VIII

The Media Age

A CULTURAL CHERNOBYL

> There is only one thing in this world, and that is to keep acquiring money and more money, power and more power. All the rest is meaningless.
>
> *Napoleon Bonaparte*

EDDIE SPEARITT AND his son, Adam, went to a football game in Sheffield on April 15, 1989. They had been caught in traffic and had just enough time to find places in the allotted Liverpool terraces at Hillsborough stadium. Adam was fourteen and a devoted Liverpool supporter; and this was a critical FA Cup semi-final against Nottingham Forest. 'We were so excited,' said Eddie. 'It was only when the crowd in the pen really began to build up that I got frightened.'

The ancient turnstiles became a bottle-neck as 5,000 Liverpool fans sought to gain entrance before the kick-off. When the police eventually opened the main gates, instead of directing the fans to the open terraces they sent them into the crowded pen. Eddie and Adam were crushed in each other's arms. Adam was one of ninety-six fans who died. The subsequent inquiry by Lord Justice Taylor left no doubt where the blame lay. 'The real cause of the Hillsborough disaster', he said in his report, 'was overcrowding . . . the main reason for the disaster was the failure of police control.'[1]

By the following Tuesday, the editor of the *Sun*, Kelvin MacKenzie, had convinced himself that the tragedy had been caused by Liverpool 'football hooligans'. When he sat down

to design his front page, he scribbled 'THE TRUTH' in huge letters. Beneath it he wrote three subsidiary headlines: 'Some fans picked pockets of victims' . . . 'Some fans urinated on the brave cops' . . . 'Some fans beat up PC giving kiss of life'. The story described how 'drunken Liverpool fans viciously attacked rescue workers as they tried to revive victims' and 'police officers, firemen and ambulance crew were punched, kicked and urinated upon'. A dead girl was abused and fans, said an unnamed policeman, 'were openly urinating on us and the bodies of the dead'. A Tory MP, whose sole source was the police, was quoted.[2]

None of it was true. There was no hooliganism. People were vomiting and behaving strangely because they had been crushed and traumatised. Others died because senior police officers failed to understand that the fans inside the pen were fighting for their lives, not trying to 'invade' the pitch. 'THE TRUTH' was the opposite. Like much in MacKenzie's *Sun*, it was clearly intended to pander to prejudice. Other journalists on the *Sun* appeared to know this instinctively. 'As MacKenzie's layout was seen by more and more people,' wrote Peter Chippendale and Chris Horrie in their history of the *Sun*, 'a collective shudder ran through the office [but] MacKenzie's dominance was so total there was nobody left in the organisation who could rein him in except Murdoch. [Everyone] seemed paralysed, "looking like rabbits in the headlights", as one hack described them. The error staring them in the face was too glaring . . . It obviously wasn't a silly mistake; nor was it a simple oversight. Nobody really had any comment on it – they just took one look and went away shaking their heads in wonder at the enormity of it . . . It was a "classic smear".'[3]

I met Eddie Spearitt and two other Hillsborough parents: Phil Raymond, whose son Philip, also aged fourteen, died, and Joan Traynor, who lost two sons, Christopher, twenty-six, and Kevin, sixteen. We sat with coffee and sandwiches in a large sunlit room in the Philharmonic pub, which overlooks Liverpool. Those who try to justify the substitution of a free press with a circus press that speaks to prejudice and 'gives

people what they want', might listen to Eddie and Phil and Joan.

'As I lay in my hospital bed,' Eddie said, 'the hospital staff kept the *Sun* away from me. It's bad enough when you lose your fourteen-year-old son because you're treating him to a football match. Nothing can be worse than that. But since then I've had to defend him against all the rubbish printed by the *Sun* about everyone there being a hooligan and drinking. There was no hooliganism. During thirty-one days of Lord Justice Taylor's inquiry no blame was attributed because of alcohol. Adam never touched it in his life.'

Joan Traynor said that ITN had asked permission to film the funeral of her two sons. She refused and asked for her family's privacy to be respected. The *Sun* invaded the funeral, with photographers shooting from a wall. The picture of her sons' coffins on the front page of a paper that had lied about the circumstances of their death so deeply upset her that, eight years later, she has difficulty speaking about it. 'Is that what a newspaper is meant to do?' she asked.

Phil Hammond said, 'Like Eddie, the family kept the papers away from me. I've still got the papers in a white nylon bag in the loft. Take one of the *Sun*'s lies; they said fans were robbing watches and money from the dead laid out on the pitch. I'm the secretary of the Family Support Group and every family has been in touch with me about that accusation. All of them have accounted for the possessions of their loved ones. Nothing was stolen.

'[The *Sun* said] that fans were urinating on the bodies. We got all the clothes back; they hadn't been washed; none of them smelt of urine. But some mud sticks, doesn't it, and there is always someone willing to pass it on. The *Sun* hurt us, and hurt us badly. We've had to defend the name of our loved ones when all they did was go to a football match and never come back.'

In the days that followed the tragedy, Billy Butler, a popular Radio Merseyside disc jockey, became a voice for Liverpool's grief and anger. 'There were newsagents calling in,' he told me, 'assuring people they would not stock the *Sun*.

They were writing on their windows, "We do not have the *Sun* here". There was a public burning of the *Sun* in Kirkby. Caller after caller said they were boycotting the paper, and the boycott is still going on today. It's a marvellous way that ordinary people have to show their power, and this city used it.'

Unlike the homes of the Hillsborough families, Kelvin MacKenzie's suburban home was not 'staked out' by a press mob. His chauffeured Jaguar routinely collected him every morning and took him to the Murdoch fortress at Wapping, east London, where, surrounded by razor wire and guards, he caught the lift to his windowless office and did not leave until the Jaguar took him home again.

However, sales of the *Sun* on Merseyside were falling fast, down by almost 40 per cent, a loss that would cost News International an estimated £10 million a year. When the Press Council subsequently condemned the *Sun*'s lies, and the boycott intensified, Murdoch ordered MacKenzie to respond publicly. BBC Radio 4's *The World This Weekend* was chosen as his platform. The 'sarf London' accent that was integral to MacKenzie's persona as an 'ordinary punter' was now a contrite middle-class voice that fitted Radio 4.

'It was my decision', said MacKenzie, 'and my decision alone to do that front page in that way, and I made a rather serious error.'[4] In 1996 MacKenzie was back on Radio 4, this time in a very different mood. 'The *Sun* did not accuse anybody of anything,' he said aggressively. 'We were the vehicle for others . . .'[5]

The *Sun*'s treatment of the Hillsborough tragedy was typical not only of its record of distortion, but of its cruelty. The rich and famous have been able to defend themselves with expensive libel actions; the singer Elton John won damages, before appeal, of £1 million following a series of character assassinations. But most of the *Sun*'s victims are people like the Hillsborough parents, who have had to suffer without recourse. Turn the pages of back copies of the *Sun* and the pattern is clear. Here are a few examples taken at random.

A man who had undergone a heart transplant operation was vilified across several pages for having left his wife fifteen years earlier. This was published while his recovery was in the balance. People who perform exceptional public duty and are celebrated as popular heroes for rescuing somebody or tackling a criminal are ritually 'knocked down' when something in their private lives is revealed. They are then branded 'love cheats' and 'rats'.[6]

Minorities are a favourite target. A bishop was vilified for being gay, a lesbian for being 'unfit' to care for children.[7] Racial stereotypes are routinely promoted; an Asian in the 'soap' *EastEnders* was defamed as 'small, greasy and cheap'.[8] A *Sun* editorial about Australia's bicentenary celebrations, headlined, 'THE ABOS: BRUTAL AND TREACHEROUS', was described by the Press Council as 'inaccurate, unjustified and unacceptably racist'.[9] The disabled are mawkishly pitied; Simon Weston, the soldier who suffered terrible burns in the Falklands War, was the subject of a faked 'interview', which invited readers' revulsion for his disfigurement.[10]

Unlike journalists, politicians are said to be 'fair game' if they are found to be hypocrites. The Labour politician Tony Benn is not a hypocrite, but his principles are anathema to Murdoch. Benn was declared 'insane' in a malicious *Sun* story whose 'authority', an American psychologist, described the false quotations attributed to him as 'absurd'.[11] The Thatcher Government's campaign against 'loony' London councils, which probably helped turn the Labour Party in on itself and away from progressive policies, was based substantially on a long-running series of inventions and distortions in the *Sun*.

The person ultimately responsible for this is Rupert Murdoch. More than any proprietor since Lord Beaverbrook, Murdoch prides himself on his ability to choose the right people to edit his newspapers. He remains in close contact with all of them. Kelvin MacKenzie was his 'favourite editor'. Under MacKenzie, the profits from the *Sun* allowed Murdoch to build his television empire. Murdoch personally approved, or approved of, much of MacKenzie's unscrupulous behaviour, such as the 'GOTCHA' headline.

When journalists on *The Times*, sister paper to the *Sun*, expressed their concern about the damage done to the paper's reputation by the publication of the bogus Hitler Diaries, Murdoch replied, 'After all, we are in the entertainment business.'[12]

The ethos Murdoch wanted to build in his papers was demonstrated early in his career. In 1964, his Sydney tabloid, the *Daily Mirror*, published the diary of a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl under the headline, 'WE HAVE SCHOOLGIRL'S ORGY DIARY'. A thirteen-year-old boy, who was identified, was expelled from the same school. Shortly afterwards, he hanged himself from his mother's clothesline. The girl was subsequently examined by a doctor from the Child Welfare Department and found to be a virgin. The 'diary' was the product of a fertile adolescent imagination.

Richard Neville, one of the editors of *Oz*, went to see the boy's family and was moved by their grief, and angered by the circumstances of his death. 'It seemed', he wrote in his autobiography, '[that some] publishers could get away with murder . . . or almost.'[13] Neville later confronted Murdoch with the consequence of his newspaper's behaviour and was told, 'Everybody makes mistakes.'[14]

In the very few interviews he allows, Murdoch is often defensive about the product that has built his multi-billion-dollar empire. In 1967, on the eve of his departure for Fleet Street, he told ABC Television in Sydney, 'I'm not ashamed of any of my newspapers at all, and I'm rather sick of snobs who tell us they're bad papers, snobs who only read papers that no one else wants, who call themselves liberals or radicals and want to impose *their* taste on the community.'[15] In London, Murdoch encouraged this view of himself as an 'outsider' persecuted by 'snobs'. These 'snobs' would later include the House of Commons and the broadcasting regulatory authorities, which consistently denied him access to British television.

Murdoch himself came from an Anglocentric elite. He went to the most exclusive 'public school' in Australia, Geelong Grammar (Prince Charles was sent there), then to Oxford.

His parents' numerous establishment connections were available to him. His mother, Dame Elisabeth, a wealthy dowager, has long bestowed her patronage on a range of cultural interests. There can be little doubt that she would find a paper like the *Sun* abhorrent, as would Murdoch's wife, Anna, a devout Roman Catholic.

Murdoch's American biographer, Thomas Kiernan, is one of the few outside his circle who has known him personally. His book *Citizen Murdoch*, was written with the co-operation of Murdoch and his family and friends.[16] 'The contrast between the private Murdoch and the business Murdoch is quite astounding,' Kiernan told me. 'I used to play tennis with him quite often and for someone who publicly is so anti-elite, he is very elitist in his manner. In his office, he is like a field-marshal: demanding, abrupt, short-tempered. But in his private life he maintains very high standards and has rigid values, high values, and demands that his children and his friends keep to these. On the other hand, in the media, he destroys standards. This has long been true of his newspapers. The infection is insidious. Even the *New York Times* will quote the *Star*, a supermarket tabloid he started, and one of America's two main sleaze merchants. The *Star* may well have got the story from the *Sun*, and around the Murdoch circuit it will go, and before you know it, some awful fiction becomes received truth. Now it's television's turn and the danger is already there.

'In the United States he has a lot of direct influence in the programming of his Fox network, which relies on sleaze. He already has turned news into entertainment, with *paparazzi* with video cameras chasing celebrities down the street: that's basically a Murdoch invention in the US. Those who run TV news fear they're going to have to go downmarket even more than they have, just to keep up with Murdoch. It's as if everything he touches becomes desensitised, like the horror displayed every day on his front pages; after a while, we get used to it.

'Now set that against his private life where the influence of his wife, Anna, is very important. When I was close to both of

them, she was very critical of what he was doing. When he turned the *New York Post* into a version of the *Sun*, he did so without Page Three Girls, because his wife put her foot down and told him she didn't want their three young children walking past news-stands and seeing the topless girls on their dad's paper. She didn't want them to suffer at school or the family to have social disapprobation as they established themselves in New York.'

Reiner Luyken, a prize-winning journalist on the respected German newspaper *Die Zeit*, has reported from Britain for almost twenty years. He is the author of a series of perceptive articles about Murdoch's impact in Britain, entitled 'A Cultural Chernobyl'. 'The most striking effect of Murdoch is self-censorship,' he wrote. 'Self-censorship is now so commonplace in the British media, that journalists admit to it without blushing.'

We met outside the gates of Murdoch's headquarters at Wapping, which Luyken called 'a journalistic penitentiary' and a 'new brave new world'. 'If you look closely at this place,' he said, 'if you look at the electronic bars, the wire on the perimeter, the patrolling guards, you must ask yourself, "How can information and ideas flow freely in such a place?" Wapping is a factory for making money, yet it has become a kind of media model. Whether you read the *Daily Mirror* or the *Telegraph* or turn on the BBC, you get the feeling that the purpose of the enterprise of journalism has been turned on its head and the new ethic is that journalism is a commodity, purely to generate money. This is the Murdoch effect. Wapping is a cultural Chernobyl, spewing its poison across the whole journalistic landscape.'

The experience of Murdoch's 'new brave new world' leaves many of the journalists on his papers with an abiding ambivalence about him. Some will insist they were never told what to do, that there was never a 'line' – when the truth is that it was never necessary to tell them: they *knew* and accepted what was required of them.

Roy Greenslade, a critic of Murdoch, was Kelvin MacKenzie's number two on the *Sun*. 'As a young man,' wrote

bought them. 'At one stage during the battle for Times Newspapers,' wrote Christopher Hird and his co-authors in *Murdoch: The Great Escape*, 'a member of the staff consortium trying to buy the *Sunday Times* rang an old friend working as an adviser to Thatcher at 10 Downing Street. Playing on the government's apparent commitment to competition, he urged a halt to the Murdoch takeover. He was told to stop wasting his time. "You don't realise, she likes the guy." '

When the takeover came to be discussed by a Cabinet committee, Thatcher chaired the meeting. Murdoch was, in effect, being rewarded for his papers' 'years of loyal support'. The result, as Michael Leapman wrote, 'was a no-contest takeover [with] all the external appearances of an establishment "fix" of the kind Murdoch affects to despise.'[21] His mother, Dame Elisabeth, told the BBC, 'Britain will perhaps learn to know that he's a pretty good chap.'[22]

Unlike the unpretentious *Sun*, the *Sunday Times* from time to time carries serious journalism, even genuine scoops, although these are sometimes difficult to discern from journalism that *appears* serious. Since Murdoch acquired it, the *Sunday Times* has borne much of the burden of the promotion of his interests and ambitions. In the 1980s, the paper consistently attacked the BBC and ITV, which were seen as obstacles to Murdoch's frustrated television plans in Britain. He made the editor, Andrew Neil, head of his satellite television company, Sky. Described as 'cross-fertilising' by a Murdoch executive, this has long been a feature of the Murdoch press all over the world.

In Neil's 470-page book, *Full Disclosure*, arguably one of the most sustained boasts in autobiographical history, the author devotes fewer than thirty words to the *Sunday Times*'s most notorious, scurrilous and destructive smear campaign – against the journalists and broadcasters who made the 1988 current affairs programme, *Death on the Rock*, for Thames Television.

This investigation was highly significant because it lifted a veil on the British secret state and revealed its ruthlessness

under Thatcher. In describing how an SAS team had gone to Gilbraltar and murdered four unarmed members of the IRA, the message was clear: the British Government was willing to use death squads abroad in its pursuit of the war in Ireland. *Death on the Rock* also posed a threat to the political and media consensus on the war in the north of Ireland, and Margaret Thatcher did not forgive Thames Television for its transgression. Having frequently attacked the ITV 'monopoly' in commercial television, her echoes of Murdoch were vociferously covered in the *Sunday Times*. When the government rounded on Thames for what it called the 'distortions' of *Death on the Rock*, the *Sunday Times* appeared only too willing to give vast amounts of space to a series of wholly spurious, politically motivated charges.

An eye-witness to the murders, Carmen Proetta, who appeared in the programme, described how she saw two unarmed people shot at close range and offering no resistance. They had their hands in the air, either in an act of surrender or in reaction to the shootings. She heard no warning. The Murdoch press, in company with most of Fleet Street, subjected her to a torrent of lies and personal abuse. She was falsely accused of being involved in vice and drugs and of being 'anti-British'. The *Sun* described her as 'The Tart of Gib'. The S*unday Times* coverage was different in one respect only: there was more of it.

Of over £300,000 in libel damages eventually paid to Carmen Proetta, more than half was paid by the *Sunday Times* in an out-of-court settlement. According to the producer of *Death on the Rock*, Roger Bolton, one of the reasons Andrew Neil decided to settle was that 'on the first day in court a former journalist for the *Sunday Times* was ready to give evidence about the way her copy, sent from Gibraltar, was misrepresented by Mr Neil's editors'.[23] In a memorandum sent to the features editor Robin Morgan, the reporter, Rosie Waterhouse, accused her own paper of being 'wide open to accusations that we had set out to prove one point of view and misrepresented and misquoted interviews to fit – the very accusations we were levelling at Thames'. She later resigned.[24]

An inquiry conducted by a former Tory minister, Lord Windlesham, vindicated the programme's accuracy and integrity. The *Sunday Times*'s branch of the National Union of Journalists called for an inquiry into the paper's role in the affair, specifically Andrew Neil's. There was none. Under the new system of allocating ITV franchises instituted by Thatcher, Thames, one of the most innovative of the major companies, lost its licence to broadcast.

'From the start,' wrote Hugo Young, political editor of the *Sunday Times* when Murdoch took it over, 'the omens were bad. During their first visits to the building, Murdoch and his associates made clear their hostility to *Sunday Times* journalism and their contempt for those who practised it. The journalists collectively were stigmatised as lead-swinging, expense-padding, layabout Trotskyites. Each of these epithets was uttered in my hearing by senior Murdoch executives. The political label was especially emphatic, wholly removed though it was from reality. Reports from El Salvador which allowed for any possibility that US foreign policy was in error were clearly potent evidence that the Commies had the S*unday Times* in their grip.'[25]

Once acclaimed for its journalistic and political independence, the *Sunday Times* was quick to reflect its master's world view. The largest rally ever staged by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which drew as many as half a million people, was dismissed beneath the headline, 'SUNSET FOR CND'. Coverage of the 1984–5 coal strike was crudely slanted to depict the miners as violent, intransigent and at odds with their leaders, an 'enemy within': the essential elements of the government's propaganda.

To the *Sunday Times*, wrote Hugo Young, 'the strike was a Marxist plot'. The paper's international coverage was reduced to that of 'a mid-Atlantic cheerleader'.[26] A published interview with Ronald Reagan bore striking similarity to a *Sun* 'exclusive': that is, it never took place. Salman Rushdie, in hiding and threatened with assassination by an Iranian *fatwa*, was subjected to a front-page, personalised, one-sided, *Sun*-style attack by his estranged wife.

