Construction, conformity and control: the taming of the Daily Herald 1921-30

Thesis

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Section Five
The year following Baldwin's intervention was to see the Herald breaking with two of the deep-rooted traditions that had defined its previous existence. The first discontinuity was summed up by Lansbury's simple statement at the 1924 TUC: “The Daily Herald for the first time in its history has for the past six months paid its way".(1)

The profits were not large, and were to be fairly short-lived. But they halted the attrition of finance and morale brought about by endless heavy losses and constant fears of closure. There is relatively little about 1924 in the Herald archives, suggesting that this was a mercifully uneventful year in which the leadership gratefully seized the chance to concentrate on other things - above all the first-ever Labour Government, which took office under the leadership of MacDonald late in January 1924.

Discontinuity number two was summarised in Fyfe's leader welcoming the new government to office. While it referred to the movement as a whole, it could as easily and aptly be applied to the Herald: "Up to now its political representatives have been critics; they have attacked Tory and Liberal governments for sins of omission and commission; they have told what they would do and what they would avoid if they had the opportunity of governing.

"Now they have it; now they are critics no longer; they become marks for criticism; now the great Movement which they have behind them waits for its leaders to justify the confidence and loyalty that have placed them where they are".(2)

Opposition was deeply rooted in the Herald's culture - it had until recently been an opposition force within the movement. It is also fundamental to journalistic culture - most journalists are by definition happier in the roles of critic and sceptic than those of the loyal follower or cheerleader.

Fyfe faced a considerable challenge on the day Labour took office - that of coping within the confines of a six-column front page with three stories that would normally have been deemed worthy of splash treatment: the first Labour Government, a national railway strike and the death of Lenin.(3)
But this pales beside the challenge of bending the Herald to the task of reporting a government, it was officially bound to support without reducing all coverage to predictable propagandist tedium. With the threat of extinction temporarily lifted, this would be the dominating theme of the Herald's life for the next twelve months.

I. In Profit

The 1923 General Election and its aftermath might have been designed with the Herald's needs in minds - not only the excitement of a poll in which Labour made significant advances, but an inconclusive outcome and subsequent hiatus sustaining interest in the paper's primary political agenda for a further seven weeks - which also included first the threat and then the reality of a national rail strike. And all these natural circulation-pullers had fallen to a paper that had already cut its costs severely to ensure survival.

The Herald had started the election campaign with a circulation of just under 300,000. It rose to 364,900 on December 1st and topped 400,000 when the results were declared.

Newspaper World reported: "On the morning of December 7 it was almost impossible to pick up a spare copy in small newsagents shops or at the station bookstall. A Teddington reader tried three local newsagents and the bookstalls at Teddington and Waterloo stations - not one of which had a copy of the Herald". Circulation was still more than 370,000 at the end of the year. The installation of the new government and the railway strike pushes the daily print back above 400,000 again.

Advertising had followed a similar trend. In December the Herald had been making a virtue of necessity, arguing that the lack of advertisements meant there was more content for the reader. But by 9th February Lansbury was reckoning that income was up by 75 per cent. By mid April Poyser was reporting an average of #1067 per week for the first 15 weeks of the year, up more than 100 per cent on 1923. Current advertising income was running at more than #1,300 per week - more than 20 per cent of the paper's overall income - against between 10 and 12 per cent six months earlier.
On 12th December the threat of closure was formally lifted as Pugh told the General Council that increased circulation and reduced losses meant it would survive at least until the next TUC. As the year ended TUC president Margaret Bondfield and general secretary Fred Bramley, appealing for a further boost in sales, said: "The Daily Herald is now just on the borderline of permanent security. Another united push and we are on the right side", they said. (6)

On 9th February Lansbury again took the state of the Herald as the subject for his Saturday sermon. But where readers had previously been used to him deploying his eloquent optimism against all the odds in pursuit of survival, the tone this time was bright, chipper and slightly ironic.

Under the headline "How We Stand and What We May Yet Do", Lansbury explained: "If we are not very careful we shall within a very short time find ourselves in the same position as our worthy competitors - the Rothermeres, Beaverbrooks, Burnhams and Riddells. We shall actually be making money. When this happens you may all look out for shocks.

"Unless we are all very severely held in check you may find us launching a 12 page paper again. As it is we are often obliged to give you ten pages because of the success of our advertisement staff" (7)

This was to a great extent yet another false dawn. Far from rising to the 500,000 Lansbury appealed for, sales were to start draining slowly as the year went on. But the freedom from short-term fear resulting from the election boost meant that for a while the Herald's harassed management could regard the front page as more important than the balance sheet.

Content: The 1923 General Election

Elections are periods of heightened purpose for political newspapers, exaggerating their characteristics and concentrating their efforts on a single purpose. Always pronounced, the Herald's political emphasis became overwhelming. Every day from the calling of the election on 13th November until French Socialist leader Leon Blum's attack on the occupation of the Ruhr on 15th December, nine days after polling day, the front page lead was devoted to a domestic political story. In the never-ending dialectic between news and propaganda the Herald swung inevitably back to propaganda. (8)
All other priorities were subordinated to winning the election, with coverage in bulk. As early as 20th November, sixteen days before the poll, the front six pages were dominated by the campaign. (9)

Its tone was well described, rather unwittingly, by Way of the World, in a satirical view of press coverage of the first week of the election that applied as well to the Herald as to any of its intended targets:

"Every party leader gets an enthusiastic reception everywhere

All our trade statistics go to prove that every party policy is right

Every party is even more absolutely united than it was last week

All parties are going to come out on top." (10)

Three basic purposes can be seen in. The first was that of acting as a conduit from the central leadership to candidates and other organisers in the country. The second was that of driving home Labour's campaign agenda, and the third that of describing the progress of the election in a manner that enthused the activists and emphasised Labour advances.

The conduit approach was most explicit three days before the poll when a frontpage bold print box bore the distinct marks of an official directive: "WHAT LABOUR SPEAKERS MUST DRIVE HOME. Only three days are left in which to win votes for Labour. Speakers must now concentrate on the strongest arguments. There must be no waste of effort; no dwelling on secondary issues." (11)

Agenda-setting expressed itself in part in expository articles on the capital levy, but in the main in fierce assaults on the other parties. Here the lash was particularly applied to the Liberals - an approach in line with MacDonald's plan of displacing them as the main left-centre party and reflecting rivalry for the free trade vote.

The Herald argued that free trade was not the issue, and that in fundamentals the other parties had little between them. This approach had been made explicit even before the election was called: "Very well. Labour will challenge. Labour does challenge.

"But it challenges on a wider field than Mr Baldwin proposes. Not in the old artificial issue between tariffs and free trade, but on the real issue between Capitalism and Socialism the conflict will come". (12)
From mid-campaign this was supplemented by claims that reactionary elements in the older parties were colluded. This struck directly at the Liberals and had the virtue of containing an element of truth provided by meetings at Lord Beaverbrook's Leatherhead home. The Herald report drew the moral: "The issue is not between Free Trade and Protection. "It is between Labour and a Coalition of which the figureheads would be Lloyd George and Chamberlain, Churchill and Birkenhead, but of which the real masters would be the Press-Gang peers - Lords Rothermere and Beaverbrook".

Like many Herald news stories it concluded with a punchline explaining the purpose of the whole report: "Every vote given for a Liberal, every vote given for a Tory is a vote given for the Old Gang which has brought disaster after disaster on Britain during these unhappy years". (13)

The attack on the Liberals was stepped up in the last week, signalled by a front-page banner on 2nd December "A vote for the Liberals is a vote for Tories" and driven home through a virulent series of profiles 'Records of the Liberal Statesmen'. These started with Churchill, headlined as "Strike Breaker, War Maker and Political Intriguer" and running on to delineate Lloyd George, Asquith and Grey in scarcely more complementary terms. (14)

Labour's alternative to this had expressed during Leatherhead coverage by a leader expressing the strong millenarian element in the movement's appeal and motivation. Fyfe, an ethical convert, cast his rhetoric in terms that saw the Labour plea as a crusade above mere politics. The heightened purposefulness of election injected an extra element of purple into his prose: "The only party which has a real programme, the only one which understands how to remedy unemployment, the only one which is inspired by the noble ideals of Justice, Freedom, Generosity and Comradeship; the only one which looks beyond the petty war of politics and marches forward with its eyes fixed firmly on the City of God, a city in which there shall be no workless, no wage-slavery, no hungry children and no slums". (15)

That vision of Labour as a crusading force was also expressed in news coverage focussing on Ramsay MacDonald's tour of the country: "The success of Mr Ramsay MacDonald's tour has exceeded every expectation and beggars description. "Everywhere Mr MacDonald is greeted by loyal workers whose zeal is heightened by personal affection". (16)
The report of his arrival in Northampton on 20th November, a picture of the great popular leader being greeted by his people, was all the more vivid for the contrast with Stanley Baldwin on the same page speaking to an audience described in a favourite Herald term of denigration as "Thoroughly Comfortable".

