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

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Constriction, Conformity and Control: The Taming of the Daily Herald 1921–30
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Section Five
"From now on the story becomes, by comparison, dull", Foreign Editor Ewer was to write almost a quarter of a century later. From one point of view he was right. The Herald was free both of the threat of imminent closure and of the stimulus of dramatic political events - after elections in three consecutive years, none was now likely until 1929. (1)

But the 18 months between the fall of the MacDonald government and the outbreak of the general strike were to see the Labour movement, with the Herald playing a central role, puzzling over the implications of its brief period in office and preparing for a major confrontation with the forces of capitalism. These, and its own continuing uncompetitiveness, would be the central themes of the period.

Goodbye George

Within the Herald it was to be a fractious time as the movement grew more frustrated with its failings - the time had passed when mere survival was achievement enough. These frustrations were reflected in tension within the paper - leading to the final departure of Lansbury and disputes between Fyfe and his staff and directors.

Little changed on the circulation front. The transient nature of the normal election windfall was summarised by Clifford Allen: "The hard fact is that we can't retain circulation even when we temporarily secure it". Circulation was 353,750 at dissolution, peaked on 537,000 on 31st October and was down to 428,000 on December 1st - an improvement of 74,250 compared to the 63,340 rise over the same period around the 1923 poll. By late May 1925 it had dropped to 384,600, showing a pattern of decline remarkably similar to a year earlier, with 1925 figures running consistently 10,000 higher. (2)

Circulation finally stabilised at around 360,000 in the first half of 1926. At the same time the long-suffering Poyser found himself under pressure from the advertising trade: "I was given a bad half-hour after receiving the other day a request for Chartered Accountants Certificate for our sale for the period ending Dec 31st 1925. This came from the Association of British Advertising Agents Audit Bureau. I was able to entertain their secretary, Mr MacPherson, with a few "chestnuts" and can only trust he will be content for an indefinite period. (3)
Such problems are common to all unsuccessful newspapers. But Poyser had also to contend with difficulties specific to the Herald's political character. Following the General Election he reported "A fresh surge of prejudice" and cancellations including Kruschen Salts - whose hyperactive grandfather had been almost as prominent a component of the front page as Ramsay MacDonald. A list of boycotter compiled a month earlier by Lansbury included Gibbs Dentifrice, Lever Brothers, Lyons, Quaker Oats, Ovaltine, Birds, HP and Huntley and Palmer. Difficulties were further compounded by an anonymous letter writer, blamed for the loss of the Anglo-American account in December 1925. If advertisers thought so little of the paper as an advertising medium that they dropped business at the behest of anonymous letter writers, it was never going to be a secure business proposition. (4) 

Enemy action was compounded by political scruples within the movement - in 1925 the TUC passed a resolution that the Herald should "refuse to accept advertisements from firms whose working conditions are known to be unfair", proposed by the Upholsterers as the latest shot in their campaign to stop the Herald taking adverts from HJ Searle and Co of Bromley, subject since 1918 of a dispute about the introduction of female labour. (5) 

Early complaints had been rejected on the grounds that the paper could not check the wages and conditions of every firm before accepting adverts, and business priorities were to win again after the TUC vote when the directors concluded "The Daily Herald is faced with tremendous opposition, and as the General Council realises, has to rely for its maintenance for a subsidy from the Trade Union Movement. It cannot yet afford to pick and choose its advertisers". Walter Citrine, for the TUC, accepted this argument but the Upholsterers continued to press their complaint through 1926 and 1927. (6)
Sometimes problems were even closer to home. An avowedly anti-capitalist editorial policy was bound to create periodic upsets. A critical leader about Boots in the last week of 1925 titled "The Old Spirit in Industry" drew a classic howl of fury from Poyser: "I should be glad if you could discourage editorial attacks on known advertisers. The travellers and myself are absolutely opposed to them, for they only make our task harder and the securing of advertisements for the Daily Herald, even in the best of times, is far from easy. I have in mind the pillorying editorially of Boots the Chemists. Firstly they have spent money with us by using our advertising columns and secondly they stock, as you know, hundreds of well known advertised articles. It would be a very serious thing for us if Boots placed pressure on these advertisers, whose goods they sell, and urged them to cease advertising in the Daily Herald.