Michael Foot, the former leader of the Labour Party, was accused, across the front page, of being a 'KGB spy', an 'exclusive' which was followed by the announcement that Foot was to be paid 'substantial damages': a familiar post-script to 'investigations' that had once been the paper's pride. No corner of the *Sunday Times* has escaped contamination. In a section entitled 'Culture', a television reviewer, Adrian Gill, unleashed a stream of gratuitous abuse about a documentary I had made on the Murdoch effect on Fleet Street and the *Daily Mirror* in particular. As part of his 'review', Murdoch's man viciously attacked the retired *Daily Mirror* writer and critic Donald Zec, whom he accused of breaking into Marilyn Monroe's home in the 1950s. Soon afterwards, Gill's page was dominated by the standard *Sunday Times* apology and retraction.[27]

In the 'Style' section there was a regular feature, 'Relationship of the Week', in which Chrissy Iley, photographed in a shiny black coat, sneered and speculated about a chosen couple, quoting hearsay about them. Mysteriously, it disappeared one Sunday and never came back. In the same week, Murdoch was named 'Humanitarian of the Year' by the United Jewish Appeal Foundation in New York. His award was presented to him by Henry Kissinger. When Kissinger was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his contribution to 'peace' in Vietnam, the great American satirist Tom Lehrer said he was retiring because, clearly, satire was now obsolete. The 'Humanitarian of the Year' reaffirmed this.[28]

Murdoch's move to the 'new brave new world' at Wapping took place on January 24, 1986. Virtually overnight, more than 5,000 employees were abandoned. The print unions, Kelvin MacKenzie told *Sun* journalists, 'haven't got us by the balls any more'.[29]

In exploiting resentment of the unions' power and abuses, such as the 'wildcat' stoppages that had lost millions of newspapers, and the 'Spanish practices' that allowed some people to pick up two pay packets, Murdoch was able to persuade most of his journalists to go to Wapping. For many,

this came as a welcome justification; for while there was truth in many of the stories about the unions, it was also true that newspaper managements operated their own corruption – on perks alone – and it suited them to look the other way.

In my experience, the majority of compositors, linotype operators, machine-room workers and others were honest people who worked hard in antiquated, filthy and often dangerous conditions, especially in the old *Sun* and *News of the World* headquarters in Bouverie Street. They were paid well compared with other workers; and in scandalously low-paid Britain that fact was enough to make them enemies.

In 1985, Brenda Dean was appointed General-Secretary of SOGAT, representing the industry's clerical and ancillary workers. 'It's time the myths surrounding Wapping were swept away,' she told me. 'The first thing Murdoch made clear to me was that if I could deliver an agreement on new levels of manning, he could do business with the unions. Of course there was some resistance to new technology. But this came from people who had worked in the industry all their lives and were not permanent employees. Quite a few had no pension provision. If they lost their jobs they wouldn't get other employment. They wanted to know what was in it for them. But there is a world of difference between that view and saying we couldn't conclude a deal. We could. The great majority wanted agreement. There is no doubt about that.'

The unions had already successfully negotiated a comprehensive agreement with the new chief executive of the *Daily Mirror*, Clive Thornton. Staffing would be reduced, new technology introduced and no strike action would be taken for three years. In seeking a similar deal with Murdoch, the unions were told that News International planned to produce a new paper, the *London Post*, at Wapping. The unions by and large welcomed this and put forward their proposals for an 'all-in new technology deal'.

On January 2, 1986, Tony Britton, the assistant general manager of News Group Newspapers Limited, publishers of the *Sun* and the *News of the World*, wrote to Tony Isaacs, the senior machine-room union official, 'The company has agreed

[to the union's proposals] . . . and has given assurances that no regular employee need make himself available for voluntary redundancy.' To which Isaacs replied, 'It is with pleasure that I can advise you that my Chapel [has] accepted Management's proposals that embrace the [Wapping] plant.'[30]

Unknown to Dean, Isaacs or any other union official, Murdoch had been secretly moving non-union staff into Wapping for months and was discussing with his senior executives how they could sack the thousands who had been given 'assurances' that their jobs were secure. In a letter to News International managing director Bruce Mathews, Geoffrey Richards, the senior solicitor advising Murdoch, proposed precisely how they might 'dispense with the workforces'. 'The cheapest way', he wrote, 'would be to dismiss employees while participating in a strike . . . The idea is to catch as many employees in the net as possible and it seems to me this will be done best if the dismissals take place at the weekend . . .'[31]

What he was saying was that, under Thatcher's new anti-trade union laws, workers who struck during 'negotiations' could be sacked instantly and would lose their redundancy entitlements: a huge saving to the company. There was no longer any mention of the *London Post*, which began to sound more and more mythical, a ploy for the 'real game', as Murdoch insiders called the trap being set.

'We were tricked,' said Brenda Dean. 'We had agreements that were at the point of being signed and the management suddenly were holding off signing them. We had even agreed to a third redundancies in some areas.' In fact, Dean had conceded more than any Fleet Street General-Secretary previously had dared to. Tony Dubbins, of the National Graphical Association, which represented typesetters, had gone even further by agreeing the principle of direct computerised typesetting by journalists at Wapping, although it effectively undermined the very existence of his union.

Only signatures were needed. The stalling continued as Murdoch's men waited for the signal to implement 'Project 800', a top-secret plan described by Murdoch at a meeting of

his executives in New York as 'our dash for freedom'.[32] When the unions finally realised they had been tricked and their agreements were worthless, they called a ballot and went on strike. 'We had given him an olive branch', said Dubbins, 'and he'd broken it in two and beat us around the head with it.'[33]

As 'negotiations' technically were still in progress, the workforce could be dismissed without compensation. Thus, almost 5,500 people were sacked, many of them lifelong employees. 'I feel deeply and personally bitter', said Dean, 'on behalf of the thousands of our people who stood on the picket line at Wapping for more than a year and have since been forgotten. The dimension of the unseen human tragedy was shocking. We had people who came with their families, their children; they wanted to take part in a peaceful demonstration. They wanted to say to Murdoch, "You've not only done this to me, you've done it to my wife and kids." But the Metropolitan Police clearly had other instructions. They were there to protect the newspapers, to see that Murdoch got the *Sun* out, and the rest of his publications. We called them "paper boys", and that was exactly what they were.

'To achieve this, they acted in a most brutal way – as the subsequent inquiries confirmed. I saw many people deliberately beaten up by the so-called riot police. The journalists who came along were shocked by what they saw. The police went for decent, straightforward trade unionists as if it was a civil war situation. One of our people was killed by one of Murdoch's lorries, and the lorry didn't even bother to stop. There were several nervous breakdowns. Marriages broke up. Strong men I knew, and I don't mean physically strong, but men with leadership, turned bitter. It broke them. People entitled to unemployment benefit didn't receive it. I'm not only talking just about the relatively well paid, but cleaners, canteen workers, who outnumbered the printers four to one . . . It was as if the British state had joined forces with Murdoch against us . . .'

In the days and weeks that followed the 'dash for freedom', the television news showed surreal images of journalists alighting from Murdoch company buses. They queued to

show the security guards their new identification cards, which described them ignominiously as 'consultants'. They passed through ten-foot electronically operated steel gates, set in spiked walls topped with coils of barbed razor wire. Several would try to run inside, squinting into searchlights that covered the perimeter of their new workplace. These were journalists on publications which, between them, commanded the greatest newspaper readership in the English language. They had been ordered to go to Wapping or be sacked. They were not consulted; and all their agreements with the management were dishonoured.

'I used to think how intimidated they looked,' said Dean. 'One always regarded the journalists as the thinking people; and if they'd thought for half a moment, they actually had a power that weekend they'd never had before. Without them, those newspapers would not have come out. Journalists lost a lot of their pride then, and their self-confidence. They came and went, with many having to lie face down on the floor of the coaches with the blinds drawn. It was not an image that sat comfortably with journalists when you read that there were others who risked their lives to get the story and tell the truth.'

Thirty-eight journalists refused to go to Wapping. Among the handful from the *Sun* was Eric Butler, a crusty sports subeditor whose nickname was 'Scoop'. After forty-two years in Fleet Street, he was less than three years from retirement. 'I knew it meant the end of my career,' he said, 'but there was no alternative for me. What Murdoch did was industrial gangsterism; the people he sacked had given him loyal service and helped him make a lot of money. He offered the journalists £2,000 to cross the picket line. For that they could keep their job, but not their self-respect.

'Ellen, my wife, took a call one night and it was one of my mates, who said, "Eric will change his mind, won't he?" and she said, "No he won't. More to the point, I don't want him to change his mind." I thought it was strange so many journalists were suddenly saying they had no time for the printers. Yes, we had our disagreements, but it was on both

sides; they were blokes making a living just like us. There were a lot of good people among them. We had a great office football team: the journalists and the printers together. Then out of the blue my mates were saying they hated the printers. Did they? Or were they trying to excuse what they were doing?

'I stood on that picket line for a year, in freezing cold a lot of the time, and I watched my old mates go in and out in the coaches, and I never saw one of them again. And yet later on so many of them were disillusioned, or were kicked out by Murdoch. They'd served their purpose. It must have been sad for them.'

David Banks was assistant editor of the *Sun* at the time of Wapping. 'We lived on adrenaline', he said, 'and on defiance . . . the defiance of the moment and the fact that the mob were at the gates, that it was us or them.'

I asked him if he had lain on the floor of the coaches that took the scab journalists through the picket line.

'Oh, I did, I did . . .' he replied. 'It wasn't pleasant. You knew the bottles and the bricks coming against the side of the coach were meant for you; and the fact that the driver then had to race through miles of darkened docklands, just to escape the anger. All of that had its effect . . . After a while it dawned on me that I wasn't part of a cavalcade of knights on white horses: that there was a serious anti-social side to what I was doing. In the end, I decided on balance that, despite the fact that little people were being hurt, it was all worth while to save a great industry.'

Murdoch, who slept on a campbed at Wapping for almost two weeks, tried to engender the spirit of a 'crusade' against the infidels at the gates. Andrew Neil contributed to this by waving his champagne glass at the pickets, although in a television interview he compared the appearance of his new offices to that of 'a concentration camp'.

Sun journalists at first enjoyed a view of the Thames. This was soon closed down, apparently for security reasons, then there was no view at all. This hermetically sealed atmosphere contributed to what John Murray, Murdoch's 'personal

counsellor', described as a 'certain mental uncertainty among the more sensitive members of the staff'.

Murray, an Australian and confidant of Murdoch, was flown to London to 'help with the transition'. I asked him about Murdoch's reputation for ruthlessness. 'Look,' he said, 'at that high level business principles can come across as ruthlessness. But let me give you another picture of the man. There was one day when a group of people were retiring – they hadn't been sacked, I hasten to add – and I asked Rupert to come down and say a few words to them. "Certainly, John," was his immediate reply. Well, he thanked them for their work and their contribution and when he was finished, one of the union leaders put his hand up and said, "Mr Murdoch, we know about your great kindness in looking after your chauffeur, who died recently, and I want to express on behalf of the unions, our appreciation for that." As he and I left the room, he said, "John, I've got a feeling they were surprised: that they don't really think I'm a kind man." '

In 1989, Murdoch disclosed that he was a born-again Christian. He said he foresaw a major religious revival in Britain in which his papers would play their part by maintaining 'high moral values'.[34] A few months earlier the *Sun* had devastated the lives of the Hillsborough families.

'I'm very much aware of Rupert's Christian values,' said John Murray. 'Actually the move to Wapping was like the crossing through the Red Sea, and Rupert was like our biblical leader . . . it was the passage from the old Fleet Street, from Egypt through to the formation of a new people. It was a bit like the Holocaust. I mean, the state of Israel was born out of the Red Sea and the passage of the Holocaust . . . and so the whole newspaper world has been revolutionised here in the UK since that crossing. Even today I don't think journalists want to hark back to the flesh pots, if you like, of Egypt . . . to the old Fleet Street. They know that's over and now we've got the promise of the modern world.'[35]

What Murdoch got from Wapping was money. He saved millions of pounds in the redundancy payments the new Thatcher laws ensured he did not have to pay the people he

sacked. His wages bill was instantly cut by £45 million. Using cheap, non-union labour – many of them unemployed and unskilled teenagers bussed secretly to Wapping from Southampton – he increased his profits from £39.1 million in 1985, the year before the move, to £98.3 million two years later and £675 million in 1990.

This gave him the money to pay the interest on loans he had borrowed in March 1985. Had his 'dash for freedom' failed, it is highly unlikely he would have been able to pay these debts. He had gambled hugely. With borrowed money he had bought six Metromedia television stations in the United States. These formed the basis of a new network, Fox, with which he planned to challenge the primacy of the great American TV networks.

With his 'Wapping revolution' won, he folded his campbed and took Concorde to Washington to collect his American citizenship, which he needed to own both newspapers and television stations. This had been 'fast-tracked' by the Reagan administration, the President having expressed his 'deepest appreciation' to Murdoch for his newspapers' support.[36] 'It is almost impossible to underestimate the importance of Wapping in the history of the Murdoch business,' said Christopher Hird, one of the authors of *Murdoch: The Great Escape*. 'If Murdoch hadn't moved to Wapping, he probably would have gone bust. It's as simple as that.'[37]

Murdoch boasted that his 'revolution' would bring what he called 'a new dawn of freedom' to the British press, a flowering of independent newspapers. The opposite happened. Of four national newspapers launched in the mid-1980s, *Today*, the *Correspondent*, *News on Sunday* and the *Independent*, only the *Independent* barely survives, its independence circumscribed by its majority shareholder, the Mirror Group. There is now less diversity and less independence in the British press than ever before, while Murdoch's power has never been greater.

At the time of Wapping, Alf Parish was the senior London official of the printing union SLADE, which has since merged with the NGA. He negotiated directly with Murdoch. 'I smile

at the irony,' he told me. 'Many of the corporate people who supported Murdoch are now the recipients of his aggressiveness, based on the tremendous financial power he acquired as a direct result of Wapping. Breaking the unions was just the first step. He's now wielding a big stick in a price-cutting war against his old allies. Think of the provincial newspaper owners who supported him and how he shows his gratitude. Every time he cuts the price of one of his national newspapers, so the circulation of the major provincial papers is affected.'

Today, Rupert Murdoch controls 34 per cent of the national daily press and 37 per cent of the Sunday market. In cutting the cover price of his newspapers, and absorbing the losses in his global empire, he controls effectively a rigged market, in which those rivals without his sources of cash are likely to fail.

'It is clear to me', Andrew Marr, the then editor of the *Independent*, told me, 'that Murdoch is engaged in a process of trying to create a *de facto* newspaper monopoly in Britain and that the politicians are well aware of it and are not prepared to do anything about it. Murdoch told Sir David English that he believed there would be three surviving newspapers – the *Daily Mail, The Times* and the *Sun*, and that would be it. The price war is his way, in part, of achieving that. It was designed to destroy the *Independent* and to cripple the Hollinger Group that owns the *Telegraph*, and after that he'll go after the rest. The reason he can do it is that he has enormous profits pouring in from satellite TV. Everyone I know in politics and the media understands this. Everyone knows the dangers . . . and I have no faith in the politicians doing anything about it.'[38]

If Murdoch's prediction is correct, two of the three remaining national newspapers will be owned by him. It is a prospect diligently attended by establishment silence. In the 'debate' about Europe in Parliament and the media, it is significant that there has been none about the press. Yet the structure of much of the European press offers alternatives.

In France, anti-trust media laws prohibit any individual or group from owning newspapers with more than 30 per cent

of combined national and regional sales. In Germany, a cartel office sees that minority shareholders in newspapers have rights to veto the decision of a block majority. In Sweden, a Press Support Board, independent of government, ensures the health of a range of newspapers. In none of these countries does the existence of specific legislation restrict the freedom of the press.

The source of this information is a Labour Party discussion document, *Freeing the Press*, published in 1988. It called for a right of reply and legal aid on libel cases. It proposed a Right to Distribution, similar to that in France which allows small imprints to reach the bookstalls – in contrast to Britain, where small-circulation papers like *Tribune* have been excluded. Most important, it recommended the establishment of a Media Enterprise Board similar to the Swedish Press Subsidies Board, which provides 'seed' funds for new newspapers committed to protecting editorial independence. (Of 165 newspapers in Sweden, 70 receive direct subsidy from the board.)

The inclusion of such proposals on a legislative agenda of the Blair Government is inconceivable. Tony Blair's New Labour is in many respects a creation of the Murdoch press and the rest of the right-wing media. The dedication of the Blair leadership to appeasing the Labour Party's traditional enemies has been unprecedented. From the day he became leader, Blair, ghosted by his press secretary, Alistair Campbell, has written frequently for the *Sun* and the *News of the World*. A common strand in these articles has been Blair's respect for Thatcher's legacy and his determination, in effect, to carry on her work.

Shortly after the death of his predecessor, John Smith, Blair and his wife Cherie were invited to dinner by Murdoch and his wife Anna. Two dinners followed. Then, in July 1995, the Blairs flew to Australia, their first-class fares paid for by Murdoch. Blair was the principal speaker at a News Corporation conference at the Hayman Island resort, which is owned by Murdoch.

From the blue Newscorp lectern Blair spoke about 'the

need for a new moral purpose in politics' that would meet the 'moral challenge' facing the British people. Murdoch nodded his approval; the two men, after all, are Christians. This 'moral challenge', Blair went on, 'is every bit as pressing as the economic challenge – the two are linked.' He named two politicians who had met the 'economic challenge'. They were Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, who had put 'a greater emphasis on enterprise' and had rewarded 'success'. Murdoch clapped enthusiastically. After all, Reagan and Thatcher had been his favourites, and he had helped to elect them.

Blair then got to the point. This 'economic challenge', he said, also applied to the owners of the press, whose 'enterprise' was challenged by government regulations. He was referring to the 'cross-ownership' rules that prevent very powerful individuals and interests from controlling both newspapers and television companies. 'There is an obvious requirement', he said, 'to keep the system of regulation [of the media] under constant review. The revolution taking place makes much of it obsolete. This is the mass multi-media society [and] we have real concerns about the role of the new media regulator, which is to be given immense power under the [then Tory Government's] proposals.'

Murdoch greeted his guest as he stepped down, shaking his hand warmly. The next day the *Sun* commented, 'Mr Blair has vision, he has purpose and he speaks our language on morality and family life.'[39]

Long before its election, the Labour leadership exchanged roles with the Tories as the supporter of media monopolies. A frequent sideshow in the House of Commons was provided by a bemused Tory minister responsible for the media, whose plea for a modest threshold of cross-ownership was routinely opposed by Labour. 'The whole point', wrote Labour's broadcasting spokesman, Dr Lewis Moonie, in Murdoch's *Sunday Times*, 'is to ensure the creation of bigger companies.' Moonie told me he regarded Murdoch as a 'visionary'.[40]

'The extent of the ties that developed between New Labour and News Corp has never been fully revealed,' wrote Andrew

Neil in his autobiography. 'In addition to regular meetings between the two top men, a network of contacts has been established between senior company executives and Labour front benchers. Even the Murdoch family was brought into the act. Lachlan, the son Murdoch has been grooming as an heir apparent, met Blair and got on well with him, as [did] his father. Elisabeth, the daughter Murdoch thinks Lachlan should have to compete with for the succession, was also introduced to senior Labour figures . . . She took to calling Peter Mandelson "my dear friend". More serious contacts were established in regular meetings between Rupert's top managers and advisers and Blair's men . . . Blair in power has so far exceeded Rupert's expectations.'[41]

'What'll it be,' an Australian politician was once famously asked, 'a headline a day or a bucket of shit a day?' When Tony Blair landed at Sydney on his way to meet Murdoch on Hayman Island, he was met by Paul Keating, then Labor Prime Minister, who owed much of his rise to power to Murdoch. Keating coached Blair on what Murdoch liked to hear: 'deregulation' was his favourite hymn.

