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NOUVELLE SOCIÉTÉ HELVÉTIQUE

(London Group)

Continuation of Mr. G. KELLER'S address.

How does a Government inform the public?

Government information can be very much a matter for good or evil. To take the latter case first, I need only remind you of the information system of the Hitler government. From the very beginning of the Nazi dictatorship that clever little Jesuit Goebbels was given complete power to mould public opinion and to bend it to the wishes of the Nazi party. The longer the regime was in power the more total became his hold over every sector of the vast field of information. Goebbels became the supreme judge of what the German public should and should not know and he built up a machine for controlling public opinion, the efficiency of which was one of the really frightening aspects of that regime. He did this both in a positive and in a negative way and one must grant him that he did it superbly well. In a positive way he controlled public opinion by telling all organs of information, press and radio, exactly what they had to say. In a negative way he did it by a strict censorship, by prohibiting the import of foreign Newspapers and by making it a punishable offence to listen to foreign radio stations. At first the punishment meted out for this offence was imprisonment, but later, during the war, this was changed to death by beheading. What with the vast network of spies, agents provocateurs, and with schoolchildren being brought up to denounce their own parents and relations, this system resulted, as you all know, in a gigantic ignorance of vast numbers of people regarding the real situation. Though I myself have always found it difficult to believe, when Germans told me after the war that they had known nothing about such horrifying events as the mass slaughter of Jews in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, nothing of Belsen-Bergen, nothing of Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, Mauthausen, Maidanek, Theresienstadt or Treblinka, I have nevertheless to concede that Goebbels did undoubtedly succeed in keeping many of the crimes the Nazi regime committed from the knowledge of the people. One of my authorities for saying this is Goebbels himself, whose diaries make fascinating reading, another one is Hugh Trevor-Roper and a third one is Walter Schellenberg, whose memoirs I have just read. This, then, is the negative, nay the evil side, of a government shaped Public Opinion.

As an example of the positive side I would like to mention, by way of contrast, the British system.

It is self evident that an intelligent democracy must be prepared to make full use of every available method of informing the citizens of what is essentially their business. Information thus becomes a weapon of democracy, just as the withholding of information is one of the weapons of dictatorships. Modern Ministries, with their immense administrative ramifications, such as for example the Ministries of Labour, Health, Agriculture and Fisheries, or indeed the Foreign Office, cannot conduct their business efficiently without special departments for public information,

be they called Public Relations Divisions, Information Divisions or News Departments. They must have — and in nearly all cases do have — as Heads of these Divisions, men who are competent to explain the general policy of their department and also the particular purpose of the various orders and regulations for which these may be responsible. If you consider, for example, the present policy of liberalisation of trade and currency, which the Conservative Government is practising, you will realise how important it is that the Board of Trade, or the Treasury, or the Bank of England should have competent Public Information Departments. Thus, an importer of Swiss watches may well wonder why it is that cars from the dollar area can now be imported into this country without let or hindrance — apart from the fact that you pay both import duty and the full purchase tax on them — whereas watches are still subjected to a quota system. Or, to take another example, many would-be subscribers to telephones may wonder — and need to have it explained to them — why it is that they may still be on a waiting list for a telephone, whereas the Post Office proudly announces on the other hand that you may now have receivers in gold, silver, ivory, green or various pastel shades. The fact that it is not so easily possible to add more and more lines to existing exchanges and thus to connect would-be subscribers from one day to another, whereas it is, of course, possible to manufacture as many receivers as one likes in any particular colour, is not self-evident and needs to be explained. Or, to take an even more topical example: as you all know a new Motorway, the M.1., from a point near St. Albans to a point near Dunchurch, about 30 miles outside Birmingham, has recently been handed over to traffic. Now every motorist who has a valid road-licence for his vehicle, naturally has the right to use this new modern highway. Yet there are a good many DO's and DONT's, which in the interest of the safety and security of all users of this motorway have to be strictly enforced. The catalogue of these DO's and DONT's is quite a formidable one, comprising a good dozen negative and even more positive exhortations. They all, without exception, make good sense and are all designed to prevent breakdowns or accidents. Clearly somebody has to explain to the motoring public, particularly to the Sunday Family Drivers who want to take out their old family cars, very often of pre-war vintage what fast driving on a modern Motorway involves. In this particular case the Information Division of the Ministry of Transport have rendered specially good service, both in print and on the more modern medium of television. Usually British Government Information Divisions do their work by a mixture of straight information, explanation, persuasion and exhortation. Sometimes, as Francis Williams has said in his excellent little book called "Press, Parliament and People", it is not easy to discriminate between explanation and persuasion, but, as he puts it, much of the work of such a Division is perfectly legitimate persuasion — the persuasion of people to co-operate in regulations and orders which have been approved by Parliament and become part of the law of the land.

