

CHAPTER V.THE PRESS AND POLITICS.

In no other sphere of journalistic activity has the element with which the Press has had to deal shown such a complete volte face as the political element. In most other activities the present position represents merely a development of the position previously existing or is the result of the gradual growth of an innovation which has been made and which has met with approval. In the political world, however, the Press has, in a comparatively short space of time, altered its position from being regarded as the politician's deadliest enemy to that of being a valuable asset. After having been hounded out of the English House of Commons and debarred from reporting the proceedings, the Press has now become an institution the personal representatives of which are treated with the utmost care and consideration, and no Legislative body is considered complete unless it has adequate Press accommodation.

The change which has come about in this connection is described by Mr. John Pendleton . Mr. Pendleton states :

"The legislators were furious against the writers for the Press who dared to enter the House to give the public outside some idea of the wine-flavoured oratory that sparkled within, and the reporters who clung to their hazardous employment in the Eighteenth Century were hunted from Parliament, persecuted, fined, and treated with

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189. Author of "Newspaper Reporting", etc., in "How to Succeed as a Journalist."

190. Page 84.

ignominy. Resolute effort and resource, longhand and shorthand dexterity, backed by public opinion, ultimately overcame the prejudice and opposition of honourable members....Parliament is nevertheless jealous of its prerogative and reserves to itself the power to expel journalists at any moment. 'Dod's Parliamentary Companion' sets forth: 'It is contrary to the standing orders of both Houses that strangers should be present and an individual member can demand that the order be enforced'.

Although the position on paper of the Press is still insecure, in practice it is firmly entrenched in the reporting of Parliamentary proceedings and it would require the courage of a very brave man to propose that this privilege should be withdrawn or suspended. A body of men, popularly elected, coming together periodically to discuss in secret the affairs of the country and to guide the ship of State, under cover of doors closed to the Press, would not be tolerated in the more advanced and civilised States. The Press has become to be regarded as essential as "Mr. Speaker" himself. It is the watch-dog of the nation, ever on the alert to find fault, to give honour where honour is due, and to report fairly and to the best of its ability the proceedings of the Legislature.

This national watch-dog is unfortunately of different breeds, and the fault-finding and bestowal of praise depends largely upon which political party the watch-dog has extended its patronage. This partisanship of the Press is one of its defects. Political prejudices-- or should the word "convictions" out of charity be used? -- tend not only to the "colouring" of Press reports, but also to biased criticism on the part of Parliamentary writers. Matters of national importance are looked at by each lobbyist from the particular angle of the paper whose interests he serves, and

an impartial survey of the proceedings is thus impossible to obtain, unless the lengthy and wearisome verbatim reports of Hansard are relied upon. Few persons-- if any-- have either the inclination or the time to wade through the numerous pages of Hansard and have to depend for their information upon the columns of the daily and the weekly newspapers, and their impressions are moulded accordingly.

As far as the actual reporting of Parliamentary debates is concerned, putting aside for later consideration the question of notes written from the Press Gallery, "From our Parliamentary Correspondent", the allegation --not infrequently made-- that speeches are deliberately misreported cannot be substantiated in fact. ¹⁹¹ Mistakes sometimes occur through reporters failing to catch certain words used by speakers and substituting in their place some other words which they thought had been used, through an incorrect transcription of shorthand notes, through a "free" translation being given, or through an error in telegraphic transmission, but professional honour and etiquette are both sufficient guarantees that a speech is not deliberately misreported or maliciously distorted. There are, however, other considerations with which politicians have to contend. A striking sentence may be taken out of its context and assume an altogether different meaning when it appears in print without the explanatory sentences which went before or the qualifying phrases which followed. Similarly, a summary of a speech may not convey to the thousands of readers of a newspaper exactly the same meaning as it conveyed to the few score members /

191. "I have never once in the whole course of my life complained of the accuracy of any newspaper report of any speech I have made. There is nothing connected with the Press that has ever got me into such great trouble as the accuracy of their reports of what I have said" - The Earl of Derby.