The state of the Australian media provides a model for and a glimpse of the future in Britain. Of twelve daily newspapers in the various capital cities, Murdoch controls seven. Of ten Sunday papers, Murdoch has seven. In Adelaide, Murdoch has a complete monopoly. He owns the daily, Sunday and local papers and all the printing presses. In Brisbane he controls all but some suburban papers. In other words, of the daily papers published in the capital cities, where the great majority of the population lives, two of every three copies sold are Murdoch papers. Three of every four Sunday papers sold are Murdoch's.

The only comparable media baron is Kerry Packer, who owns most of the magazines Australians read and the dominant television network among the three commercials. Until December 1996, the Canadian Conrad Black, in controlling the Fairfax Group, controlled most of the rest of the city press. With his departure from the Australian scene, the

Howard Government tried at first to steer the Fairfax papers into the eager arms of Packer, then backed away after a backbenchers' revolt. At the same time Murdoch was seeking control of a commercial television channel by way of compensation. Pay TV is still in its infancy, but Murdoch and Packer look set to dominate it.

This is largely due to the Labor Governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, whose Thatcherite policies offered inspiration to 'new' Labour in Britain. As Treasurer, then Prime Minister, Keating was the architect of media deregulation. In November 1986, Keating announced legislation to 'restructure' commercial television. Under the old regulations no one could own more than two television stations. Now the government proposed that one owner could command an 'audience reach' of 75 per cent of the population. This would mean that the nation's fifty television stations, which had been spread among 25 owners, would be taken over by a handful of conglomerates, notably those with numerous and often conflicting commercial interests. Not since the dawn of the television age had there been such a contraction of ownership.

At the same time, with Wapping out of the way and a foothold gained in American television, Rupert Murdoch was turning his attention to his native land. He had long wanted to fulfil a 'dream' and buy the country's biggest newspaper group, the Herald and Weekly Times, which would allow him to dominate the press. However, Murdoch faced the twin obstacles of the Foreign Takeovers Act and the Australian constitution. Having recently renounced his Australian citizenship in order to further his American ambitions, he faced the obstacle of a law that restricted foreign ownership of the press. Moreover, Section 51 of the constitution gives Parliament the authority to prevent concentrated ownership of any section of Australia's small and often fragile economy. Clearly, as the Australian saying goes, he needed a 'mate'.

On November 13, 1986, three weeks before he flew to Melbourne to make his bid for the Herald and Weekly Times, Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper unexpectedly attacked the

conservative opposition to Hawke's Labor Government. Shortly before that editorial appeared, Murdoch met Paul Keating in the United States, where they discussed the problems of media ownership. On their return to Australia, they met again, this time with Bob Hawke, the Prime Minister, present. Within days, Murdoch's senior executives were left in no doubt that his papers now supported the Labor Government.[42]

Murdoch exuded a new public confidence. When it was pointed out to him at a press conference that the chairman of the Trade Practices Commission, a regulatory body, had said that his takeover of the Herald and Weekly Times might contravene the law, he said, 'That is not an insurmountable problem.' Neither was the Foreign Takeovers Act nor the constitutional safeguard a 'problem' any more.

The only remaining 'problem' was a law that prevented Murdoch from owning television and radio stations which were part of the Herald and Weekly Times empire. Murdoch dealt with this by vanishing. His Australian company, News Limited, announced his disappearance in the following press release:

> 1 Although Mr Murdoch was formerly a director of News Ltd, he is no longer a director and he holds no office in the company.
>
> 2 Mr Murdoch has no authority to speak on behalf of or to bind News Ltd . . .

The ruse beckoned endless court action, so Murdoch tried another. Now in *de facto* control of the Herald and Weekly Times, he arranged the sale of its television and radio interests *before* he took it over officially. That one worked. The Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, although pressed by the Australian Journalists' Association to investigate the deal, was outmanoeuvred and, with no encouragement from the government to do otherwise, simply gave up.[43]

For his part, Prime Minister Hawke had only to remain silent to acquiesce. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bill Hayden, and the Opposition spokesman on communications, Ian Macphee, called for a public inquiry into the Murdoch bid, to no avail; Hayden was silenced by the Cabinet and

Macphee was visited on a Sunday morning by his frantic leader, John Howard, who had interrupted a holiday to tell him that under no circumstances was Murdoch to be offended. On both sides of the Australian Parliament the silence was contagious. One MP told me at the time, 'The hostility of Murdoch would mean my political death. So I shut up and I'm not proud of it.'

Elsewhere few dogs barked. Coverage by the non-Murdoch media of such an historic shift in power was primarily of the isn't-Rupert-clever-school. The Australian Press Council all but disintegrated as a result of the Murdoch takeover. With seven of its members representing the proprietors, their vote blocked a proposal for an inquiry. The chairman, Hal Wootten, a former judge, resigned in protest, saying bitterly, 'Allowing Murdoch to assume control of Australian newspapers was unparalleled outside totalitarian countries. The Federal Treasurer [Keating] could stop the takeover if he wanted to . . . in this case it is a man who has renounced his citizenship to further his worldwide power, and who makes no secret of the fact that he intends to make personal use of his control of newspapers.'[44]

When Hawke finally spoke about the sale, he and Keating had been entertained by Murdoch on his estate a short drive from Canberra. Ian Macphee refused to accept the government's silence and, under the Freedom of Information Act, requisitioned from Keating's office the Foreign Investment Review Board's recommendations. Six of the eight pages he received were blacked out and stamped 'Commercial. In confidence'. One paragraph, released two years later, indicated that the Board had opposed the takeover. Hawke denied this, and Keating still refused to release the full report, declaring the episode 'over'.[45]

At the root of Murdoch's financial power is his talent for manipulating tax laws. At the beginning of the 1990s his Australian parent company, News Corporation, paid tax of less than two cents in the dollar. In 1996, the *Australian Financial Review* calculated that Murdoch's tax bill was $A300 million less than the amount he would have paid had

he been taxed at the statutory rate of 33 per cent.[46] However, this pales against his savings in Britain, where, in the decade to 1996, Murdoch's News International paid virtually no tax on recorded profits of almost a billion pounds.[47]

None of this is against the law. Murdoch's great skill lies in the way he moves capital and profits around the world, specifically to and from the books of 'letter-box companies' in tax havens like the Cayman Islands, the Virgin Islands and the Netherlands Antilles. This is his secret empire: an ever-changing number of subsidiary companies that trade in circumstances bewildering to all but the most creative accountants.

In 1994, for example, an 'off-the-shelf' Murdoch subsidiary, News Times Holdings, paid almost a billion and a half pounds for News Publishers, a Bermuda-registered shell company also owned by Murdoch's News International. Why was this unheard-of company worth so much money? Why should a Murdoch subsidiary buy a Bermuda-registered company owned by its parent company? The answers lie in the now standard practice by multinational corporations of creating 'virtual companies' in order to avoid tax.

Murdoch is reputedly the cleverest of them all. Although in 1997 his companies were being investigated by tax authorities in Britain, Australia and Israel, it was unlikely that any action would be taken against him. 'This government will not tolerate any action by companies which rip off the rest of the community,' said Paul Keating in 1987: a year in which the Australian Tax Office estimated that, by shifting profits to tax havens, News Corporation and other Australia-based companies had cost Australian taxpayers $A1.2 billion in lost revenue.[48]

'Murdoch is not like you and me,' said Christopher Hird, one of the few journalists to have investigated Murdoch's tax affairs. 'We work, we pay our taxes. Murdoch lives by different rules. His companies use the services that we provide, they use the roads to carry their newspapers around, they use the health service for their employees to use when they're ill. They benefit from all the things that our society

provides, but they feel no sense of obligation to make a contribution to that. On the contrary, they see it as a challenge to avoid paying taxes. They are a different class of people. They are the over-class, the ones who want to rule the world, and they don't want to pay us for the privilege of doing so.'[49]

It is the scale of the hypocrisy that is difficult to grasp. Murdoch's newspapers incessantly attack people who are not meeting the 'moral challenge': that is, those who do not speak the *Sun*'s language on 'morality and family life'. These are mainly the minority among the poor who, usually out of desperation, 'fiddle' the social security system out of a few extra pounds.

Impoverished single mothers are a frequent target. They are labelled 'scroungers'. The *Sun* has campaigned for their child support to be cut, arguing that the saving would allow a five pence cut in taxes.[50] No mention is made of the fact that big business in Britain owes £23 billion in uncollected tax. Because Murdoch's companies pay so little tax, papers like the *Sun* are, in effect, subsidised by the public purse and are scroungers on a grand scale.

In 1996, the *Independent* asked the Labour Party leadership what it planned to do about Murdoch's taxes, or lack of them. Gordon Brown, then Shadow Chancellor, had frequently denounced 'fat cats' and promised they would be taxed 'fairly'. When asked about Murdoch's taxes, neither he nor other members of the Labour front bench were available for comment. Alistair Darling MP was eventually put forward as spokesman. 'You can't be subjective,' he said. 'You must never design a tax system to get at one person. It is a matter of fundamental principle.'[51]

The fear of offending Murdoch was evident early in 1997 as Murdoch began to take control of the 'digital revolution' in television. He has monopoly ownership of the 'black box' technology which you buy and put on the top of your TV set. If you have a satellite dish, this will eventually bring in 200 digital channels. At the very least, it will provide a further thirty terrestrial channels.

television career has been spent entirely in the commercial sector. Some of the best drama, current affairs, documentaries and children's programmes in the world have been produced by Britain's ITV network. That, too, is now threatened.

A former executive of the American National Broadcasting Company, Sonny Fox, put it bluntly. 'The salient fact today', he said, 'is that commercial television is primarily a marketing medium and secondarily an entertainment medium.' The former vice-president of the Columbia Broadcasting System, Arnold Becker, was even more forthright. 'I'm not interested in culture,' he said. 'I'm not interested in pro-social values. I have only one interest. That's whether people watch the program. That's my definition of good, that's my definition of bad.'[55] As Thomas Kiernan points out, the undisputed 'pace-setter' of this view is Murdoch's Fox network in the United States, whose transmission began with the 'live' broadcast of the voice of a woman about to die in a blazing building.

The Thatcher Government's Broadcasting Act of 1990 brought about a television 'revolution' as significant as Wapping. By introducing market ideology directly into ITN's gathering and presentation of news, 'for the first time in British broadcasting', wrote Franklin, 'news had to make a profit'.[56] Jon Snow, the presenter of Channel 4 News, called this 'news under siege'. 'Ratings will be the determinants', he wrote, 'because the money comes from advertisers. Within a couple of years, there could be no serious analytical news programmes on American TV and that is the way we are heading.'[57]

Something similar has happened in radio. The Broadcasting Acts of 1990 and 1996 almost doubled the number of Independent Local Radio (ILR) stations. The government's stated aim was that 'market forces' would trigger greater choice and diversity. 'In reality,' wrote Franklin, 'the policy outcome has been precisely the opposite. The market penalises those who stray too far from the mainstream; ILR stations offer a dull, homogeneous and predictable output . . . a rather unwholesome diet of muzak seasoned with newszak.'[58]

Again, mostly silence has greeted these radical changes in the

way millions of people are to be allowed to perceive and interpret their world. Media sections in the broadsheet newspapers occasionally allow dissenting voices, but that is not their purpose. Like the media itself, they are essentially marketing vehicles, whose primary interest is not serious journalistic scrutiny of the industry, but formulaic 'media village' tittle-tattle, something on circulation figures, something from the what-I-had-for-breakfast school of journalism and perhaps a 'controversial' interview with a wily political 'spin doctor'. The reason why journalists are so malleable is rarely discussed.

Media stories, no matter how incestuous and trivial, are now so popular with editors they are no longer confined to their specialist section. The *Guardian* filled three pages of its tabloid section with a 'profile' of Tina Brown, editor of the *New Yorker*. This was 'market' or 'shopping mall journalism', written largely in American marketspeak. 'As new-broom editor of the fusty *New Yorker*', it began, 'Britain's Tina Brown has had both brickbats and bouquets. Held in awe by some as a very big cheese in the Big Apple, to others she is Stalin in high heels . . . Tina is what marketing men call a breakout star [who] can command a table in any New York restaurant at any time.' However, her 'commitment curve' is 'brutal'. And so on. Market ideology's division of humanity into 'new' people (good) and 'old guard' (bad) was duly honoured. The performance would not have been out of place in the tabloids.[59]

Tabloid stories now appear often on the news pages of the broadsheets. The front page of the *Observer* carried, in large type, Lynn Barber's gratuitous abuse of the actress Felicity Kendal – 'IF A MAN SAYS HE FANCIES HER, I TAKE IT AS A SIGN HE IS SEXUALLY DEFUNCT'. Inside, in her 'interview', Barber noted that Kendal's 'hands are hideous knotted bony claws with crimson talons'. What her subject had done to deserve such cruelty was never explained. It would have fitted comfortably into the *News of the World*.[60]

Some journalists have been mesmerised by Murdoch and his ethos. There is widespread admiration for the *Sun*, the sort that comes from vicarious middle-class flirtation with low-life. Murdoch's semi-official biographer and faithful

defender, William Shawcross, described the *Sun*'s fatuous sound-bites as 'witty'. Forget the lies and the devastation of people's lives: this is the sensibility of the late 1990s, the way of the reactionary tide.[61]

A 1996 history of the popular press, *Tickle the Public* by Matthew Engel, exemplifies this. The author describes the infamous *Sun* headline 'GOTCHA' as 'a cultural reference point' and exudes an almost missionary zeal in persuading us that Kelvin MacKenzie has been misunderstood. Although MacKenzie 'behaved obnoxiously', he wrote, 'he is not an obnoxious man'. On the contrary, he can be 'endearingly vulnerable'. Indeed, he only abused people because his own journalistic 'standards were very high'. For here was an editor with 'a natural, instinctive flair for turning raw information into highly readable stories . . .' Endearing anecdotes about the great man follow, the sort that 'cling . . . to all really great journalists'. Here Engel can barely contain himself. 'MacKenzie was a sort of genius,' he effuses. 'No other word will do.' As for Murdoch's 'revolution' at Wapping, this 'did indeed give journalists new freedom'.

Freedom to do what? Engel does not say. Freedom certainly to carry on falsifying and pillorying while suppressing the truth of the most sustained political attack on ordinary people in modern times? He does not say.[62]

In 1975, Murdoch's *Australian* conducted a campaign resembling a vendetta against the reformist Prime Minister of Australia, Gough Whitlam. The conservative Opposition, led by Malcolm Fraser, had paralysed the Australian Senate, blocking bills providing legislative authority for the government's annual spending. The Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, was on the verge of sacking Whitlam and triggering a constitutional *coup d'état*. The *Australian* urged on Fraser and Kerr during the critical period before Kerr finally acted. Journalists' copy was slanted and rewritten as the country's only national newspaper clearly assisted in the despatch of the elected government.

The journalists rebelled, and seventy on the *Australian*'s staff wrote to Murdoch: 'The *Australian* has become a

laughing stock. Reporters who were once greeted with respect when they mentioned the *Australian* have had to face derisive harangues before they can get down to the job at hand.' They told him they could not be loyal to a 'propaganda sheet'.[63] Murdoch ignored their letter, and Kerr dismissed Whitlam. The journalists went into the streets and burned copies of their newspaper in the centre of Sydney. They were joined by hundreds of passers-by. Nothing like this had ever happened before in Australia.

'Since when did any democrat admire great power used for private advantage?' wrote David Bowman, a former editor-in-chief of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and one of the few Australian journalists publicly critical of Murdoch today. 'The danger is that the media of the future, the channels of mass communication, will be dominated locally and worldwide by the values – social, cultural and political – of a few individuals and their huge corporations. Democrats ought to fight to the last ditch against what Murdoch and the other media giants represent.'[64]

Like any emperor, Murdoch is clearly anxious to establish his dynasty, especially in the land of his birth. When age has finally caught up with him, his heirs will still need to manipulate politicians in order to bypass laws so that the empire continues to prosper. So the 'grooming' of his offspring, has begun in earnest.

In 1996, a 'Sir Keith Murdoch Memorial Lecture' was instituted, honouring Lachlan's grandfather, a famous journalist. The first lecture was given by Lachlan, who emphasised that his parents were Australian and that he was the product of both Australian and American cultures. In fact, he was born in Britain and brought up in the United States. As part of an accompanying propaganda drive to establish both acceptance and respectability for the heir, pictures of Lachlan and his father appeared, Maxwell style, in the Adelaide *Advertiser*. They looked out from the front page, from the sports pages (Murdoch owns the TV rights of Super League football) and from the business pages.

'The danger for the Murdochs', wrote David Bowman, 'is

that [Rupert Murdoch's] disappearance will stiffen the backbone of the politicians in Canberra. Only Canberra can break the Murdoch grip on the Australian press . . . His special place of power and privilege in Australia, arranged for him by Paul Keating, was made possible to a large extent by the rose-tinted view the public held of Murdoch personally. With time, reality is sinking in and he is increasingly viewed not as the Aussie who took on the world and won, but as a foreigner-by-choice who is in this country for what he can get out of it.'[65]

With his son at his side, Murdoch described himself as an Australian. He seemed not to understand that in an immigrant society the renunciation of citizenship is not viewed kindly, particularly when the reason is the circumvention of laws in the country of adoption. He also had the audacity to call for 'tax reform' in a country where he pays minimal tax. The letters pages of the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* (which he does not yet own) lit up with anger.

'How dare Rupert Murdoch use the term "us" and "we" when referring to Australia?' was a typical response. Another was: 'Will somebody please remind Mr Rupert Murdoch that he is no longer an Australian. He sold his birthright, for money, and therefore renounced his right to a say in how this country is run.'[66] Public opinion can be a bewildering phenomenon, even to powerful individuals who believe they understand it, even own it.

In his seminal book about journalism, *The Captive Press*, David Bowman compares Murdoch's growing power, and its accompanying silence among politicians, with the rise of Alfred Hugenberg in Germany in the 1920s. 'Hugenberg is reliably estimated to have enjoyed control or influence over nearly half the German press by 1930,' he wrote. 'His philosophy was right-wing nationalist, and accordingly he helped block the spread of democratic ideas in Germany, to that extent weakening the Weimar republic and paving the way for the triumph of the Nazis.'[67]

This theme is taken up by Reiner Luyken, the *Die Zeit* journalist who coined the expression 'cultural Chernobyl'. 'The laws of supply and demand worked well for Hitler,' he

told me. 'He no doubt gave many people what they wanted. Does that mean that supply and demand is an immutable law? Does that mean that, as journalists, we listen to the Murdochs and always look over our shoulders, wondering if we are giving the readers what they want, regardless of the demands of principle and of honest journalism? Of course not. As a German I know that Britain not only won the war, but brought freedom back to Germany. This freedom allowed us to establish newspapers whose main concern was not what the readers wanted, but truth and contributing to democracy. Not to further this objective, not to cling to it as if it were life itself, is surely an abuse of something that has been created with the deaths of tens of thousands of soldiers.'