"Magnificent' is the only word which can fittingly describe the reception accorded Mr Ramsay MacDonald on his arrival here tonight.

"All the way from the station to the cinema, where the meeting was being held, the brilliantly lighted car which local friends had provided, and in which Mr MacDonald sat beside Miss Margaret Bondfield, passed beneath cheering supporters who eventually 'fell in' and followed it.

"Towards the door the crowd was so closely packed that the police had a stiff task in keeping the way cleared.

"The hall itself was already packed to the last inch, quite a third of the audience being obliged to stand, and the cheering was tremendous when Mr MacDonald entered".(17)

Herald readers were also left in little doubt that the crusade was going well. As early as 21st November the main headline read "Why Labour is winning the Great Campaign" while the final week saw "Fighting Like A Winning Party: Evidence of Amazing Enthusiasm : Labour Hopes Rise, while Opponents' Anxiety Grows".(18)

The optimism was justified - even if the Herald's post-poll claim of 197 Labour members was a clear sub-editing error. An increase from 144 members to 192 consolidated Labour's second-party role, with the Conservatives losing their overall majority and dropping to 252 while the Liberals took 149. The Herald naturally enough hailed the result as "Labour's Magnificent Progress at the Polls".(19)

But the implications of the result appear for a moment to have been lost on it. With his protectionist appeal denied a majority Baldwin could hardly claim a mandate. But if not him, who? The uncertainty of the following weeks, with the prospect of Labour taking office for the first time, was exactly the sort of political excitement in which the Herald both revelled editorially and prospered in sales terms.
ii. Content: Taking Office

It was also a time of fierce debate, with the issue of whether Labour should grasp office if it were offered by no means clearcut. Sydney Webb reported that Arthur Henderson was the only major leader wholeheartedly in favour of taking office although Snowden’s biographer Colin Cross argues that he and MacDonald also felt taking office was inevitable. (20)

On the left James Maxton was opposed, but found himself in a minority among the Clydesiders and the ILP, where most opinion favoured taking office, putting forward a boldly radical programme and daring other parties to turn them out. (21)

The Herald aligned itself firmly with the centre against the left, and reached this position before the decision to take office was made by the national committees. Not taking office, it argued on 10th December, would fail the unemployed and the activists - allowing opponents to argue that while Labour asked for the job of government, it would not take it when offered.

"We are only putting an imaginary case. We are asking ourselves whether it would be possible for Labour to do something for the workless at once. They are our most pressing problem. Their condition is bound up closely with foreign policy. To help them and all of us - for their wretchedness hurts us all - is the mandate with which 192 Labour members have been returned.

"No bargaining with any other party can be thought of. No working arrangement can be considered. But if Labour took a bold and vigorous line, the other parties might be frightened into letting it go through.

"There are objections. They leap to the eyes. There are objections to every course. Is it worth thinking about? What do our leaders say?" (22)

While waiting for their answer the Herald outlined a possible Labour programme, again aligning itself with the centre by excluding the Capital Levy as impossible until a majority was attained. Debate among the leadership was paralleled in the correspondence columns: "We give an equal show to the "Noes" and "Ayes", but it should be pointed out that, taking the letters that reach us as a whole, the vast majority are in favour. (23)
And when the national committees opted for a course of action roughly paralleling its own recommendations, the Herald was not slow to take credit and treat this as in part tribute to its own influence: "The suggestion made in our issue of Monday last has been very quickly taken up by the leaders of the Labour Movement". (24)

But it was to be another six weeks before Labour actually took office. On one hand the Herald muttered darkly about plots to keep Labour from power and delays between the return of parliament and the crucial vote. On the other it noted, in a leader notable both for the absence of any belief or hope that a Labour government would represent any form of radical change and for an apparent conflation of the metropolitan chattering classes with the nation, that the hiatus was toning down public reaction to the political novelty: "It is instructive to notice how quickly people have got used to the idea of a Labour government. At first they were most of them incredulous. They felt alarmed - a few went so far as to put their money into American securities, losing half-a-crown in the pound on the transaction. Now they have become accustomed to the prospect they are sensible enough to see that there is nothing to be alarmed at, they are discussing what Labour will do with a great deal of interest and without excitement or panic" (25).

This was a clear endorsement of MacDonald's determination to prove that Labour was safe and respectable. The premier-designate remained the centrepiece of political coverage as tension was maintained - a photograph of him on holiday was captioned wistfully "What Are His Thoughts?" while an article on cabinet-making was Headlined "Secrets that only Mr MacDonald knows". (26)

There was clear excitement too as the new Parliament assembled in London and Fyfe attended an Albert Hall rally his signed report said was the most remarkable he had seen in a lifetime of political meetings - flattering his readers by implication in his description of the audience: "There was in their faces a light of idealism, in their eyes a shining of intelligence which you certainly could not find in any mass meeting of Liberal or Conservative supporters.

"And it was this which raised the speeches to so high a level. All who addressed them felt they must rise to the level of the occasion. Every speech was worthy of it, and of those who listened so eagerly, and with such enlightened interest". (27)
He said: "This appears to me to be the business of the Council and consisting as it does, in the main, of experienced Trade Union officials, and men of national standing with qualifications which justify their position, I think that you ought to leave all questions of policy to be dealt with by the national body elected for the purpose...

"I think it would be much better for the writers on the Herald to limit their attention to giving publicity to the policies laid down by the people responsible and popularising the objects we have in view as they are made clear and definite from time to time in our circulars and publications". (32)

But in line with his previous policy, Fyfe refused to be restricted to this role. The Herald's attitude to the Labour government was that of the "Candid friend" - supportive and defending it from attacks by outsiders, but reserving the right to offer dissenting advice and opinions in the best interests of government and movement.

The supportive role was seen at its strongest in parliamentary coverage, where attacks on government came from the other parties. Thus Bracher's summary of "What Labour Has Achieved" might have gone straight into electoral addresses: "The record of the first Labour Government during its first session is one that reflects the greatest credit upon it, when the circumstances in which it holds office are taken into account.

"It has passed a budget which is the most popular in living memory, and which reduces the cost of living for all, most appreciably for the very poorest...a Housing Act...an Agricultural Wages Act...recognised the Soviet Government...brought a new atmosphere into foreign affairs which will help to promote a settlement of Europe". (33)

Having argued the centrist line for taking power on a cautious programme, it rejected left criticisms of the government for being insufficiently radical. As Labour took office it implied some sympathy with the frustrations of the left: "A great many among us might have preferred a different kind of ministry, other things being equal. But other things were not equal". But the same leader concluded by saying of MacDonald: "Had he acted as some people in the Movement would have had him act. He would have started with a rope, not only around his ankles, but round his neck". (34)
When an unambitious programme was unveiled, Fyfe examined it from the point of view of the unemployed: "A Government", they would say, "which deliberately tried to do things at present impossible, in preference to improving the condition of the people, would betray its supporters... If we were all prosperous, if no misery and hardship called for redress, it would be a fine dramatic effect to challenge Parliament on the Capital Levy or on nationalisation. To do so at the expense of Millions who are in sore need and distress would be callously cruel".(35)

This pragmatic line was followed when the government, rejecting its own declared policy and the Herald's past editorial line, accepted higher air force estimates on the grounds of public opinion. Its argument was a classic exposition of the "realist" as opposed to the ethical view of power: "No man ought to hold office", some people argue, "unless he acts in every particular exactly as his conscience dictates.

