

AREOPAGITICA;
A
SPEECH
OF
Mr. JOHN MILTON
For the Liberty of VNLICENC'D
PRINTING,
To the PARLAMENT of ENGLAND

Τὴν δὲ θεοῦ δ' ἐπιτοῖα, ἀπὸ θεοῦ πάλαι
Χρῆσθαι π' ἔβλεπον, οἷοι μάλιστα εἶπερ, ἔχου.
Καὶ γὰρ ὁ χρῆζαν, λαμπροῦς ἔδ', ὁ μὲν ἔβλεπον,
Ἐγγ', ἢ τὸ πῶς ἔσεν ἰσχυρῶς πάλαι;
Euripid. Hicceid.

*This is true Liberty when free born men
Having so advise the public may speak free,
Which he who can, and will, deserv's high praise,
Who misbeev can nor will, may hold his peace;
Whas can be juster in a State then this?*
Euripid. Hicceid.

24. LONDON,
Printed in the Year, 1644.

The Need For a Free Press

by Tony Benn

The Need For a Free Press

On March 31st and April 1st 1979, after a sensational press campaign against the trade unions had dominated a strike-torn winter, the Institute for Workers' Control convened a national conference on The Media and Democratic Accountability. This pamphlet contains the text of a keynote address by TONY BENN.

I welcome this Conference and congratulate the IWC on its initiative in arranging it. It is very timely because it follows a winter of news coverage which, to put it at its mildest, lacked balance in its handling of the industrial situation. It comes at the beginnings of an Election campaign in which many electors are going to depend very largely upon the media for information about current affairs, on which they will base their decision to vote. It comes on the eve of a Direct Election Campaign reminding us of a Referendum four years ago when 8 million people were entirely unrepresented by the national press in this country and when the warnings that were given at that time by those who took a certain point of view were either ignored or dismissed. It comes at a time when *The Times* and the *Sunday Times* are still closed as a result of management seeking to enforce the new technology for their own benefit without adequate discussion, and it comes just before the new legislation to organize or re-organize the BBC and the IBA is going to come before Parliament. The very fact that we had that short debate about whether the BBC should be present or not, is an indication of the grave breakdown of confidence there is between the media and large sections of people, many represented today, who know the media very well because they work in it.

What this Conference is really about is common ground between us: it is about democracy and how to strengthen it. It is not just democracy in the media but, because of the role the media play in our society, it is about democracy in society itself. If people are to enjoy and use democratic rights they must be allowed to know what is going on and why. They must be allowed to know how power is exercised, by whom, and in whose interests. It is not *only* trade unions or elected representatives that should be held accountable before the media. We should be able to scrutinize the activities of business and of finance and of the EEC and of the media itself. These are all centres of power, and in my view are much more powerful than the trade union movement or, in some respects, Parliament itself.

We are entitled to hear a wide range of opinions from those with different experiences who have different explanations of what is going on, and different views about what to do. We are entitled to expect that those who control the press, and radio and television, will act responsibly in their presentation and selection of the news, and in the views that they put out; and that they will not deliberately suppress facts, distort news and submerge real issues beneath a sea of trivia, gossip and campaigns of personal vilification. We are also concerned to see that the new technology which is available to us in both press and radio and television, should allow us to speak to each other and is not solely controlled by those who already have financial, political and economic power simply to preserve their interests and present their views for our consumption.

It is all very well having the right to free speech. But it loses much of its meaning unless it is accompanied by the right to be heard and in this country today very large sections of our people, and notably the trade union movement, do not have the right to be heard.

This is a genuine crisis of representation. As far as the media are concerned, we are living in a pre-1832 Reform Act situation. We are kept in ignorance about many of the matters which concern us most personally as a direct result of the way in which the media are owned, financed and controlled and consequently we have events explained to us only from one particular point of view.

It is no answer to say that we have many newspapers and many broadcasting and television channels. For their general political line from the *Daily Telegraph* to the *Sun* and from Radio Four to ITN, is the same. Proliferation of similar programmes and papers is not the same as true variety. We want more press, not less. What we are here to discuss is how best a truly free press and media can be created in Britain to serve a very mature political democracy that is entitled to information not now available to it. I guess that the coverage of this Conference, if it is covered at all (the presence of a camera doesn't guarantee that it will be used) will give us some idea of the difficulties that we are up against.