Hugh Cudlipp went further. 'I look to the journalists on the lousiest of our newspapers', he wrote, 'not to do the dirty work.'[68]

GUARDIANS OF THE FAITH

> At any given moment, there is a sort of all pervading orthodoxy, a general tacit agreement not to discuss large and uncomfortable facts.
>
> *George Orwell*

THE SIXTIETH ANNIVERSARY of television was celebrated at the BBC in Shepherd's Bush, west London, with a gala dinner and 'hall of fame' awards. In keeping with the times, it was sponsored by a multinational corporation, the electronics giant Philips. Everyone received a miniature model of the first Philips' wireless set. Among the guests were television's Great and Good – Sir Robin Day OBE, Sir Jeremy Isaacs, Sir Christopher Bland, Sir Geoffrey Cox CBE, Lord Thomson of Monifieth, Esther Rantzen OBE, Kate Adie OBE, David Glencross CBE and others of similar distinction.

In a glossy booklet, the BBC described itself as a 'centre for excellence'. There was a photograph of Robin Oakley, its political editor, who, said the blurb, 'heads the political unit, based at Millbank studios, Westminster, where staff have rapid access to the main centres of power, Parliament and 10 Downing Street'. There were two pages on *Crimewatch UK*, whose 'value can be gauged by the fact that nearly 300 people have been convicted as a result of information given to the police by viewers'.

The highlight of the evening was a celebratory video produced by the Royal Television Society. This mentioned only one programme which had questioned, indirectly, the

nature of the political and social system of which broadcast television is part. This was *Death on the Rock*, about four murders committed by an SAS death squad in Gibraltar, and which may well have cost Thames Television its licence to broadcast. When the congratulations petered out, a fleet of chauffeured cars collected the most important participants. Like a Guildhall dinner or the Trooping of the Colour, the ritual had celebrated the prerogative of power.

In 1968, television passed newspapers as Britain's primary source of information. 'Broadcasters', wrote the media historian Michael Tracey, 'had convinced the public that the words they spoke may have been few [compared with the press] but, by God, they had been touched by the beauty of truth.'[1]

Today, British television enjoys more credibility than television in most countries. This is partly because in other countries institutional bias in broadcasting is understood, if not always acknowledged. In the former Soviet bloc, as in other totalitarian states, many people regarded the bias of the state as implicit in all media and made a conscious or unconscious adjustment.

Since the birth of the BBC, the bias of the British state has operated through a 'consensus' created and fostered by a paternalistic order. The public has been groomed, rather than brainwashed. George Orwell, in his unpublished introduction to *Animal Farm*, described how censorship in free societies was infinitely more sophisticated and thorough than in dictatorships because 'unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without any need for an official ban'.[2]

In the fifty years since he wrote that, much has changed, but the essential message remains the same. This is not to suggest a conspiracy, which in any case is unnecessary. Journalists and broadcasters are no different from historians and teachers in internalising the priorities and fashions of established power. Like others with important establishment responsibilities, they are trained to set aside serious doubts. If scepticism is encouraged, it is directed not at the system but at

the competence of its managers, or at popular attitudes as journalists perceive them.

Ambitious young journalists are often persuaded that a certain cynicism about ordinary people ordains them as journalists, while obedience to higher authority and deference to 'experts' is the correct career path. By this route, the myths and assumptions of power routinely enter the 'mainstream' unnoticed and unchallenged. 'I am still hanging on to my idealism,' a young graduate journalist wrote to me from Wales. 'But people I work with tend to think my belief in real democracy and the media's responsibility to question institutions and events is strange. I am repeatedly told I will grow out of it.'

Those who do question the nature of the system risk being eased out of the 'mainstream', a process described by one veteran journalist as 'a sort of gentle defenestration'.[3] Unless they navigate with care, they will find themselves exiled to the margins and stereotyped with a pejorative tag, such as 'committed journalist' – even though their commitment to an independence of mind may well pale against the surreptitious zeal of those who loyally serve the system.

Perhaps in no other country does broadcasting hold such a privileged position as an opinion leader as in Britain. When 'information' is conveyed on the BBC with such professional gravitas, it is more than likely to be believed. Possessing highly professional talent, the illusion of impartiality and an essentially liberal ethos, Britain's 'public service broadcasting' has become a finely crafted and infinitely adaptable instrument of state propaganda and censorship.

The much-admired BBC World Service is an outstanding example. When BBC Director-General John Birt announced his cost-cutting plans for the World Service, the vigorous opposition he triggered included not only journalists but impeccable establishment figures, such as the British commander in the Gulf War, General Sir Peter de la Billière, and the British naval commander in the Falklands War, Admiral Sir Sandy Woodward. The NATO general, Sir Anthony Farrar-Hockley, was another signatory to the campaign.

Language plays a vital part; popular concepts like 'democracy', 'freedom', 'choice' and 'reform' are emptied of their dictionary meanings. This has long been standard practice, but in the late twentieth century it is reinforced by the facility of technology and the illusion of an 'information society' which, in reality, means more media owned by fewer and fewer conglomerates. There is minimal public discussion about this, although there is strong evidence that the public has intuitive concerns about the secret laws of media power and its influence over and intrusions in their lives.

In the respectable media, especially broadcasting, discussion of widespread voluntary and subliminal censorship is a taboo subject. A striking illustration of this was a public spat in 1997 between BBC senior management and the presenters of current affairs programmes. The issue was the appointment of five executives who would control all the programmes. The broadcasters argued that this would 'CNN-ise' the BBC, reducing it to one corporate voice. A BBC correspondent, Fergal Keane, spoke about the purity of an 'unalterable principle of journalism that is our heritage and our mission', and said he would 'rather sweep the streets of London than compromise on that'.[8] Like the revolt of the clergy against a modification of intonement, it was essentially an argument about form. There was no mention of the powerful, exclusive, almost instinctive shared assumptions which, with a handful of exceptions, already produce a corporate echo – as was illustrated by the coverage of great events like the Gulf War and the death of Diana Spencer.

It is this issue, its genesis and subtleties, that ought to be high on the curriculum of media studies courses seeking to turn out independent and critically minded journalists; but it is seldom even discussed. Students are taught, often by former practitioners, the collective responsibility of precepts that shade the bias of the state behind a veil of saintly 'principles'.

These include the 'three truths' laid down by Lord Reith, founder of the BBC: 'impartiality', 'objectivity' and 'balance'. There is something to be said for the stamina of the Reithian myths. As a propagandist, Reith was a true pioneer. His 'three

truths' were to be adhered to at all times, except when the established order was threatened. Reith demonstrated this in 1926 by broadcasting Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin's propaganda during the General Strike – much of it scripted by Reith himself – while refusing to allow the union leaders to put their side until the strike was over.

'Reith emerged [from the strike] as a kind of hero,' wrote Patrick Renshaw in his study, *The General Strike*. '[Here was] a young man who had acted responsibly and yet preserved the precious independence of the BBC. But though this myth persisted, it had little basis in reality . . . the price of that independence was in fact doing what the government wanted done . . . Baldwin saw that if they preserved the BBC's appearance of impartiality, it would be much easier for them to get their way on important questions and use it to broadcast Government propaganda.'[9]

Even then, this was not a new concept. During the Boer War and the First World War, respectable journalists, who had promoted their impartiality above all other virtues, became little more than propagandists for the state. 'There was no need of censorship in our despatches,' wrote Sir Philip Gibbs, correspondent of *The Times*. 'We were our own censors.'[10] Prime Minister Lloyd George confided to C. P. Scott, the editor of the *Manchester Guardian*: 'If people really knew [the truth], the war would be stopped tomorrow. But of course they don't know and can't know.'[11] According to the historian Arthur Ponsonby, 'there was no more discreditable period in the history of journalism than the four years of the Great War'.[12]

The modern era has produced many such periods. In 1945, the Allied governments did their best to cover up the fact that the atom bombs dropped on Japan produced new, devastating effects from radiation. The media, including the BBC, reported the official line. The truth was left to a maverick, the Australian Wilfred Burchett, then working for the *Daily Express*, who was almost expelled from Japan by the Allies for giving them the slip and travelling to Hiroshima to find out for himself.

In 1952, at the height of the Korean War, the United Press correspondent, Robert C. Miller, echoed Philip Gibbs with this admission: 'There are certain facts and stories from Korea that editors and publishers have printed which were pure fabrication . . . Many of us who sent the stories knew they were false, but we had to write them because they were official releases from responsible military headquarters and were released for publication even though the people responsible knew they were untrue.'[13]

Contrary to one of the most resilient myths of modern journalism, the first 'television war', fought in Vietnam, was reported largely from the point of view of the Americans. The competence of the foreign military 'involvement', as the US invasion was called, was questioned at times, but not American motives, which were judged to be essentially well-meaning, even 'noble', at worst wrong-headed (see pages 558–60).

Another 'noble cause' was the Falklands War in 1982. Leaked minutes of one of the BBC's Weekly Review Board meetings showed BBC executives directing that the reporting of the war should be concerned 'primarily with government statements of policy' while impartiality was felt to be 'an unnecessary irritation'.[14] This suppression was quite successful. As British Government statements barely mentioned it, a peace plan put forward by the Peruvian Government for a negotiated settlement between Britain and Argentina was barely reported. How close it came to success the public never knew.

On May 13, 1982, Edward Heath told ITN the Argentinians had requested three minor amendments to the peace plan. They were so minor, said Heath, that they could not possibly be rejected. But Prime Minister Thatcher rejected them out of hand – and that brief interview with Heath was the only occasion on television news that reference was made to the British Government having a case to answer. The story then died and the invasion went ahead.

When the war was over, the broadcasters gave the game away. Having once defended their objectivity as 'a matter of

record', they were now almost truculent in their praise of their own subjectivity in the cause of Queen and Country, as if the war was a national emergency, which it was not. If they had any complaint, it was that they had not been allowed sufficient freedom to 'get on side' and to win the 'propaganda war'.

As in previous wars, it was risky to question this kind of coverage. A Channel 4 series, *The Friday Alternative*, was taken off the air following an episode based on research by the Glasgow Media Group, which showed how journalists had let the government use them during the Falklands War.[15] A subsequent study showed how the BBC and ITN had allowed themselves to be manipulated so that Thatcher could make a political connection between her 'victory' over the Argentinians and her 'struggles' against workers at home. 'We have found a new confidence,' she said unchallenged on ITN, 'born of the economic battles at home and tested and found true 8,000 miles away.'[16] When the BBC's industrial correspondent asked a minister, 'Is the government going to meet [the miners'] strike with the same resolve it showed over the Falklands?' he got the answer he expected.[17]

In covering the miners' strike of 1984–5 respectable journalism did not go as far as tabloids such as the *Daily Express*, which invented a secret 'confession' by the miners' leader, Arthur Scargill, that he had 'lied', or the *Sun*, which distorted a photograph to make Scargill appear like Hitler.[18] Instead, the miners were cast on the television news, night upon night, as violent and provocative, flouting and challenging law and order: an 'enemy within'. TV crews, who had not hesitated to film from both sides in Beirut, remained behind police lines. The pictures showed the faces of angry miners, seldom the police, and never the paramilitary-style attacks on miners' villages, and the suffering these caused.

When the strike was over, the National Council for Civil Liberties documented the scale of police violence. 'Contrary to the impression inevitably created by the media', said the NCCL report, 'most of the picketing during the strike had been orderly and on a modest scale.' This was reported only in the *Guardian*.[19]

The objective of the government's war against the miners – the destruction of the coal industry – was derided in the media as a 'myth'. Arthur Scargill's uncannily precise forecast of a mass closure of mines if the strike was lost was dismissed as propaganda. Although reporters on the coalfields were given reliable tip-offs about the intervention of the secret intelligence services in the strike, none disclosed the government's use of MI5 to subvert and crush the miners' union. It was ten years before the 'Get Scargill' campaign, conducted by a special task force in MI5 and personally authorised by Thatcher, was documented by Seamus Milne in his book, *The Enemy Within.*[20]

The getting of Scargill and the miners was not simply a vendetta by Robert Maxwell's *Mirror,* as already described (see pages 430–3); it could not have succeeded without the compliance of serious journalists throughout the media. Reporters from all branches of the media were known by the miners as 'Thatcher's frontline troops'. It was only when the strike was lost, and scores of bogus assault and riot charges against miners were thrown out by magistrates, that a few journalists realised the extent to which they had been used by the state. Many others continued to assume Arthur Scargill's guilt long after the trumped-up 'Libya-paid-his-mortgage' story peddled by Robert Maxwell's *Daily Mirror* and Central Television's *Cook Report* was demolished.

Without a shred of their own evidence, serious journalists casually attacked Scargill with 'a level of vituperation verging on the unhinged', wrote Milne. The efforts of Scargill's lawyers to establish his innocence were dismissed as 'classic Comintern stuff'. The miners' leader was compared to Nicolae Ceausescu, the Romanian tyrant who had been summarily shot a few months earlier. To this day, there has not been a single apology from any of the journalists who attacked a man Milne describes as 'ferociously principled'.

There was a resonance of this in the reaction to the disclosure in 1994 that the literary editor of the *Guardian*, Richard Gott, had accepted trips from the Soviet Embassy in London. Rival, respectable journalists had a field day. That

the *Guardian* was then immersed in the early, seemingly arcane stages of a campaign that would bring down a senior establishment figure and pillar of the arms trade, Jonathan Aitken, was barely acknowledged.

The Times found Gott guilty of nothing less than 'treachery'. Certainly, Gott compromised his independence; but he had not provided the kind of service that is the everyday practice of journalists promoting and collaborating with rapacious Western interests. 'The Gott affair', declared *The Times* in a leader, 'has resurrected the pernicious doctrine of moral equivalence between the West and the Soviet Union. It has been suggested that Mr Gott's links with the KGB were no different to reporters' contacts with Western intelligence. The two are not the same. *Many British journalists benefited from CIA or MI6 largesse during the cold war*; none was supporting a totalitarian regime devoted to the overthrow of their own country . . .'.

My italics point up an astonishing admission. What exactly was this 'largesse'? What did these journalists have to do in order to 'benefit'? And who are they? Should they, like Richard Gott, be named? Surely, if there is no 'moral equivalence' with the agents of Stalinism, they have nothing to fear?

The 'largesse' came from, among others, the commissars who ran the Information Research Department in the Foreign Office (IRD), a secret political warfare agency, which in the 1950s and 1960s 'ran' dozens of Fleet Street journalists.[21] The IRD used 'white' (true), 'grey' (partially true) and 'black' (false) propaganda, planting forged official documents, smear stories and outright fabrications in the media. In the anti-colonial struggles in Kenya, Malaya and Cyprus, IRD was so successful that the journalism served up as a record of those episodes was a cocktail of the distorted and false, in which the real aims and often atrocious behaviour of the British were suppressed. Thus the bloodshed in Malaya was and still is misrepresented as a 'model' of counter-insurgency; the anti-imperial uprising in Kenya was and still is distorted as a Mau Mau terror campaign against whites; and the struggle for basic human rights in the north of Ireland became and

remains a noble defence of order and stability against IRA terror (see pages 514–19). The common denominator of British political and military terror was deemed non-existent: a brilliant illusion that brought 'disinformation' to the language.

The most enduring success for the IRD and its 'contacts' in the media was in misrepresenting the Soviet Union as a threat and the source of a global conspiracy. This gave legitimacy to the nuclear arms race initiated by the United States, thanks largely to the fictional 'missile gap' of the Kennedy era, a triumph of disinformation, and to nuclear provocations such as the siting in Western Europe of 'first strike' nuclear weapons. Had war broken out with the Soviet Union, those propagandist journalists absolved by *The Times* of any moral equivalence with Stalinism would have shared the responsibility.

In 1991, Richard Norton-Taylor of the *Guardian* disclosed the existence of some 500 prominent Britons who were paid by the CIA through the corrupt and now defunct Bank of Commerce and Credit International in London. They included ninety journalists and broadcasters, many in 'senior positions'. Journalists who worked directly for the intelligence services are not uncommon. One prominent journalist and author has served British and American intelligence in a parallel career shortly after graduating from Oxford.

This is surprising only because it has been so effectively suppressed. For forty years, from an office in Bush House in London, home of the BBC World Service, a brigadier passed on the names of applicants for editorial jobs in the BBC to MI5 for 'vetting'. Journalists with a reputation for independence were refused BBC posts because they were not considered 'safe'. The *Observer* exposed the secret process in 1985,[22] and senior management are still vetted by MI5. In any case, it was quite unnecessary. Many senior journalists and broadcasters are proud that they are 'safe' and willing to be influenced, at times flattered by the state, without any formalised intrigue or material favours. For them, it seems perfectly natural to receive the state's 'hospitality', 'contacts'

and 'access' – and, most important, its blessing.

For example, a number of influential journalists in the BBC and the press belong, like those Cabinet members of the Blair Government already mentioned (see pages 95–97), to the 'Successor Generation' network. This is the British-American Project for the Successor Generation, set up in 1985 with money from a Philadelphia trust with a long record of supporting right-wing causes. Although the BAP does not publicly acknowledge it, the source of its inspiration was a call by President Reagan during the Cold War for 'successor generations' on both sides of the Atlantic to 'work together in the future on defence and security matters'.

Washington was then deeply anxious about opposition to nuclear weapons, specifically the stationing of Cruise missiles in Britain. Today the aims of the network are broader. They are, according to David Willetts, the former director of studies at the Thatcherite Centre for Policy Studies, to 'help reinforce Anglo-American links, especially if some members already do, or will occupy positions of influence'.

The British Ambassador to Washington, Sir John Kerr, was more direct. In a speech to Successor Generation members in 1997, he said the BAP's 'powerful combination of eminent Fellows and close Atlantic links threatened to put the embassy out of a job'. Indeed, the Successor Generation 'was clearly a threat to the very existence of diplomats'![23] An American BAP organiser described the BAP network as committed to 'grooming leaders' while promoting 'the leading global role that [Britain and the US] continue to play'.[24] Not surprisingly, the BAP has had little publicity in the mainstream media.

An instrument of the 'leading global role' is, of course, NATO. Reporting from the NATO summit in Madrid in 1997, Ian Black of the *Guardian* noted that, although critics at the conference had described the organisation's expansion into Eastern Europe as 'an error of historic proportions' that would 'encourage a £22 billion arms race and undercut democracy in Russia, strikingly, there has been little public debate about this'.[25]

Here again it should be emphasised that there is no

suggestion of a conspiracy, rather a shared world view based largely, though not exclusively, on class. 'The British class system', wrote Anthony Sampson, 'has always been like an onion, revealing yet more layers.'[26] The mutuality of class and aspiration is assured, unspoken, and the warm embrace of power memorable. For some, this is a noble connection which, although having nothing to do with journalism, has everything to do with the preservation of things. They are the guardians of the faith.

Guardians are often candid and proud. In his autobiography, *News from the Front*, the ITN correspondent and newscaster Sandy Gall boasted of his high government and MI6 contacts and the work he did for them. 'I received a call from a friend in British Intelligence,' he wrote, 'telling me that the Foreign Secretary remained particularly concerned about Afghanistan and was anxious to keep the war "in front of the British public"; how could this be done? Would I talk to someone from his office and give him, and Lord Carrington, the benefit of my advice? Feeling flattered, I agreed . . .'

Gall made Afghanistan his speciality. In the 1980s, he went on a number of trips with the mojahedin, the guerrillas fighting the Soviet occupiers. On the eve of one of these assignments, which began in Pakistan, he went to see the Pakistani dictator, General Zia, who clearly regarded Gall as an important ally. Both MI6 and the CIA were backing Zia as the ruler of a 'frontline' state in this important Cold War conflict with the Soviet Union. As they strolled through his garden, the General, one of the world's nastiest fundamentalist tyrants, asked Gall if there was anything he wanted.

' "Yes," [Gall] said, "would it be possible to have some SAM 7s with us?" Zia laughed. "SAM 7s? I don't see why not. But why?"

' "We're likely to come under attack by Mi24 gunships, I suppose, and it would make some spectacular pictures if one of them were to be shot down."