"When I was in Peking, about eight years ago, Dr. W. W. Yen told me that the word "Reuter" had passed into Chinese as a synonym for 'the true word', or Truth. - Sir Roderick Jones Chairman of Reuters for Cardiff Business Club, April, 1932

members of the House to whom the words were uttered. In the same way a brilliant speech by a member whose political views do not co-incide with those of the paper in whose columns his speech is reported may be dismissed in a few lines, while a mediocre speaker propounding political opinions similar to those held by a certain newspaper may have a column or more devoted to his utterances in that paper. These are all defects which, owing to the urgent necessity for condensation of Parliamentary news, appear to be irremediable, but the damage done by these factors is lessened by the fact that more than one can play at the same game and it is a weak political party that does not have the support of some section of the Press. The defects of one newspaper are thus partly counter-balanced by the defects on the other side of the others

The reports of the "Parliamentary correspondents are even still more bewildering. While one paper may describe a Cabinet Minister's defence of his policy as "brilliant, masterly, and statesmanlike", another paper may describe the same speech as "a priceless example of beating about the bush, avoiding the vital issues, and a feeble attempt to save the situation in spite of its transparent hopelessness! The facts stated above are known and tacitly admitted by those who have given the subject any thought but the question of suggesting a solution to the difficulty is not an easy one to answer. The prohibition of such criticisms--confining Press activities to straightforward reporting-- might be one way out but this would not be desirable, as criticism is perhaps more necessary in the political field than elsewhere. Persons so criticised have always the power to reply to such criticism either in the House or on political platforms

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during election campaigns. This power is used as often as is thought fit.

Leading articles dealing with politics may conveniently be placed in the same category as Lobbyist's notes. These are written to the tune called by the political influence exercised over the paper. In fact leading articles are liable to be still more damaging to a cause than the Lobbyist's notes or the Parliamentary reports as they are invariably based on such notes or reports, subject, as has been shown, to colouration for the reasons stated above.

A way out of the difficulties described would be the creation of an independent newspaper, unhampered by political influence and prejudice, and criticising freely and justly. Moves have indeed been made in this direction. Theoretically such an independent newspaper would be an excellent institution but in practice it simply would not work. Sooner or later, probably sooner than later, the bias would be on one side or the other and the independence would have disappeared.

The views of some authorities in this connection should prove illuminating. Mr. Waldron Smithers, M.P. for Chiselhurst said: "A newspaper should be absolutely independent and not dominated by one person or one party. It is becoming the custom among some big newspapers to allow the policy of that paper to be dictated by one person". In the course of a series of interesting articles on "The Press and the Public" the following relevant paragraph appears:

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192. Speaking at the opening of the new offices of the "Kentish Times", reported in "World's Press News" June 4th, 1931.

193. Published in the "Natal Witness" during 1930.

"If politics is in such a discreditable condition, the fault lies to a great extent at the doors of the Press. I do not think that a newspaper should be a political instrument. It will be many years before politics, even in the most civilised country, becomes a dispassionate science and ceases to be a jumble of vested interests and unintelligent prejudices. Until then a newspaper taking part in political controversy on a partisan basis, cannot fail to sink to the same level. But it is not the newspapers that debase the standard of politics. The advent of the newspaper has exercised a temperate influence. Even the most reckless and embittered of newspapers dare not publish, unaltered, half the letters it receives from correspondents who seek to air their political views with a violence quite disproportionate to the issues in question. South Africa devotes far too much attention to politics at the expense of industry and culture. Newspapers are often accused of suppression, but a newspaper that ventured largely to close its columns to political controversy in South Africa would be deserving of widespread gratitude. Yet it is very doubtful if it would receive that gratitude, and even more doubtful if it would retain its circulation".