"Is there not ample scope for editorial vigour in concentrating on capitalism and its attendant evils, without the necessity of referring to individual advertisers".(7)

Evidently not - Poyser was complaining about further attacks on Boots in April. But his department continued to ride its handicaps and keep revenue rising gently. In 1925 income rose 14 per cent from #55,094 to #63,029 - with the Lever Brothers account, seen as crucial for credibility, secured in July - and progress was maintained into the first half of 1926.(8)

Lansbury argued in early 1925 that the Herald must progress, or else "Lose the opportunity to take its place among the other national daily newspapers; it will remain an exotic probably requiring a subsidy again before long". Losses, renewed in the second half of 1924, grew in 1925 - totalling #11,882 for the year. This was hardly life-threatening but an irritating attrition of resources available for development.(9)

At the end of 1924 the Herald directors, after calling for estimates from Lansbury, reaffirmed a Northern Edition as their priority but argued for the creation of a Sunday paper in the belief that it would be easier to raise funds by firing enthusiasm for a new project than appealing simply for the extension of an existing activity.(10)
But their logic had no appeal for either Bramley or Henderson. Bramley noted that all proposals assumed increased General Council funding. But with unemployment increasing pressure on the funds of individual unions and decisions from the 1924 widening the responsibilities of the General Council, such money could not be found. Indispensable the Herald might be, but no more than the General Council and its duties. The Finance and Office Committee concluded that the best policy was one of "Consolidating and strengthening the paper as a daily paper, prior to any further extension of liability". (11)

If the Finance Committee minutes are accurate, the directors defied this advice to the extent of deciding in January or February 1925 in favour of publishing a weekly - although there is no other trace of such a decision. But the idea clearly progressed no further, and the paper continued throughout 1925 in much the same form - although with most issues now running to 10 pages rather than eight. (12)

But not under the same management. Lansbury resigned as General Manager on 3rd January 1925, leaving to start Lansbury's Labour Weekly - a paper that was originally advertised as the Weekly Herald, a title that was dropped after pressure from the Herald. The Herald's expressions of regret - a leader said that "As long as the Daily Herald lives its name will be coupled in the thoughts of the workers with the name of the great leader who made it" - were to some extent genuine. Fyfe recorded that he had pleaded with Lansbury to continue his Saturday articles, but had been told that he could not manage it on top of commitments to his own paper. (13)

It is possible that Lansbury's Labour Weekly was not the only reason for his departure. On the day before his resignation, the TUC Finance and Office committee were told that he had told the Labour executive of a £4,000 General Council payment to guarantee a 10 page paper, but that nothing of the sort had happened. Lansbury was to be asked to justify his statement and the issue would be raised at the next directors' meeting. (14)
But the only surprise was that he had stayed so long. Lansbury was on his own admission unsuited to the disciplines of reporting to a board, and was constantly at odds with them: "The board of directors acted as if any proposal coming from me was sure to be wrong. All sorts of experts were called in ostensibly to inquire what was wrong with the management, conduct and editing of the paper. The result of all this expert inquiry and management after five years is that all the heads of departments who served so loyally under me are still in the same positions. The only change is a new general manager and a new editor", he wrote in 1928.\(^{15}\)

Lansbury took with him five members of staff including Postgate - and was followed shortly by another old-guard stalwart in company secretary Philip Millwood. Bevin moved acceptance of his resignation.\(^{16}\)

Lansbury was ironically to get his way over the appointment of a successor. While Fyfe wanted "a thoroughly competent man with plenty of experience", Lansbury said a professional manager would be too expensive and that a director should take over for a couple of hours a day.\(^{17}\)

One hundred and twenty-three applications were received. Four candidates were interviewed by the Board, including some who met Fyfe's specifications. But the man appointed to the #650 a year post on 11th March was, in Fyfe's words, "A trade union official who knew nothing about newspaper production" - Robert Williams, General Secretary of the National Transport Workers Federation and a Herald director.\(^{18}\)

Fyfe's disgust was shared by the Typographical Association, whose president JD French protested against the appointment of a "non-practical manager". The appointment looks to have had more to do with the internal politics of transport trade unionism than the needs of the Herald.\(^{19}\)

Williams had been a dominating figure in transport before the formation of the Transport and General Workers in 1921 and was arguably Bevin's only serious rival for leadership within the sector. His departure doubtless suited Bevin extremely well, but deepened the editor's conviction that his directors were a liability.\(^{20}\)
He did little to conceal this view - Bevin complained "If suggestions are made on the Board for the editor or anyone else, instead of the suggestions being received with an open mind and examined as to their workability and usefulness, they are met in an entirely wrong spirit". (21)