'Zia laughed again, seeing the point. "I'll see to it," he promised. "You'll get your SAMs." '

Gall got his missile, which, he wrote, 'we fired', but it malfunctioned. Back in London, he was invited to lunch by the head of MI6. 'It was very informal,' wrote Gall, 'the cook was off, so we had cold meat and salad, with plenty of wine.' Britain's leading spymaster wanted information about Afghanistan from Gall who, once again, was 'flattered, of course, and anxious to pass on what I could in terms of first-hand knowledge'.

Moreover, the man from ITN determined 'not to prise any information out of him in return', even though 'this is not normally how a journalist's mind works'. The reason for this journalistic reticence was that 'avuncularly charming' as the head of MI6 might be, 'he was far too experienced to let slip anything he did not wish to'.[27]

In 1992, an internal committee of the Central Intelligence Agency reported that the CIA now had excellent links with the media. 'We have relationships with reporters', it said, '[that] have helped us turn some intelligence failure stories into intelligence success stories. Some responses to the media can be handled in a one-shot phone call. Others, such as the BBC's six-part series, draw heavily on [CIA] sources.'[28]

The BBC series in question, *CIA*, was written by John Ranelagh, formerly of the Conservative Party's Research Department and a speech writer for Margaret Thatcher. In 'drawing heavily' on the CIA's 'sources', Ranelagh's films allowed the notorious organisation to 'correct allegations' about its role in the overthrow of numerous governments and in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Ranelagh wrote that '[of the] subjects which US intelligence was expected to address . . . none was more momentous than the growth of international terrorism, a subject of major concern to the Reagan administration'.[29]

Nowhere in his films did Ranelagh identify the CIA itself as arguably the most powerful instrument of international terrorism, notably under the Reagan administration. The record on this is, of course, voluminous. In Reagan's first term alone, wrote the CIA historian William Blum, 'CIA-led, trained and funded Contra terrorists murdered 8,000 Nicaraguan civilians.'[30]

In 1994, the United States invaded Haiti. Bill Neely of ITN described the invaded country as 'festering in America's backyard' and crying out to be 'saved'. The BBC reported that the Pentagon had 'brought democracy' to Haiti. A BBC correspondent added the rider that 'the days of America as Mr Nice Guy are over'.[31] On neither of these primary channels of news was there reference to Mr Nice Guy's murderous interventions in Haiti since 1849 which, as the American historian Hans Schmidt noted, 'have consistently suppressed local democratic institutions and denied elementary political liberties'. Currently, Mr Nice Guy's plan for Haiti, wrote another American historian, Amy Wilentz, 'achieves two strategic US goals – one, a restructured and dependent agriculture that exports to US markets and is open to American exploitation, and the other, a displaced rural population that not only can be employed in offshore US industries in the towns, but is more susceptible to army control'.[32]

British governments have generally supported American terror in the region. Margaret Thatcher's Foreign Secretary, Geoffrey Howe, said that Britain 'absolutely endorsed' US objectives in Central America. According to *The Times*, these objectives were to 'maintain and strengthen the forces of democracy in an area threatened with a communist takeover'. Examining the serious British press, Mark Curtis surveyed 500 articles that dealt with Nicaragua during the early Reagan and Thatcher years of 1981–3. He found an almost universal suppression of the achievements of the Sandinista Government in favour of the falsehood of the 'threat of a communist takeover'.

'It would take considerable intellectual acrobatics', he wrote, 'to designate Sandinista successes in alleviating poverty – remarkable by any standard – as unworthy of much comment by any objective indicators. This might particularly be the case when compared to the appalling conditions elsewhere in the region – surely well known to every reporter who had ever visited the area . . . The absence of significant press comment on the Sandinista achievements was even more

remarkable in view of the sheer number of articles that appeared on the subject of Nicaragua in these years. One might reasonably conclude – and this is supported by the evidence – that reporting was conditioned by a different set of priorities, one that conformed to an ideological framework in which the facts about real development successes were ignored in favour of the stream of disinformation emanating from Washington and London.'[33]

While rejecting any notion of a conspiracy theory, Curtis found in the work of leading journalists and academics a slavish, if at times unconscious devotion to the myths that perpetrated the old Cold War, which have extended to the new Cold War. At times ideological support becomes parody. Professor Lawrence Freedman of King's College, London, who was called upon frequently by the BBC and the press as an 'expert', wrote in a major study of the Gulf War (with Efraim Karsh) that 'there seems little doubt that [President] Bush was influenced most of all by the need to uphold the principle of non-aggression'. He called Bush a 'crusader' for 'the cause of international norms of decency'.[34]

Soon after taking office, this crusader for non-aggression and decency attacked Panama, killing at least 2,000 civilians, more than the number estimated to have been killed by the Chinese army in Tiananmen Square. He then attacked Iraq, killing at least 200,000 people, the majority of them civilians. He then invaded Somalia, killing, according to CIA estimates, between 7,000 and 10,000 people. And Bush was a president who, like Richard Nixon, was frequently lauded in the British media for his expertise in foreign affairs.[35]

In the glory days following Mr Nice Guy's victory in the 1991 Gulf War, Peter Snow interviewed the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, for the BBC's *Newsnight*. Snow began by asking, 'Do you now regard the United States as the world's policeman?' The General, softly lit from behind, his ribbons marching down his chest, smiled sagely.

'Sir,' he replied, 'what we provide is a presence, a stabilising influence. You see, we have power that people tend to trust.

[However] I would not say we have seen the end of wars, or the end of history.'

Snow then had some suggestions to make. What about putting American troops into Yugoslavia to 'sort out the situation'? And, 'Look, is it not practicable to conduct air strikes?' After all, Margaret Thatcher had said it was.

'I'm second to no man', replied the General, 'in my respect, indeed in my love for Margaret Thatcher. But, sir, I'm always nervous about proposals that say all you have to do is go bomb some folks and they will be deterred from action you don't like.'

Snow nodded his agreement. 'Thank you so much, General,' he said.[36]

In 1997, the BBC showed the last of its acclaimed *People's Century* series, which expertly marshalled archive film and interviews with witnesses to and participants in the closing century's stirring and apocalyptic events. A recurring technique was the merging of government propaganda film, from Britain, France, the Soviet Union and the United States, with documentary footage, all of it accompanied by a narration. After a while, it became difficult to tell one from the other.

The overall effect was quite unlike the propaganda of the *CIA* series. This was finely honed, at times subliminal and, above all, dependent on political airbrushing. In the pivotal episode, *Brave New World*, about the origins of the Cold War, Stalin's crimes were played against the West's post-war heroics, as in the Berlin air-lift. This was 'balanced' by the absurdities and cruelties of American anti-communist paranoia in the 1950s.

However, there was barely a hint of the massive post-war planning in the United States aimed at controlling and exploiting millions of people and their resources: a hegemony greater than the world had ever seen, dominating markets and trade, from food to oil; a *Pax Americana* under which, as the great American imperial planner George Kennan put it, the United States had 'a moral right to intervene' anywhere in the world – and did so relentlessly, subverting and destroying

governments which dared to demonstrate independence, from Italy to Iran, Chile to Indonesia.[37]

In helping to bring the Indonesian tyrant Suharto to power, American imperial power ensured the deaths of more than half a million 'communists'. In Indo-China, the same fundamentalism oversaw at least five million dead and millions more dispossessed, their lands ruined and poisoned. Then known as the 'free world', the American empire rules today with ever-changing euphemisms. Perhaps its most brilliant, if unsung, victory has been in the field of media management, as the omission of its rapacity from *People's Centur*y demonstrated.

Guardians of the faith, the clerics of the established order, are most commonly found in the 'lobby system'. This is periodically attacked as a 'cosy club', even 'pernicious', but it never changes. 'Lobby correspondents' have their own rules, 'officers' and disciplinary procedures. Their 'privileges' include access to government statements before they are made public and to private briefings by ministerial press secretaries or senior Civil Servants, or even ministers themselves.

At the time of writing, the BBC employs thirteen national and nineteen regional political correspondents, all of them based at London's Millbank, close to Parliament and the other 'centres of power' covered by Robin Oakley and his team. On a clear day you can see the MPs queuing up to dispense their mostly predictable views. According to a former BBC reporter, Steve Richards, now the political editor of the *New Statesman*, some MPs go straight to Millbank in the morning, rather than to the House of Commons, 'in the hope that someone will interview them'.[38]

In an average week 'lobby' journalists churn out some 300 reports: most of them are on the same theme, adhering to the agenda put out by the two main political parties, which are themselves virtually the same. The truth that the British people are now denied the semblance of a democratic choice is not reported.

The message from the Millbank echo chamber is quite

straightforward. There is only one way now, the way of the triumphant 'market'; and no buts, let alone 'balance'. It shapes political news and commentary and it excludes genuine challengers – that is, those *outside* the collective responsibility of 'mainstream' journalists and politicians and their vested consorts. The influence of this parallel arm of government cannot be overestimated. 'MPs are giving up their capacity to set their own agenda in Parliament,' wrote Richards, 'and are accepting the journalists' power to shape the agenda, and to fit in to what the journalists decide they want the MPs to say.'[39]

What many journalists want them to say comes from an agenda that divides the world neatly between 'new' and 'old', rather like the pre-election division of the Labour Party. 'New' political issues are sustained by the media's unequivocal support for 'the market' – regardless of the fact that every reliable indication, such as the annual survey by the venerable *British Social Attitudes* survey, leaves little doubt that most of the public has 'old' priorities. Millions of people reject the Westminster parties' unwillingness to redistribute the national wealth from the rich to the poor and to spend on vital services like health, education and jobs. During the 1997 election campaign, to my knowledge, no journalist asked Tony Blair or John Major to justify this discrepancy.[40]

Following Labour's landslide victory, the media quickly sought reassurances on behalf of the status quo – what did it mean for the 'stability' of the pound, the stock market, interest rates? Was Tony Blair a 'safe pair of hands'? Of course he was; the share indexes had soared and the pound strengthened. The guardians may have changed; the faith had not.

British liberalism's three principal newspapers, the *Guardian*, *Observer* and *Independent*, along with the BBC, were, it is fair to say, beside themselves. The new government, rejoiced the *Guardian*, 'has set a breathless pace [as] the floodgates of change burst open . . .' The first floodgate was Chancellor Gordon Brown's surrender of vital economic powers to an unelected committee of financiers at the Bank of

England: something a Tory would never have dared. 'The Bold Chancellor', cooed the front page. 'How daring he is . . . clearly, the new government has hit the ground running.'

'GOODBYE XENOPHOBIA' was the *Observer*'s post-election front page, and 'THE FOREIGN OFFICE SAYS HELLO WORLD, REMEMBER US'. The government, said the paper, would sign the Social Chapter within weeks, push for 'new worldwide rules on human rights and the environment', ban land-mines, implement 'tough new limits on all other arms sales' and end 'the country house tradition of policy-making'. Apart from the land-mines ban, which was already effectively in place, none of the above happened. A week later it was 'WELFARE: THE NEW DEAL'. The Chancellor, said the paper, 'is preparing to announce the most radical welfare budget since the Second World War . . .' On the contrary, what he announced was a 'welfare-to-work' scheme that was a pale imitation of failed and reactionary schemes already tried by the Tories and the Clinton administration. There was no new deal.

When Blair went to Europe the crescendo rose again. 'Blair ready to fight for a People's Europe', announced the *Independent*, and the next day: 'Europe's leaders smitten by Blair'. In Amsterdam, said the *Guardian*, 'the Prime Minister charmed his way to a EU Treaty deal'. On the BBC's *Newsnight* Peter Snow declared it 'Blair's day as admiring delegates expressed their admiration . . .'

Like the old *Pravda*, most of it was simply untrue. Blair's 'triumph' in Europe, like that of his predecessor, had been to fudge the question of a single currency and to shore up Britain's inhuman refugee laws by demanding special border controls. 'Peace in our children's time', shouted the *Independent*. At last, irony? No, the signing of the NATO–Russia Security Pact, with Blair centre-stage, was another triumph. The alarming implications of NATO's expansion were of no interest.

'The New Special Relationship' was the next good news, with Tony Blair and Bill Clinton looking into each other's eyes in the garden at 10 Downing Street. 'What was it', asked

Rupert Cornwall on the front page of the *Independent*, 'one Jack Kennedy, exactly our Prime Minister's age, 43, when he came to power, said about torches being passed? Rub your eyes on a dazzling spring day in Downing Street, and it seemed to be happening – from a becalmed and aimless American presidency to the coltish omnipotence of Blairdom?' In the total absence of satire (Steve Bell excepted), journalism had become parody.

A mystical tone emerged. The new Prime Minister, wrote Hugo Young, 'wants to create a world none of us have known, where the laws of political gravity are overturned'. In the Age of Blair 'ideology has surrendered entirely to "values" . . . there are no sacred cows [and] no fossilised limits to the ground over which the mind might range in search of a better Britain, and very few that these values would not be able to accommodate.'

The besotted minds ranged far. In a prize-winning Tonier-than-thou piece, Martin Kettle declared Blair an honorary Australian. 'He is not in awe of the past,' he wrote. 'He is not intimidated by class. He is a meritocrat, a doer [and] he is not particular about where he gets his ideas from. He is simply happy making his own history . . . it would be nice to think that one day these would be thought of as British characteristics, too.'

I suppose I ought to have been grateful for this reappraisal of my heritage. Goodbye corks-around-the-hat and beer-swilling blokes, we Australian males were now the exemplars of post-modern man. Kettle's effusions were from the same well of patronising ignorance lampooned in the old Barry MacKenzie strip in *Private Eye*: such is Blair-love. The irony is that Australia, a class-based society like any other, is burdened with the same high unemployment and poverty as Britain, thanks to policies set in train by a Labor Government which has served as something of a Blair model.

By the time Foreign Secretary Robin Cook had made his famous 'mission statement', putting human rights at the 'heart' of British foreign policy and reviewing arms sales on 'ethical' grounds, scepticism remained dormant. Indeed, the

Guardian counselled him not to be too 'soft centred'. On *Newsnight* Jeremy Paxman assured his audience that even if the new 'ethical' policy stopped the sale of Hawk fighters to Indonesia, their presence in East Timor was 'not proved' – the Foreign Office lie. Alone on a panel of New Labour hagiographers, it was left to a man from the Body Shop to make the point that Cook's policy was a sham because British foreign policy was *institutionally* committed to the denial of human rights. As it turned out, Cook continued arms-dealing, as the Tories had done and Labour before them had done.

The next 'dynamic' change was Defence Secretary George Robertson's 'radical, wide-ranging review' of 'priorities'. His 'review' banned all discussion of the billions of pounds spent on the Eurofighter aircraft and Trident nuclear submarines. Setting the tone of the reporting, BBC radio news put it this way: 'The Government has become alarmed at continual delays by Germany in approving its share of funding for production of the multi-national aircraft. Thousands of British jobs depend on the project.' The fact that each job cost £1.1 million, which could create hundreds more jobs, as well as restore much of the nation's infrastructure, was simply left out.

One media-managed stunt followed another. 'POVERTY'S THE PROBLEM, WORK IS THE SOLUTION', said the Victorian headline in the *Independent* over a piece about a visit by Blair to the land of the 'underclass' on a battered London council estate. Surrounded by poverty, he pledged no resources and proposed no plan to alleviate it. 'Blair', wrote Donald Macintyre, 'was trying to teach the lesson that where the Sixties was the age of the state, the Eighties of the individual, the millennium ushered in the age of the community.' Thus, political journalism and a government's sloganeering merged.[41]

A not untypical example of the subversion of journalism by political public relations was on the front page of the first 'relaunched' issue of the *Independent*. This was pure *Baghdad Observer*, dominated by a back-lit, messianic image of the

Prime Minister, beneath the banner headline: 'BLAIR: MYVISION FOR THE YEAR 2000'. The 'interview' was mostly a series of slogans. 'Speaking from Chequers', The Leader declared that he would 'create a country that would hold its head high as the model of what a 21st century developed nation should be'. There were no details, simply 'hard choices ahead' in order to achieve 'proper levels of social provision'. 'The Prime Minister,' noted the political editor, Anthony Bevins, 'would not be drawn on the application of these principles.'

The next day, it was Harriet Harman's turn. Announcing its 'exclusive' interview with the Social Security Secretary, the paper celebrated the 'sensational early results [of] New Welfare . . . giving the underclass an escape from a life on benefit'. 'With 1000 [single] mothers seen so far,' wrote Bevins, 'the hit-rate is beyond all expectations; without precedent.' What kind of work they were found he did not say. How much they were paid and how much they had to spend on child care he did not say.[42]

Nor did he refer to the fact that one of Harman's first decisions on coming to power was to abolish the single parents' welfare premium and benefit, in spite of her pledge to the House of Commons that Labour opposed these impoverishing Tory-inspired cuts. 'The way to get lone mothers out of poverty and cut spending on benefits for them', the future minister had said, 'is not by cutting the amount on which they have to live year by year and plunging them further into poverty. [Such cuts] will make hundreds of thousands of the poorer children worse off.'[43] Nor did the lobby writer make any mention of an independent report released that week by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which all but dismissed the Government's 'New Welfare Deal', concluding that 'welfare-to-work' schemes rarely helped the unemployed find lasting work and were poor value for money.[44] Instead, the *Independent* allowed the minister to say, unchallenged, that her sinister project 'is about real people, real lives. It is what government is for. It is very exciting; it's liberating people. This is part of the process of creating a new welfare state. And it works.'

Blair's invitation to Margaret Thatcher to visit him in Downing Street caused momentary confusion. Blair (who in 1987 described Thatcher as having an 'unchecked and unbalanced mind') was rescued by Hugo Young, once the scourge of Thatcher. Young wrote, 'It is entirely related to the kind of inclusiveness he sees as the philosophy with which any sensible leader should be running any country he happens to control. Into this frame Margaret Thatcher easily fits. She has a contribution to make.' This is the same woman who, Young once wrote, had an 'utterly insatiable desire for domination'.[45]

The new guardians briefly scratched their heads as to why ruthless *laissez-faire* capitalists like Alan Sugar and Lord Rothermere, owner of the *Daily Mail*, should embrace Blairdom. Oh, well, they were now One of Us. Let the celebrations continue *Hello!* style! Blairdom, wrote Sally Weale, 'already has an icon like Princess Diana'. It's Cherie Blair! 'Cherie is naturally brilliant,' Tony told Sally, who wrote that for the first time in 10 Downing Street, 'we have a brilliant professional whose salary (and talents, many say) far outstrip those of her husband'. *And* she is a 'brilliant working mother'. This is the same Cherie Booth, barrister, who in 1995 asked a magistrate to return a penniless poll tax defaulter to prison.[46]

'New York, New Labour, new opportunities . . .' sang the *Guardian* in its report of a 'celebrity fund-raising' party for the Blairs by a group of rich, corporate, expatriate Britons. The guest list had given Alistair Campbell, the Prime Minister's press secretary, 'a positive frisson of delight'. *Everybody* was there: Henry Kissinger, Bianca Jagger, Lauren Bacall, Barbara Walters. 'There was, however, one name that troubled him [John F. Kennedy Jr]. Ye Gods, he could see the headlines . . . "Blair Sups with IRA Sympathiser".' The late President's son 'had been spotted standing at the back of an IRA funeral'. So JFK Jr was out, and 'Campbell could not have planned it better himself . . . Everyone just loved Blair.'[47]

And they loved Gordon Brown, too – literally, it seemed. 'A BUDGET FOR THE PEOPLE' said the *Independent*'s front page

over a drawing of Brown dressed as Oliver Cromwell. This was difficult to fathom. Apart from a few crumbs for the Health Service and education, and windfall taxes on the utilities, which their huge profits easily absorbed, the nature of Brown's budget was reflected the next day when the *Financial Times* Share Index rose a record 80 points and shares in all the utilities leapt, because the stock market had expected him to be tougher on them. Moreover, he reduced corporate tax to the lowest of any major industralised country. Most Labour voters had endured eighteen years of cuts in education, social security, disability and other benefits – yet Brown reversed not a single one of them; and there was not a word of protest from the mainstream media. As the Institute of Fiscal Studies mused, the new Labour Chancellor had imposed a squeeze 'far harsher than any during eighteen years of Conservative rule'.