A strong advocate for an independent Press is
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Mr. Michael Louw, who declared that: "The farmer is merely a tool in the hands of the politicians and the remedy for this state of affairs lies, not in forming a Farmers' Party, but in establishing a strong independent Press to serve exclusively as a farmer's mouthpiece and to promote their interests".

Specific instances of alleged misrepresentations by newspapers will serve to elaborate the remarks made earlier in this chapter, and, incidentally, to strengthen the hands of those who desire an independent Press, although, in the writer's opinion such an organ is not as yet within the range of possibility. The Minister of Lands (Mr. P.G.W. Grobler) ¹⁹⁵ deplored the fact that the National Party had no English newspaper, no mouthpiece with which it could make its ideas known to the English-speaking population. "It /

194. Addressing a meeting of farmers at Frieska, during 1931, reported in the "Pretoria News".

195. Addressing the Junior National Party, Johannesburg, reported in the "Rand Daily Mail", April 9th, 1931.

"It is impossible for the English-speaking people to understand us or our ideals as long as they are fed by an English press that is hostile to us", he declared. When one listened to the debates in Parliament and then read the English newspaper accounts, one was amazed at the misleading manner in which everything was reported. "How can the English-speaking people know that we are not the racialists that the others try to paint us if they read only the English newspapers?"

"The Government had been criticised and called racialists in Parliament, because of the appointments and promotions of Afrikaans-speaking men in the civil service, he proceeded. Nothing was said of the fact that the promotions of each section were equal. The facts were not given in the English Press, which accused the Government of making the civil service a close preserve for Dutch Afrikaners. The English-speaking people were not to blame. The facts were hidden from them.

"As long as the Nationalists had no English newspaper of their own, it was the duty of the Junior Nationalists to impress upon them that the truth was not told in the English Press".

Mr. F.J. Roberts, M.P. also has a grudge against the Press, and, following upon an outburst by the Jewish community against certain remarks attributed to him derogatory to the Jewish people, he declared ¹⁹⁶ that the newspapers always sent their worst reporters to his meetings. In a letter to ¹⁹⁷ "Ons Vaderland" Mr. Roberts wrote: "Enclosed is a copy of my address concerning the Jews which has caused such a stir and which the English newspapers have so distorted as to indicate that I am opposed to the Jewish nation and would favour their being driven from this country. I am prepared to stand criticism of what I said, but to be incorrectly reported and denied the opportunity of explaining my attitude, as I was by the English Press, is certainly unworthy of journalistic standards".

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196. "Star", January 31st, 1931.

197. January 19th, 1931.

In a footnote to the letter the Editor of "Ons Vaderland" wrote: "This paper also published a report of Mr. Roberts's speech which largely coincides with that published by other papers. Our Johannesburg correspondent is one of the most capable journalists I know and he attended Mr. Roberts' meeting. We showed him Mr. Roberts' version of his address and our correspondent asked us to say in reply that he adheres to every word of his own report".

Among the numerous letters which appeared in the Press in connection with the matter was the following: ¹⁹⁸

"Sir, - Mr. Roberts has, I see, made the usual excuse of the politician for his ridiculous remarks about the Jews. He blames the Press, and in no gallant way berates the efficiency of the reporter responsible. To any thinking man it is sufficiently illuminating to note that thousands of highly technical speeches, and long reports of company meetings, are reported year in and year out by The Star and other papers, with no corrections necessary.

It would appear that only the politicians suffer from misrepresentation. In most cases it would be better wisdom not to report them at all, and spare a long-suffering public".

Similarly Dr. N. J. van der Merwe, M.P., accused the "Natal Witness" of "gross misrepresentation", when, in the House of Assembly, he was charged with having stated that he was in favour of the arming of Native troops in the event of an invasion of South Africa. ¹⁹⁹ Dr. van der Merwe stated that the misrepresentation had taken place in spite of the fact that he had supplied the newspaper concerned with a copy of his address. When he read the report of his speech in the paper he hardly recognised a word of it and within half an hour had repudiated it in toto, although the newspaper had not published his denial until four days later.