"If that rule were in operation, nobody would take office, nobody that is, with a conscience. The affairs of the nation would then be managed by men without consciences. We should go from bad to worse. As it is, we are going from bad to better, but we cannot do it in one great leap".(36)

Critics of government moderation thus received short shrift. In May GDH Cole and HG Wells attacked it from the left, and were in turn criticised by Railway Servants president Gill. The Herald, its pro-government stance accentuated by a rare burst of populist anti-intellectualism, had no hesitation in backing the mainstream view of the trade unionist - who had led the debenture holders move for the takeover of the paper back in 1921: "Of course it has not done all that the most eager of Labour men and women would have liked it to do. No government ever does please those who were keenest about seeing it in office. But is the best way to help it to satisfy the eager ones to attack it and say it is a contemptible failure? No the best way, as Mr Gill says, is to line up behind it and show that there is a demand for greater energy and bolder initiative. However these "intellectuals" need not be taken too seriously. They are both novelists, and novelists get into the way of looking for "sensation".(37)
Direct criticism of government policy was ruled out, in the early stages at least. But among the most effective means by which candid political friends convey discontent without outright dissent is criticism of presentation. Labour policy might have been moderate, but the Herald held that it should be prosecuted with conviction and vigour. Thus the Clydesider Minister of Health John Wheatley rapidly became a favourite. "Be bold, be bold again, be ever bold" urged the leader comparing his success in the Commons with an unhappy display by India secretary Lord Olivier - described as cold and bureaucratic.

Wheatley, it was said, showed "The irresistible value of judiciously bold and vigorous leadership". In the Commons, the leader argued : "The men who win respect and confidence are those who have the courage of their convictions, the leaders who boldly lead". (38)

And not only men. Margaret Bondfield's front bench debut was commended as showing her "The best man of the lot" among the Employment team, with the vigour of her approach favourably contrasted with the caution of Minister of Labour Tom Shaw, put on the defensive when he might have been attacking opposition parties' past records. (39)

The Premier was always excepted from such criticisms. A defeat in early April was blamed on the deputising Clynes : "The bold front was dropped. A conciliatory, almost apologetic tone was taken". When the government ran into difficulties the Herald said this would bring into play "His exceptional genius for Parliamentary leadership". (40)

Just as exceptional was his personal sensitivity, and relations between MacDonald and the paper that praised him so fulsomely deteriorated rapidly during his first administration. The initial problem appears to have been the Herald's attitude to the Labour cabinet ministers wearing court dress.

This was a significant symbolic issue for the movement. For MacDonald the decision to wear court dress was a crucial demonstration of Labour's integration within the existing system. Many activists saw this as a form of integration they wanted to avoid - exactly the sort of upperclass flummery that the movement existed to do away with. The Herald line on compromises with the status quo, such as adopting a moderate programme, was that there was nothing wrong with them provided they were for a practical purpose. It could see little practical about court dress.
The initial response was mildly indulgent - Way of the World describing MacDonald's first appearance in the outlandish garb as a "Penalty of Office", and taking his mildly ironic comments, misleadingly, as reluctant acceptance of the dress: "I feel like a Free Church elder", said Mr MacDonald yesterday morning when he appeared in his blacks, a coat with tails instead of his normal jacket. He would much have preferred to wear the latter, but he is a man who holds that it is always better to hurt one's own feelings than other people's. As Buckingham Palace attaches great importance to costume, he decided to fall in with its ideas as to proper dress for the occasion". (41)

There were never any editorial attacks on MacDonald or any other leader for wearing court dress. But the Herald's view was made clear when it sympathised with a minister who refused an invitation to dine with the Speaker because of dress requirements - exactly the sort of gesture which was guaranteed to infuriate MacDonald: "There is no reason, indeed, we can see why politicians should be expected to change their social habits and to attend festivities out of their line just because they have accepted great responsibility as members of the government. This kind of thing belongs to the past - and might as well be left there". (42)

And if the paper chose not to make direct attacks itself, it was prepared to print them in letters columns which resounded to vigorous controversy throughout 1924 as an expression of Fyfe's pluralist view of the Herald's role: "It is very important that no section shall feel resentment at not being allowed to express its views in its own newspaper", he was to argue in correspondence with MacDonald later in the year. (43)

Court dress was one of the first issues of serious controversy, with the critics quicker off the mark. JC Dempsey of Rothwell, Northants, asked: "Did we pour our energy and strength at the last election so that our leaders might go riding with Royal Princes and patter about in gold braid and toy swords at King's parties. Oh for a whiff of Keir Hardie". (44)
There was something of a counter-attack by supporters of court dress - a regular pattern in Herald letter-page controversies, was for the right to start writing only after an issue had been pressed by the left, suggesting that left-wingers were still more likely to see it as their paper. But the issue simmered on through the year, with eight local parties choosing to adopt critical resolutions for party conference. The Herald's decision to lead its summary of that year's resolutions with the Court Dress motions - quoting South Kensington's description of it as "Ridiculous and harmful", Scarborough's "Foolish" and Limehouse's call for "Rational and Democratic" attire - was calculated to strike MacDonald as gratuitous.(45)

MacDonald felt entitled to unquestioning support and said so in a long correspondence with Fyfe which has not survived. Fyfe recalled: "He protested against our publishing anything that questioned his wisdom or acts of his Government. To my submissions that it was the duty of a newspaper belonging to the Movement, to all the Trade Unionists and all Labour Party members throughout the country, to allow opinions to be expressed and the words and acts of leaders discussed, he fretfully objected.

"Over and over again, in long letters written by his own hand, he complained not only of what had appeared in our columns, but of my letting correspondents have their way".(46)

That hostility was accentuated in May when a Herald leader was violently critical of the conduct of a Conservative committee chair as the Housing Bill was obstructed. Fyfe was summoned before a committee of privileges, chaired by the Prime Minister who made it clear that he regarded the offence as a serious one. The Herald's persistent use of the term 'antiquated' made it equally clear that it did not.(47)

But the Herald had still yet to directly criticise a government policy. That final sanction of the candid friend was to be invoked during the summer over the government's continuation of the bombing of fractious Iraqi tribesmen. Hostile letters and resolutions mounted during July, prompting the Herald to run an interview with junior air minister William Leech, a former conscientious objector, justifying the policy.

Leech argued there was little alternative: "Six months ago Labour took office and we proceeded at once to re-examine the whole position. Could we clear out? No, because a bond had been made to stay the term of four years."
"Could we drop the use of air methods? Yes, but it meant a dreadful cost of British lives and the lengthening of our stay. It meant a vast increase of ground forces and of cost to the British taxpayer."

Leech said the RAF were "invariably the model of chivalry", and that it was for critics to tell the government what they would do instead. (48)

Fyfe's comment a day later was decidedly double-edged: "Were I in his place I might be behaving exactly as he behaves". It was unrealistic to expect ministers to resist the compulsion to be "practical". But it was equally important that followers keep their principles: "We must always keep ahead of the people who govern. If they are wise they will see that this is useful and necessary". (49)

The Herald had been prepared to argue for "realism" over air force credits. It could in extremis be argued that air credits did not actually kill anybody. The policy in Iraq did - an actual wrong as against the principled wrong represented by the credits. And if MacDonald's tetchiness could be blamed on the pressures of office, it is possible that the considerable pressures of editorship and the stream of complaints for Downing Street were having a comparable effect on Fyfe's temper.

The consequence was a leader of extraordinary ferocity in mid August: "What would be said if they enforced private claims by throwing explosives into their neighbours' homes. How could they defend themselves against national indignation if they justified such an action by saying that their neighbours were imperfectly civilised and that it saved trouble to throw hand grenades among them? Yet that is exactly the attitude of Lord Thomson and Mr Leech, and with them the whole of the Cabinet, in a matter affecting not themselves personally, but the country....
"This will not do. The Labour Movement did not make General Thomson a peer and put him into an official position in order that he might officially repudiate one of the principles upon which the Movement is founded. As for Mr Leech, his conversion to the Creed of Militarism can only be explained by Shelley's lines:

"Power like a devastating pestilence.
Pollutes whate'er it touches."