'I, personally,' wrote the *Guardian*'s Emma Forrest of the Chancellor, 'am obsessed by his lounge suit and what exactly it might turn out to be. I keep picturing him playing Las Vegas in purple crushed velvet, or wandering the corridors of power in a romper suit . . . Let's be honest: in the nineties, who doesn't want to be with a man who knows about money and how the markets are being played?'[48] In the *Independent*, Suzanne Moore wrote, 'When he smiled on election night it was so beautiful, like when Mandela smiles – you could poke him and there would be something there.' Moore is a zealous guardian. Before the election, she proposed 'a kind of political rehabilitation programme for those uncomfortable at these changes being brought on board [by New Labour].'

And as in the former Soviet Union, or down on Animal Farm, all those who fail to greet the 'new' establishment must be suffering a form of mental illness. According to Susie Orbach, the pop psychologist, not taking unquestioning pleasure in the rise of Blairdom must be because 'there's something safe in negativity . . . you often find [this state of mind] in someone who appears to be a fighter, who takes on external injustice and enemies, but who, on the other hand, is unable to recognise their own attachment to defeat'.

To be critical of New Labour at this historic and orgasmic moment was thus to be an emotional inadequate, someone to be pitied: 'a fighter who can only fight, who can never rest from battle . . . trying to defeat inner demons, hopeless feelings, that are far too frightening to touch directly'. Thatcher's command to the nation to 'rejoice!' during the Falklands War comes to mind.[49]

Alas, those inner demons and hopeless feelings would not go away, but migrated to the rejoicing class itself. The *Guardian* tried its best to ignore them. 'HIGH IDEALS, HARD CHOICES', said the front page, 'Blair can be a beacon to the world . . . Blair [is] turning leadership into an art form.' But it was not to be.[50]

Through the media looking-glass Bernie Ecclestone, for whom the notion of 'hard choices', unlike single parents and the unemployed, did not apply. Tony Blair had met Ecclestone, the billionaire controller of Formula One motor racing, when he visited the Silverstone track before the election. He had sat in a Formula One car; he had been very impressed, and Ecclestone, a lifelong benefactor of the Tory Party, had been impressed by him. Unfortunately, one of New Labour's 'promises' had been to ban tobacco advertising, including sports sponsorship. With Blair in 10 Downing Street, Ecclestone asked to see him. Twenty-four hours later the Prime Minister had sent a memorandum to the Secretary of State for Health, exempting Formula One from the sponsorship ban.

It was left to the Health Minister, Tessa Jowell, to tell the world what a good idea this was. Alas, it was discovered that Jowell's partner, David Mills, had been, until just after the election, a director of the Benetton Formula One racing company and remained its legal adviser. The minister derided suggestions of a conflict of interest. Then it was discovered that Ecclestone had given £1 million to New Labour. For his part, Blair claimed that he had already alerted Sir Patrick Neill, Chairman of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, as to the 'question of ethics' of accepting such a donation, long before the press had disclosed it. In fact, the letter to Neill was sent after the press published it. The

government had not only acted in the interests of a powerful businessman and against the interests of the electorate, but had lied about it. Blair subsequently apologised, but his apology was really for a failure of public relations. If the public are to be fooled, they should be fooled efficiently. Of course, the only difference between New Labour's and the Tories' sleaze was that the New Labour variation involved more money.

'DID YOU LIE TO US, TONY?' pleaded the *Independent on Sunday*. 'We believed you when you promised sleaze-free politics. We shared in your electoral triumph. We thought you were different. But now we're not sure.'[51]

In 1983, during the Cold War, two colleagues and I were given a 'secret' briefing at the Ministry of Defence, presided over by Ian McDonald, who achieved fleeting fame during the Falklands War as the government's spokesman, or 'speaking clock' as journalists unkindly but concisely called him. We sat down with a senior Civil Servant, whose name and position I forget, and who was described as an expert on the 'nuclear deterrent'. He gave us a stream of low-grade Cold War propaganda of the kind you read in *Daily Telegraph* editorials.

I wondered if this was what defence correspondents swallowed regularly behind a screen of schoolboy secrecy. McDonald assured me it was. As we parted, he said, 'You realise none of this happened? . . . what's more, you cannot even say that none of it happened.' It is not surprising that when the Berlin Wall came down and the old Cold War ended, those journalists on a strict diet of their government's propaganda were taken completely by surprise.

However, from the point of view of the state, the efficacy of the system cannot be denied. Between 1965 and 1980, Parliament did not once debate the nuclear arms race, arguably the most urgent and dangerous issue facing humanity. An almost parallel silence existed in the media. The 'lobby system' contributed to this. Journalists were either put off the scent of genuine stories of public interest, or they were

given briefings that were spurious in their reassurance. Little has changed. The post-Cold War acceleration of the nuclear weapons programme in Britain and the United States, which Russia is again attempting to match, is a non-story.

This omission is part of the 'culture of lying', described by the former Foreign Office official Mark Higson at the Scott arms-to-Iraq inquiry.[52] It ensured the cover-up of a series of nuclear disasters in Britain spanning forty years, including nuclear fires, crashes, contamination and dropped and damaged weapons. In the most extreme case, reported the *Observer* belatedly in 1996, 'a United States nuclear bomber and its weapon burnt on the ground [at Greenham Common in Berkshire], contaminating the surrounding countryside with fissile material in its deadliest form.' A large part of Britain was almost turned into 'a nuclear desert'. Not a word of this was reported at the time.[53]

The silence and complicity on the nuclear issue were dramatised to remarkable effect in Peter Watkins's film, *The War Game*, which reconstructed the aftermath of an attack on London with a one-megaton nuclear bomb. The film's commentator said, 'On almost the entire subject of thermo-nuclear weapons, on problems of possession and effects of their use, there is now practically total silence in the press, official publications and on TV. There is hope in any unresolved or unpredictable situation. But is there real hope to be found in this silence?'

The irony of this statement equalled its accuracy. In 1965, the BBC banned *The War Game*. The official explanation was that 'the effect of the film has been judged by the BBC to be too horrifying for the medium of broadcasting'. The BBC insisted that the decision had been taken entirely on its own and 'not as a result of outside pressure of any kind'. Both these statements were false.

The chairman of the BBC Board of Governors was Lord Normanbrook, formerly Secretary to the Cabinet. In a letter to his successor at the Cabinet, Sir Burke Trend, Norman-brook revealed that the real reason for the ban was that the film 'might have a significant effect on public attitudes

towards the policy of the nuclear deterrent'.[54]

The Director-General who concurred with this decision was Hugh Greene. A few months earlier, Greene, a distinguished liberal, had said in a speech, 'Censorship to my mind is the more to be condemned when we remember that, historically, the greatest risks have attached to the maintenance of what is right and honourable and true'.[55]

It was not until 1985 – twenty years after the film was made – that *The War Game* was finally shown by the BBC. In introducing 'this highly controversial film', Ludovic Kennedy said it had been kept off the screens all this time because it was 'too shocking and too disturbing to transmit'. To my knowledge, no one challenged this falsehood.

Peter Watkins never worked for the BBC again, becoming both bitter and wise. In 1980, he described 'the liberal repression which has been emerging as a phenomenon on TV . . . Using the names of "quality" and "professionalism" and "objectivity" and "standard", the middle echelons of television are now exercising a repression which is even more severe than that of the political bosses who they like to claim are responsible, but in fact whose only guilt often is that they (the bosses) provide an excuse, or a front, for the middle echelon to carry out a wave of censorship and self-censorship unparalleled since the inception of public service broadcasting.'[56]

The war in the north of Ireland has been covered successfully and often courageously by a select band of journalists, notably Peter Taylor, John Ware, Robert Fisk, Eamonn McCann, Simon Winchester, Ronan Bennett and Paul Donovan. They and others are the honourable exceptions; for the nature of the conflict, its causes and likely solutions are seldom illuminated.

To British viewers, listeners and readers, 'northern Ireland' is synonymous with a cycle of malicious violence perpetrated exclusively by the IRA. Beyond that is an arcane struggle between two tribes, with the British authorities honourably in the middle. That is the official version, and attempts by British

journalists and broadcasters to tell the truth about the state's pivotal part in the denial of human rights and justice in Ireland are likely to end up on a list of hundreds of programmes on Ireland that have been banned, doctored, delayed or neutered.[57]

I have reported from the north of Ireland, but I have never submitted a proposal for a documentary; and part of the reason is undoubtedly a self-censoring trepidation tied to the 'special difficulties' that lie ahead. The Independent Broadcasting Authority guidelines stated that 'para-militaries' could be interviewed anywhere in the world without prior reference to the Authority, *except in Ireland*. I could interview Pol Pot's genocidists without permission from London, but not members of the IRA.

In 1988, this attained the level of high farce when broadcasting institutions accepted a Home Office decree that the representatives of certain Irish political organisations, including those with MPs elected to Parliament, could not be heard on the public airwaves. Their faces could be seen on television, their lips could be seen moving, their words could be spoken by someone else, but their voices could not be broadcast.

Instead of opposing outright such an absurdity, the broadcasting organisations substituted actors' voices. This served to marginalise and demonise those like the Sinn Fein leader, Gerry Adams, who were to play, and could have then played, a part in bringing peace and justice to Ireland.

'Some journalists who have argued that the ban is counterproductive', wrote David Miller in his book *Don't Mention the War*, 'implicitly agree with supporters of the ban that the main object of covering Sinn Fein and the IRA is not to explain the conflict but to discredit the republicans as part of the campaign to defeat "terrorism". Their difference with supporters of the ban is that they see it as a means of "inhibiting" the exposure of Sinn Fein.'[58]

David Nicholas (later Sir David), the editor of ITN at the time, protested that a ban was unnecessary, 'because we all understand that what these extremist organisations stand for

is abhorrent to many people. British public opinion has never been more resolute than it is now, in my opinion, in defeating terrorism and that owes a lot to [our] full and frank reporting . . .'[59]

What he did *not* say was that ITN (and the BBC) had seldom discussed British withdrawal from the north of Ireland, an issue on which public opinion had indeed been 'resolute'. 'In almost every poll since 1971', Miller pointed out, 'a majority has favoured some form of British withdrawal from Ireland.'[60]

Backed by the National Union of Journalists, I and five other journalists tried to have the ban declared illegal in the High Court, but we were unsuccessful. There is no doubt in my mind that had the BBC, ITN and Channel 4 mounted a concerted campaign against the ban they would have had it overturned. John Birt, then deputy Director-General of the BBC, wrote a number of hand-wringing articles in the press after he had failed to raise any objection to the ban when it was imposed. With ventriloquists on the evening news, Britain became a laughing stock until the ban was lifted after the IRA declared a ceasefire in 1994.

The paranoia felt by the British establishment over Ireland was described by Colin Wallace, the former British army psychological operations officer who was subsequently framed on a manslaughter charge. 'MI5's increased role in Northern Ireland from the early 1970s', he told Paul Donovan, 'coincided with growing industrial unrest in the rest of Britain. More extreme elements within the security service, aided by equally extreme associates in politics, industry and the media, projected the situation as part of a world-wide communist conspiracy. The intelligence community saw the Irish situation as the front line of the left's threat to the UK, and of a great conspiracy by the communist bloc to undermine the whole of the UK . . . Media operations played, and as far as I can judge, continue to play an important part in this psychological warfare.'[61]

In December 1996, Sean O'Callaghan, a former IRA commander claiming responsibility for more than seventy

attacks on security targets, was suddenly released and pardoned. He was immediately put through a £10,000 'media training' course by MI5, and his former position in the IRA was rewritten to enhance his status. Thereafter the 'ex-IRA leader' was given extraordinary coverage in Britain. For his handlers in MI5 all went brilliantly. O'Callaghan was on the BBC's *World at One*, then the *Nine O'Clock News* and *Newsnight*. His message was straightforward: the IRA ceasefire 'was never genuine . . . the Irish Government must admit they have been conned . . . the IRA has to be politically and militarily defeated if there is ever going to be peace.' The SDLP leader and peace broker John Hume 'must be brought under control'.[62]

All this had a familiar ring to it. On the BBC and in the *Belfast Telegraph*, O'Callaghan opined that 'political isolation, security force attrition and broadcasting bans [were] the methods that had brought the IRA to the edge of defeat'. In the *Independent*, he wrote that 'the Prevention of Terrorism Act or something similar is absolutely necessary in the fight against terrorism'. O'Callaghan's 'insights' were, almost word for word, those of the British Government's propaganda model of the previous twenty-five years.[63]

The Irish press recognised this, including the conservative *Irish Times*, and O'Callaghan's pronouncements were treated with proper journalistic caution. In contrast, the British media, wrote David Miller, 'tend to accept the definition of the conflict in Ireland as "terrorism" versus "democracy" '. This has led to 'a souring of relations between the republican movement and the media', which has meant that journalists are frequently denied the kind of legitimate contacts that might allow them to assess more objectively the kind of 'insights' offered by O'Callaghan.[64]

In his 1969 book *Low Intensity Operations*, which is widely regarded as a propaganda blueprint for the war in Ireland, Brigadier Frank Kitson wrote that the government must, above all, 'promote its own cause and undermine that of the enemy by disseminating its view of the situation'. And what better way to achieve this than by the time-honoured use

of a grateful collaborator and a malleable press?[65]

On December 29, 1996, the *Sunday Times* reported on its front page that 'Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, Sinn Fein's two most senior strategists, have been appointed to the IRA's army council, intelligence officials say'. There was no corroboration for what was an 'intelligence plant'. Ten days later, the *Observer* allowed Michael Mates, the former Northern Ireland Security Minister, to repeat this unsubstantiated claim, and to add that the two men 'are certainly orchestrating [terrorism]'. This, Mates assured the *Observer*, is 'all you need to know'.[66]

During the 1994–6 IRA ceasefire, both press and broadcast coverage adhered strictly to the British Government model. That is, it continued to concentrate on the IRA. 'Decommissioning' of IRA arms became a major issue, even though it was a non-issue, while minimal attention was paid to the Unionist paramilitaries and nothing was made of the extensive refortification of British military bases and of continuing British Army activity in nationalist communities, specifically the border town of Crossmaglen.

When a conference on demilitarisation was held in Crossmaglen, army helicopters hovered overhead. This spectacular intimidation was not reported in Britain. Throughout the ceasefire the Royal Ulster Constabulary continued to use plastic bullets, firing more than 100 in two days in Derry. This also went unreported in Britain.[67]

When the IRA renewed its bombing campaign in February 1996, the American liberal journal the *Nation* described it as 'an indefensible military response to the corruption and recklessness of a politician who was willing to torpedo peace to keep his job'. Similarly, the *Washington Post* described John Major as the 'saboteur' of the peace negotiations.[68] These were far from being pro-republican voices; and they reflected a body of opinion in the United States that appreciated why the bombers had returned. Such a perspective remains suppressed or obscured in Britain behind ritual denunciations of violence and a consensual media/parliamentary silence.

With the release of Ken Loach's 1988 film, *Hidden Agenda*, which effectively broke the silence on the government's 'shoot-to-kill' policy, the cinema began to play a role forsaken by journalism. Certainly, the level of press hysteria directed at Loach's film suggested a shaming of journalism's record on Ireland. The writer Jim Sheridan told a London Film Festival audience that films like *Hidden Agenda*, *In the Name of the Father*, *Michael Collins* and *Some Mother's Son* were 'gradually bringing some glimpse of history to the British public'.[69]

In 1997, *Some Mother's Son*, about the hunger strikes in which IRA prisoners died, was routinely attacked as 'anti-British' and 'IRA propaganda'. The *Daily Mail* predicted that the film's effect would be to 'weaken the consensus which has kept Parliament united on the issue . . .' Helen Mirren, the star, was constantly asked to take a loyalty pledge to Queen and Country. 'Mirren is quick to stress', wrote Ian Katz in the *Guardian*, 'that one of the most sympathetic characters in the film is a Foreign Office official who tries – and fails – to broker an end to the stand-off, but it is hard to escape the impression that she too feels some unease about the film's transparent bias. She points out that she fought hard for her character to express her disapproval of the IRA and the hunger strike . . .'[70]

In fact, her character *is* disapproving of both the IRA and the hunger strike; and it is an irony that, contrary to its depiction in the film, in reality the IRA tried to stop the hunger strike. This fact eluded the film's critics, who also failed to question whether the 'sympathetic' Foreign Office official existed. 'Transparent bias' can be like a mirror.

'The paradoxes and dilemmas explored in *Some Mother's Son*', wrote Ronan Bennett, 'will undoubtedly unsettle some British audiences in much the same way other recent films on Ireland have. But if it encourages debate and speculation, if it drives people to question the assumptions on which British policy in Ireland continues to be based, where is the harm in this? The questions the film raises can either be answered, or they can't.'[71]

'Europe' is an enduring establishment concern, or obsession.

To the serious media, politicians are 'pro-European' or they are 'Euro-sceptics' or 'Little Englanders'; the 'debate' is conducted largely in jargon with frequent xenophobic outbursts. 'The terms of Maastricht' slips from the lips of interviewers and interviewees alike without the viewing or listening audience being granted a clue to what they are talking about.

Yet Britain's membership of the 'single market' and the European Monetary Union has grave implications for the majority of people. The issues have nothing to do with the joys of European togetherness, or with European notions of democracy and prosperity for all. 'Europe' is an economic cartel, dominated by Germany's conservative elite and the German central bank, which wants every member country's balance-of-payments deficit and rate of inflation wiped out so that the deutschmark can reign all-powerful, becoming the 'Euro' currency by another name. As governments strive to meet these conditions by cost-cutting on jobs, health, welfare, education and transport, economic and social disaster beckon throughout the European Union, especially in the poorer countries.

The consequences are well understood by millions of Europeans who have angrily demonstrated their opposition to 'Maastricht'. France has twice been paralysed by popular protest; at the time of writing, demonstrations are sweeping Germany, where the rate of unemployment has risen to 12 per cent, the highest since Hitler came to power in 1933.

