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NOUVELLE SOCIÉTÉ HELVÉTIQUE

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Conclusion of Mr. G. KELLER'S address.

Having mentioned the many positive sides of an efficient system of Public Information, such as largely exists in Great Britain, there is, however, another aspect, a revers de la médaille, as it were, which should be mentioned also. Public Relations can also be grossly overdone. It is truly astonishing how many uninteresting people try to establish their own system of Public Information to further their own, mostly purely commercial ends, or to get some personal publicity. The number of invitations I get, mostly to cocktails which have become the modern bait with which to obtain publicity, is really sometimes astounding: from inventors and would-be-inventors, from businessmen and manufacturers who want to bring out some novelty, from fashion houses wishing to launch and publicise the truly shortest of short bikinis, from politicians who have been behind the Iron Curtain, from exiled Monarchs, who visit the London stamp collectors conference, from ex-diplomats who want to save the world from the hydrogen bomb and a third world war — they all, and many more, hold press receptions where they hope to "sell" or "put across" their ideas. Of course, they occasionally really have something of general interest to say. But it is frequently nothing but personal vanity, which impels them to try to get their name into the news by giving a reception for the press — there are often two or more of these receptions being held in London on the same day. After a time a correspondent intuitively knows which of these many receptions are worth attending, and which are merely waste of time. But it is really surprising how many people, who either have nothing of importance to say, or through reasons of etiquette, statecraft or diplomacy *cannot* say much, give receptions for the press and say in so many words: "I am not at liberty to speak and even this is off the record." It is equally astounding how pushing and undignified some press men can be in their persecution of prominent personalities and then, when they fail to extract any interesting news from their celebrities, they describe their clothes, the colour of their hair, the way they hold their cigarette and such like.

Some years ago that eminent and witty speaker, The Duke of Edinburgh went so far, at a banquet of the F.P.A., as to speak of newspaper representatives as of "The Ambassadors of the people." He half jokingly pulled the legs of the real ambassadors who were present on this occasion, some two dozen of them, by reminding them that they, after all, only informed Governments, whereas the newspapermen *influenced public opinion*. This, of course, is to a large extent true, though I would not like to have to say which is more important: informing a government or influencing public opinion. Both, if badly done, can have catastrophic effects. To illustrate this, I need only remind you of the activity of the late pre-war German ambassador in London von Ribbentrop. As is well known he kept telling his master, whose voice he was, that Britain was degenerated, was down and out, would never fight, would not honour her pledge to Poland and more such dangerous nonsense. And the German correspondents, partly because they could not help it, partly because they probably really believed it, simultaneously informed German public opinion along similar lines. Thus, when Britain really took up the fight on the 3rd of September 1939, it came as a ghastly surprise both to the Nazi government and the German people. The present British system of informing and thus of forming or shaping Public Opinion does, although it is by no means entirely fool-proof, work well enough.

Public Opinion is thus, I think, reasonably well informed in this country, both as regards home policy and foreign policy. But a far more complicated problem is the question of the effect the free press in this country has on continental opinion. Some foreign governments simply will not believe that the British press is as independent of Government opinion as is actually the case. Not long ago, to give you a topical example, some British newspapers, particularly one or two connected with the Beaverbrook group, said some very harsh things about the West German Chancellor, Dr. Adenauer. It goes without saying that these utterances went back to Germany in no time. Not very long afterwards Dr. Adenauer made a speech, in which he criticised British policy rather violently and then said there were even highly placed British wirepullers who had inspired British Press attacks against his own person. He simply did not believe that the opinions published in some Beaverbrook papers were not those of Mr. Macmillan or Mr. Selwyn

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Lloyd, but merely those of the particular papers editors and collaborators. No doubt his own Embassy here in London have since enlightened him on this point. Such misconceptions, however, are often extremely difficult to eliminate; thus: if "The Times" writes a leading article which happens to differ from official policy, many continental editors are very hard to convince that this was really a purely domestic Printing House Square happening. They believe, in 99 cases out of 100, wrongly, that The Foreign Office has been flying a kite. This may lead to Foreign Governments blaming the British Government in cases where the latter has had no control whatever over what has appeared in print. However, such cases are not occurring very frequently.

Now before closing I would like to revert once more to the term public opinion. I have already drawn your attention to the fact that Public Opinion is a somewhat misused, not to say maligned term. It is, as we have seen, used very freely and also quite frequently by newspapermen and politicians to popularise their own opinion, which in many cases they *pretend* is the public one. If, in controversial matters, enough agitation is made in the name of public opinion, this may lead to a situation when a democratic government decides to put it to the test whether some measure is really demanded by Public Opinion or not. You may ask how such a test can be made and the answer is, of course, very simple: in a direct democracy such as our Swiss one by the plebiscite and in a parliamentary democracy, such as the British one, by allowing a *free vote* in the House of Commons with no party discipline involved and no particular line taken by any of the parties officially. Such free votes, with the Whips off, where every member of Parliament can vote entirely according to what his own judgement is and what his conscience dictates, are occasionally granted, provided the matter involved is non-political, controversial and of definite public interest.

