

THE EMBATTLED PRESS

FRANCIS WILLIAMS

British Author, Journalist and Broadcaster. Former Editor of the London 'Daily Herald', present Editor of the Labour weekly, 'Forward', and Press Critic of the 'New Statesman'

THE battle for the freedom of the press has gone on in many countries and over many centuries. Whenever and wherever it has been won, a foothold of freedom has been held, however harsh and vigorous the forces that would destroy liberty. Whenever and wherever it has been lost, a hand has been held out to tyranny and oppression.

The freedom of the press is not something that simply belongs to newspapers. It is a possession and heritage of all—an essential foundation of civilisation.

“Let it be impressed upon your minds, let it be instilled into your children that the liberty of the press is the palladium of all civil, political and religious rights”. So wrote Junius in one of the most famous of his letters in the middle of the long, bitter and heroic struggle against censorship in England during the eighteenth century.

As the South African Government prepares a new, and it no doubt hopes final, attack on press freedom, these words need to be remembered by every journalist and every reader of newspapers in South Africa, by every man and woman in fact who cares at all that South Africa shall still retain some vestiges of respect among the nations of the world.

And it needs to be reaffirmed, also in the strongest and most public way, by all outside South Africa who still hope that the true voice of what is best in South Africa may even yet be able to make itself heard while there is time.

The palladium, the ultimate safeguard of all other public rights. It is a high claim. But it is a true one. And nowhere more true than where, as in South Africa to-day, so many others of these rights have already been overthrown.

The freedom of the press is not, let me repeat, something special to the press. It is not something that belongs to journalists apart from all others. It is cardinal to the health of society as a whole. To strike at it is not to attack the interests of one profession or industry, it is to attack what is central to the most basic of all rights among men and women living in a com-

munity. For the freedom of the press is wholly a representative right, enjoyed by newspapers not on their own behalf but exercised on behalf of the public as a whole.

What does it consist of and why is it so important? The answer to both these questions arises directly from the responsibilities and duties of newspapers and the true relationship between them and the responsibilities of governments.

More than a century ago, a famous editor of the London '*Times*', Delane, set down, in words that have an especial validity and urgency to-day, the nature of these responsibilities and the difference between them and those possessed by Ministers.

The government of his day sought, as governments terrified of the verdict of national and world opinion have always sought, to insist that it was the duty of the press 'in the national interest' to support the government in what it did, and if it refused to accept the duty to support, then to remain silent.

To this the '*Times*' replied in a classic statement of the true principles that should govern the relationship between newspapers and governments: "We cannot admit that a newspaper's purpose is to share the labours of statesmanship, or that it should be bound by the same limitations, the same duties, the same liabilities as Ministers. The purpose and duties of the two powers are constantly separate, generally independent, often diametrically opposed . . . The press can enter into no close or binding alliances with the statesmen of the day, nor can it surrender its permanent interests to the convenience of the ephemeral power of any government".

Delane, let me point out, was not a revolutionary. He was not even a liberal. The paper he edited was no radical sheet. It was the most influential and respected journal in the world and it represented all that was most solid and soundly based in British life. It was no accident that this was so. Nor that the forces upon which Delane could rely included not only those representing the new ideas of political democracy, but all that was strongest and most successful among the great commercial and industrial interests in society; for they realised that their own future progress and their competitive position in the world was inextricably bound up with the principles of freedom of information and opinion—with the right to know. What did they, and Delane who spoke for them and for all that was most respectable and responsible in society, hold to be the

essential function of the press? Let me quote him again.

"The first duty of the press", he declared, "is to obtain the earliest and most correct intelligence of the events of the time and instantly by disclosing them to make them the common property of the nation . . . The press lives by disclosures, whatever passes into its keeping becomes a part of the knowledge and history of the times, it is daily and forever appealing to the enlightened force of public opinion—anticipating, if possible, the march of events—standing upon the breach between the present and the future and extending its survey to the horizon of the world."

And of the duties of the journalist he said this:

"The responsibility he shares is akin to that of the economist and the lawyer, whose province is not to frame a system of convenient application to the exigencies of the day, but to investigate truth and apply it in fixed principles to the affairs of the world . . . His duty is the same as that of the historian—to seek out the truth above all things and to present to his readers not such things as statesmen would wish them to know, but the truth as near as he can attain it."