"Is he or any of the Cabinet, going to speak at the No-More War meeting this month? If so, what are they going to say?" (50)

Leech struck back with his "What would you do?" line, but found himself under heavy fire from the readers, his few supporters outnumbered.

This row triggered off another. Within days the letters column was dominated by a debate over the Herald's right to criticise the government, with opinion overwhelming on its side.

JW Roberts of Birmingham argued "Criticism is helpful; it enables the government to see itself as others see it". For L Ingham of Brighouse "The day when the editorial columns of the Daily Herald become an official gramophone, it will cease to be a leader of public opinion". (51)

And EM White of West Runton, Norfolk, delved into memories of the Chronicle under Lloyd George's control: "The Daily Chronicle used to be known among us as the 'official boot-licker', because whatever a certain politician said or did was always right in its eyes. Heaven forbid that the Daily Herald should ever descend to that position!" (52)

Within a month a new controversy blew up when Ernest Hunter, a member of MacDonald's staff, claimed the unions lacked an effective political and industrial strategy. While rejecting the criticism, the Herald said this was the sort of issue that should be aired in public to allow open and honest debate. MacDonald, quoted by Hunter as attacking Poplarism, was doubtless in even less agreement than before after being attacked in turn in the Herald by backbencher John Scurr - still at this time on the left. If Poplarism was not socialism, said Scurr: "I have failed to understand what Socialism is after being a member of a Socialist body for 26 years". (53)
By this time MacDonald's discontent with the Herald was coming to wider notice. Beatrice Webb, who recorded his complaints that "The party had behaved badly, the Parliamentary executive regards itself as a court martial and the Daily Herald queering his pitch permanently" (182).

His unhappiness was poured out in a four-page letter to Fyfe complaining that the paper was "Doing us far more harm than service...a dumping-ground for rubbish which would be put in the waste-paper basket by anyone who knew his business or who was not out for mischief". He said it would be better "If the Herald came out honestly in the open as an organ hostile to the Government or, at any rate, to me?"

Fyfe's reply was a statement of his pluralist policy: "The Herald is the organ, not of your Government, not of a Party, but of the Labour Movement. In that Movement there are many currents of opinion... It would be foolish to aim at making the policy of the Herald fit in with all these currents of opinion, but it is very important that no section shall feel resentment at not being allowed to express its views in its own newspaper..."

"If I were to say to any section of them" I will not publish your opinions because that would be unpleasant to the Prime Minister", there would be good reason to retort that I was setting the momentary interest of a Ministry above the permanent interest of the Movement, which is beyond question the greater of the two.

"I never publish complaints or criticism of the Government unless I know - from my study of the mass of correspondence which comes in every day - that it represents a fairly large body of opinion. You could not point to any letter, much less to any article - which did not voice the feelings of a great many people in the Movement....."

"You tell me I don't know my business as an editor. Assuredly I have much yet to learn, but I have been in training for thirty years. You have been Prime Minister for eight months without any previous experience. Isn't it just possible that you have some things to learn too?" (55)

If Fyfe is to be believed his forthrightness helped restore relations - recording that MacDonald took the rebukes well and, somewhat cryptically, "was soon writing as usual". Since on Fyfe's own account these 'usual' writings were deeply unfriendly it is hard to work out what he means. (56)
Other accounts suggest that any improvement was either temporary or minimal. The account of MacDonald's state of mind given to CP Scott by New Leader editor HN Brailsford in late November suggests either that there was some error in transmission or that he was, in the wake of a General Election defeat, in the grip of serious paranoia: "He was furious with the 'Herald' which perhaps was not wonderful as its editor was a Communist and perhaps hated MacDonald more than any other person in the world". (57)

Anyone who could see Fyfe as a Communist clearly had serious problems. But MacDonald's reaction to the Herald's attempts to act as candid friend to his government had an important message for the paper. While journalistic instincts and assumptions pushed in the direction of pluralism, political pressures applied by the people who funded it would increasingly drive the Herald in the opposite direction - towards an imposed top-down official line. The reactions of MacDonald and Bramley - and there is little to indicate that they were untypical in this respect - show that Labour's leaders did not want a lively, entertaining paper giving a voice to the full diversity of the movement. They wanted one that would do what it was told, and instruct its readers to do the same.

Further challenges to the government came in a series of industrial disputes - 1924 was to be the busiest year for strikes since 1921, although disputes were shorter, with fewer days lost than in any year since 1918. Industry still ran a close second to party politics among the Herald's priorities. Strikes were, not least, still good for business - Lansbury reckoned that the rail dispute was the major factor in the rise over 400,000 sale at the end of January. (58)

From the start the Herald, doubtless well briefed by General Council directors, emphasised that having a Labour government would not cramp union options. With both the rail strike and office looming in January it commented: "Such a strike would undoubtedly cause difficulties for any government, but it is a delusion to imagine that Labour's advent to political power will be allowed to have the effect of crippling Labour's industrial activity". (59)
This proved to be the case, with Bevin appearing on the front page almost as often as MacDonald in the first half of the year. The London bus and tram strike provoked the government into threatening the use of Emergency Powers when a tube strike was also called. As confrontation loomed the Herald derided the idea that emergency powers would be used to strike-break - when the government's intention to use them if necessary was announced it chose, not for the first time when confronted with tricky choices, not to comment in its leader columns. The settlement relieved the paper of the unpleasant choice between government and unions.(60)

The Government's main industrial tactic was the Court of Inquiry - an industrial reflection of the Labour taste for Royal Commissions noted by shrewd German observer Egon Wertheimer. TUC secretary Bramley told George Thomas, Industrial Editor that too many inquiries would break down the role of the unions, but the Herald took the government view, arguing that "Prevention is better than cure" in a pro-inquiries leader.(61)

One possible factor in this viewpoint was that inquiries provided classic Herald copy, combining detailed examination of pay and conditions with partisan polemic. The Mines inquiry in May was quoted as showing "A wonderful revelation of the capitalist mind and attitude towards the human needs of people...The miners claim that human values must be taken into account was challenged by the owner advocate Mr Evan Williams. His point of view was clearly that of a businessman with a disregard for values that were not strictly related to the economics of his industry".(62)

Two disputes that did happen placed the Herald in an uncomfortable position. It was always happiest when the movement could be united against an external threat, and correspondingly unhappy when there was an internal clash of interest. In consequence its response to the rail drivers strike, described by JH Thomas of the National Union of Railwaymen as a "fiasco" at the same time as Bromley of ASLEF was claiming an "Amazing response" was deliberately even-handed. Both points of view got exactly equal space - even though news coverage left little doubt that the strike was seen as effective. Readers were told there was insufficient space to print all the letters about the strike, or even all those from railwaymen, but that "Several correspondents bitterly criticised the statements of JH Thomas".(63)
Similarly revealing was its response to the London docks dispute. The basic problems of low pay and casual employment were little different to 1923 but this time the strikers had official Transport and General Workers Union backing. This, to the Herald, made all the difference. In contrast to the previous year it lined itself up firmly behind the strikers: “The men’s teeth are set for the struggle. And they will have, in this fight for the elementary decencies of life, the sympathy, and if need be, the active help of the whole working-class movement”.(64)

The dockers had struck for a 2s per hour pay rise. A compromise offer of 1s was rejected in a crosshead as a "Useless Trick", and subsequent headlines proclaimed "Dockers Never So Determined" and "Organised Labour Supports The Dockers". The settlement, offering 1s now and a further shilling later, was headlined "IT IS A GREAT VICTORY - Ernest Bevin". The accompanying leader comment supplemented congratulations to the strikers with a restatement of the Herald commitment to the principle of follow-your-leader in trade unionism: “The dockers have, as Mr Bevin says, won a great victory. By following solidly their leaders, who knew so well when to be prudent and when to be bold, they have established their claim to the rise in wages for which they put forward so irresistible a case".(65)

This argument put the Herald firmly in the camp of the centrist mainstream. But it continued to attract suspicion with its attitudes to Communism. This was the year in which the Communists formed the Minority Movement as a pressure group within the unions with the declared aim of "The overthrow of capitalism, the emancipation of the workers, and the establishment of the Socialist Commonwealth through agitation and propaganda for the revolutionary class struggle".(66)

