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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

THE lively debate on the control and ownership of the Press in the House of Commons on October 29, which issued in a resolution urging the appointment of a Royal Commission to inquire into its finance, control, management and ownership, touched on matters that lie very near the heart of democracy, and which may have a closer bearing on the advancement of science than a superficial examination would suggest. It is not that there is any great enthusiasm for a Royal Commission. On the contrary, few suggested that a Royal Commission could add significantly from the fact-finding point of view to the information already collected in the report issued in 1938 by Political and Economic Planning, and Mr. Douglas Jay was not alone in failing to see that such an inquiry would produce any very substantially useful results. Even if other facts were discovered, he questioned whether they would throw more light on the really essential question whether the present financial control of the Press is interfering with freedom of expression.

That central issue was clearly recognized in the debate. Few questioned that the general tendency for the great majority of newspapers to fall into the hands of a very few men constitutes a serious threat to political democracy. That was explicitly stated by Mr. Haydn Davies in moving the resolution: Could we, or could we not, have real freedom of the Press in a system of combines and chain newspapers? But among those who agree with Mr. Davies that we cannot, there are still those who doubt whether Government action such as a Royal Commission might invite could be effective without involving worse dangers. What is wrong is not so much the private ownership of the Press, as the use that is being made of that ownership.

If, however, the existence of abuses is recognized, there is little indication of clear ideas as to how they are to be checked. Moreover, as Mr. Driberg pointed out, it is not solely a question of freedom of expression for the writer, but of a part of the general liberties of the citizen, who is entitled to receive accurate news and fair comment. However well-founded may be the belief that the citizen is not getting a full measure of either, no one succeeded in the debate in showing how that measure could be extended without either a direct curtailment of the liberty of the Press or an extension of Government control.

What is required, in fact, is some very clear and constructive thinking at just this point, and it can scarcely be expected that a Royal Commission will go beyond the fact-finding from which such thinking must start. No doubt a further inquiry will again emphasize the interference with freedom of expression which comes from the present law of libel; and Mr. Mallalieu suggested that a Royal Commission might well look into the question of the way in which freedom of expression and of discussion is hindered by the tendency to exclude the Press directly or indirectly from the proceedings of local councils. Such matters, however, like the better training of

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journalists and the higher standard of writing for which Mr. Mallalieu and Mr. Derek Walker-Smith both pleaded, are scarcely matters on which a Royal Commission can formulate proposals. They must come in the main from the professional associations of journalists or from that body of informed public opinion which, recognizing the natural restraints on freedom which are inherent in an organised community, realize also the value of standards evolved from within rather than constraints imposed from without or above.

It could not be said that the opinion expressed in the debate was entirely pessimistic. Some speakers suggested that the position is already better than two decades ago, and Mr. Walker-Smith at least anticipates both advances in technique and in presentation from the production side, and also in the standards which a people whose mind is on the march would demand. Though this comes near the core of the problem, other speakers in the debate showed little consciousness that this whole question is bound up with the wider one of informing the public and assisting the formation of a sound public opinion in a democratic society, to which both broadcasting and the information services which a Government is bound to use have also important contributions to make.

It is the great merit of Francis Williams's "Press, Parliament and People" (W. Heinemann, Ltd. London, 1946. 8s. 6d. net) that he sets all these factors in their true perspective, and his book should certainly assist in assessing the value of the contribution which a Royal Commission can make. In fact, it is difficult to believe that the report of a Royal Commission could stimulate the constructive and creative thinking, which is our primary need, half so effectively as this lively and timely book. The key problem is not so much that of the ownership and control of the Press, as that of how a democracy can adjust itself to the great and inevitable increase in the concentration of power in the hands of a Government without endangering the personal liberties inherent in a democracy.

That thread is clearly visible in what might well have seemed an interminable debate on the address to the Throne, which well illustrates both the need on the Government side to inform the people of what it is doing in terms that they can understand, and on the other hand the balancing need for highly informed and critical watchfulness on the part of the Press and other instruments of public opinion in order to safeguard the liberties of the individual. As Mr. Williams truly observes, many of the problems of domestic reconstruction are so complex that an almost entirely new approach to the task of informing and explaining policy will be required if the great mass of ordinary people upon whose positive co-operation the success of these policies depends are to feel themselves participants in a common adventure. Moreover, not only is there a need for less secrecy and more information in home and in foreign affairs alike; the debate on certain topics such as the 'closed shop' also underlines the force of Sir Walter Layton's contention in his pamphlet, "News-

print: a Problem for Democracy", that the present size of the Press, with the consequent limitation of knowledge of public affairs, constitutes a severe handicap to the country. On the evidence of this debate alone, it might be added that it constitutes a danger to personal liberties and to individual justice, apart from the fact that, as Sir Walter observes, "the press of a country is neither healthy nor truly free unless its circulation can respond to the impact of public opinion".

Mr. Williams has much that is pertinent to say about the British press censorship as it was exercised during the War. Emphasizing that it was always voluntary, he points out, too, that it was one of fact and not of opinion. It existed to advise the Press as to which facts could and which could not safely be published without running the risk of giving the enemy information of value in the prosecution of the War. It had no authority to advise the Press as to the opinions they should or should not express. Moreover, while Mr. Williams from his inside knowledge pays a high tribute to the liberality with which the British press censorship was on the whole conducted, he is convinced that censorship of any kind is an instrument to be used only in the most extreme circumstances and with the most rigorous safeguards, and that no Government can be trusted with power to control the Press or the publication of books. Even in the circumstances of war, more damage was done, on the whole, when newspapers accepted directives on policy outside the strict and narrow limitations of press censorship than when they ignored them.