It is understandable that many governments have sought to prevent the exercise of such functions—especially those bent on evil. And all of them have always done so on the pretext that they were seeking to safeguard the public against exaggeration, or untruth, or pornography.

But the true reason has always been their fear of the power of the press to inform and educate public opinion in the full implications of what they were doing and its effect on world opinion. It is only governments that are guilty, and know they are guilty, that fly to censorship.

To do so is their admission that they are incapable of an honest defence before the bar of public opinion; it is a public acknowledgment that they cannot justify their acts before the conscience, intelligence and common sense of their own people and of the world.

That is the lesson of all censorship in peace-time. To examine the history of censorship is to examine the records of governments self-convicted of inability to justify what they are doing. It is historically the resort of all those who dare not stand up to an independent judgement of their acts—the perennial refuge of the cowardly and criminal in public administration.

Censorship seeks to invalidate the first basic compact between

newspapers and public—a compact that derives directly from the democratic system and is essential to all. This compact is, quite simply, to give news. Not such news as will please particular political parties or religious bodies or economic interests, but all the news that is available and that is necessary to a full comprehension of what is happening in the nation and the world.

The importance of this compact—at which censorship strikes directly and, if it succeeds, fatally—to any society cannot easily be over-estimated. It is only if people know, that they can judge correctly of the policies and principles by which their affairs are governed. For knowledge is not only power. It is the essential adjunct of any attempt to organise human affairs—and particularly, of course, to organise them democratically.

The first essential of press freedom is, therefore, the freedom to obtain news and to report it: all the news, not news selected by particular interests for their own purposes or their own deceptions. Access to information, the right to report what is going on in Parliament and in the Courts and the public reaction to it, to seek news wherever it is to be found and to publish it without any hindrance save the right of the individual citizen to protection against libel or trespass, this has historically proved to be the first and most fundamental of all the constituents of a free press.

It was the one that had to be fought for hardest and it is the one that is always attacked first by governments which seek to impose censorship in order to hide or disguise their own follies or crimes.

This freedom to report includes inevitably the possibility that some newspapers will sometimes be wrong. There has never been an occasion when the enemies of press freedom—the little, contemptible men frightened of the light—have not been able to point to some errors in some newspapers and seek to use them as an argument for the censorship of all.

But the safeguard of truth and of the availability of all that supply of public information upon which the life of civilisation depends lies not in control or suppression. There is no case in the whole history of the press throughout the world where government control and censorship has not produced worse papers and more misleading ones than freedom, with all its possibility of error. The safeguard against error or distortion lies not in an imposed unity of official “truth”, but in the existence of many newspapers of many different opinions and

sources of information so that one can be set against another.

The most that censorship can do is to create a desert and call it truth. But the real truth, the truth that societies need if they are to expand and prosper, lies in the midst of diversity. And it can only, as the whole history of the press shows, survive in freedom.

The second essential pillar of press freedom is, of course, the liberty of expression. Like all the rights of which the freedom of the press is comprised this, as with the right to report, does not derive from something special to newspapers, but from what is essential to the existence of a democratic society. It is an extension to the printed word of the right, which ought to belong to everyone and does in all civilised societies, to hold opinions and to express them without hindrance, except in so far as they may prove contrary to the law of libel which exists to protect individuals.

It is only through the right, not only to report, but to interpret and comment on the news, that newspapers can fulfil their role as the representatives and watchdogs of the public. Whenever and wherever it has come to exist, a controlled and censored press has always been a bad press, for its real purpose has been taken from it. And the real damage has been not simply to newspapers themselves but to the national society as a whole.

No one can, in the light of its record, be surprised that the South African Government should now be preparing to impose such a censorship. But it ought to know and the people of South Africa ought to know, and perhaps especially the great commercial interests of South Africa whose international position and prestige will be affected more than any by such an act ought to know, that if South Africa does impose censorship it will stand before the world as a state governed by men afraid of the truth and committed to policies which they dare not allow public opinion to examine; a state whose citizens are denied the basic human right to know the facts and which dares not let the world know them either.

All who care for what is still left of South Africa's good name should fight these proposals to the very limit. It may not be an easy fight. The battles against censorship never are. But it is an absolutely essential one.

And it is one in which all who fight can expect and will receive the support and allegiance of the press and public of the whole of the free world.