functions entrusted to him, the co-operation and support of the public as well as of the other workers in the industry concerned will often be required. For this reason alone the question of the control of nationalized industry and the responsibility of such industries to Parliament is a matter of close concern to him. It is evident that Parliament itself is much exercised over the special status of the boards of nationalized industries, and that while there is no desire to interfere with matters of day-to-day administration, there is a desire for fuller information on policy and for opportunity for public criticism. The Speaker indicated in the House of Commons on June 7 that he was prepared, if it was generally approved, to exercise his discretion to direct the acceptance of questions asking for statements to be made on matters about which information had been previously refused, provided that, in his opinion, the matters were of sufficient public importance. Public importance is one of the tests for motions for the adjournment of the House and was not in his experience an unduly difficult test to apply. This suggestion the Government is prepared to accept; it is probably to be welcomed as affording further time for the whole question of public information and public relations to be re-examined.

What must be remembered, however, is that any such procedure inside the House of Commons will still be insufficient while the newsprint position restricts the Press from reporting such questions and debates at reasonable length. We come back to the point with which we started, that freedom of information and communication are an essential element in the functioning of democracy as well as in the application of knowledge to public affairs and the advancement of science; it is impossible in the presence of a direct censorship or of that indirect censorship which the absence of adequate supplies of paper or print imposes. There are few members of the Government who, despite obvious touchiness in regard to criticism, can fairly be suspected of an illiberal attitude on this question of information and independent comment. None the less, in spite of

the work of the British delegates at Geneva on the resolution that freedom of information is a fundamental right of the people and the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations are dedicated, the Government's attitude on the question of imports of newsprint still gives rise to serious concern. Such resolutions are hypocritical unless they are accompanied by practical evidence of concern to provide the essential means for a free Press, technical and scientific, as well as general, to discharge properly and efficiently its function of keeping men and women informed on advances in knowledge and on the issues involved in every aspect of public affairs. Nor can any Government information service, however efficient and free from party bias, undertake that task without the support of an independent Press which has also the resources for acting as an efficient instrument of information.

THE SEARCH FOR THE GERMAN ATOM BOMB

Alsos

The Failure in German Science. By Prof. Samuel A. Goudsmit. Pp. xiv+260. (London: Sigma Books, Ltd., 1947.) 15s. net.

PROF. GOUDSMIT has written a racy account of the part played by the Alsos mission in the investigation by Allied intelligence of the German uranium projects, which makes very good reading. He tells some first-class stories; the one about the radioactive wine dispatched by air to Washington deserves to become a classic; and he has some interesting things to say about the methods used by his unit and about security in armament research. His book necessarily treats only part of the subject, namely, the work of scientists who accompanied the advancing armies from the time of the liberation of Paris until the end of the War. It is to be hoped that it will some time be possible to release an account of earlier investigations, of the extent to which it was possible for military intelligence to keep track of the relevant activities of German scientists, and of the conclusions that were drawn. It was not until the occupation of Strasbourg that the Alsos mission obtained certain proof that the Germans were far from obtaining either an atomic bomb or radioactive poisons; but whether at this or at an earlier stage of the War fear of these developments was a potent motive in Allied strategy, or whether enough evidence existed to show that they were most unlikely, Goudsmit's account does not say.

But to the reviewer by far the most interesting part of the book is the description of Goudsmit's meetings with the German scientists, and his discussion of their motives in working or not working for the German war machine. This is a subject of profound interest and importance, for the question of the relation of the scientific worker to the State is one which every one of us has to face, even though we hope that the problem will not soon be again so acute as it was in the Third Reich. It is of particular importance also in connexion with the re-establishment of normal relations with the scientific workers of Germany. For a German professor invited abroad acquires thereby some prestige in his own country,