That opinion is well substantiated by Mr. Williams's account of the failure of political censorship during the War. Whereas in the technical and factual field the machinery established for joint consultation and co-operation made for the elimination of clashes and contributed to the success of the censorship, in the political field he argues it cannot be justified. It represents a confession by the authorities of their refusal to trust the people to form sound opinions, and of their unwillingness to allow them to judge between conflicting views and to abide by the result as democracy requires.

The growth of public relation and information services is a much bigger question. Mr. Williams points out how that growth has been accentuated by the War and still more by the measures of social reconstruction to which Britain is now committed; and he shows that Government information services, including such research units as the Social Survey, have a permanent and essential place among those instruments which the executive in a democracy requires to carry through positive measures essential to national and international advance, while the democracy retains those checks upon the exercise of undue authority, those balances and counterbalances which are equally essential to safeguard liberty. We are here straying into that important problem of the organisation of government machinery, and it must suffice to note with Mr. Williams that publicity is no substitute for good administration; it is only effective when the administrative measures it seeks to explain

are sound in themselves. What is essential is that the version of a measure or policy placed before the general public by the information services of the Government shall be fair and unbiased. Public judgment must be formed on the true facts, and not on a partisan presentation of them.

That is an argument for the constant scrutiny of the activities of Government information services, but not for their restriction; and one basic reason for Sir Walter Layton's plea for a more generous supply of newsprint is to enable the Press to play more effectively its part in such scrutiny, and in averting the further danger that under the guise of straightforward explanation and instruction the public may be led to accept as facts what are highly debatable propositions. This is a point which was missed by the unofficial 'working party' under Sir Richard Gregory's chairmanship which prepared for the recent Empire Scientific Conference a paper on the "Dissemination of Scientific Information to the General Public"; but it is one to which scientific workers need to give far more attention. It is one aspect of the obligations which their loyalty to truth demands in that partnership with science as a part of the social contract which in Burke's view constitutes the State. Beyond that it is a duty which they owe to science itself. A bad book was ever the enemy of other books, and in the conditions of to-day it has to be remembered that publication of a book or a periodical which does not meet those high standards of accuracy and impartiality which science rightly demands, may well be hampering the publication of another which does.

That is no reason for return to a censorship. The argument of Milton still stands. But it is imperative that the reviewing of books and the scrutiny of scientific publications of all kinds should be searching and objective, and that neither loose nor tendentious writing, inaccuracy, nor verbiage should escape the criticism it invites. It would be easy to instance recent scientific and technical books which have been too lightly handled in this respect. If the proceedings of the Royal Commission and Mr. Williams's book emphasize that scientific workers have real responsibilities in this field, much good will have been done; and possibly one way opened up for easing that serious position which the shortage of scientific and technical books is causing. It is true that increasing use is being made of broadcasting for the dissemination of scientific news, and scientific men in Britain are showing far more signs of awareness of the immense influence which the B.B.C. can exert in educating and informing the public on scientific and technical matters. The way in which this influence could be exerted and the use of this instrument, by which the mass of the people can learn more about the world in which they live and something about the purpose and significance of the policies their Government has adopted, were among the reasons prompting the desire for an independent inquiry on broadcasting policy which the Government rejected in the White Paper last July.

While, however, broadcasting is one important way in which information on Government policy or on

scientific and technical matters can be disseminated, it cannot either replace the printed book or paper, or provide the check on executive action which is the other half of the democratic problem. That part of the problem relates to the machinery of government; this cannot be discussed further here, except to insist once more that any effective machinery of government must be equipped with adequate means of both keeping the executive in touch with the trend of public opinion and of providing the country and the world in general with an honest and truthful picture of the position of the nation and the reasons for its policy. Any form of censorship or control that would restrict the seeking out and disclosure of truth or dam the flow of knowledge, either within any one nation, or between nations, is a fatal bar to the efficiency of democratic government and the understanding between peoples on which all our hopes depend. It is only by a readiness to seek and publish the truth whatever its implications, to enter into frank debate between governed and governing, and between nation and nation, to challenge, to criticize and propose, and to offer to the test of world opinion the principles by which we seek to guide our affairs, that, as Mr. Williams concludes, freedom can flourish.

Until the terms of reference of the Royal Commission are published, it is, of course, not known whether or not its inquiry will embrace the scientific and technical Press as such. Indirectly at least it is clear that the whole question touches the dissemination of knowledge and the advancement of science very closely. Some of the particular problems which it offers to men of science have already been indicated. They on their side have repeatedly emphasized in the past year how closely not merely the advancement of science but also the future of civilization depend on the restoration of the fullest freedom of communication within and between the nations. There is in Mr. Williams's book, no less than in the debate just noted, much that should stir them to the constructive thinking on the organisation and use of information services which the functioning of democracy and the needs of science both demand.

HISTORY OF MODERN CHEMISTRY

Modern Chemistry

Some Sketches of its Historical Development. By A. J. Berry. Pp. x+240. (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1946.) 10s. 6d. net.

THIS is a history of chemistry that is different. Its title and sub-title indicate quite a new approach to the treatment of the subject. A chemistry curriculum is a crowded affair nowadays, partly because of the rapid advances and immense ramifications of chemistry, and partly because it is not yet certain, in these post-war years, just how the curriculum should be arranged. In this changing period the attempt is almost inevitably made to give students as much information as they can digest, with the result that many scarcely realize that all these advances have been made by men many of