What are the main issues that must concern serious people as they turn to this particular problem? The first one is a question of using the new technology to increase diversity and to open access to all. The second one is securing adequate accountability for the use of existing power; and seeking to make it possible for integrity to be expressed by those who work in the media, which is not easy for them, employed as they are by very large organizations. We have to consider how to organize our own campaign to get across these ideas that have been discussed at Nottingham this weekend, and which require a public debate. Finally, we must discuss how to launch a paper, or preferably papers, that reflect the most important debates about this country and its future that are going on within the Labour Movement.

May I say this, and perhaps say it twice in case the camera breaks down: *we are not seeking direct or indirect Government control of the press, radio or television.* I repeat: we are not seeking direct to indirect Government control of the press, radio or television. (I may say that on two occasions having been interviewed on tape by the BBC I found changes made, in one place putting one answer to a different question and in another case leaving out a preliminary qualification which led to a question in the House of Commons and has made it necessary for those of us who are engaged in public speaking to see that our views are preserved at any rate for private hearing in a way that may not necessarily conform to the way in which they are publicly presented. We want more voices to be heard and not fewer. And we want control to be de-centralized and not centralized.

Now let me take these three issues separately. First of all, the question of how we are to use new technology to achieve diversity. And here, the *Times* and *Sunday Times* case is of absolutely classic importance and has played, I think, a very large part in making this Conference relevant to those who have come. Here is a new technology, and I don't speak as an expert on it, which permits papers to be pro-

duced more rapidly and efficiently with greater simplicity. The question that arises in the *Times* case is the question that arises in all cases when new technology comes forward: is that new technology to be applied in a way that benefits the owners of the paper at the expense both of those who work for the newspapers, and at the expense of those who read newspapers, or are we, like the Lucas Aerospace Combine Committee, to look at the skills and look at the technology and look at the need and see how the three can be connected together?

I am sorry to have missed Geoffrey Goodman's speech yesterday because his Minority Report written with David Basnett about the National Print Corporation was of the greatest importance. It was also referred to in *The People and the Media*, the Labour Party publication, based on the work of a committee which I have chaired over many years. A National Print Corporation would, without any doubt, be the most useful way of using the new technology in order to create jobs instead of losing them and in order to increase the output of newspapers and of information instead of centralizing and reducing them. If we had a National Print Corporation in this country, and we had a launch fund to go with it, we would be able to enfranchise those who wished to launch their own publications to fill the very substantial gaps that exist in our mass media. I am not only speaking about political parties or political sects of one kind or another. We are all impoverished by not being allowed to hear the whole rich range of argument that goes on in and around the political scene. There are the ethnic minorities; there is the women's movement; there are the trade unions themselves: we must not only fill the national gap but also fill a whole range of local gaps. For example, in Bristol, which I represent, both the morning and the evening newspaper are owned by the same company and that company has a share in Harlech television which provides a part of the television coverage.

If we are going to look seriously, as I think we must, at the National Print Corporation, then we have got to look again at the whole question of distribution so that papers that are produced this way are not prevented from reaching the public because there are political difficulties raised at the point of distribution.

In parallel with that we come to the question of broadcasting, where the notion of the Open Broadcasting Authority, which has now come forward in the Government's latest White Paper, offers possibilities, that must be developed, of going beyond the 'Open Door' type programme, which I very much welcome, but which is still only a tiny section of total output. It would allow the possibility of going beyond phone-ins, where there is a pre-selection mechanism before the person on the telephone is put on to the programme, and would open the way for more public service local radio, representing – and guided by – a wide range of local interests.

Within the framework of a National Print Corporation as a public service organization, and of an Open Broadcasting Authority and local radio stations there is going to be scope for a whole mass of co-operatives of one kind or another, or producer groups, or individuals, or political parties or other groups with something to say, to find an outlet for their publishing instead of findings, as at present, that all that they do may be lost if it doesn't appeal to the editor.

Now I come to the question of the public funding for information. It is a classic

argument used against this case that the press is a perfect market; that people buy the popular papers because they are in greatest demand and that the Labour movement has never been able to get enough people to read its opinions to justify the maintenance of a press in its own name. Enough has been written about this, I think, for people to see through that argument. First of all in the case of the *Daily Herald*, when it died, it died with a circulation, twice as great as the *Financial Times*, *The Times* and the old *Manchester Guardian* put together. And the reason it died was that the advertisers were not interested in the readership of a Labour paper because their purchasing power was not sufficient to attract the advertising needed to keep our paper going.

If we were to apply those same arguments about the market being the best determinant for information, we would very quickly make changes in many other sections of our society. You could imagine, quite easily, that education could be determined very largely by market forces, that the BBC might be determined on a different basis, likewise the arts and so on.