Nor was his relationship with his staff all it might be. He had never been happy with their quality, complaining that "It is impossible to replace men of inferior capacity by men who would do better work". Williams was to complain about a indiscipline in the office :"It is assumed that because the paper is run under trade union auspices the staff can behave in a manner entirely different to what is expected in commercial houses". (22)

The extent to which staff-editor relationships had broken down was exposed when Hicks, a reporter since 1922, was sacked in April 1925. Fyfe cited earlier warnings, a careless book review and a poor series of articles on Blackcoated workers. But in appealing to the Board, the National Union of Journalists chapel said "The attitude of the chapel has been more than tolerant than some incidents, over a long period, have warranted". (23)

The Board confirmed the sacking, with an extra month's notice to prevent hardship and criticised the speed with which the NUJ had been prepared to contemplate industrial action. But it also extracted from Fyfe a promise to recognise the NUJ in future disputes of this sort. (24)

The appeals procedure was invoked again in 1926 when a reporter named Fox wrote that new printing machines installed by the ultra-patriotic Daily Mail had been bought abroad. Fyfe recalled that it had been passed by veteran libel-catcher WJ Ryan because "He knew the editor dislike the daily Mail". The Mail threatened to sue, the Herald was forced to apologise and a board sub-committee confirmed Fox's sacking. But the NUJ appealed again and, Fyfe recalled "The directors went back on their promise, arranged an arbitration and allowed the customary compromise to be patched up". (25)
But the editor also found himself on occasion defending staff and contributors - when Labour assistant secretary Middleton passed on a Liverpool local secretary's complaint that their stringer in the city took no interest in local parties and furthermore also worked for the ultra-reactionary Morning Post, Fyfe's reply betrayed exasperation with the complainants incomprehension of the way newspapers work, with political pressures and perhaps most of all with the politically-motivated staff he had inherited from Lansbury.

"He is a good correspondent. He serves us well. What his politics are, I do not know. "It is not the slightest use trying to make it a condition that our correspondents should be keen Labour men. As a rule, when we get a keen Labour man he is no good as a journalist, and as a whole good journalists take very little interest in politics". (26)

He took a similar line when the Labour Party's strongly anti-Communist International Secretary William Gillies passed on a complaint that Prague stringer Frank Krejci was a known Communist - arguing that provided he was a good reporter it did not matter what his politics were. (27)

Whatever Fyfe's strictures on the journalistic competence of the politically committed, politics remained the Herald's raison d'être. A glimpse of a continuing self-image as the guardian of socialism could be seen in a leader page short story by Francis Williams, to be City Editor then Editor in the 1930s. The leader page mix of short notes, stories and features might be dismissed as inconsequential space-fillers had not Fyfe recorded that they were chosen very carefully. He himself read the 30 to 40 that were sent in each day, and a TUC delegate had said that "Page four alone was worth the money". A piece using the paper's name as a punchline would not have been chosen unless in accord with its self-image. (28)

Called "What the Public Likes", the story tells of a pub landlord who whose customers like his beer, not knowing that it is watered, because it gives them the illusion that they can hold their drink. The narrator's memory goes back to a provincial newsroom, telling a news editor of a strike: "And the News Editor: "Learn! They're not going to learn. Smooth it down my boy, smooth it down. It's too strong at the moment - go to folks heads. Smooth it down; they'll like it all the better".
"Water! Water! Why they likes water - only you mustn't let 'em know".

I sighed. "The true philosophy!" I remembered the DAILY HERALD and smiled "But just wait", I said, "Just wait". (29)

But whatever a party paper serves up, it is doomed to be accused of adulteration. Attacks from readers on left and right were an inescapable concomitant of the Herald's role - rather more significant in its implications for editorial independance was the clear disattisfaction of its main financial backer, the General Council.