It is, of course, normal practice that Government Departments hold more or less regular news or background conferences for the press. These may be taken by a Minister, or by a senior Official of the Ministry,

mostly assisted by one or more representatives of the Public Relations Department. In many cases only newspaper representatives belonging to specialised groups are invited to these conferences. There is, for example, an Industrial Correspondents Group, a Food Reporters Group, an Agricultural Correspondents Group and so on. It has become customary that these groups undertake that none of their members will divulge confidential information given in advance or publish information before the time agreed with the particular Public Relations Department. To breach such an undertaking is, of course, a very serious breach of professional etiquette, both as far as Representatives of the British Press are concerned or Foreign Correspondents. Unfortunately the temptation to jump ahead sometimes does prove too great. Thus during my two tenures of office as President of the Foreign Press Association in London, one from 1941-43 and another five-year stretch from 1947-51, I remember two cases of breach of confidence we had to deal with. In one of them an Under-Secretary of State at the F.O. gave, in an off the record speech after a Dorchester-Luncheon, some confidential information concerning the situation in Trieste. I was horrified when I received, a few days later, a letter from the Private Secretary of that particular junior minister, to the effect that one of our members, an Italian, had misused the Ministers confidence and published the information in an Italian paper. The letter went on to say that, unless the F.P.A. informed the Minister without much delay about the steps taken against this particular member, he, the Minister, would not only refuse all future invitations to meet members of the F.P.A., but would warn all other members of H.M.G. against our organisation. We discussed the case at length in our Committee and a severe reprimand was the sanction decided upon. It was also decided that the President should carry this decision into effect and it thus fell on me to summon an Italian colleague some ten years older than myself and to reprimand him severely according to the Committee's decision. We then informed the Minister in question that justice had been done, whereupon he declared himself satisfied and the matter was allowed to be dropped. I have mentioned this example to illustrate how seriously Ministers or Departmental Chiefs take these undertakings on the part of the press to either keep confidential information confidential or to keep to certain agreed release times. In this connection, I might add that in the case of the F.P.A. it is, of course, extremely difficult to vouch for the professional integrity of correspondents from countries behind the iron curtain. Many of them are, after all, known to be agents of their Embassy Information Divisions, and paid and kept in an important western centre such as London not so much to explain Britain to their readers as to get as much confidential information as possible for their employers. It thus became my habit, while I was in the chair of the F.P.A., to draw the attention of the Association's Guest Speakers to the fact that Communist correspondents were present too. This may, in some cases, have resulted in important guest speakers withholding certain information from all, but I preferred this to unpleasant ramifications and incidents which were bound to result from known breaches of confidence. This also resulted in the formation of an entirely unofficial group of western correspondents being formed, which, for a time, met

regularly in the Office of the late Sir David Gammans and to which meetings such junior Ministers as the former Minister of State at the F.O., Anthony Nutting or the former Secretary for Foreign Trade at the Board of Trade, Mr., now Sir, Toby Low, would come frequently.

It is, of course, easy to see the advantages of a system of briefings and fixed release times to any Government Department. It is naturally to the advantage of a department to issue news dealing, say with a change of policy or an important piece of social legislation in as many papers as possible at the same time. Through such *orchestration* it is not only possible to reach the greatest possible audience, but also to synchronise explanatory comments. An exclusive piece of news obtained by one newspaper from its own independent sources means, of course, as far as the Department is concerned, that the information with which it hoped to reach *everybody*, only reaches a fraction of the population. Unless the piece of news involved is of real importance, the tendency then for other newspapers is not to use it, as any paper — with the exception perhaps of the "Times" — minds having the reputation of lagging or limping behind the others. It will thus be seen that the system of canalising information or background explanations has obvious advantages. Now seen from the correspondent's point of view, such a system clearly has its two sides. On the one hand, there is of course, an advantage for the correspondent in achieving a more or less intimate relationship with a Minister or Head of Department. There is also an advantage in receiving, at such briefings, a good deal of confidential background information. Moreover there is an advantage in not having to rush despatches unduly for fear of being scooped by the correspondents of other papers.

But there is also a negative side to all this. Correspondents are there to inform their readers. This is their *raison d'être*. If they can't inform their readers, either because there is an embargo with a fixed release-time, or, more important because some news or information may have been given *off the record*, it is still possible, and fully in keeping with etiquette, to pass such news on to one's editor at home under the same conditions of silence.

A foreign correspondent in possession of such news will practically always pass it on and will always try to let his paper have as much information "off the record" as he can possibly glean, as these exclusive reports are the best justification of his existence. Over the years he will get hold of a great deal of confidential information, which, even if it cannot be used in print, will greatly help him in his personal appreciation of a situation. Consequently the more of this confidential information he has, the more comprehensive and authoritative will be his reports and articles, as he writes with a knowledge of the true background of his dispatch. A clever correspondent will never scorn a meeting, a conversation or an exchange of views, even if he is aware that he will not be able to pass anything on for publication. He knows that his harvest of confidential information will enrich his articles on home and foreign policy.

(To be concluded in next issue).