There are however many precedents already accepted for public funding of information and I list just some of them: eight thousand million pounds a year is spent on education, including Universities, which is only a way of conveying to each new generation the basic information that they need in order to live full lives as citizens and play an active part in a productive society. The BBC licence fee comes to about £300million a year and does, of course, fund publications like *The Listener* and the *Radio Times*. The Arts Council receives £50million.

We even have the free post in a General Election which, if you assume that every freepost election address costs seven pence to send and there are on average three candidates in each constituency, and now 41 million electors, means that in the next three or four weeks the Government will be spending £10million in order to make it possible for the political Parties to present their argument to the electorate. This expenditure is based on the belief, quite correctly, that a mature democracy requires at least once in the five years that people should hear different points of view put through their letter box before they come to polling. Then remember that the EEC Commission is spending £1 million in the next month in Britain, apparently, or so we are told, entirely non-politically, in order to alert people to the importance of voting in the Direct Elections.

If you add all that up you come to £8,361million already spent by a mature democracy in opening up channels of communication. Divided by 56 million people it comes to £149 a head. Therefore, if we say, in addition to that, that some funding might be needed for local radio, or an Open Broadcasting Authority, or for a National Print Corporation, with a launching fund, can anyone really doubt that we are basing ourselves on secure precedents where public money is already used for the public good, complete with a barrier to prevent that public money being a carrier of Government information through to the ultimate recipient of the opinion that reaches them? It is clear the argument that public funding has no place in securing a free press in a free society does not stand up to one moment's examination.

Now I come to the second question, which relates to the existing media: that of democratic accountability. The IWC has always argued over many years that the

"opening of the books" was a key question, the first question of all in democratic accountability. Whether you apply that to a Freedom of Information Act which the Labour Party strongly supports and a major amendment of the Official Secrets Act; or whether you apply it to opening books so that workers in industry can know the true state of the firm for which they work at a time they put in their wage claim or when they are considering investment policy, research and development policy, manpower forecasting and the like. However you look at it, openness of information must be the first step in democratic accountability in the media.

I can see no reason why the Minutes of the Governors of the BBC or the Governors of the IBA should not be published. The policy papers of the BBC and IBA Governors should be made available. The directives that are given about the handling of certain matters, whether it be on racialism, trade unionism or whatever other matter is the subject of directives should certainly be made available. It should be the demand of the trade union movement and the Labour movement that they should. I think it is arguable at any rate that editorials might be signed, because anonymous editorials calling for open government lack a certain credibility in my own mind. They remind me of debates on overmanning that take place from time to time in the House of Lords which have never influenced me very greatly in my approach to these questions.

Now we come to the question of the role of the trade union movement in this whole process of democratic accountability. In 1971 I made a speech at the Glasgow May Day meeting saying that the trade unions should have their own television programmes. HTV in Bristol then offered to give half an hour to present a programme on the trade unions. I said that I didn't want to present a programme on the trade unions and that the whole purpose of my argument was that the trade unions should be able to speak for themselves. HTV agreed and the programme was arranged. What happened in the weeks surrounding the programme *My Brother's Keeper*, before it was finally published and broadcast, was very interesting. It began with a debate very like the one which preceded by speech. "Shall we have the television in?" "After all", the union said, "when we have an industrial dispute in Bristol the media, including the television, always present our case so unfairly, so if they now make a programme about us it is bound to be unfair as well."

That was the first stage of the debate. How was the Transport and General Workers' Union to respond to the very thing that it wanted itself, namely access to the public. There was also a discussion within Harlech television among the cameramen, the producers, about how they would respond to a request that they make the programme about the Transport and General Workers' Union. Before the programme planning could even begin the two joint chapels sat down together to discuss it. In the end the T&G and the HTV unions agreed. This was the key to it all. The Harlech television film and television unit agreed to put its considerable skill at the disposal of the T&G in order to allow to T&G to make its own case instead of saying: "we know how to present you: leave it to us".

That programme was a very remarkable programme. It was referred to in the Annan Report because what came out of it all was how the Transport and General Workers' Union in Bristol perceived itself. This was done through the eyes of

T&GWU shop stewards, one in the docks, one at Rolls Royce, one in a road haulage firm; and one from Frys at Somerdale. What came out of it was the perception of trade unionism as seen by those who served in and worked through the Transport and General Workers' Union. Later the film was given a press showing in London for industrial correspondents and I have never forgotten their reaction. It was that this had nothing whatever to do with trade unionism. It was so different from the trade unionism that they describe day by day they couldn't understand the trade unionism that was presented by the Transport and General Workers' Union.