The coverage in Britain has concentrated almost exclusively on effect rather than cause and on political careers.When French cities filled with protesters in 1995, the emphasis was on the 'survival' of the then French Prime Minister, Alain Juppé, and his deficit-cutting policies. A year later, during the French truckers' strike, the emphasis was on the inconvenience caused to British business and the alleged 'intimidation' of British truckers held up in France; typically, most of an item on the BBC *Nine O'Clock News* was about drivers who had tried to escape the blockade.[72] There was scant reference to why the truckers were blocking roads and

ports. The newsreader referred to the 'industrial anarchy' of the French, implying a generic fault. The positive and moving spectacle of working people united, supported by the overwhelming majority of the French people, was minimised.[73]

On the day of the truckers' victory, the BBC's Paris correspondent, Hugh Schofield, reporting on *PM*, brushed over the issues before interviewing an employers' representative, whom he accused of a 'cave in' and 'giving in to blackmail'. Refusing to rise to the BBC man's level of indignation, she explained that the truckers were poorly paid and had every right to retire at the age of 55 'because it is such a hard job'. The irony of the employer having to put the truckers' side appeared to be lost on the broadcaster, who failed to explain why there was no union representative on the programme.[74]

I could find only one report that made the connection between the truckers' action and the pressure to install a single European currency. This was by Martin Woollacott in the *Guardian*. He explained how 'the policies necessary for the single currency are more and more against the grain in France. A majority of French people sympathised with the drivers and, in a choice between cutting deficits and creating jobs, or sustaining adequate wages, prefer the latter . . . The uncompleted single market is already a force driving down wages and conditions.'[75]

Similar mass action by workers elsewhere in Europe failed to qualify as 'mainstream' news in Britain. This included a long-running strike by 70,000 secondary-school teachers in Greece and strikes by bus and Métro workers in France and steelworkers in Belgium. The most newsworthy action of all was in Britain on January 20 and September 8–9, 1997, when dockers in 105 ports across the world stopped all shipping as an act of solidarity with 500 sacked dockers in Liverpool (see pages 352–3). This was both unprecedented in modern maritime history and ignored.

The consequences of 'market forces' are generally reported as if they are acts of God. To the BBC, the penury of some sixty million pensioners in Russia is a 'free market reform'

and those who oppose it are 'hardliners' and 'crypto-communists'. So it was not surprising that the first anniversary of Boris Yeltsin's military assault on Russia's democratically elected parliament should be celebrated on BBC radio as 'Yeltsin's courage that crushed the hardliners'.[76] Moreover, lamented the *Guardian*'s Moscow correspondent, David Hearst, there is no longer 'any faith that democratic values are the right ones for crisis-ridden Russia today . . . The question remains, did *we* win the East or are *we* about to lose it?' (My italics.) Who is 'we'? More to the point, why do journalists take refuge in what Orwell called 'the language of power'?[77]

This 'we' is an increasingly fashionable device, long used to represent the civilised West against dark forces, now used to great effect in the promotion of something called 'New Britain'. Born on the day Tony Blair took office, New Britain is the latest attempt to breathe life into the Victorian notion that 'we' are a single nation with a single identity. Class distinctions that ensure whether or not you have a job and how long you live have no place in this 'kinder, gentler land', where, as Jeremy Hardy pointed out, 'Michael Heseltine and a former miner will embrace each other because they're both Welsh [and] people will have more say over their own lives so long as that doesn't mean selecting their own political candidates or cramping their employer's style.'[78] 'Culture' is everything; style and image 'make it happen'; populism is democracy. The self-promoting marketing agency Demos, a source of many New Britain stories, offers 'principles for culture changers'. 'Be distinctive,' it advises. 'Seventeen out of twenty new brands fail – usually because the brand doesn't offer the consumer anything new. In a world where countries have very little "brand recognition", it is vital to isolate a unique selling proposition.'[79]

Although it is not disputed that Blair is the major inspiration of New Britain, as Jonathan Freedland memorably wrote in the *Guardian*, 'it took the death of Princess Diana to inject real life into the idea'.[80] On the evening of Diana's funeral, the BBC broadcaster Gavin Eslar announced that we had 'come together as a people and learned who we are'.

With every maudlin cliché and platitude and crapulous homily, from 'Diana is at rest; the nation is not', to 'Things will never be the same again', those whose job is to keep the record straight, *especially* in challenging and emotionally trying circumstances, became little more than assistant pall-bearers, at worst cogs in a mighty public relations juggernaut. Like the Gulf War, few dared raise uncomfortable questions; those who did were heretics. Few dared to point out that a wealthy aristocrat and her playboy lover found speeding through a built-up area with a criminally intoxicated driver could have caused the deaths of innocent road users. Few dared to suggest that, given the infinite opportunities and privileges of her wealth and class, Diana Spencer had done little to advance the human condition, and that her principal achievement was her own media-constructed image. Most of her estimated fortune of £40 million did not go to the charities that were 'close to her heart'.[81]

Apart from 'our' grieving, the serious media's line was that the House of Windsor was somehow threatened by Diana's popularity in death. On the contrary, during the week of the funeral the British establishment demonstrated, yet again, its consummate skill at assimilating populism and drawing new life from it.

Ruling politicians can, of course, be counted on to arrange their own place in the assimilation. The 'spontaneous and utterly genuine' reaction of Prime Minister Blair to the news of Diana's death was, in fact, written for him in the early hours of the morning by one of his numerous 'spin doctors', who coined the mantra 'people's princess', the mantra of both politicians and media speaking as one.

As for the crowds, and without detracting from the decent responses of people and their support for a perceived 'underdog', few journalists dared to say that the numbers in the streets were as much a product of the new power of the media, particularly the global celebrity 'culture', as Diana's ephemeral reputation. This was demonstrated by the many people who repeated for the camera the rushed judgements and gossip served up to them as news and current affairs.

A sense of history is part of serious journalism, and history is marked by spectacles of 'grieving' and otherwise 'moved' crowds; I have been among my share of them. When the Pope visited the shrine of the Black Madonna in Poland in 1979, he was greeted by a million people; I shall not forget a landscape of green meadows lined with hundreds of portable confessionals. The Poles were also 'dignified' and threw flowers at their hero, just as people did at Diana's hearse. The funerals of the Egyptian nationalist Gamal Abdel Nasser and Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini drew millions to events of great shared emotion. This did not mean they held the key to the truth of the occasion. In my experience, the opposite is usually the case. Journalists who fail to recognise this let down the millions of people who did not lay tributes and did not watch the funeral (almost half 'the nation') and who still look to them for the truth.

In his book, *Joe McCarthy and the Press*, Edwin P. Bayley, a veteran reporter, reveals and regrets how he and the majority of his colleagues became the tools of McCarthyism in the United States by 'going along with the propaganda' and seldom challenging its assumptions or identifying the power that lay behind it. 'All the while we believed we were being objective,' he wrote.[82]

Forty years later the veteran BBC war reporter Martin Bell, now the MP for Tatton, announced his own revelations and regrets. Bell said he now regarded 'the notion of objectivity [as] something of an illusion' which belonged to 'bystander journalism'. He believed in 'the journalism of attachment' – 'a journalism that cares as well as knows; that is aware of its responsibilities; and will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, victim and oppressor'.

What was striking about Bell's Damascene conversion – apart from his desire to have it both ways: he rejects BBC 'objectivity', while 'holding fast' to BBC 'impartiality' – was his failure to acknowledge the *inherent* propaganda role of the media, especially the BBC, as an extension of establishment power. When did these institutions *ever* 'stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, victim and oppressor'?

Bell is, of course, right about the 'illusion of objectivity'; George Orwell dispensed with this long ago. 'The more one is aware of political bias', he wrote, 'the more one can be independent of it, and the more one claims to be impartial, the more one is biased.'[83] This can only be understood by looking behind the façades of benevolence and paternalism in the institution Martin Bell served and identifying its true 'language of power'. Instead, he paid fulsome tribute to the 'long and honourable BBC tradition of distance and detachment' and 'the culture of truthfulness [that] still prevails'.[84]

He might tell that to the miners, and the Irish, and the Liverpool dockers, and the French truckers, and the Nicaraguans, and the Vietnamese, and the Russians, to name just a few whose lives and struggles have been filtered, misrepresented and excluded by the same 'tradition' and 'culture'. And he might mention it to his blackballed former colleague, Peter Watkins, who did not concern himself so much with establishment myths about 'detachment' but simply strove to tell the truth.

It is time journalists and broadcasters abandoned these myths. The great American journalist T. D. Allman once defined 'genuinely objective journalism' as that which 'not only gets the facts right, it gets the meaning of events right. Objective journalism is compelling not only today. It stands the test of time. It is validated not only by "reliable sources" but by the unfolding of history. It is reporting that which not only seems right the day it is published. It is journalism that ten, twenty, fifty years after the fact still holds up a true and intelligent mirror to events.'[85]

THE LAST VOICE

First they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out –
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for the communists
And I did not speak out –
Because I was not a communist.
Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out –
Because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for me –
And there was no one left
To speak out for me.

Pastor Niemöller

NOT LONG AGO, I left for the last time a place where I had invested much of my working life. It was the home of Central Television's freelance documentary makers: a three-storey terrace you would easily pass by, in Charlotte Street, London. Except for the night bell it did not announce itself. This was put right when Michelle Hartree was at the reception desk and, in her wonderfully exuberant way, welcomed visitors into what must have seemed like a cell of elusive anarchists.

A string of camp followers came and went: homeless people, worried people with good and bad ideas for films, talented people wanting to work for nothing, shadowy Pimpernel people who had served the British state in nefarious ways, like the SAS renegade with part of his face missing. 'Charlotte Street', as our documentaries unit was known,

was one of the very few places in British television, or anywhere, where film-makers were encouraged to make the documentaries they wanted to make without institutional assumptions and *diktats*. They were films that reached behind the screens of power and fashion, as good journalism, in whatever form, should do.

The location was important. Charlotte Street itself is the spine of Fitzrovia, one of the last remaining villages in the heart of London, home to writers and poets such as Dylan Thomas. The lemming march of Oxford Street is nearby; but the eccentricities of Charlotte Street seemed somehow immune.

Our neighbouring iconoclasts, like the revolutionary Index Bookshop, would not have survived in less bohemian territory. Neither would the man in the woolly hat who shouted at cars and was looked after by the people at the Villa Carlotta and Camisa's deli opposite. Near where I sat, within frying distance of two restaurants, one Greek, one Italian, the *plats du jour* were announced at noon by the crackle of fresh food in great pans of oil and the smell of garlic and basil. In the summer we waved to people in their deckchairs next to the chimney pots.

We were so cramped that entry and exit were by single file. The flushing of a lavatory would be remarked upon at the other end of an international telephone line. Almost every phone call was overheard, with perhaps the exception of director Adrian Cowell whispering in Portuguese. Some calls were tapped, and the place was broken into during long-running investigative films which involved government secrecy. But in the end they got nothing: I think the clutter defeated them. When Michelle Hartree left for the third time (she was a brilliant dancer who had also worked in a circus as a knife-thrower's assistant), we knew the rest of us would not be far behind.

Charlotte Street was the inspired idea of Richard Creasey, a gentle, determined man who produced the first television series made for the disabled, called *Link*. As head of documentaries at Central's forerunner, ATV, in 1980, he looked for a place where, as he put it, 'film-makers could

develop their ideas into films, with our support, occasionally turning up to tell us how it was going; we were seldom disappointed'. Richard was succeeded by Roger James, a talented film editor, who offered support and commissions to those who might have seemed to others like itinerants but who, given the chance and a bit of development cash, produced memorable films.

These included Adrian Cowell's *Decade of Destruction*, a series of visionary films that alerted the world to the destruction of the Amazon rain forests; Judy Jackson's *In Search of the Assassin*, which showed vividly the CIA at work in Central America; Chris Menges's *East 103rd Street*, a stunning portrait of New York lost and found; Brian Moser's lyrical series on Latin America, *Before Columbus*; Anthony Thomas's *Thy Kingdom Come and Thy Will Be Done on Earth*, which exposed the evangelical movement in the United States; the late Juris Podnik's raw glimpse of communist Europe in transition, *Hello, Can You Hear Us?*; and Michael Grigsby's *Living on the Edge*, which bared Thatcher's Britain.

Ken Loach made *Questions of Leadership* at Charlotte Street. This was the series of three films which revealed the collaboration between the trade union hierarchy and Thatcherism (see pages 343–4). With the connivance of lawyers, they were banned, then gutted. It was an inglorious episode. With Alan Lowery, I made a series on Australia called *The Last Dream*, which told something of the rapacious truth about the country of our birth. And, of the many films to come out of my long partnership with David Munro, five on Cambodia were planned, researched and made in the cramped fire hazard opposite the deli.

There was a myth the place did not pay; in fact, it gave Central a modest, steady profit, mainly because our films sold all over the world and because our audience in Britain would wait up, if necessary, to watch them. When *Death of a Nation*, a film I made with David Munro about an unheard-of place called East Timor, went to air on ITV, British Telecom recorded, after midnight, 4,000 calls per minute to the 'helpline' number.

The problem with Charlotte Street was that it did not fit the future corporate mould and so it had to go. The homeless were said to be turning up far too frequently and sleeping on our doorstep. When the order to vacate finally came from our new owners, Carlton, it seemed appropriate that moving day was the day that the Tory Government minister responsible for the media, Virginia Bottomley, announced her Broadcasting Bill, which allowed the biggest and richest in commercial television to swallow the smallest.

That is the trend. The biggest and richest are swallowing not just the minnows, like Charlotte Street, but most of the world's media: news, current affairs and documentaries, our primary sources of information. This began in the 1990s in the United States, where the Disney company has swallowed the American Broadcasting Company, Sumner Redstone has taken over Paramount Communications, Time-Warner and Turner (CNN) have merged to become the world's biggest media monopoly and Rupert Murdoch has become the largest owner of television stations in the United States. His friend John Malone now owns 23 per cent of all the cable television stations on the planet. In Britain, two companies, Granada and Carlton, dominate the ITV network; and the digital age of television belongs to Murdoch and his friends.

Writing in the *New Yorker*, Ken Auletta described the 'gameplan'. Above all, it was Murdoch, he wrote, who 'created the first global media network by investing in both software (movies, TV shows, sports franchises, publishing) and the distribution platforms (the Fox network, cable and the TV satellite systems) that disseminate the software. Within the next few years, the News Corporation's satellite system will blanket South America, in addition to Asia and Europe and parts of the Middle East and Africa. "Basically, we want to establish satellite platforms in major parts of the world", Murdoch explains.'[1]

Auletta described a 'summit' between Murdoch and John Malone, the 'king of cable'. 'Malone had several goals in this meeting,' he wrote. 'He wanted to see if there were areas where he and Murdoch could do business together, and he

wanted to avoid conflicts.' Malone believed that 'between us' they could 'control' thirty-three million pay-TV subscribers. Change the names and they are Mafia godfathers, dividing turf.

The immediate aim for all of them, says Murdoch, is to keep 'technology galloping over the old regulatory machine, getting past politicians and regulators'.[2] He means everywhere. Take his remarkable relationship with the rulers of the world's most populous nation, China. In 1993, in a speech lauding the 'communications revolution', Murdoch said that advances in media technology posed 'an unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes everywhere'.[3] The Chinese Government responded by banning individuals from owning a satellite dish, thus depriving Murdoch's Hong Kong-based Star TV of its biggest market.

Not one to make such a mistake twice, Murdoch set out to appease and court the regime. He started by 'removing' BBC World Service Television from his Asian satellite. The Beijing regime had objected to the BBC's reporting of the Tiananmen Square massacre and to a BBC documentary about Mao Tsetung. 'The BBC was driving them nuts,' said Murdoch. 'It's not worth it. [The Chinese government] is scared to death of what happened in Tiananmen Square. The truth is – and we Americans don't like to admit it – that authoritarian countries can work.'[4]

Murdoch proposed a 'joint venture' with the Communist Party mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*, to sell information technology. In 1996, Shao Huaze, the boss of the *People's Daily*, who is also head of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, was invited to Britain as a guest of *The Times*, which is owned by Murdoch. He stayed at the Ritz, where he was visited by Prime Minister John Major. Shortly afterwards, Murdoch's Star TV broadcast a documentary series, made by the regime, eulogising the life and times of the 'paramount ruler' Deng Xiaoping.

This was based on a hagiography of Deng written by his daughter, and published by Basic Books, a division of HarperCollins: owner Rupert Murdoch.[5] Ms Deng was flown

to America by Murdoch, who fêted her with private parties, put her up at his ranch and toasted her father as 'a man who brought China into the modern world'.[6] Like the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989, it was as if his earlier, unfortunate speech had never happened.

As part of his deal with the *People's Daily*, Murdoch reportedly offered the Chinese dictators 'smart card' technology that would allow television programmes to be vetted before they were broadcast, although his company denied this.[7] His aim is a 'joint venture' allowing him to 'wire' China for pay-TV, and consummation is at hand, if his latest deal with Beijing is an indicator. In 1997, with the *People's Daily*, he launched his 'Chinabyte' Internet service in English. Politics will be censored; the Chinese users' view of the West will be the Murdoch view.

Ninety per cent of all world news and current affairs now comes to us from fewer and richer and more powerful sources. Three agencies, Associated Press, Reuters and Agence France Presse, supply most of the world's 'wire service' news. One is American, one is British, the other is French. Reuters and AP make huge profits selling financial and corporate information; their newsrooms have become centres of the 'free market' crusade. AP gets most of its funding from American clients and devotes most of its coverage to events in the United States.

Africa accounts for less than 5 per cent of this coverage, most of it concentrated on disasters.[8] The former President of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, has drily suggested that the people of his country should be allowed to take part in the elections for President of the United States because they are bombarded with as much information about the candidates as Americans are.[9]

In television there are just two agencies providing foreign news footage to all the world's newsrooms – Reuters Television, formerly Visnews, and World Television Network, WTN. Reuters supplies 400 broadcasters in eighty-five countries, reaching an audience of half a billion people. WTN

reaches an estimated three billion people. Another two Western broadcasters, CNN and BBC World, come second. And there is the Internet, which, for all its variety and potential, is essentially an elite operation as most people in the world do not own a telephone, let alone a computer.

At a media conference organised by the *Financial Times* in 1996, a man described as 'Rupert Murdoch's technology guru' declared that by the year 2000 'a newspaper could be sent around the world by digital satellite signal in ten seconds, compared to an hour on the Internet'. No one in the audience asked him what difference this made to the *content* of the newspaper. The *Sun* sent in ten seconds is still, alas, the *Sun*; the *Sunday Times* digitalised is still the *Sunday Times*. No one interjected, 'So what?'[10]

It is said, at gatherings like this, that something called 'technological determinism' has replaced something called 'economic determinism'. Both are euphemisms for the latest model of *laissez-faire* capitalism. This is never said. The social consequences of the rise of media technology are seldom an issue. When modern media managers discuss their calling, they celebrate the *chutzpah* of their godfathers. Michael Eisner of Disney gets $10 million a year! Murdoch rewards his immediate executives with 'packages' totalling $45 million! Michael Grade buys the key to his golden handcuffs!

In the meantime, production budgets for factual programmes are reduced; ITN's once proud news service is handicapped by cost-cutting and profiteering, the BBC is consumed by 'market' bureaucracy and the new Channel 5 introduces the equivalent of a television penny arcade. ('Tune in, or get out of the way,' says the continuity announcer.) As 'multi-skilling' becomes the doctrine, the deskilling of craft becomes the practice, with the untrained encouraged to believe that possession of a camcorder makes them a film-maker and pointing it at nothing in particular produces an 'observational' documentary.

The managers of Murdoch's BSkyB satellite channel offer the industry an hour of television for £2,000. By 1998, some 170 satellite and cable stations will be in service, with

Canary Wharf, the glass obelisk rising out of London's former docklands, where five national newspapers are produced, is known by journalists as 'the ministry of truth'. Journalism has turned inward here. Having penetrated the layers of 'security', you notice the silence: footsteps are unheard and voices distant. Eye-contact is with the banks of VDU screens. There are no smells, not of ink or wood panelling or carbolic on the stairs. A vertical airport comes to mind.

On the *Daily Mirror* floor there are spy cameras and guards patrolling the newsroom. A journalist was hauled before managers because video evidence showed he was 'not working hard enough'. 'You don't leave your desk without your smart card,' said one of the journalists. 'We are as isolated from our readers as it is possible to be.'[18]

The maverick humane reporter fades in places like these. The likes of Robert Fisk, Ed Vulliamy and Maggie O'Kane come to mind. Trained by experience to take time and listen to people, the best of them went to uncomfortable places, followed leads and gathered evidence Their scepticism was reserved for the powerful. They were 'investigative journalists', but that, after all, is what all journalists should be.