Those of you who follow the news are no doubt aware that there is, at this moment, a considerable amount of agitation going on in this country with a view to forcing the Government to re-introduce, for better or worse, corporal punishment for thugs and criminals who commit deeds of violence. Such controversies and public discussions about this particular subject have been quite frequent ever since the Labour Regime abolished whipping in 1948. So far, the Home

Secretary, Mr. Butler, who belongs to the progressive section in the Conservative Party, has steadfastly refused to yield to such pressure. He was not prepared, he has said, to turn back the wheel of history and would not be instrumental in reintroducing what he considered outdated methods. Now of late, inspired by a speech delivered by the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Parker, and as a result of a number of particularly repulsive violent deeds of young thugs, this pressure has become very strong. One of the more picturesque Conservative M.P.'s., Mr. Nabarro, supported by Mr. Cyril Osborne and others pestered the Home Secretary in the House of Commons some 11 days ago to such a degree, that Mr. Butler, whose department are at this moment drafting a new Criminal Justice Bill, had to change his position somewhat. Those who want to reintroduce the birch — they are called the Birchers and are, of course, no relation to our popular Press Counsellor at the Embassy — naturally claim to have public opinion behind them and have actually asked the Home Secretary whether he was aware that he was going completely against public opinion in his hitherto negative stand on this question. The result has been that Mr. Butler replied that, after all, this was a free country and that he might, in his capacity of Leader of the House, be prepared to allow a free vote on this question, when the new Criminal Justice Bill is debated in the House. I have mentioned this example to show that there is, indeed, a possibility of testing public opinion — in this instance by allowing 630 freely chosen representatives of the people to vote freely on a subject which is as controversial as it is apt to lead to rather passionate arguments.

In Switzerland, as you know, there has been an enormous amount of agitation, also in the name of public opinion, for the introduction of the women's vote. It was, as you all remember, put to the test by a nationwide plebiscite with the negative result we all know and which I personally regret very deeply as I look on it as entirely reactionary. It could, of course, be said, that it was not a fair plebiscite, as only the men were able to vote and the women had no say in the ballot. But in fairness I am bound to add that most probably it would have made little difference if the women had been allowed to take part in this vote, as in actual fact there seems to be a majority amongst both men and women who do not want the Swiss woman to have access to the Polling Stations.

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I have, so far, mainly dealt with Public Opinion in connection with political matters. But there are other aspects, in which it can play a very important part. It is only a few days ago that an author of a play — William Douglas Home is his name — walked onto the stage in the Fortune Theatre here in London and complained bitterly about the London theatre critics who had severely criticised his play — “Aunt Edwina” it is called — and had thus influenced public opinion against it to such a degree that the public stayed away after a night or two and the theatre management decided to take the play off. By asking the audience to give a round of applause, if they thought the play — one about a sex change case — a good one, and by getting such applause, the author then succeeded in influencing the management of the Theatre to leave the play running for some more days. Now I am not concerned here with the question whether this particular play is, as some critics have said, bad, unfunny and in bad taste, or, as the author claims, good clean fun, not to be taken seriously. But the author’s admission that a handful of critics, or perhaps ten or so, have the power to shape public opinion to such an extent that a play becomes an immediate flop, I think, most interesting in the context of this examination of what Public Opinion is. Much the same would, of necessity, apply to Cinema criticism, as well as to art exhibitions, and other public performances which run for any length of time. It applies much less to the field of music, as concerts are not repeat performances. One may, after a symphony concert at the Royal Festival Hall, read with interest next day what the critics, particularly Colin Mason in the Daily Telegraph or Neville Cardus in the Guardian, have to say about it, but I don’t think any adverse criticism from them would prevent many people from going to see the same conductor or hearing the same orchestra or soloist again at a later date.

Public Opinion, Ladies and Gentlemen, is, if you look up an Encyclopedia for a definition, “the Sum total of all individual opinions of an existing community in all questions of public life”. It is also to use a definition which has appeared on October 18th in the “NZZ”, “a phenomenon which is difficult to grasp, as it is in a state of constant flux and which is composed of varied factors.”

With the first, Encyclopedia definition I cannot entirely agree, because Public Opinion is, I think, hardly the *sum total*, but rather a *clear majority of all individual opinions held in an existing community*.

I hope, according to this definition, that public opinion in the N.S.H. Community here tonight feels that I have succeeded in illustrating a number of interesting aspects of this problem.

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