This should not be interpreted as an attempt to move the paper to the right - the General Council had shifted left in 1924 and the 1925 TUC has been called "The high-water mark of a 'movement to the left'. But the left, as witness Bramley's comments to Brodzky in 1924, was as keen that the Herald should do what it was told as the right.(30)

In January 1925 the General Council asked directors to report on the means by which the paper was informed of the official line. Turner told the 1925 TUC that the directors were looking into "Making the policy of the paper fit the party more than it has done in the last year or two". (31)

But the line was an elusive concept. Agricultural workers leader RB Walker showed that directors were not quite as uncomprehending of the Herald's problems as Fyfe might suggest, saying it "Cannot be expected to speak with any more authority, or any more consistently, on any one issue than the Movement itself does. It is notorious that there are divided opinions on many important questions; and whether we like it or not, this is bound to affect comment etc., in the paper, and make it seem to blow hot and cold, or from the right and the left alternately". (32)

One response to these uncertainties came in an April 1926 leader calling for an agreed Labour programme on which all sections could unite. This concept showed immense faith in the power of reason and the goodwill of the movement, but its incomprehension of the reasons for division betrayed the ethical tradition's lack of analytical sophistication.
The programme would include: "All the planks necessary for the building of Socialism in the shortest possible time. This would, of course, have to be discussed and disseminated by a Supreme Labour Council. Were that course followed, we should be spared passages of unedifying recrimination between leaders and followers, we should not have authority repudiating methods which had the Movement behind them, and we should know where we were". (33)

Utopian millenarianism, the ethical tradition taken to its logical conclusion, remained a recurrent element in the Herald’s language - epitomised by its reaction to a decision to allow the staging of a previously banned play by Eden Philpotts. Remarking on everchanging rules of morality in dress and language, it concluded: "Nothing can ever put fair dealing out of fashion, or generosity or comradeship. If more attention were paid to them and less to the shifting 'morals' of the hour, we should make more progress towards the City of God". (34)

Even though Parliament relinquished the utter news dominance it enjoyed under the MacDonald government it was still taken as read that the route to the City of God ran via Westminster. Major debates still commanded front-page leads, while determination to provide detailed reports produced such phenomena as a four-column page two headline "Sugar Subsidy Bill - 3rd Reading" which can have done little to encourage any passing Daily News readers to switch allegiance. (35)

Bracher continued to cheerlead, his efforts epitomised by his summary of Labour’s performance at the end of 1925: "The close of the session finds Labour mobilised, united and determined - the most formidable opposition of our lifetime". (36)

MacDonald, though absent for long periods abroad as he recuperated from the exertions of 1924, remained the central figure. Securing him as a weekly columnist during the Parliamentary session was seen as a coup worthy in itself of a front-page banner headline accompanied by a picture of the party leader at his desk, holding his glasses in his hand and giving the distinct impression that he wished both interviewer and photographer would go away.
The Herald had firmly grasped the technique of portraying a series of competent but predictable commentaries - ghost-written following interviews by Ernest Hunter, a former member of his Downing Street staff - as conferring special intimacy with the great: "The purpose of these articles is to keep touch between the Labour Movement and its leader. Mr MacDonald will here reveal his ideas and purposes: he will express views that would otherwise be confined to the narrow circle which can meet him individually.

"He will chat to the wider movement as he does to his friends around the fireside, answer doubts and difficulties and, by frank, homely methods seek to establish valuable contact between a great party and those whom it has placed at its head". (37)

The alleged frankness of the interviews did not extend to MacDonald confiding his view of the Herald. In the month of the first interview he told Herald chairman Ben Turner that the paper was "sloppy, inaccurate, superficial" and that "For a long time the Herald has been a mischievous influence in the party...Nothing contributed more to our defeat than the policy of the Herald and the way it handled our case...If I did not consider it a duty I should no more think of subscribing to the Herald than I would to the Morning Post". (38)

In spite of Bracher's fulsome commentaries on his Parliamentary performances, it is not hard to see the ultra-sensitive MacDonald should have been irked by the Herald. He, as much as the General Council, wanted a paper that would act as a loyal follower rather than a candid friend.

It is not that the Herald moved markedly to the left in this period, or that it was any more critical than it had been during the 1924 Government. But it maintained the view that its responsibility was to the movement as a whole rather than the leadership, and in consequence continued to insist on its right to criticise, to report critics and facilitate debate in which criticism might be aired. This had little appeal for director Clifford Allen - his loyalty to MacDonald outweighing his own role as a leader of the ILP, the main remaining conduit for criticism, when he argued: "A daily is not a place to carry on domestic controversies...on principle I should rule out the vast majority of the parochial controversies which are constantly being run in the DH". (39)
The Herald's credo found eloquent expression in a February 1925 leader: "In any movement that is vigorously alive there will always be criticism of leaders - often fierce criticism. Men and women who feel strongly are wont to speak and write fiercely. All active members of the Labour Movement are intensely eager for the New Order which we have in view. Every one of them is quick to resent any act which seems to betoken a slackening of effort in pressing towards the New Order.