The Herald regarded this as a development worthy of a full column report - as it had seen "Communism Backs Labour:Solid Support in the Election. Policies and Aims", a contribution from CPGB political secretary Thomas Bell as worthy of two thirds of a column during the 1923 election.(67)

But growing suspicion on the movement right of Communism and sympathy with it was shown by a TUC resolution from the Workers Union condemning the extent of the Herald's Minority Movement coverage - which was withdrawn only following Bramley’s personal intervention.(68)
The mismatch between union toleration of Communism and the Labour Party's progressive exclusion of it continued, with party conference declaring membership of the two parties incompatible. The importance the Herald attached to this was shown by a four-column news report. Its discomfort, as with the government's intent to use emergency powers, was shown by the absence of a leader. (69)

Closer conformity to the party line was displayed in a front-page report later in September when Clynes attacked Communism: "The Labour Party has once again expressed its enduring hostility to Communist methods which seek to subdue all classes by the military dominion of one class in each country", and a leader on the 60th anniversary of the International showed similar conformism: "It can afford to be calm under the stream of abuse which the 'Third International' created by the Russian Communists, discharges at it. It represents the vast mass of workers everywhere, the other represents only a few". (70)

But apprehension of Communist influence at the paper - not unjustified if Fyfe's picture of his deputy Mellor is to be believed - would be a running problem throughout the 1920s. (71)

Ramsay MacDonald's concerns about Communist influence focussed particularly on foreign coverage and Ewer. During 1924 he was also to express concern about the allegiances of Italian correspondent Giglio, whose expulsion combined with the murder of Matteotti to end any lingering strands of faith in Mussolini. Fyfe did not think that Giglio was a communist and, knowing that Ewer was, had good reason to tolerate him. As he told MacDonald, Ewer was the best journalist on the paper, and one of the best in London. He had never put Communist views in the paper and could be subbed if he did. (72)

This was in any case a year when Communist views might have been hard to discern from others on the left. As Andrew Williams points out the movement consensus on the importance of recognising and concluding a trade treaty with the Soviet Union, the contentious foreign issue of the year, extended to confirmed anti-Communist pragmatists like Snowden and MacDonald. (73)
Even so the Herald's enthusiasm for the treaty looked remarkably like a continuing enthusiasm for Bolshevism. The leader on recognition referred to "The only system which could have held Russia together" and paid warm tribute to Soviet envoys Rakovsky and Krassin: "They have been patient, often under great provocation: they have been tactful: they have been amazingly able: they have shown that it is possible to combine the practice of diplomacy with the firm retention of working-class principles". (74)

A clear identification of Labour's cause with Russia as fellow standard-bearers of the working-class was indicated, and reinforced in April when Ewer described the arrival of the Soviet delegates to negotiate the treaty as "The first negotiation between the two working-class governments". (75)

That worldview had been seen earlier in the year on Lenin's death. The coincidence of MacDonald's accession and the railway strike relegated it to third lead, but direct identification of him and his regime as an ally in the struggle was indicated by Ewer's statement that he was "The greatest spokesman, the greatest leader that the working-class has yet known".

Ewer's two column obituary "Best-Loved Leader of Russia's People: His Work for the Revolution" was summarised by the cross-heads "Wonderful Career: A Terrible Blow: His Will Was Law: World for Workers". The leader, less ambitious in its claims, still called him "Certainly the greatest Russian since Tsar Peter". (76)

This was followed by an unsourced account of his funeral that recalled Herald descriptions of the Poplar revolt. Headlined "On His Comrades Shoulders: Lenin's Return to Moscow: Weeping Crowds: Workers March Hand in Hand" it started by telling of his four mile journey to the station on friends and workers shoulders, followed by a procession including: "Hundreds of peasants from the villages around who had walked, 20 miles and more through a Russian winter night, so that they might follow him a last time".

It went on to describe the arrival in Moscow: "No pageantry, no pomp, but line and after line of workers, in their working clothes, marching hand in hand, an endless column. Such a friend as no man has ever had....By the coffin, day and night, passes by the coffin the endless procession of his people, come to look once more upon his face before they lay him there under the Red Wall, among his fellows". (77)
In April the Herald carried Gorkiy's tribute to Lenin as a series, opening with an article called "Why Lenin was loved as a man". (78)

The other major foreign theme was fear of a recurrence of European war, and twice during the year warnings from within the Labour movement - an illustration of the extent to which the party-political themes pervading the paper consistently influenced foreign coverage - dominated the front page. In July ED Morel, secretary of the Union for Democratic Control and MP for Dundee, warned in an interview of the mass production and marketing of arms in Europe, particularly from Austria and Czechoslovakia. Headlined "Europe A Vast Arsenal: The Facts", it was accompanied by a leader calling for action to halt the drift to war. (79)

This was followed in late August by a lead story drawn from the ILP summer school - Philip Baker's description of "incendiary bombs which can destroy an entire town in a day or two and would make the 1914-18 war seem "child's play" in comparison". (80)

In the circumstances MacDonald's attempts to defuse Europe's diplomatic pressure-points could count on particularly loyal support as propagandist needs coincided happily with the desire to reduce fears of war. The abrasive Poincare was still seen as the main obstacle to his hopes, so his defeat at the polls in May was greeted with undisguised rapture. Herriot, his successor, was more amenable and granted his share of the credit when agreement was reached on the evacuation of the Ruhr and the rescheduling of reperations in August, hailed as the "First Real Peace Treaty Since The War". But there was no doubt about the real hero of the hour "It was Mr MacDonald who began the process. His plain-speaking, his friendly expressions, his readiness to give credit for honesty of purpose, induced M Herriot to take the same line. Between them they have wrought a mighty change. (81)

Mighty changes were less in evidence in general news coverage, subordinated even more than usual to the paper's political agenda. But that agenda lent itself to a developing Herald speciality, the radical human interest story. If the standard human interest story beloved of other papers was intended to evoke a range of emotions, the Herald human interest story aimed to evoke anger at injustice and pity for its victims. And politics were never far away, with interest often following a political cue.
Two stories in 1924 - the Vaquier case and the Empire Exhibition at Wembley - illustrate the genre. Murders are always good copy, and it is instructive to compare the case of Jean Pierre Vaquier, tried for the murder of a Surrey publican named Jones, and the other spectacular case of 1924 - the Crumbles Murder. The Crumbles case provided several days of front-page copy, but there was little distinctive about the reports which were in much the same style as any other paper or press agency. The killer, Patrick Mahon, was executed without causing the Herald much apparent regret.

The Vaquier case appeared little different until the Frenchman was convicted and sentenced to death. But he then became the focus for a fresh assault on capital punishment - his victim status based on having been condemned via an unfamiliar language and legal system. The ten-day assault initiated by Herald director Ben Turner - a characteristic political cue for human interest - was sustained by daily updates in the right-hand front-page column. Readers were told that the paper was "Snowed Under By Appeals", that "All Classes Join in Demand for Reprieve" and that "Public Feeling Grows Daily".

It was reported that 17,000 signatures had been received on a petition and that a feature of the heavy postbag was the number urging the abolition of capital punishment, although some wanted the law to take its course. Unhappily for Vaquier Home Secretary Arthur Henderson was with the minority as the banner headline "No Reprieve for Jean Pierre Vaquier" confirmed on 9th August. The Herald had never forgotten where its main loyalties lay - while Turner's Labour affiliation was played up, it throughout presented the appeal as a Home Office matter rather than personal to Henderson, and conspicuously refrained from direct criticism of the Home Secretary.

The Wembley story fitted the Herald's traditional preoccupations and strengths even better. Concern over the high prices of supposedly popular entertainment had surfaced in their 1922-3 campaign on football prices, their one distinctive sporting campaign. And the attack on poor pay and conditions drew on and renewed a "Teashop Slavery" campaign of September, once again casting caterers Lyons in the role of villain.
The assault started within a fortnight of the exhibition's opening in late April 1924, signalled by an open letter from a Watford reader to the organisers: "Your management must remember that it is the masses who will either make or mar the whole affair. And the masses cannot afford shilling programmes, fourpenny cups of tea or thrills at a shilling a time". (86)

This cast working people in general as victims of rapacious capitalists, a familiar Herald theme. But the campaign acquired more specific victims and villains on which to focus in the shape of exhibition waitresses and their catering employers in early May - with the political cue coming from Bramley and a threat to withdraw union cooperation following complaints about poor pay and conditions.