Without /

198. "Star", January, 1931.

199. Reported in "Bloemfontein Friend", March 19th, 1931.

Without reflecting in any way upon the politicians mentioned in the foregoing examples of alleged misrepresentation, the writer would emphasise the fact that the blame does not always lie on one side. It is not always the Press that is in the wrong. In the heat of the moment a politician may say something which he ought not to have said, or which would have been better left unsaid, but the Pressmen have recorded his words "which may be used in evidence against him," to coin a legal phrase. How then is he to save his face

The following incident in the journalistic career of Mr. W. T. Cranfield indicates one manner of escape.

"I once had to interview a prominent politician on a topic then agitating the industrial world. I took a shorthand note. A proof was submitted by me personally and was declared "all right".

The article duly appeared, unsigned. Instantly there was an outcry. The man's private sympathies had led him to express an opinion that cut athwart the policy of his Party and delivered him bound into the hands of his enemies. What did he do? Declare that he had been misreported?. Nothing so ordinary. He repudiated the entire interview.

The Editor asked what I proposed to do about it. My answer was the carbon-copy of a lawyer's letter. I had preserved my shorthand notes.

At the Editor's earnest request, I consented to stay action, to "save" the politician's "face", on condition that the genuineness and accuracy of the interview were categorically admitted. This was done in writing. Moreover, a comparison, which I contrived to bring about, between my notes and the notes taken by the politician's secretary, showed me to have been meticulously just".

In illustration of the remarks made regarding Parliamentary Lobby correspondents extracts from the "Daily Sketch" follow. The article, headed "Mr. Snowden should know better", was in reply to an "outburst made by Mr. Snowden against the Lobby correspondent of the 'Daily Sketch' in the House of Commons".

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200. Quoted in the "World's Press News".

201. February 14th, 1931.

"What the Daily Sketch correspondent wrote about Mr. Snowden was not what he said in the House" it was stated; "that was the business of the gallery journalists. His business was to state what others inferred to be the inner unexpressed meaning of what he said, its implications and its likely sequel. I confess that I had independently come to much the same conclusion as this Lobby representative. For Mr. Snowden, to complain that this correspondent had attributed to him intentions as to his policy that he did not express is quite beside the point. The business of a Lobby correspondent is to begin where the sentence ends, and to see as far round the corner as, or, if possible, farther than, anyone else, and Mr. Snowden, as a journalist himself, ought to have known better than make this mistake".

The St. George's (Westminster) by-election campaign provides a striking instance of how Press and politician may fight with the gloves off and how a due sense of proportion may be lost in the maze of personalities, irrelevant issues, and red herrings, which spring up to obscure the true purpose of an election, namely to ensure the success in a constituency of a candidate who can best serve the interests of his country. The by-election assumed an importance far beyond its due, sank to a low level of mud-slinging and abuse, and filled many columns of the newspapers--both overseas and in South Africa--for several weeks. From the many references to the campaign the writer has selected the following as being typical of the nature of the fight.

"Exchanges of abuse, reminiscent of the Eatanswill election, are figuring in the St. George's (Westminster) campaign. (302) One of the anti-Baldwin papers resenting the Conservative leader's references to an "insolent irresponsible plutocracy" retorted that Mr. Baldwin was the last man in the world who should reproach others for being rich. He had inherited great riches which had largely disappeared, and if it proved that he was an incompetent custodian of his own fortunes, he was not likely to be an efficient guardian of the nation's.

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"The paper described Mr. Duff Cooper as a political softy, and made great play of the fact that he lectured to the Kultur Society of Berlin on "an apology for the British Empire." The paper attached the everyday meaning to the word "apology" which Mr. Duff Cooper used in the special sense of "apologia".

"Mr. Duff Cooper last night hit back. He said that Lord Rothermere had not got the "guts of a louse." He apologised for such gutter language, but said it was necessary when fighting the gutter press.