"There is consequently a perpetual flow of criticism directed against the leaders, against newspapers, against the organisation, against the officials, entrusted with the task of carrying on the fight - which is a real fight, not a sham one - for a change of system.

It went on in a form hardly squaring with Bevin's account of Fyfe's response to critics: "Criticism is always welcomed by the Daily Herald, no complaint is resented. We know that they come as friends, we know that such keen interest as they take is the lifeblood of the Labour Party."

"The leaders must know that, too. It would help if they sometimes said that they know it. There must be a continuous interchange of views between them and the rank-and-file. If there were not, the Labour Party would soon become like the old parties. Its energies would be sapped. Only when Labour leaders are not keenly criticised will the Labour Party be in a bad way". (40)

But MacDonald could hardly be expected to welcome the leader comment on his re-election to the leadership. Although headlined "A Wise and Indeed Necessary Choice" it contrived to suggest that his detractors were better informed than his supporters: "Whatever criticism there is of Mr MacDonald's leadership is confined to a small circle who follow events closely and know something of what goes on behind the scenes. There has been room for criticism. It has found voice from time to time in these pages. But all who go about the country know that Mr MacDonald has a very firm hold upon the mass of Labour supporters"
It went on to repudiate MacDonald's pursuit of respectability at all costs via the standard tactic of coding its view through unidentified critics: "There are many among the Labour MPs, and many outside the House of Commons, who think that the late Government should have approached its task in a different spirit. That it should have emphasised less its likeness to other Governments and more its unlikeness to the old Party combinations. That it should have stood more stiffly by its principles and undertakings".

The conclusion endorsed the right to criticise in rather more ringing tones than it did the leader: "When all allowances have been made for his critics, who are moved by none but the highest motives and by devotion to the Cause, he remains a great figure and arouses real enthusiasm. He will lead his party all the better now that he has been told openly of certain causes of discontent."(41)

And the critics continued to find a voice in the Herald's columns - sometimes in invited contributions from movement leaders to the news columns, on others an essentially rank-and-file letters column debate arising out of an item in the paper. Debates were not always on party issues - those aired in the year up to the General Strike included the composition of a Socialist Ten Commandments, the wisdom or otherwise of gambling and the essential requirements for happiness.(42)

But politics predominated - within days of the election defeat readers were disputing how far blame could be laid on the Communist Party, and echoes of government were seen in early 1925 when one of Lansbury's final columns catalysed a debate about the reaction of Labour governments to strikes in "essential services".(43)

The decision to facilitate an argument on this issue by inviting contributors from a range of leaders was bound to look unfriendly to MacDonald as it gave the left opportunities to attack his government. Clynes put the government line vigorously - saying that the choice was "govern or go", that he would prefer not to intervene at all in disputes, and that where this was unavoidable the government's role should be neutral.(44)
But the debate had taken its cue from Lansbury's view that government should have taken over the affected industry and payed the wages and conditions demanded pending a public inquiry - and that in failing to do this in the transport strikes it had failed workers aspirations to a better standard of life and missed the chance to break a private monopoly.(45)

It also facilitated TUC chairman Swales' view that if Labour governments did not act differently they were a waste of time, Wheatley's assertion that denial of the right to strike in 'essential industries' was a form of industrial servitude and the Communist Pollitt's demand for the resources of the state to be placed at the disposal of the workers.(46)

But there were limits to the Herald's endorsement of free and frank exchanges within the movement - and they were reached in March 1926 in a vicious spat between JH Thomas and AJ Cook. Having exercised its own freedom of inquiry and expression in printing Thomas' attack on Cook on the front page then despatching a reporter to get Cook's reply, it chose not the print the letters attacking its actions: "The idea in the minds of most of our correspondents is that we should disregard our function as a newspaper and suppress anything with which we do not agree".