Today, isolation and depleted staffing have bred a new kind of 'multi-skilled' journalist, who is not multi-skilled at all, but a sad, Protean figure required to work for a range of very different publications in the group and be loyal to none. There is no time to investigate; lifting a phone and scanning 'cuttings files' require no apprenticeship and little expense. Partly as a consequence of this, newspapers have become 'viewspapers', as Julian Petley calls them, vehicles not of curiosity and inquiry but of narcissism.[19]

The so-called metropolitan journalist is concerned more with introspection than with finding out about others. For females, this means 'relationships', personal disclosure and exhibitionism, child-obsessed matters and other *angsts* of the middle class. It is rare to read a 'feminist' writer whose work fails to confirm the stereotypes of the 'women's magazines': what Indian middle-class women call 'sari talk' (tittle-tattle). This is another version of pack journalism. It lacks the basic

courage expected of people with principled insights, as true feminists are meant to have. None, it seems, dares to reclaim the politics of feminism from the therapist's couch: to explain to both women and men that the interests and needs of a teenage single mother struggling to keep her family going in a high-rise flat and those of a redundant steelworker are not divisive: that only by making that *political* connection will society move towards a fairer relationship between the sexes. So narrow has 'women's' writing become in the respectable press that it is rare indeed to read a Western feminist celebrating the courage and independence of disadvantaged women around the world.

An exception is the writer Sheila Rowbotham. In 1997, she published a refreshing attack on a journalism obsessed with the 'personal dilemmas of the middle class' and 'excluding the experiences of the great majority'. The debate on feminist issues had become stuck in the narrowest of grooves, she argued, and went on to list inspiring examples of women's movements who were 'doing and thinking the unimaginable . . . amidst adversity and in desperation they have developed the courage and conviction to challenge that dismal deification of "flexibility" and market forces which has threatened their livelihoods'.

One shining illustration she cites is the Self-Employed Women's Association of Ahmedabad, India. The SEWA acts as both campaign group and union for its impoverished members, who range from rubbish collectors and street vendors to agricultural and home workers. With the slogan 'dignity and daily bread', they now represent more than 200,000 poor women. In countries such as Peru, Mexico, Brazil, Nicaragua and South Africa, thousands of women have been active in campaigns around 'prices, rents and basic social needs, schools, health centres and sanitation'.

As Rowbotham reminds her readers, it is not just in the Third World that women are mobilising beyond the media lens. Poor black and native American women in the United States have protested against toxic dumping that has led to miscarriages and birth defects. The new 'militant mothers'

include, for instance, Dolly Burwell, who has been in prison many times for protesting against the contamination of soil by transformer oil leaked down a rural road. Theirs is a feminism that embraces an infinitely wider range of women's concerns than those of the 'women's pages'. 'They have a great deal to teach those of us who see feminism as relevant to more than a privileged minority,' wrote Rowbotham, 'and indeed anyone concerned about the numbing acceptance of inequality and injustice which has left us with a society and a political system so manifestly out of joint.'[20]

Those words also apply to a male journalism limited to fellow travelling with established power: to the gamesmanship of politicians and spin doctors and 'media village' gossip, what F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* called 'bantering inconsequence'. Among these would-be opinion-leaders an 'ironic *hauteur*' is affected, exemplified by a political columnist devoting an entire piece to Tony Blair's 'iconoclasm' in allowing members of his Cabinet to call each other by their first names. False symbolism is all; political substance is obsolete.[21] As for the readers, like the readers of tabloids, their imagination is pacified, not primed, and the 'numbing acceptance of inequality and injustice' is left unchallenged. While corruption among the system's managers and supplicants is at times brilliantly exposed by a small group of exceptional journalists, the wider corruption is apparently unseen.

In 1988, the literary critic and novelist D. J. Taylor wrote a seminal piece entitled 'When the Pen Sleeps'. He expanded this into a book, *A Vain Conceit*, in which he wondered why the English novel so often degenerated into 'drawing room twitter' and why the great issues of the day were shunned by writers, unlike their counterparts in, say, Latin America, who felt an *obligation* to take on politics. Where, he asked, were the George Orwells, the Upton Sinclairs, the John Steinbecks of the modern age?

The same can be said about journalism. Reading Orwell again, I am struck by his genius at extracting the lies submerged just beneath the surface of the status quo. Yet the

prizes awarded in his name to political writers and journalists rarely reflect this. Writing in the *Observer*, the chairman of the 1995 Orwell Prize for Political Writing, John Keane, attacked those who referred back to 'an imaginary golden past'. But if the past is imaginary, why have Orwell's name on a prize? Keane says those who 'hanker' after this illusory past fail to appreciate writers and journalists making sense of 'the collapse of the old left–right divide'.[22]

What collapse? The convergence of the Labour and Tory Parties, like the American Democrats with the Republicans, represents an historic meeting of essentially like minds. The real divisions between left and right are to be found outside Parliament and have never been greater. They reflect the unprecedented disparity between the poverty of the majority of humanity and the power and privilege of a tiny minority who control the world's resources.

Tell the people of Pollock in Glasgow that there is no longer a left–right divide. There, half the jobs available to working-class people have disappeared over the past dozen years and poverty is constant. 'It's like a blanket has been drawn over the place,' wrote Tommy Sheridan, the Socialist Party councillor who lives in Pollock. Where are the Orwells writing *The Road to Pollock*?[23]

In the United States, where scrutiny of the media is not confined to a spectator sport, as it is in Britain, the writer James Petras has traced the history of the 'collapse' of the left–right divide. He wrote:

> During the 1980s the western mass media systematically appropriated basic ideas of the left, emptied them of their original content and refilled them. Politicians intent on restoring capitalism and stimulating inequalities were described as 'reformers' and 'revolutionaries' while their opponents were labelled 'conservatives'.
>
> This reversal of the meaning of political language disoriented many, making them vulnerable to claims that the terms 'left' and 'right' had lost their significance, that ideologies no longer mattered. Global cultural manipulation is sustained by this corruption. In the Third World, the selling of

> national public enterprises is 'breaking up monopolies'. 'Reconversion' is the euphemism for the reversion to nineteenth-century conditions of labour stripped of all social benefits. 'Restructuring' is the transfer of income from production to speculation. 'Deregulation' is the shift of power from the national welfare to the international banking [and] corporate elite.

The examples that Petras cites come from the same lexicon as 'work makes you free' – *Arbeit Macht Frei* – the words over the gates at Auschwitz.[24]

Noam Chomsky often quotes the work of the late Alex Carey, the Australian social scientist who pioneered the investigation of corporate propaganda. 'The twentieth century has been characterised by three developments of great political importance,' wrote Carey in 1978, 'the growth of democracy; the growth of corporate power; and the growth of corporate propaganda against democracy.'[25]

Chomsky adds that, following the Second World War, American business looked to the public relations industry to deter the social democratic and socialist impulses of working people. 'By the early 1950s,' he wrote, 'twenty million people a week were watching business-sponsored films. The entertainment industry was enlisted for the cause, portraying unions as the enemy, the outsider disrupting the "harmony" of the "American way of life" and otherwise helping to "indoctrinate citizens with the capitalist story" . . . Every aspect of social life was targeted and permeated schools and universities, churches, even recreational programs. By 1954, business propaganda in public [state] schools reached half the amount spent on textbooks.'[26]

The most dramatic illustration of the rise of corporate propaganda was in the late 1970s in the newly contested area of environmentalism. In response to gains achieved by 'green' campaigns, such as clean air and clean water legislation and the establishment of environmental regulatory agencies, corporate America struck back with its own 'activism'. By 1980, there were more lobbyists, 'public affairs consultants' and company-employed journalists in Washington than there

were federal employers, including 8,000 public-relations 'environmental specialists'.

As Sharon Beder documents in her book *Global Spin*, the 'think tanks' that provided vehicles for the rise of the Reagan 'new' right in the United States (like Thatcherism in Britain) 'sought to cast doubt on the very features of the environmental crisis that had heightened public concerns ... including ozone depletion, greenhouse warming and industrial pollution'. By distorting the public perception of environmental dangers, they successfully campaigned for laws 'that would ensure regulatory efforts become too expensive and difficult to implement, through insisting on cost benefit analyses and compensation to state governments and property owners for the costs of complying with the legislation.' By 1992, '51 per cent of those surveyed agreed that environmentalists had "gone too far" compared with 17 per cent the year before.'[27]

Taking a lead from the United States, public relations in Britain and other Western countries, 'PR', has usurped much of journalism's proper work, becoming, as Tom Baistow warned in 1985, a 'fifth estate'.[28] Today, according to Max Clifford, the famous PR man who deals with the London tabloids, the function of PR is 'filling the role investigative reporters should fill but no longer can because cost cutting has hit journalism heavily'.[29]

As the staffs of newsrooms have contracted, the public relations industry has expanded. According to the editor of *PR Week*, the amount of 'PR generated material' in the media is '50 per cent in a broadsheet newspaper in every section apart from sport. In the local press and the mid-market and tabloid nationals, the figure would undoubtedly be higher. Music and fashion journalists and PRs work hand in hand in the editorial process. It is often a game of bluff and brinkmanship, but the relationship is utterly interdependent. PRs provide fodder, but the clever high-powered ones do a lot of journalists' thinking for them.'[30]

The same is true of the phenomenon of 'think tanks', also known as 'research institutes'. The oldest of these propaganda

bodies are establishment arms, such as the Royal Institute for International Affairs. Others, with similar, scholarly sounding titles (such as the Institute for Strategic Studies), mushroomed in the 1970s and 1980s, at first to support and fund pro-business and pro-Cold War academics and counter the work of 'revisionist' and radical social scientists and historians. William Simon, head of the immensely rich Olin Foundation in the United States, called for a 'counter-intelligentsia' in the universities and the media that would 'regain ideological dominance for business'.[31]

During the Reagan and Thatcher years rich and well-connected think tanks like the Heritage Foundation in the United States propagated the notion of a post-Sixties conservatism sweeping the West. The media picked this up and, in an exemplary exercise of what Noam Chomsky calls 'manufacturing consent', deflected what had been a progressive trend on both sides of the Atlantic: on issues such as tax, welfare, race relations, environmental protection and military spending. 'By crediting conservative policies with a popular support they did not have,' wrote Michael Parenti in his study on the politics of the American media, 'the press did its part in shifting the political agenda in a rightward direction'.[32]

Today, it is common for think tanks to usurp the role of independent journalism. Accomplished at self-promotion and understanding editorial exigencies (and idleness), the leaders of the 'counter-intelligentsia' have no difficulty in finding public platforms for their reactionary *chic*. In Britain, just as the Thatcherite Centre for Policy Studies was a master at this, so too is the fashionable Demos, which serves the new Thatcherism.

Australia, with the narrowest base of media ownership of any Western democracy, has more than its share of think tanks. The best known is the Sydney Institute, formerly the Institute of Public Affairs. Modelled on the extreme-right American groups which spent the Reagan years monitoring and 'naming' liberal journalists, the 'institute' is the work of a one-man band, Gerard Henderson, an experienced clerical

propagandist who was formerly a lobbyist for the conservative Prime Minister, John Howard. In 1987, Henderson attended a seminar in Washington entitled 'The Red Orchestra in the South-West Pacific'. Sponsored by the Reaganite Hoover Institution, the speakers described all manner of conspiracies, notably 'the left network and the Australian media' and Moscow's 'penetration' of the Australian press. (Most of the press was then, as now, owned by Rupert Murdoch.) Henderson began writing for Murdoch's *Australian* and now has regular columns syndicated in both the two principal non-Murdoch papers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the Melbourne *Age*. His targets include the often beleaguered Australian Broadcasting Corporation and virtually anyone who attempts to offer an alternative vision to the rampant forces that have destroyed Australia's proud claim to social equity.

The cry 'freedom of the press' was probably first heard around the time Wynkyn de Worde set up Caxton's printing press in the yard of St Bride's Church, off Fleet Street, in London. Twenty years later, in 1520, a weaver stood in the main square of the German city of Magdeburg and offered Martin Luther's printed work for sale. The mayor promptly ordered the weaver's arrest. A riot followed, then a revolt, which overturned the rule of the Catholic city council. Already aware of the power of the written and spoken word, the authorities now feared Gutenberg's revolution of mass printing – 'the press'.

The first great battle for the freedom of the press was fought by dissenters, dreamers and visionaries who begged to differ from the established guardians of society. They suffered terrible penalties. Thomas Hytton was executed for selling books by William Tyndale, who translated the Bible into English. Richard Bayfield, John Tewkesbury and other booksellers were burned at the stake. John Stubbs had his right hand cut off for writing a pamphlet on the possible marriage of Queen Elizabeth. William Carter, accused of printing a book that would encourage the women of the court

to kill Elizabeth, was hanged, drawn and quartered. For the crime of printing Puritan books in Holland, John Lilburne, the Leveller, was given 500 lashes in the streets of London, pilloried and fined the fortune of £500.[33]

In the early nineteenth century, the law increasingly became the instrument of censorship and sanction. In Australia, Edward Smith Hall, publisher of the campaigning Sydney *Monitor*, was routinely convicted of criminal libel by military juries whose members were selected personally by the military governor of New South Wales. Hall spent more than a year in prison where, from a small cell lit through a single grate and beset by mosquitoes, he continued to edit the *Monitor* and to expose official venality.

Hall's vision was of a press that was 'a medley of competing voices'. When he died in 1861, there were some fifty independent newspaper titles in New South Wales alone. Within twenty years this had risen to 143 papers, many of which had a campaigning style and editors who regarded their newspapers as 'the voice of the people' and not of 'the trade of authority' or of vested mercantile interests.

By the beginning of the twentieth century there were twenty-one metropolitan newspapers in Australia owned by seventeen different proprietors. By 1997, Hall's 'medley of competing voices' had been reduced to sixteen principal newspapers, ten of them owned by Murdoch. Television, radio and computer software are in the hands of conglomerates. Free Australia now provides the model for the destruction of a 400-year-old freedom.

'What is deeply ironic', wrote David Bowman, 'is that, having thrown off one yoke, the press should now be falling under another, in the form of a tiny and ever-contracting band of businessmen-proprietors. Instead of developing as a diverse social institution, serving the needs of democratic society, the press, and now the media, have become or are becoming the property of a few, governed by whatever social, political and cultural values the few think tolerable . . . Looking at the thing historically, you could say that what we are facing now is the second great battle of the freedom of the press.'[34]

If Marshall McLuhan's 'global village' means anything, it is the power of the global media monopolies and their antipathy to a 'medley of competing voices'. 'It seems grotesque', wrote Bowman, 'that the press, or rather the media, should be allowed to abuse its social role fatally by rushing on down the road to monopoly ownership. That is a negation of press freedom.'

By falling silent, journalists and politicians both negate history; for the struggle for a free press was always part of the long journey towards universal suffrage and democratic government. It was a fight for opposing voices to be heard when those in authority considered themselves the custodians of truth: an enduring delusion.

By their acquiescence the journalists dishonour those like Edward Smith Hall, whose tenacity allowed the press to emerge from two centuries of repressive laws, corruption and political bribery; and William Howard Russell, whose dispatches from the Crimea revealed the truth of war, its sacrificial battles, waste and blunders; and Morgan Philips Price, the *Guardian* man in Moscow in 1917 who alone reported the Allied invasion and its grave implications for the future; and Ted Scott, the great *Guardian* leader writer (later editor), whose work included the following: 'If for any reason the right to strike is withdrawn it should be recognised as the deprivation of what is normally the most jealously guarded and most socially valuable means of progress.' That appeared in 1919. It could just as well appear today.[35]

Journalists ought not to stand outside the closed doors of the powerful waiting to be lied to. They are not functionaries, and they should not be charlatans: 'your sham impartialists', as Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, 'wolves in sheep's clothing, simpering loyally as they suppress'. They ought to be sceptical about the assumed and the acceptable, *especially* the legitimate and the respectable. ('Never believe anything', said Claud Cockburn, 'until it's officially denied.') Their job is not to stand idly by, but to speak for 'the true witnesses, those in full possession of the terrible truth', as Primo Levi described the victims of Nazism. At the least they ought to be the

natural enemies of the authoritarianism that Rupert Murdoch says 'can work'.

In countries where the majority of humanity live, the efforts and sacrifice of journalists shame their quiescent colleagues. I have already mentioned my friend Ahmad Taufik, who had his prison sentence in Indonesia extended to three years. His crime was to write a mildly critical analysis of the Suharto dictatorship for *Independence*, a newspaper he and others dared to start. In Turkey, the regime has made something of a speciality of terrorising journalists. Metin Goktepe, a journalist for the daily *Evrensel*, was beaten to death on January 8, l996, while in police custody in Istanbul. He was arrested under a law which classifies all reporting of the oppression and rebellion in Turkey as either propaganda or as 'incitement to racial hatred'.

The editor of *Ozgur Gundem* (Free Agenda), Ocak Isik Yurtcu, is serving fifteen years under the same law. 'I'm in prison', he said recently, 'because I tried to learn the truth and relay this truth to the public – in other words, to do my job – in the belief that it is impossible to have other freedoms in a country where there is no freedom of the press.'[36]

The Philippines has constitutionally the freest press in Asia and one of the highest death rates of journalists in the world. Edgar Cadagat, who runs the Cobra news agency on the island of Negros, works behind sand bags. He specialises in exposing official corruption. He has survived several assassination attempts, and one Christmas was sent a miniature coffin with a bullet and his photograph inside.[37]

In Russia, fifty journalists were killed in 1996, including the television commentator Oleg Slabynko, who spoke out against organised crime. In Algeria, sixty journalists have been killed for doing their job. In St Bride's, the journalists' church off London's Fleet Street, there are the names of others who have given journalism an almost Homeric pride. When I was last there, I lit a candle before a plaque for 'Veronica Guerin, aged 33, journalist, *Sunday Independent*, murdered in Dublin for writing the truth'.

This is not to suggest that journalists need to prove

themselves by facing physical danger – although in countries like Indonesia, Algeria, Russia, Nigeria, the Philippines and Turkey, they may have no choice. What all serious journalists ought to share is a certain *moral* courage. In the democracies, this means the courage to clear away the ideological rubble that smothers independence of mind and leads to self-censorship. This is not without risk. 'If one tells the truth,' wrote Oscar Wilde, 'one is sure sooner or later to be found out.'

In Britain, free-minded journalists might turn their attention to the repeal of legislation passed since 1979, which restricts and intimidates the right to report openly and without fear or favour: the 1981 Contempt of Court Act, the 1986 Police and Criminal Evidence Act and the 1994 Criminal Justice Act. Any authoritarian regime would be delighted to have these on its statute books. The libel laws should be abolished, too, or rewritten to provide a free service for ordinary people seeking redress. And there ought to be a law, similar to that in France, preventing huge companies like W. H. Smith and John Menzies, which have 53 per cent of the distribution market, from withdrawing small-circulation magazines and newspapers from sale. These are our *samizdat*.

A Freedom of Information Act unfettered by 'exemptions', the establishment of a public body to provide start-up funds for newspapers, journals and broadcasters independent of the monopolists, a new Broadcasting Act that stops the richest and biggest swallowing the smallest and requires an unfettered commitment to original drama and independent factual programmes – these would begin to win the second battle for the freedom of the press.

It is a freedom we are in danger of losing without even knowing it. For when there is no longer anyone speaking out, who will be the last voice?