

Editorial & Publishing Offices :

MACMILLAN & Co., LTD.
ST. MARTIN'S STREET
LONDON, W.C.2



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Vol. 141

SATURDAY, MAY 21, 1938

No. 3577

Broadcasting as a Social Service

IN the admirable essay on the British Broadcasting Corporation in the volume of essays "Public Enterprise: Developments in Social Ownership and Control in Great Britain" by a group of contributors belonging to or associated with the New Fabian Research Bureau, Dr. W. A. Robson, while recognizing the achievements of the Corporation, the merits of its organization and the high degree of public spirit in its staff, referred to the deplorable absence of serious criticism and intelligent information concerning broadcasting in Great Britain. The general public indeed is scarcely aware either of the achievements or the shortcomings of British broadcasting, or the possibilities and the dangers of broadcasting as affecting international relations.

A more searching and discriminating attitude towards broadcasting activities is undoubtedly essential if the vitality and future progress of broadcasting are to be assured, and the same plea is advanced in Dr. Cleghorn Thomson's recent suggestive survey of radio development and its problems in our changing world under the title "Radio is Changing Us". Dr. Cleghorn Thomson writes in a disarmingly bantering tone but never loses sight of the serious aspect of his thesis. His seven years' experience inside the British Broadcasting Corporation add weight to many of his criticisms, although his attitude is that of the keen listener, and he lays his main stress on the importance of creative imagination in the development of broadcasting services whether in Great Britain or elsewhere.

Without a more critical approach to broadcasting problems and a more imaginative and creative appreciation of the social and cultural elements involved, technical development is likely

to lag far behind what is possible, and much of the value of efforts, such as those of the International Broadcasting Union and the International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation, to use this new means of spreading information in the service of peace and understanding between the nations, may well be lost.

The problems and difficulties so far encountered are, of course, essentially those which have been raised and stressed repeatedly of late, notably in Mr. T. H. O'Brien's study of "British Experiments in Public Ownership and Control" and in the essays on the British civil servant edited by Dr. W. A. Robson. Fundamentally, the problem is one of linking efficient administration and effective safeguards against abuse or damage to the public interest with the creative imagination which is alive to the human and social issues involved and the service which technical developments can render to them. It is this which has brought into the forefront at the present time the whole question of training for administration, and the importance of securing those who possess the scientific background to assess technical factors as well as creative ability and the capacity to promote energetic and far-reaching projects. Caution and regard to existing interests can never be a substitute for vision and initiative; and the severest criticism that has been made of the Governing Board of the British Broadcasting Corporation is just that its personnel does not inspire confidence in its contact with progressive thought, its receptivity to new ideas and its capacity to promote energetic development. It suggests the retrospective rather than the forward-looking mind which is so imperatively needed in such positions to-day.

Statements in the Press that the quality of broadcasting programmes in Great Britain is likely to be affected by the financial stringency through which the British Broadcasting Corporation is passing give further point to some trenchant criticism by Dr. W. A. Robson in the essay to which we have alluded. Dr. Robson notes that the British Broadcasting Corporation, a public service undertaking carried on without a divisible profit on a self-supporting basis, has been required over a long period of years to pay to the Treasury out of its licence revenue not only a heavy percentage deduction amounting in 1934 to £1,134,315 out of £3,369,000 but also a series of "emergency contributions" levied annually to meet the financial crisis of 1931, amounting in 1934 to £187,500, as well as a further sum by way of income tax amounting to £113,000 in the same year. Thus in 1934, out of each ten shillings paid for a licence, only 4s. 9d. was available for broadcasting, and, though the Government has accepted the view of the Ullswater Committee that the Corporation should receive a larger share of the licence revenue, the change is estimated to bring the net licence revenue in 1937-38 to £2,800,000, on which basis about 6s. 5d. out of the ten shilling licence will be available for the broadcasting service.

This, therefore, is a step in the right direction; but on any broad or long-range view of the broadcasting service these payments must all be regarded as unjustifiable. They are drained out of the broadcasting revenue derived from the licence fee at the expense of the listener, and are due to demands made by the Treasury, regardless of the purposes for which new enterprises are run.

What is needed here is, of course, some central planning organization which is competent not merely to stimulate such a philosophy of public finance, but also to assess the significance of broadcasting as an element in the social services or educational system of the nation, and to determine the broad lines along which it can work out its own policy and contribution in harmony with other public or social services. Only in such a way can we be sure that adequate financial resources will be available, and machinery developed for co-ordinating the work when required and avoiding friction or overlapping between different public utilities or services.

This is, of course, a matter involving much more than questions of finance alone. It affects questions of technical development, the recruitment of staff and most matters in which the

utilization of creative thought, a scientific outlook and progressive opinion are concerned. Above all, it means constructive and fundamental thought about the place of broadcasting in national economy and its contribution to cultural or social development as a basis for the framing of a policy. Moreover, if, as Mr. Cleghorn Thomas holds, it is in its contribution to the fuller and more abundant life—in the stimulation of intellectual life and individuality in the arts, the sciences, the humanities—that broadcasting can most permanently justify itself, the fullest opportunity for its expression can only be secured when those in direct or indirect control of it are fully alive to the opportunities it holds and in sympathy with the service it can render to humanity.

The danger indeed is not greater in the financial than in the political or other spheres. Indeed one reason why the public should be afforded much more information about the expenditure of the British Broadcasting Corporation, as urged by Dr. W. A. Robson and Mr. T. H. O'Brien, is to facilitate an intelligent understanding of the work which the Corporation is doing and the way in which financial difficulties hamper development. The attention focused upon staff problems and especially recruitment by Dr. Herman Finer in his essay in "The British Civil Servant" is of significance because of the vital importance of securing staff and conditions of service in which the psychological atmosphere is favourable to creative thought and imaginative development. The relations of the Corporation to the Government and the composition of its Governing Board similarly not only affect these matters but also the firm establishment of continued belief in the impartiality of the Corporation, its freedom from propaganda and prejudice and its willingness and ability to serve the changing needs of the public to the maximum of its opportunities, both within the territorial limits of the nations and on the international scale also. The appeal for constructive criticism which is so striking a note in Mr. Cleghorn Thomson's book and in the other essays we have noticed is founded on the belief that only by such means can an institution be assisted to develop its services and keep itself imaginatively alive to the magnitude of its opportunities. In such criticism scientific workers have a part to play which has special claims upon their interest, because of the rapidity with which the problems presented have themselves arisen out of the application of scientific discovery and thought.