Lecture to Civil Servants on 22nd July, 1959
at Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture

GOVERNMENT AND THE PUBLIC

In our country which has become a democracy in recent years the existence of the Government depends on the support of the public, on the support of the adult citizen who by law has the right to vote, who maintains the State by the payment of taxes and abides by the law of the land.

Our country is a democracy because the Cabinet is responsible to a Legislature whose members, by and large, are responsible to the people who elect it

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and because the Rule of Law prevails. The Government has to account for its stewardship every five years - or earlier if it chooses - and if the electorate are not satisfied with its performance they can turn it out. The individual whose legal rights are infringed has the right of redress through the Courts.

The business of the Government is not merely to make laws. A part of its job of governing is to see after the public welfare and it does this in various ways. And being dependent on the citizens for its existence, the Government must see to it that the citizen knows what is being done in his name, create a good impression on the citizen and foster mutual understanding and goodwill.

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The points of contact between the Government and the public are many and various. Indeed it may be said that in our time the State and its works confront us every minute of our waking day. Yet it is the very frequency of this contact which can be the cause for misunderstandings and consequent irritation.

We need only mention the process by which the Government comes into being in a parliamentary democracy. The coming into power depends upon the party organisation convincing such a number of the electorate as to enable it to gain a majority of seats. It must by using

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various means of communication persuade them to the support of its interests.

When the Government comes into being the process continues at two levels - that of the party organisation and that of the Government. We are concerned here only with the latter which differs from the former in that there the aim isto be objective and non-partisan because the task must continue to be done whichever party becomes the Government. Under whatever guise this process works and

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however it is called it is just a job of public relations - in this case relations between the public and its Government.

One of the instruments by which a Government seeks to carry out its public relations functions is its Information or Public Relations Department. Like public relations in business public relations work by Governments is comparatively novel. The appeal is generally to the public as a whole but there are occasions when it must be limited to and aimed at a particular group or class. This presupposes a knowledge of the people and how they think because a different approach will be required in each case

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depending upon which "public" it is desired to attract.

To go into greater detail the basic functions of a Government Information Department are - if I may borrow a phrase - "twofold and two-way" - outward and inward. In the one case it must keep the public informed about the work and policy of the various ministries of Government, explain to them the purpose of legislation, orders and regulations, and to secure their understanding and co-operation in furthering the aims of the Government.

The inward function is to keep

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the Ministers and Departments in touch with the movements of public and press opinion, their problems, anxieties and misunderstandings, and their likely reactions to new measures.

You will recall that I described an Information or Public Relations Department as one of the instruments by means of which a Government seeks to fulfil its public relations functions. I said one of the instruments because Ministers occupy a privileged position in and out of the Legislature and whatever they say of importance is news whether in the course of a legislative debate, in answer to a question in the Legislature, in speeches

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at meetings or in statements at a Press Conference. They have many opportunities of expounding Government policy, explaining new measures and securing public understaning and cooperation through the news and editorial columns of the newspapers and on the radio. This will vary between Ministers as a great deal depends on their personality, their understanding of the public and their news sense.

There are, of course, barriers to communication - obstacles which must be overcome before the message can be got across. There may be internal

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barriers like having to convince a Minister that a certain decision should be announced; barriers like lack of the capacity to understand the written word or illiteracy; like being engrossed in sport and having no interest in public affairs, like the antagonism of a newspaper editor who not only insists on presenting a distorted picture but is intent on misrepresenting the Government as a whole or a particular Minister.

Let us turn aside, however, to the means of communication. In brief, these are the Press, that is daily and weekly newspapers and magazines; broadcasting,

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that is, sound radio and television; exhibitions; films; photographs ; and printed material.

The maintenance of good relations with the Press is of very great importance to the public relations of any Government. Of course, situations may arise where good relations become impossible because of the antagonistic newspaper editor suggested as an example of a barrier to communication mentioned earlier in this discourse. It is also most important that the Public Relations Officer does not become personally involved in the

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crossfire between the antagonistic newspaper editor and the Government.

These good relations are necessary because of the great influence of the newspaper in moulding opinion not so much by what it says in its editorial columns as by the presentation of the facts on which readers may form their own judgments.

It is the job of the Public Relations Department in the field of press relations to get the news published in the newspaper. If it floods the newspaper office with inconsequential details it will gain a bad reputation and most of its releases will find their sure way into

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the wastepaper basket. It must select its information and write it attractively. It is the basic job of the newspaper to provide its readers with news. If there is any news value in the stories supplied to it by the Public Relations Department it will use - antagonism notwithstanding - the stories of news value which, after all, are the grist to its mill. The objective of the Public Relations Department is to get information to the public and it does not matter so much to it how invalid are the ~~facts~~ editorial comments so long as the facts are published.

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However, the Public Relations man has no means of ensuring that this will be done. He may see his best effort in the next day's newspaper but distorted almost beyond recognition, or he may see an editorial or leading article commenting invalidly on a matter and ignoring the facts which he had given out in a release which the newspaper had never published.

You will say, "Send a correction" but corrections are things to be sparingly used and there are times when a perverse editor will distort even a correction. I do not mean by this that all distortions in a newspaper are ~~done to~~ due to perversity for other factors also come into play, such as

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incompetence, pressure of space and lack of appreciation of the ethics of journalism.

I am now going to quote a couple long paragraphs from a small book published during the war entitled, "Psychology and World Order." The theme of the book seems to be that the perversions of news by the newspapers contributed to the occurrence of the war.