He recalled the fact that Mr. Baldwin had given one-fifth of his fortune (£140,000) as a free anonymous gift on the day after the outbreak of the war as an example to others. "Not a penny came from Rothermere, not a farthing from Beaverbrook".

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In a speech in support of Mr. Duff Cooper, Mr. Stanley Baldwin said that the British Press was the admiration of the world for fairness, ability and high principles, but the Rothermere and Beaverbrook newspapers were engines of propaganda for the constantly changing policies, desires, personal wishes, and the likes and dislikes of two men whose methods were direct falsehood, misrepresentation, half-truths and suppression.

"The statement in the Daily Mail with reference to his fortune could only have been written by a cad. He had been legally advised that he could sue for libel in that connection, but he would not move in the matter, because the apology would be valueless, and he would not touch the damages with a barge pole.

"The proprietorship of these papers is aiming at power without responsibility - the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages. In fighting for Mr. Duff Cooper they were striking a blow that would resound in London for the decencies of public life and honest British journalism".

Despite the opposition of the Rothermere and Beaverbrook Press, Mr. Duff Cooper was elected and the "Rand Daily Mail", commenting on the result of the election said :

"Even at this distance there has been a thrill in the St. George's (Westminster) by-election, which has been most handsomely won for the

Conservative /

"Conservative Party by Mr. Duff Cooper against the Press Lords, who combined forces to bring about the defeat of Mr. Baldwin's candidate. The outstanding lesson of the campaign, which has been one of the most vituperatively contested in recent years, is that any attempt to stampede public opinion by means of the printing press is foredoomed to failure".

Neither the "Daily Mail" nor the "Daily Express" (the papers of the Press Lords referred to) made any comment on the election result.

It seems fitting in this connection to quote
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Professor L.T.Hobhouse :

"The Press constantly represents public opinion to be one thing while the cold arithmetic of the polls conclusively declares it to be another".

A gloomy picture has so far been painted, but there is, fortunately, a brighter side. "The British Press",
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said Mr. Stanley Baldwin, "is the best, the fairest, and
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the cleanest in the world". The same speaker also associated himself with the remarks of the Prime Minister of England, Mr. Ramsay McDonald, who, on the occasion of the retirement
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of Mr. R.G.Emery, said that he did not believe Mr. Emery had ever written for his paper a sentence which he did not wholly
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believe, or a sentence which he regretted having written. Nearer home, the Minister of Finance, Mr.N.C.Havenga, on a similar occasion, paid the highest possible compliment to
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the South African Press when he stated that the Press Gallery had /

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204. Professor of Sociology, London University, "Liberalism" page 234.
205. Speaking at the Caxton Hall, Westminster, on June 24th, 1930.
206. Quoted by Dr.G.J.Renier in "The English: Are they Human?".
207. Political correspondent of the "Morning Post" after 52 years association with Parliamentary life.
208. The "Star", April 8th, 1931.
209. At a farewell dinner to Mr. George Wilson, political correspondent of the "Cape Times", on May 30th, 1931, after an association with the Press Gallery lasting 30 years.

had so long and intimately been associated with the work of the legislature that the question arose whether the South African constitution should not be amended to define Parliament as comprising the King, the Senate, the Assembly-- and the Press. General J.O. Smuts, Leader of the Opposition, said that Mr. Wilson had set up a very high standard. "Whatever may be said about the degeneracy of Parliament may be said to improve the prestige of the Press Gallery. I have always thought that Mr. Wilson's work as a journalist has been of a high standard. He has had to take his part in the fight that goes on in politics but he has fought according to rules, and he leaves the Press Gallery without a blot on his escutcheon", General Smuts declared.

These appreciations of Pressmen by politicians are significant, for the men eulogised are by no means isolated in their virtues. There are numerous others in the field of journalism who have a high sense of their responsibility and who are prepared to give credit where credit is due--even in the arena of politics. Perhaps the most convincing statement that has ever been made by a statesman on behalf of the Press was that of Mr. Winston Churchill who, after stating that the growth of the power of the Press was one of the most remarkable features of modern life, hinted at some form of Government by the Press.

