



# Make Yourself a Nuisance

ROBERT MILLER

AT A TIME when in far too many parts of the world the press and radio are state controlled, and when the expression of contrary political opinions is punished with imprisonment or death, it may at first seem unjustified and ungrateful to suggest that we in Britain enjoy anything less than a free forum for opinion in the national press and television.

But freedom in practice is always really a matter of degree. A canary having escaped from its cage may consider itself free and be quite happy about it; but we know that its freedom is limited, because the window and door of the room are locked. We must not allow our repugnance at such unhappy conditions in other countries to blind us to the necessity of constant vigilance in defending and preserving the liberties we still have and of striving to make good any deficiencies in our principal means of communication.

The deficiencies may not be too obvious at first, probably because the disappearance of so many of our civil liberties during the past thirty years has been so gently contrived as to be painless to all but a discerning few. Or, if the going of them has been noticed at all by the many, they have been shrugged off with a resignation which by now may almost be considered a part of our national character.

It must be agreed that the press bears certain obligations towards society: it should faithfully and truthfully report events of public interest, give fair comment upon them, publish with impartiality and without mutilation the views expressed by its readers, and present as nearly as possible a day to day picture of social conditions.

While the first of these obligations is generally fulfilled by the daily papers, there is in most of them a strong bias towards the sensational, too often at the cost of other news which may be just as important. For example, last May in Paris a young man named Daniel Cohn-Bendit was given by the press a totally unwarranted prominence merely because of his association with mob violence. (He was even interviewed at length on television when he visited Britain—and thus received publicity for which many a hard-working, conscientious and law-abiding social reformer would give his ears). Every word and gesture uttered by Tariq Ali is painstakingly reported, and on the occasions when Colin Jordan does or says anything, he is similarly fav-

oured.

The total faithful following of all these people probably does not exceed a few hundred, but the doings and sayings of much larger groups go unreported. It would seem, therefore, that if you want to get your voice heard and your views disseminated in the national press, you must in some way make yourself a public nuisance. It is because of the publicity which the press freely hands out to these vociferous minorities that they are able to continue to exploit the vast majority of their fellows, whose views and grievances are just as worthy of being heard, but who prefer to observe the law and respect public order.

Pressure of time will be pleaded when refusing to send reporters to meetings, conferences and so on when the proceedings are likely to be peaceful and quiet. However, let any person in the audience throw a firework or molest a speaker, and reporters will appear from nowhere to report the incident. Up to that moment it mattered not at all what words of wisdom flowed from many learned lips.

Do people really clamour for such sensationalism in their newspapers, or do they accept and expect it as a normal and inevitable way of presenting news? Is it not possible that most people merely want to learn the facts?

How much of this is due to editorial policy dictated by private interests (including advertisers who often pay the piper) or to a justified fear of losing sales? Would it be a good thing to have at least one newspaper which could be run by people of all political views or none? But then only the few would buy it, advertisers would not use it, and so it would be too costly. Look what happened to *The New Daily*.

Perhaps there is no answer to this problem except to try to increase the sale of *LAND & LIBERTY* and other independent journals!

## The Blight on Local Government

ROY DOUGLAS

PROFESSOR ROBSON is one of the greatest living authorities on English local government. *Local Government in Crisis\**, like everything he writes, is lucid and authoritative. Anyone who sometimes finds himself discussing questions which bear on local or regional government, and who wants to be sure that he is not talking nonsense, can profitably absorb what the author has to say on factual matters. But the author is not exactly a friend of the ideas that are popular among the readers of *LAND & LIBERTY*. He gives site-value rating only the barest mention, and I

\**Local Government in Crisis*, by William A. Robson. Second Edition. George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 28s.

do not think that the word "Whitstable" appears once in the book.

Professor Robson rightly points out the circumstances that have produced a slow encroachment by the organs of central government upon the functions of local government. As this process advances, less and less people of ability will enter local government. This justifies further encroachments, and so on. But this bears on another effect, which is much less adequately treated in the book.

We all talk of "responsible" local government, but unfortunately responsible local government is already dead in the large towns, and is gradually withering elsewhere. Although the candidates' election addresses usually imply that the issues on which the local elections are fought are matters within the competence of the authority for which they are standing, we all know that people usually do not vote for a local government candidate on what he or his Party have done, or intend to do, in the local government authority concerned. Local government elections are all too often simply a demonstration of which Party the electors wish to see ruling at Westminster. The safeness or vulnerability of a candidate's seat is not determined by how he and his Council colleagues face the issues of local government, but by how totally different people face totally different problems in a totally different place.

One would be glad to know what Professor Robson thinks on this subject. Is it possible to make local government truly responsible again—for example, by some sort of constitutional or electoral reform? If this can not be done, then local government is indeed dead, and the only remaining question is how long we must wait before the whole business is brought under the control of Whitehall. Personally, I hope that it is not dead, and I hope that it will be revived—although I cannot pretend to be very sanguine. But the problem of its future (if any) can be solved only after a frank appraisal not just of the structure of local government, but of the way in which it really works.

## Research Absurdities

T. O. EVANS

**T**HE OBSESSION with social "research" seems to be on the increase. Any subject, it seems, will do for an exercise in statistics. I should not be at all surprised to hear of a research group deliberately hiding a needle in a haystack so that they could measure the time and complexity required to find it.

These thoughts have been provoked by the latest report of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, an organisation that conducts researches

into a variety of relevant or irrelevant matters with government financial assistance.

The Institute's eleventh industrial enquiry was carried out in December, 1968. Managements of 110 firms in the metal industries were interviewed and a postal questionnaire was sent to a number of large firms in the chemical industry. The report contains some fascinating statements.

"We have been unable to include a report on the paper industry as no firms responded to our enquiry."

"Small firms are not adequately represented in the sample. This may account for the discrepancies between figures reported by the firms and official estimates."

"The limitations of the enquiry should be noted."

"Some firms were able to give only very rough estimates in reply to certain questions."

"The results are provisional."

What was all this about? Output, employment and exports! And what conclusions are drawn from these provisional results? That the limitations to growth of business were the demand for the product, labour shortages, and shortage of capacity. Who would have guessed? This kind of information reminds me of the reports sent out by the Ministry of Agriculture informing farmers of the weather conditions for the previous month.

Thirteen foolscap pages tell me that firms could produce more with more demand and with more labour—and they give estimates as to how much. Since the figures differed from firm to firm, and from product to product, what on earth is the use of this information except to the firms concerned? Surely, they could carry out their own research. When you collate and strike averages you have something quite useless for acting upon.

Nearly 70 per cent of engineering firms reported that their exports had increased more rapidly than during 1967. The report says: "Almost all of these firms gave the same explanation for this—increased export demand and more competitive prices as a result of devaluation." Now who would have thought that?

The report also reveals, as a result of the research undertaken, that firms imported certain goods because they were cheaper or because they could not be obtained on the home market! (What other reasons did the researchers imagine importers might have?)

Another revealing outcome of the research was that firms would continue to import this year at the same level as last year unless they had reason to import more!

"The import deposit scheme," say the researchers innocently, "had been published too recently for most firms to be able to give their responses to it."

There is much more of this kind of stuff which provides one with a "blinding glimpse of the obvious."