A frontpage full column investigation detailing cases of low pay, long hours and reliance on tips were typified by a description of "One white-faced girl.. on the verge of tears as she told me that up to three o'clock yesterday she had made 2d.

"I don't know whatever I am going to do", she added "I am in debt to my landlady for the first time in my life since I came to Wembley, Even if, as they tell us, we make plenty of money when the season really starts, it will take it all to clear our debts". (87)

Similar stories were to run through the summer, with unexpected pay rises at Lyons in July attributed to the Ministry of Labour's collection of statistics. Lyons reportedly banned their staff from speaking to the Herald and denied claims that Wembley was "seething with discontent" - leading the paper to flourish a crop of letters from employees and ask why so many felt compelled to write to the press. (88)

Other weapons deployed in the attack were cartoons - a front pager captioned "An Exhibit We Would Rather Not See At Wembley", showed a caged lion, the pun obvious, chewing on bones marked "waitresses", "sweated labour" and "low wages" - and the juxtaposition of Lyons profits of £665,377 and a 25 per cent dividend with that of a 15/- a week waitress left with 3/- net pay after two customers left without paying. (89)

A final attack later in the summer arraigned Wembley management as a whole and drew on the paper's deep-rooted anti-militarism after an official with a military background refused to admit a group of women with babies whose tickets had been left behind: "That sort of stupidity, which we associate with the military mind, appears to be enthroned at Wembley." (90)
The paper's ingrained social attitudes could also be seen where the privileged or famous were in the news - not in the social gossip sense, for Way of the World continued in its vein of literate whimsicality, but like Viscount Curzon appeared in court on his 28th driving charge in 16 years. The report of his six-month ban concluded in a rhetorical manner evocative of the paper's view that there were different rules for them and us: "How many common folk would have been permitted to go on for 16 years breaking the law, without having their licenses taken away altogether?" (91)

A similar vein was struck over post boat-race jollifications: "The usual ridiculous riot...the sons and daughters of the 'gentry' were more or less allowed to run riot without any serious interference from anybody".

"The dears I Look at the letting off their high spirits", exclaimed a fashionably dressed woman in Leicester Square as three young men in evening dress dived headfirst through a taxi window. If the trio had been unemployed demonstrators...But that's a different story". (92)

But the Herald was not without its intermittent versions of society news. Just as the Lansbury paper ran periodic references to events and personalities in Poplar, so the official paper found newsworthiness in the families of Labour leaders - particularly those newly dignified with cabinet office. MacDonald's son Malcolm, a student at Oxford, was the subject of a short article in February and the wedding of Arthur Henderson's daughter in July prompted a quarter-column front page story on the arrangements, followed by a front-page picture and two-thirds of a column account of the wedding itself indicating that most of the Cabinet had been among the guests. (93)

Nor was there any dimming in interest in scientific and technological advance. Early experiments with television were reported under the headline "The Miracle of 1924: Seeing by Wireless Nearly Possibility". Less benign technology was in the news in late May as rival inventors debated the military and pacific uses of "death rays", and the flight of one to France was deemed worthy of a six-column splash on the day when the Commons approved the Budget. But they were essentially a three-day wonder, chiefly useful to new cartoonist Will Hope who ran several drawings with death-ray related themes - notably MacDonald successfully piloting a plane though attack by "Death Rays, of which we have been hearing so much lately". (94)
This reflected the main running technology-related story - that of the advance of flight.

While acknowledging potential military uses, the Herald continued to see long-distance pioneers as bringing mass international travel closer. D'Osiey's flight from Paris to Calcutta was hailed: "It really marks a stage in the progress towards air journeys becoming as common as railway or steamship travel. The progress may to some people seem slow, but recollect how many years it took to make railways safe and regular. That is a useful corrective to impatience". (95)

Flights also furnished drama. Squadron-Leader MacLaren's attempt to fly round the world encompassed disappearance in mid-July - the Herald pictured his waiting wife and daughter - reappearance off Japan to days later and final abandonment after being forced down off Japan. This could be treated as a heroic failure - and that was the tone of the report of his welcoming lunch, where Clynes was among the speakers, and a front-page description of "The full and thrilling story of his ill-fated but great attempt to fly around the world". (96)

But the initial response, only four days after the demolition of a British heavyweight vigorously hyped by the press including the Herald, provoked an extraordinary leader on national sporting failings: "For a while one believed in MacLaren's bad luck, but when a main fails time after time, one is forced to look about for a reason.

"As for Bloomfield he ought to play dominoes. He made the British race look silly. Not by beating beaten, but by being fool enough to stand up only to be knocked down". (97)

This was a rare example of sport impinging on the rest of the paper. It existed in a self-contained world, apparently seen as a necessary evil and presented in perfunctory fashion. The closest-ever finish to a football league season - Cardiff City lost the title on a missed penalty - was dismissed in nine lines. It was also isolated in attitude. The Herald, proponent of the working-man's ability to run the country, might have been expected in 1924 of all years to support the professional cricketer's ability to lead England. Yet columnist Titwillow discussed the issue in conventional-wisdom terms that would have brought down leader-column derision if applied to any political, industrial or artistic issue (98):

"In practice I doubt if it would succeed. "First it is a well-known fact that a professional is not so apt to give of his best if he is under the command of a brother professional. There is bound to be an element of sub-conscious rivalry between them."
"And a captain's duties do not end on the field. He has a certain amount of social work to do. An England captain on tours abroad is in the position of being a kind of ambassador, and has to attend all kinds of functions and make speeches".

"I do not mean to suggest that a professional of today could not do this part of the work just as well. But I would wager anything that not a single professional cricketer would like to take the task on!". (99)

It may simply be noted that an argument which needed only minor adaptation to be deployed against the viability of Labour governments appeared shortly before the 1924 Gentlemen v Players match in which the professionals, led by the professional Jack Hobbs, defeated the amateurs by an innings of 231 runs. (100)

By contrast reviews continued to provide a continuation of the paper's political agenda by other means - not least through reviews by members of staff. Ewer was to be found reviewing the final volume of the Cambridge History of British Foreign Policy under the headline "Our Share of War Guilt". Endorsing the radical stance of Herald correspondent Philips Price's Germany in Transition he spoke of "A brilliant piece of analytical economics" describing Social Democrat complicity in "The most brutal and unscrupulous system of capitalist exploitation which modern Europe has seen". (101)

Fyfe extracted a ferocious critique of British rule in India from his review of EM Forster's A Passage To India: "If at the end you do not say to yourself 'Now I understand better than I ever did before the problem we have to solve in India' - well it won't be Mr EM Forster's fault". (102)

The formula continued much as before - serious-minded, highbrow and literary. And if the letters page is any guide it continued to enjoy the approval of readers - with the majority of an admittedly small sample of letters printed on the subject arguing, if anything, for greater austerity.
Under the headline "Who Wants Reviews of Novels?" A Elcott of London SW9 hinted that he found the current book pages heavy going by asking for a weekly article summarising the best books. But J Lydon of Liverpool demanded "definite working-class literature" in place of reviews of best-sellers and "Student" of London N22 spoke for the most austere traditions of the self-educated and politically committed with his claim that "The majority of Daily Herald readers find sufficient reading material to occupy their spare time from the vast field of literature which is in some way connected with the Labour Movement".(103)

"Student" was surely overstating the case. Any group as large as the readership of a national newspaper, even an unsuccessful one, is bound to encompass a much wider range of interests. But that this perception of their character should be possible says something about the Herald's continuing problems - not only of winning new readers, but retaining their current ones. And by mid 1924 it was clear that even the existence of a Labour Government could not arrest the law of gravity as it affected the circulation of the Herald once the immediate political excitement of the election and its aftermath had worn off.

viii.Struggle Renewed

In late 1924 the Herald had every justification for looking back on "the best year in our history". But all such evaluations are relative - and it was clear that the best was still not good enough. Lansbury's optimism in February was a consequence of personal temperament and the belief that the existence of a Labour government would keep political interest constantly at the levels that boosted the Herald readership.