"Such intolerance, such intemperance of language, such incomplete conception of the duty of a newspaper, do great harm to the cause which they, and we, have at heart". The leader spoke of "A growing temper of narrow sectarianism in the ranks of Labour which is bound to have a damaging effect". It seems unlikely that the suppressed letters contained anything more vicious and damaging than the ugly exchange between the leaders of two major unions that the Herald chose to air.(47)

If emphasis on debate was calculated to anger the leadership, so was coverage of parliamentary rebellions - among the deepest-rooted of MacDonald's belief was that the Parliamentary Party should conduct itself according to accepted rules and in a disciplined manner.
The Herald leader ducked the party discipline issue when Clydesider Davie Kirkwood protested against a $15,000 grant to finance a trip to South Africa and Argentina by the Prince of Wales, but two columns of front-page coverage plus extensive letters page debate, almost unanimously pro-Kirkwood and critical of leaders who, other than Henderson, refused to back him showed where the paper's heart lay. MacDonald's comment that "If the Socialist and Labour press had given as much attention to the Geneva Protocol as to the Prince of Wales there would be no need for putting conscientious objectors to jail in 1950", betrayed undoubted fury. (48)

But the rebuke had little effect. In April 1926 13 Labour members including Lansbury, Scurr and Wheatley occupied the division lobby in protest against a government guillotine. On this occasion front-page reports and back page pictures of all 13 were accompanied by a leader justifying their action. (49)

A more significant challenge to the established order was contained in the ILP's Socialism In Our Time programme. Richard Price points to the ILP as the only group providing a significant intellectual challenge within the party after 1923. David Marquand sees the programme the founding point of Labour's postwar economic management, but at the time its Living Wage proposals, based on the underconsumptionist theories of JA Hobson, were a challenge to the orthodoxy epitomised by Philip Snowden and a symbolic issue used by the left to attack MacDonald. (50)

The Herald endorsement placed it, intentionally or not, in opposition to the leadership. It said in 1925 "What is needed is a new theory of industry based on the idea of service. And it is with that new theory and its operation that the ILP has been concerning itself at its conference". (51)

When the programme was issued in 1926 it was welcomed as "A big programme, but one for which we believe the Labour Party is ready. The ILP gives a useful and heartening lead. If a policy of this kind can be agreed upon, the year which begins today will indeed be memorable in history". When the ILP's right to develop alternative policies was questioned, the Herald called them as "a consistent and legitimate development of the party's work and policy" and regretted that neither MacDonald nor the unions had endorsed it. (52)
While the TUC was moving left, Labour was completing the process of excluding Communists. Here the Herald's view of Communists was hardening - arguing that "An energetic Left Wing of a constitutional organisation is a very different thing from a body of people who denounce peacable action as a back number" and that "The cleavage between the Labour Party and the Communist Party is one of principle which expresses itself in the methods to be employed to achieve a New Order of Society". (53)

The subsequent juxtaposition of an advertisement headed "That Flatulence" with the headline "Labour Conference: Closing Debates" was more sub-editorial mishap than editorial comment, but the Herald's post-exclusion leader was unenthusiastic, turning on a bureaucratic appeal to rules and unity rather than vigorous advocacy of the official policy.

The strong implication was that while the head backed exclusion, the heart was divided. Newspapers are complex organisms, few more so than the Herald, and it is possible to see this leader as a dialogue between different points of view within the paper. The common Herald technique of quoting unidentified but numerous sceptics in order to signal disquiet without outright dissent was put to use:"By many members of the Labour Party this decision, as was made obvious in the debate, will be regretted. They fear heresy hunts: they point to the incessant work of the Communists in the struggle against capitalism as a definite set-off to any differences of principle: they regard it as an obstacle to a united movement. To them we would say that the decision has been made by the governing authority of the Labour Party, that it carries the imprimatur of that authority, and that the primary requisite of the moment is that decisions by that body should be accepted by all who belong to it." (54)

But there were to be no such equivocations shortly afterwards when a dozen leading Communists were prosecuted for Incitement to Mutiny. Coinciding closely with the hijacking of a Herald van by a group of fascists, and the Director of Public Prosecutions decision merely to bind them over, the paper's reaction showed that however far it and the Labour leadership had accepted most institutions of the state as socially neutral, this tolerance did not extend to the courts and the legal system. (55)
The two stories dominated November 1925. Arguments over the van incident were neatly summarised by the writer Arnold Bennett who said "I would like to know what would have happened if a gang of Communists had help up a Morning Post van and treated 8,000 copies of the Morning Post as the 8,000 copies of the Daily Herald were treated". (56)

Ramsay MacDonald thought the DPP's action "Disgraceful" and "Outrageous" while the Herald management complained of "organised reticence" by the Newspaper Publishers Association - although the circulation department saw the potential benefits, running an advertising campaign suggesting potential readers might like to find out why the paper was worth stealing. (57)

While the Herald ran the story for rather more than it was worth with a succession of front-page splashes reflecting the belief that readers found an essentially internal manner of unlimited interest, it was a ten-day wonder. The Communist story had much wider resonance.