He thought the Press was the only flourishing institution in the British Empire at present. It seemed to him that the growth of the Press and the decay of Parliament had gone so far that at the present time, when so many people seemed dissatisfied with existing forms of Government, no matter which party discharged them, this new estate, the writing institution, should/

210. At the annual dinner of the London District of the Institute of Journalists, reported in the "Rand Daily Mail", December 12th, 1930.

should be invested not only with the power, but with the responsibility of government.

This was an after dinner speech which should not, therefore, be taken too seriously, but the sentiments expressed clearly show an admiration of and esteem for the Press, which would be quite inconsistent with a political career of Press misrepresentation, and unjustified criticism. The observations made by Mr. Churchill in connection with the more prominent part the Press was playing in Parliamentary and political life was also commented upon by General Smuts at the farewell dinner to Mr. Wilson already mentioned.

General Smuts said :

"There is no doubt that the Press is under the impression that it is the Rising Estate of the Realm and that Parliament is a waning institution, and that the Press is taking over more and more the duties formerly done by Parliament",

Whether this ascendancy on the part of the Press is for good or for bad may be a debatable point but the writer, fully aware of the defects to-day existing, is firmly convinced that an imperfect Press is better than no Press at all. The Press plays an intermediary role in politics. It restrains the legislators from hasty and ill-considered action and it allays the suspicions of the electorate by keeping them informed of the activities of their elected representatives. It provides the electorate with an effective mouthpiece and makes its wishes known in connection with proposed legislation. "Now that the average man can make his voice effectively heard by means of elections and newspapers, the danger of arbitrary and ignorant interference by the State is greatly reduced".

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The Press is

classed /

211. "A History of Politics", by Edward Jenks.

classed (by Professor L.T.Hobhouse in "Liberalism", page 242) along with the civil service and the Bench as an unofficial brake against unwise or hasty legislation.

So efficient has the brake proved in the past that those whose progress is impeded by the application of this restraining influence have been trying in various countries to ease the pressure and to make the brakes less effective. One of the proposals that has been made with a view to curbing Press attacks was that by Mr. Henry Longstaff, M.P. for Chiswick,²¹² who urged that a Bill should be introduced into Parliament containing a clause to the effect that :

"Should any newspaper attack any Minister or ex-Minister the proprietor of such newspaper shall be compelled by law to publish, without comment, a full reply from such Minister, and should he fail to do so, the machinery of such newspaper shall be liable to be dismantled".

The suggestion was made by Mr. Longstaff in a letter to Mr. Neville Chamberlain, Chairman of the Conservative Party organisation, who, in reply, said that although the idea was not new it greatly attracted him. The practice of certain newspapers of distorting news and publishing only such items as happened to suit the particular propaganda they were carrying out had reached such a dangerous pitch that if it continued public opinion and the more responsible sections of the Press would, he thought, support the imposition of some such obligations.

While the idea of the dismantling of the plant of a newspaper is grotesque, there is nothing unjust in the proposal that the Minister's reply to an attack should be published. The catch lies, however, in the two words,

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212. "Star", March 3rd, 1931.

"without comment" It is a newspaper's prerogative to comment, and if it were to have its teeth drawn in this manner, this would greatly strengthen the hands of the Government and it is doubtful whether the interests of the nation would be best served by the adoption of such a procedure.

In a survey of the Press in the field of political activity, more than in any other field, generalisation is impossible. It could not justifiably be stated that the influence of the Press is for good or for bad. This essentially depends upon each individual newspaper, but, taken all in all, it would perhaps not be unreasonable to suggest that the benefits derived from the incursion of the newspapers into politics outweigh the defects and that in this respect, as in others, the Press has a real and valuable contribution to make to the welfare of a country.
