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# How influential is the Press?

DURING my later years as a correspondent in London a youngish attaché at the embassy asked me, soon after his arrival, which of the British papers I considered to be the most influential.

The question is an interesting one, but it is not very easy to answer. To start with one has to try to define the term influential as clearly as possible: is it meant in the sense that the Press can influence governmental or parliamentary decision and policy? Or is it meant in the sense that it can and does influence public opinion?

I do not think that any British newspaper – or any Swiss one for that matter – has so much influence that it can induce a government or parliament to take decisions which it would not have taken anyway.

If leader writers, and be they ever so prominent in the hierarchy of the fourth estate, think that they can force governments or government departments to decide matters according to their own wishes, then they overestimate their own influence.

As an example I need only quote the Daily Express with its four million circulation: it thundered against Britain's entry into the European Community during months and years, but without achieving its

aim. This is only one of many examples which show that governments are hardly ever directly influenced by the Press.

Another one would date back to the autumn of 1956 when the then Prime Minister Anthony Eden ignored a very powerful press campaign against any military intervention against President Nasser's Egypt and did the very thing the mass media (and the Church and the trade unions) advised against.

On the other hand the Press can and does vitally influence public opinion. And since no democratic government can ignore public opinion for long, it can be said that the Press can – and often does – indirectly influence governmental thinking. Many people on the Continent believe that the London Times – known also as "The Thunderer" – is a governmental organ, and that whatever the Times says reflects governmental thinking.

This is of course a totally

erroneous belief, even if it is true that the Times has in the past occasionally been used by Conservative Prime Ministers to influence public opinion.

One such case dates back to 1936 when the then (Conservative) PM Stanley Baldwin was determined to bring about the abdication of the then reigning King Edward VIII over the Wallis Simpson affair. The Times received a flood of readers' letters during that crisis – many, as one now knows, in favour of a morganatic marriage of the King, but many also in favour of abdication.

As only the latter ones were ever published, at least a section of the public's opinion was influenced in the sense which Baldwin wanted. It was, in other words, a case of indirect governmental influence on public opinion, and not vice-versa.

Another well-known such case dates back to 1938, when the then (Conservative) Prime

Minister Neville Chamberlain influenced the Times to publish an article about "far away Sudetenland", to which, it was stated, Nazi Germany might well have a legitimate claim.

Can the Press make or break governments? Or can television do it? Again it is not easy to give a "Yes or No" reply to this question. I do, however, remember a case, of which it can be said that a newspaper was instrumental in bringing down an immensely popular Prime Minister. I refer, of course, to the election campaign in June-July 1945, just after the end of World War Two.

Most observers took it for granted that the architect of victory in Europe, Winston Churchill, would be re-elected with a large majority. But the Daily Mirror, that widely read Left-wing paper with its five million circulation and its handy small format, had decided that it was time for a change.

It published, during the most crucial moments of the campaign, a picture of Churchill over the whole front page, showing him with a revolver in his hand and his finger on the trigger. This picture inferred, of course, that Churchill was a trigger-happy warrior, and thus a national danger in peacetime.

It is impossible to say how many voters were thus influenced to vote Labour, but it can certainly be said that the Daily Mirror had substantially contributed to Churchill's defeat. He himself, as is now known, first thought of suing the Mirror's editor, but after a few days thought better of it and dropped the idea.

The influence of the Press and of other media, direct or indirect, can, as these few examples have shown, be considerable. And sometimes one can even speak of a kind of inter-dependence between the executive and the fourth estate.

GOTTFRIED KELLER

## A pact of mutual respect

THE extradition treaty between Britain and Switzerland was 100 years old last week.

During its lengthy existence literally dozens of criminals have been repatriated by both countries to face trial, and often imprisonment, at home.

The treaty – at the time only the second to be entered into by the Swiss – was signed in Berne on November 26, 1880, by the British Minister to the Swiss Confederation, the Hon. Hussey Crespigny Vivian, and the Vice President of the Swiss Federal Council, F. Anderwerth, who was also chief of the Federal Department of Justice.

It covered all common crimes

and offences punishable by more than three months imprisonment, but excluded political, fiscal and military misdemeanours.

The treaty was declared operational in Switzerland and Great Britain including all her dominions and foreign possessions.

However today, following the dissolution of the Empire, it continues to be honoured by Canada, Australia and South Africa but to a much lesser extent by the newly-independent former colonies.

One curious feature of the treaty is the lack of complete reciprocity. This results from the

Swiss constitution, which forbids the expulsion or extradition of a Swiss national from his country. The British have no such reservations. So when crimes are committed on British soil by a Swiss fugitive Her Majesty's Government has to demand punishment of the fugitive by his fellow countrymen.

But despite the anomalies extraditions continue, denoting the mutual respect and understanding that exists between the two countries.

Perhaps a sign of the times, the traffic is actually on the increase, the Swiss now requesting around four extraditions a year mainly for drug offences.