The initial response was in fact ostentatiously careful to avoid comment while the case was before the courts - allowing an attack on Home Secretary Joynson-Hicks, a particular butt for his hardline style, for referring to the "arrest of a certain number of notorious Communists" in a speech to, of all unlikely audiences, the Hounslow Amateur Dramatic Society. (58)

Reports of the hearings were similarly circumspect, though their copiousness, references to the deluge of letters and resolutions of protests and lists of those, such as Lansbury, who were standing bail were a clear indicator of sympathies. But the shackles came off once the defendants had been jailed. The Herald's line was overtly pro-free speech rather than pro-Communist, but it clearly identified the defendants as working-class martyrs in its comment that they "chose prison rather than abandon their faith", and identified with them in their plight in a leader headlined "Whose Turn Next?" that argued "This rusty antiquated weapon can be turned against the Labour Party and the leaders of the Trade Unions. And will be so turned very soon if Mr Baldwin's Masters, Jix and the rest, have their way". (59)
It could comment in this mildly overheated manner confident in the knowledge that the movement leadership as a whole was backing the campaign for an early release. Underpinning the Herald analysis of the entire case was the view that British justice was class-biased - a view made explicit in a leader noting the parallels with the Ulster rebels of 1913: "Because Mr Asquith was in power and the offenders belonged to the Ruling Class, into which he had managed to climb. When the same thing is done by poor men, men of the class which has for so long been ruled, the case is altered. Yet there are those who still deny that there is a class war!".(60)

Communism and the possibility of class confrontation were never to be very far away in industrial coverage in a period dominated by the coal crisis and its eventual consequence, the General Strike. The Herald's attitudes to Communism remained an object of suspicion for the right: "Is the Daily Herald to be the property of the Minority Movement", asked Brown of the ISTC at the 1925 TUC, implying strongly that it currently was.(61)

This was patently unfair. The Herald did give full coverage of Minority Movement events - in January 1925 reporting the dramatic opening of their conference when chairman Tom Mann pointed to a portrait of Lenin and said that it was a year since his death: "Immediately the 590 delegates rose to their feet and remained standing while the funeral march was played".

And it printed the blistering invective of James Larkin: "The hope of the working classes of the world lies in Russia. If the Clyneses, the Thomases and the MacDonalds had remained true to the revolutionary fervour they used in the old days, it would be a different story today. We might have had the working-class in power".(62)

But it was also prepared to give space to attacks on the Minority Movement by Clynes and Thomas, and argued that the howling down of Thomas at a railwaymen's meeting was "totally at variance with the spirit of the movement" and to criticise advocacy of revolutionary violence, arguing that "A rising of the people, if it took place - we do not see any signs of it at present - would make things worse instead of better".(63)
Critics also noted the space given to the speeches of miners leader AJ Cook, the MM's most prominent union supporter. He was covered four times in eight days, twice on the front, during March 1925. But as Middlemass has argued "The history of trade unionism in the 1920s resolves around the perpetual crises of the coal miners". The MFGB, around one fifth of the TUC membership, were building up to a dispute that would embroil the whole movement and Cook, charismatic, quotable and an indefatigable speaker at a time when speech reports were the staple of political and industrial coverage, was secretary of the MFGB.(64)

The momentum of the coal crisis built up through the first half of 1925. The Herald argued that either reasonable behaviour by the owners or nationalisation could avert the crisis, but never concealed a belief that all-out conflict was likely. In line with its conviction that government was an instrument of the owners - reinforced by periodic evidence of preparations for a "national emergency" - it argued that "the attack on the miners is plainly part of a concerted new offensive by the employing class". A consistent Herald line had been that the employers' offensive must be met by better Labour co-ordination, so it welcomed the announcement in mid 1925 of an Alliance of railwaymen, engineers, miners and transport workers as "One of the Most Hopeful Events of our Time".(65)

Coverage, once the owners had announced a lock-out from 31st July, stressed the miners' case in terms drawn from the ethical, humanitarian tradition :"No one who thinks of industry not in statistics, but in terms of flesh and blood, can be in doubt as to the rightness of the Miners decision yesterday to reject the owners proposals. Nor can anyone who understands all this may mean underrate the gravity of the situation.