Here I think we have got a critical task to achieve, which *The Times* dispute has begun to make possible: the need for a close link between all the unions concerned in Fleet Street, between the NGA and SOGAT, NATSOPA and SLADE and the NUJ, not only across Fleet Street, but I think even more importantly within each newspaper so that gradually the barriers that have divided different groups of workers within the media can be broken down to bring people together to discuss what it is they are engaged in doing.

That brings me on to the next question of codes of conduct. I have been a member of the National Union of Journalists for 30 years. I joined when I went into the BBC in 1949. The NUJ already has a Code of Conduct. And it is only through a code of conduct, jointly accepted by those who work in the media, that we are going to get round the problem which every trade unionist here knows to be the case of a man stuffing a microphone in your face as you leave a meeting where there has been a discussion about strike action and putting a number of aggressive questions and then afterwards coming up and saying: 'I didn't want to do it, I didn't mean to do it, it wasn't my fault, I was told I had to do it.'

That is a problem of moral responsibility, and it applies to journalists just as well. It can only be overcome by giving to the trade union movement, through its joint work, some responsibility for maintaining higher standards than the proprietors or the big broadcasting corporations have been able to achieve.

This leads on to the whole question of complaints procedure which is the subject of one of the paragraphs in your draft resolution. In my opinion the present Press Council has no credibility whatsoever. I say that absolutely candidly. I do not believe that the Press Council offers the best way by which the problems of complaints can be dealt with. It seems to me right that the first place to which a complaint should be put by a trade union or by an individual or by an ethnic minority should be straight to the joint shop stewards in the newspaper or broadcasting authority that has published the material in the first place.

Now it may be argued that in that case a certain defence mechanism will come into play, a thing not unknown when you complain to the editor, I might add. But I believe that the BBC and the IBA and the newspapers should be required to print, at any rate a list of the complaints and then the comments of their own employees on whether those complaints are valid or not.

Now I come to the last point of all which is the campaign. Where do we go from here after this weekend Conference? I have drawn special attention to the need which I believe to be overwhelmingly important that the media unions should co-operate together nationally and locally at their place of work and that is of special

importance when you think of the task of defending interests against the wrongful imposition of new technology without consultation. Next we must press for a National Print Corporation and changes in the broadcasting structure to permit local radio and the Open Broadcasting Authority to come into being. Next we must launch a Labour Party and Trade Union Congress initiative to change national policy in a way that will make possible a new structure.

Finally, we should begin at this Conference to keep in touch with people who work in the media and make contact with others who couldn't be here to set up something that would be permanent to bring socialists in the media together. There are parallels with two other organizations of a similar kind. One was the Socialist Medical Association under Dr Stark Murray, which worked for many years and brought about, through the agency of the post-war Labour Government, the National Health Service. The other was the Socialist Education Association which over many years campaigned for, and has made good progress in bringing about comprehensive education in this country.

I must conclude with a word of warning. This campaign itself will be the subject to gross misrepresentation and we may well have the first opportunity of seeing it from reports of this very Conference. For any campaign *for* the freedom of the press will be denounced as a campaign *against* the freedom of the press. Any demands for diversity will be presented as demands for uniformity. Any attacks on commercial censorship will be described as a call for Government censorship. The media, who call everyone else to account, will resist very strongly all attempts to call it to account itself.

If we want to find the parallel with this argument upon which we are engaged I personally can think of no better one than the religious wars of the 16th and 17th century. The issues then were precisely the same, particularly in the 17th Century in England. At that time the argument was about the Church, but the Church was, the mass media of its day. Everybody had to go to Church on Sunday and there was a priest in every pulpit, in every parish, every Sunday who told you what you ought to know. These 'priests' are still to be found on BBC1, BBC2, BBC3, and BBC4, and the 'bishops' appear on *News at Ten* and *Panorama*. The truth is that we are struggling for what the Dissenters in the 17th century struggled for. It is very simple: the right to elect our own 'lecturers' to address us in a way that interests us about our problems in our own chapel where that man will be allowed to preach after we have chosen him, and safeguarding our right to replace him.

That struggle for religious dissent led to the most terrible bloodshed in Western Europe over 200 years, it also caused "a little local difficulty" in Britain in the middle of the 17th century. This is what we are engaged in doing. Anyone who comes to Nottingham for an IWC Conference should not be surprised, nor discouraged to find that if you go for the really central issues of our time you are bound, in addition to making progress in the end — as we shall — to be engaged in a little bit of argument on the way.