But it did not happen. Indeed if the paper's circulation travellers are to be believed, what political controversy there was cost rather than increased readers. Lansbury's report in July epitomised one of the eternal dilemmas of the political paper : "We also hear from our travellers that we lose circulation because people dissent from our presentation of Labour's case. What are known as the Right Wing disagree because we are said to favour the left, while those who are Left say we favour the Right".(104)
The steady rise to 500,000 circulation foreseen in February did not happen. Instead it fell back - dropping below 400,000 during the same month and falling steadily during the year to a little over 350,000 by mid September. Lansbury, in a standard reversion to the view that the paper was owed a living, called the figures "A disgrace to the movement" (105).

Advertising remained relatively buoyant - income of just over #30,000 to mid July was only #1,600 below that for the whole of 1923 with Stephen's Ink, the Gramophone Company (HMV) and Izal Disinfectant among the new accounts. Poyser talked of increasing the column rate, but by August he was pointing to sales resistance from sceptical space buyers and the paper was slipping back into loss. (106)

A fresh bid for Cooperative support had failed with the CWS refusing the Herald offer of a deal exchanging a daily page of Coop news for #40,000 a year financial support. The paper had its supporters within the Cooperative moment, notably the leaders of the London Society. But the June Cooperative Congress voted by three to two not to back the Herald, and instead to start their own daily. (107)

A new Board had taken charge. Members of the government had to resign directorships - Thomas, Gosling, Henderson, Hodge and Clynes left the Board never to return and were replaced by Robert Smillie, Purcell, Ethel Bentham, WH Hutchinson and Robert Williams while Bramley took over Bowerman's place as TUC general secretary. In May Ben Turner took over as chairman, not a move that enthused Fyfe who remembered him as "A figure-head with white whiskers whose method of settling controversy I was told (he never tried it at board meetings where we had no controversy) was to take a bible out of his pocket and read it aloud". (108)

Their inheritance was summed up in a report to the TUC which would have been a reasonable description of the paper's situation at almost any time between 1923 and 1930 : "The 'Herald' is by no means the kind of paper which would be, in every sense of the term, a credit to our movement. The management is restricted in finance, business operations are curtailed and several important developments have been postponed pending the accumulation of the necessary capital for the promotion of new plans and contemplated efforts to secure an improvement in the circulation. (109)
The most ingenious means of breaking out of stagnation was proposed by Fyfe and Lansbury in August. Arguing that "just paying its way is no good", they argued that under current conditions it would take years to reach 500,000 and even longer to accumulate profits for investment. Rejecting a major capital investment as vulnerable to an advertising boycott he argued for taking the Herald out of the Fleet Street jungle altogether and running it as a controlled circulation paper along the lines of labour papers in Germany, the USA and Australia - provided to trade unionists as an addition to their union benefits in return for a weekly levy.

They urged the appointment of a high-powered committee to consider the idea. But it appears to have met with a hostile reception - there is no surviving record of any further discussion.(110)

In consequence the national conferences were - once Bramley had prevailed upon the Workers Union to withdraw their hostile resolution - uneventfully dominated by the Herald's complaints of poverty and the impossibility of providing the paper the movement wanted unless something were done about it.

The line was typified by Lansbury, responding to Congress calls for a Northern Edition: "The only point is the money. We have first got to pay our way. If you make us much stronger in the building up of our circulation, I think that by this time next year we may perhaps be able to do something in that direction. We are convinced as to the absolute necessity of printing a whole edition in the North as well as in London".(111)

It was echoed by Fyfe, in a Labour conference speech recognising that the Herald could be improved in almost all aspects and stressing the movement's responsibility towards it: "What would they think of anybody who saw a ragged man in the street, with his clothes in tatters, unfit to shelter him from the winds and weather, and who went up to him and said "Have you considered buying yourself a nice new suit and a warm overcoat". Almost every question that had been asked has been as to why they had not done something that would cost a great deal of money".(112)
The General Council decided on 16th October to delegate consideration of development schemes to its Finance Committee. The Ragged Man of Fleet Street had in any case to wait while a shorter-term priority was addressed - the General Election, which was called for October 29th. (113)

ix. Content: The 1924 General Election

Ramsay MacDonald was to tell Ben Turner early in 1925: "When people talk about who is to blame for the General Election I have no hesitation in saying that nothing contributed more to our defeat than the policy of the Herald and the way it handled our case". (114)

This credited the Herald with a level of influence it would have hesitated to have claimed for itself, and can hardly have related to the impeccable display of loyalism provided by the paper during the election campaign. But MacDonald's sensitivity to the candid friend mode was clear - and this was strongly in evidence in the run-up to the election.

Two issues dominated this period. The first was the government's planned Russian Treaty. Here MacDonald can have had little to complain of. The Herald hailed the treaty as "A sure step towards restoring activities to the workshops of Britain and bread to Britain's workless" and gave fulsome coverage to a 12-day campaign of pro-treaty rallies in September culminating in a 110 minute oration by MacDonald in Derby. It was reported that Labour had been "Enormously strengthened by the great speech". (115)

The treaty was an agreed item of policy backed by a movement concensus. Not so the arrest of Communist editor JR Campbell on a charge of Incitement to Mutiny on 5th August, authorised by politically inexperienced Attorney-General Sir Patrick Hastings. The Labour left, notably John Scurr, raised the issue in Parliament while the Herald made its view clear by the simple expedient of noting that the act of 1797 being used was the same one that had condemned the Tolpuddle Martyrs. There was no directly critical leader, but the historical reference was calculated to strike a nerve among a readership assumed to know the history of their movement. (116)
When the charges against Campbell were dropped the Herald pictured him on the front page surrounded by cheering crowds and explained that the government had been under 'severe pressure' from the left - naming Maxton, Lansbury, Purcell and Scurr. This may have been true, but the image of an administration prone to surrender to pressure from the left was hardly one that MacDonald wanted to project.

The knife was twisted by a leader pointing to the difficulty of having MacDonald as Foreign Secretary - it meant there was "No effective Prime Minister" and therefore no supervision of colleagues. It pointed to the deportation of Czech pianist Ulman "An act of spiteful tyranny", the Campbell prosecution and Lord Chancellor Haldane's decision to remove a magistrate opposed to paying rates for church schools as symptoms - although its comment that Haldane's blunder was certain to have more unfortunate consequences than the Attorney-General's was spectacularly wide of the mark.(117)

But once the government had fallen over the Campbell case the Herald, having got its hand in with ferocious abuse of the Liberals once they had decided to vote against the government - "Clynes on Asquith's Political Suicide", "The Liberal Suicide", "Liberals Sinking Deeper into the Mire" - committed itself as fully to the battle as it had a year earlier.(118)

By 13th October, three days into the campaign, election news was occupying 27 to 28 columns of a 60-column paper - two thirds of the content apart from sport, the serial and advertisements. By 24th October the election was taking 32 columns out of 60. Coverage was strongly upbeat - full of strong candidates, backed by well-organised campaigns based on devoted party workers, making unprecedented progress.(119)

Ecstatic coverage of MacDonald's campaign was not without objective justification. MacKibbin, not a historian easily swayed into undue enthusiasm, quotes Times accounts in describing a tour which "For dramatic interest seemed to some observers to exceed anything since Joseph Chamberlain's Protection Campaign in 1903".(120)

The Herald captured the enthusiasm as he ended his tour in his Aberavon constituency: "It far exceeds the demonstration which was made when he entered his constituency during the last election."
"For miles the Premier's car threaded its way through the crowds; at times it was held up for several minutes and once or twice it seemed in danger of being overturned by his supporters as they pressed forward to see him.

"Rockets and squibs were fired and the people sang "Ramsay is the Man" to the tune of "Men of Harlech". At last the continual pressure of the crowd around the Premier's motor caused so much damage that it had to be abandoned". (121)

The tour ended immediately before the campaign's bombshell - the Daily Mail publication of the "Zinoviev letter" providing apparent proof that the Russians were fomenting subversion in Britain, political dynamite in an election launched amid the Campbell and Treaty debates.