The extract reads:

"It is not necessary to say much here about the fanning of international misunderstanding by propaganda and the press. If ~~it~~ I had been content to get my idea of foreign countries from the British Popular Press of the last 20 years I do not see how I could have any conception of any single

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country which remotely resembled the truth. Its snippets of sensational news portray a people. Our local press with its accounts of village entertainments, bowling-club prize-givings and parish politics comes near enough to depicting real life for us to be reminded by it of the workers and housewives of the district with their passions for gardening and football, tennis and dancing, and their absence of all passion for high politics. In contrast, the "National Press" shows us less and

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of the real life of our own people, and little or nothing of the strangely similar but piquantly different lives of our foreign neighbours. Politically our National Press is steeped in prejudice: in the heightened ideologies of recent years nearly every journalist must become most strongly prejudiced in his political judgements. And it is in the light of the high policies of governments and

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newspaper owners that the prejudiced hournalist has to earn his living.

"But Foreign correspondents of our newspapers who live abroad often know their lands of sojourn well and could give us a much truer account of those lands than we are ever allowed to read. It is the increase in the deliberate distortion of news as it comes into newspaper offices which is the great journalistic crime of today. I do not refer to actionable lying. 'The lie that is half a truth is ever the blackest of

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lies'; and at a time when truthful information about the foreigner is a crying need of all men everywhere, it is sad to record the testimony of the head of the London Office of the New York Times (F. Kuhn in We Saw it Happen) as follows:-

'Distortion has become so common even in reputable (British) papers that it is hardly noticed; suppression occurs so frequently that I am keeping a museum of the choicest examples ... An editor of what used to be Britian's greatest newspaper boasted ... that he was as proud of what he withheld from readers as of what he published'. That boast was made before this War started.

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Such perversions of news played their part in its occurrence."

Need I, ladies and gentlemen, raise the question whether the perversions of the news in our own newspapers contribute to grave misunderstandings among our people, especially when they are given so much to sensational, fictional speculation and to commenting on matters on which they have not provided the reader with the facts?

One suggestion that might be made is that if the facts are provided to the newspaper it will then not resort to harmful, fictional speculation. That would be ideal but the fact to bear in mind is that it is not always possible to reveal Government information or steps need to be taken before a disclosure can be made. Unauthorised

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disclosure ~~can be~~ by an official to the newspaper is to be deprecated as much as publication by the newspaper, especially where its obvious intention is to embarrass the Government. Of course, nothing can be done about this in the field of public relations and no steps can be taken against the newspaper unless it breaks the law.

Some might say the Government could counteract all this by having its own newspaper but it is not in the ~~em~~ democratic tradition for Governments to run newspapers for general circulation. That is more properly for the political party of the Government or the Government's supporters.

Where a democratic Government finds itself blocked from proper access to the

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newspapers it may have to seek other avenues for imparting information. It is necessary in this instance to come right home and without going to unnecessary detail - to refer to the Premeir's Press Conference. Perhaps I should disabuse your minds of the nonsense which some people have trotted out as to what is a Press Conference.

I have at home a reputable modern book on Public Relations which contains a chapter on Press Relations by a man who has worked on the Manchester Guardian, in a top position on a leading Australian newspaper and is now back in England in the newspaper field. This is what he says on the press conference:

"A press conference is a meeting between journalists and a person, or

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persons, who have, or think they have, news to communicate.

"Procedure may be as formal as the circumstances dictate. As regards members present, it can range from a chat in the open air between one or two reporters and a news purveyor to a meeting between, say, a foreign secretary and the national and international press in strength, at which some momentous policy is announced. The equipment needed may range from none ~~to all~~ at all to complicated and expensive apparatus for verbatim recording, simultaneous translation, with facilities for radio, ~~newspa~~

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newreel and television coverage."

You can see films of President Eisenhower's Press Conference at the offices of the United States Information Service in Port of Spain. But the point I was making was that when the daily newspapers deny a Government spokesman access to its columns, the Government may have to seek other means of imparting information.

When the newspapers thought they could bring pressure to bear on the Premier by boycotting his Press Conference they failed to realise that they were fighting against a most powerful medium of information - the Radio. They wanted the Premier to direct what he had to say through their columns rather than doing it also over their heads direct to the public. The broadcasting of

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the Press Conference had a great corrective function in that the reader of the Sunday morning newspapers, by listening in to the broadcast on Sunday night, was able to see where the newspapers had misled him because he heard the Premier's exact words. The ultimate effect - if the newspapers continued to attend and distorted - would have been to undermine the reader's faith in the accuracy and reliability of their news service. One newspaper editor at least appears to have come to terms with reality, if he is not willing to recant after declaring publicly that he would send no reporter to Press Conferences so long as it was broadcast. He now takes stories given at the Premier's Press

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Conference from the rival radio station and, I am informed, copies the tapes of the Press Conference sent to ~~its~~ his own station to be transcribed for stories in his newspaper.

Apart from the Press and the Radio, I have already mentioned the other means whereby the Government presents itself to the public. The most important of these media is the Film which has a particular appeal to all peoples, literate or ~~illi~~ illiterate, and which even when silent can be accompanied by a spoken commentary.

Along with the film is the powerful medium of Television which has not yet made its entry into our little world and of which I will only make mention because when it comes its impact on our life is likely to be terrific.

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But first the problem will have to be solved whether it should be entrusted to commercial firms as has happened to sound broadcasting and if so whether the operator should be local or foreigh - an important ~~opera~~ question when we are on the threshold of independence - or whether television should be operated on public service lines and in what way should the Government itself make use of it as a medium of information.

I think you will agree that it is vital for the public to know what the Government is doing and that it is the business of Government to let thepublic know. I realise some of you will feel I have only skirted the whole question but that should give you the opportunity to raise points which occur to you for discussion.