Fyfe recalled disagreeing with MacDonald's view that it was too blatant a forgery to make any impact. But there was little in the Herald's initial response to suggest serious worry - a low-key three column, page three news story written in straight news style and containing denials from Rakovsky and British Comintern delegate Arthur McManus. (122)

The last two days saw fierce front-page rebuttals of the "Red Plot", but the fact that they were forced on to the defensive at this stage was probably more significant than anything they had to say.

Accentuating the positive to the last, the Herald treated the result, a Conservative majority of over 200, as opening an era of straight Labour-Tory conflict and made much of the demolition of the Liberals. (123)

Freed from the necessities of battle, the Herald reverted once more to candid friend mode in passing its verdict on the government. First came the supportive element: "There is no shred of reason for regretting the decision of the Party to take office. There is every ground for satisfaction that Labour did not run away from responsibility, did not shrink from taking on a very difficult and thankless job. Now even Mr Churchill, with all his contempt for his fellow-countrymen's intelligence is ever likely to repeat that silly phrase "Labour cannot govern".
But the conclusion struck a pointed note of candour: "The chief fault of the Ministry was a tendency to be more official than the politicians of the Old Parties and an anxiety on the part of a good many to prove that a Labour Government was no different to any other. That was certainly a mistake. A Labour Government must be different, or there is no need for it to exist. More individuality in matters of minor importance would have fully made up for Ministerial impotence, imposed by the conditions under which they took office, to do more big things". (124)

Westminster had dominated the Herald as never before over the last two years - a stranglehold it would never entirely lose. But with Labour out of office the balance of the paper's attention would now shift towards industry - above all coal - and its own perennially insoluble difficulties.

Conclusion

Insofar as they saved it, the 1923 general election, the subsequent hiatus and Labour's accession to power were a turning point in the Herald's fortunes. But they provided a substantial breathing space rather than the fundamental change in circumstances Lansbury clearly hoped for in February 1924. With energies naturally concentrated on the new demands of power, little was done during the year to address the constraints enumerated in the TUC report. The paper emerged from 1924 as uncompetitive as ever, and with no general election bonus to look forward to for another five years.

The big issues of 1924 were journalistic, those of coping with power. The role of candid friend was a logical compromise between official status and the journalist's instinct to be critic rather than publicist - as much as anything to avert monotony. During this period Fyfe's independent instincts as a journalist and those of his staff as political critics were almost certainly more in accord than in the periods of opposition.
The critical stance of 1924, contrasted with the complicity of the earlier period in opposition, might be taken as a shift left. But there is little indication of any change in underlying principles. Being in opposition presents few conflicts between principle and practice. Government presents them all the time. Members of the government were unlikely to have argued, when in opposition, in favour of the principle of bombing Iraqis, wearing court dress or prosecuting Communist editors. But they did them in power, and these were the flashpoints for the Herald.

The price of independence was MacDonald's undying enmity. The experience of government would strengthen the hand and motivation of those leaders who wanted a tamed paper that would do what it was told.
CHAPTER EIGHT (p111-146)

1. RPTUC 1924 p 266
2. DH 23.1.24
3. Ibid
4. DH 9.2.23, NW 7.12.23. Lansbury memo to TUC 18.7.24 LPDH 358
5. DH 14.12.23, 9.2.24. GM reps 25.11.23 LPDH 244, 15.4.24 LPDH 311
7. DH 9.2.24
8. DH 13.11.23ff, 15.12.23
9. DH 23.11, 3.12.23
10. DH 22.11.23
11. DH 3.12.23
12. DH 26.10.23
13. DH 26.11.23
14. DH 28, 30.11, 1, 3.12.23
15. DH 26.11.23
16. DH 22.11.23
17. DH 20.11.23
18. DH 21.11, 3.12.23
19. DH 3, 4, 7, 8.12.23

21. William Knox in ILP on Clydeside op cit p 160
22. DH 10.12.23
23. DH 11.12.23 Brand op cit p 96
24. DH 11.12.23
25. DH 19.12.23, 5.1.24
26. DH 8.1.24
27. DH 9.1.24
28. DH 23.1.24
29. NW 2.2.24
30. Ibid
Fyfe - Seven Selves op cit p 258
TUC 788
33. DH 8.8.24
34. DH 24.1.24
35. DH 12.2.24
36. DH 8.3.24
37. DH 13.5.24
38. DH 28.2.24
39. DH 12.3.24
40. DH 13,22.2,4.4.24
41. DH 23.1.24
42. DH 21.2.24
43. Fyfe - Seven Selves op cit p 258-60
44. DH 19.3.24
45. DH 24.3,1.4,15.8.24
46. Fyfe - Seven Selves op cit p 258
47. DH 10,13.5,3.6.24
48. DH 15.7.24
49. DH 16.7.24
50. DH 11.8.24
51. DH 22,23.8.24
52. DH 25.8.24
53. DH 14,15.9.24
55. Fyfe - Seven Selves op cit p 258-60
56. Ibid p 261
58. DH 9.2.24. GS Bain, R Bacon and J Pimlott - The Labour Force in (ed)
59. DH 7.1.24
61. DH 22.2.24 Thomas to Bramley 25.2.24, Bramley to Thomas 5.3.24 TUC 788 Wertheimer - Portrait op cit p 81
62. DH 26.4.24
63. DH 22,24.1.24
64. DH 16.2.24
65. DH 18,19,20,26.2.24
66. DH 24.8.24
67. DH 29.11.23,24.8.24
68. DH 24.8.24,9.9.24 TUCGC 4.9.24
69. DH 26.9.24
70. DH 27.9.24
71. Fyfe - Seven Selves op cit p 254
72. Ibid. Fyfe to MacDonald 5.4.24, JRMPRO File 2 Item 62. DH 2.4, 17.6.24
73. A. Williams op cit p 24
74. DH 30.1.24
75. DH 30.1, 14.4.24
76. DH 23.1.24
77. DH 24.1.24
78. DH 17.1.24 ff
79. DH 3.7.24
80. DH 28.8.24
81. DH 13.5, 11, 18, 8, 9.9.24
82. DH 5, 7, 8, 16, 18, 21.5.24
83. DH 30.7, 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8.24
84. DH 9.8.24
85. DH football campaign 5.9.22 ff, Teashop slavery 12.9.23 ff
86. DH 5.5.24
87. DH 13.5.24
88. DH 19, 20, 5, 27.6, 11.7.24
89. DH 20.5, 12, 27.6.24
90. DH 16.7.24
91. DH 3.4.24
92. DH 7.4.24
93. DH MacDonald 6.2.24 Henderson 26.7, 1.8.24
94. DH Television 5.5.24. Death rays 26.28, 29.5.24 Cartoon 15.4.24
95. DH 6.5.24
96. DH 24.4, 17, 19, 7, 6, 8, 8, 26.9.24
97. DH 11.8.24
98. DH 5.5.24
99. DH 9.7.24
101. DH 27.2, 2.4.24
102. DH 18.6.24.
103. DH 19.3.24
104. GM rep 14.7.24 LPDH 355
106. AM reps in GM reps 14.7, 19.9.24 locs cit
107. Millwood to Bramley draft letter 4.4.24 TUC 788. NW 14.6.24
109. RPTUC 1924 p 266
Footnotes Twenty One

110. Fyfe, Lansbury memo to DH directors, GC, LPEC 8.8.24 TUC 788.12
111. RPTUC 1924 p 459-62
112. LPRAC 1924 p 177
113. TUCGC 16.10.24
114. MacDonald to Turner 3.3.25 JRMPRO File 1170:1 Item 801
115. DH 6, 7, 8, 20, 23, 29.9.24
116. DH 6, 7, 9.8.24
117. DH 14.8.24
118. DH 2, 3, 4.10.24
119. DH 13, 24.10.24
120. McKibbin - Evolution op cit p 130
121. DH 14, 15, 16, 21.10.24
122. DH 25.10.24 Fyfe - Seven Selves op cit p 262
123. DH 27, 28, 30.10.24
124. DH 4.11.24

ENDS