"The men will stand firm. They are lights for life, a life that is worth living, not a mere existence of toil, existence and semi-starvation.

"They have declared their solution to the Coal Problem to be a national system under national control. That solution has been approved by a Royal Commission. Let the government quickly adopt it. There is no other".(66)
The depth of coverage left no doubt of the gravity of the situation. But though the Herald was prepared for a fight, it was not spoiling for one. Headlines as crisis loomed in the last 10 days of July were noticeably short of polemic: "Mineowners Pressed To Withdraw Demands", "Coal Crisis; Labour's General Staff in Command", "Government Meets Mines and Mineowners", "No Coal Imports if Miners are Locked Out" and "Premier Conducts Long-Distance Parleys" - with only the references to "demands" and to the General Council as the "General Staff" betraying its sympathies. (67)

Not until Stanley Baldwin called for all workers to take a pay cut to put industry back on its feet was the semblance of objectivity dropped - the news story running "In a flash this Premier, whose name is associated with one of the big coal and steel companies of Great Britain, thus revealed himself and threw down a challenge to the whole Labour Movement". Baldwin, the accompanying leader asserted, had shown "The mind of an owner. he cannot take any but an owner's point of view". (68) MF

With the lock-out only a day away. The Herald sought to mobilise its readers on the miners' behalf, in two oddly contrasting appeals reflecting diverse elements within the paper as much as the leader on Communist exclusion. One showed hints of the old Lansbury touch in using language that identified readers and paper as a single body: "We all have a duty to the Miners...We can all state their case...We can all plead for sympathy for them". The other, noting a statement by movement leaders, was imperious, impersonal and treated the readers as abstractions rather than individuals in its invocation of the established totems of union solidarity, discipline and trust for leaders: "It is more than an appeal; it is a definite Trade Union instruction for, and on behalf of, powerful and well-established organisations , bearing the signatures of tried and trusted leaders and representatives". The indirect address was accentuated in a conclusion pointing to the Herald as the one paper that would support the miners: "Will our readers therefore constitute themselves a voluntary army of canvassers in order to point out these really self-evident facts to those who have hitherto placed their individual whims and caprices before the duty they owe to themselves and their dependents". (69)
But the government caved in, offering a one-year subsidy to the coal industry to avert the lock-out. Evoking still clear memories of "Black Friday", the Herald hailed "Red Friday" - a label that has gone into the historic record - as the greatest victory in Labour history, won by the Herald's values of trade union discipline and solidarity.

Baldwin and the owners had been "forced to yield by the forces of organised Labour standing solid behind the Miners, prepared to make common cause with them, no matter what sacrifice...That was what won the victory - the Solidarity of Labour, and if it chooses Labour can use this giant's strength to gain everything on which its heart is set.

It concluded "So, successful in the first round of what will be a long tussle, Labour moves forward full of confidence and hope. Black Friday can now be forgotten. Red Friday has washed it out".(70)

But even in the euphoria and relief of victory there was a realisation that the main battles still lay ahead and the government subsidy was a delaying tactic. By 10th August the Herald was warning readers of this, and in its conclusions allying itself with those on the left arguing for an industrial showdown: "For the next nine months, Mr Wheatley has said "The workers must prepare on a new scale and on new lines for the greatest struggle in their history.

"There is the whole thing in a nutshell".(71)

iv. Content: Foreign

Foreign coverage also reflected a significant case - in this case the more recent setback of the loss of the Russian treaty through defeat at the General Election. The circumstances of the defeat served to reinforce still existing instinctive sympathies towards the Russian revolution - and with Ewer in charge such tendencies were not going to be restrained.

Nor was any check likely from the TUC. As Williams notes the left still dominated international debates, with the right concentrating on home pay and conditions. This was reflected by a TUC delegation who reported back from Russia in late 1924 with an enthusiasm in full accord with the Herald line: "Labour's Russia Policy Justified" was the headline followed by massive coverage of the publication of their report in February 1925 under the six-column heading "Where The Workers Are The Ruling Class".(72)
It was greeted as burying "fantastic fictions" of reigns of terror and starvation. The leader commented "Russia has settled down after its upheaval and...the benefits which the change of system has conferred on the workers decidedly outweigh any temporary disadvantages brought by it to them or to other classes of the community". (73)

That self-image as the paper dispelling myths put about with malicious intent by the capitalist press was in evidence again in April when Tomsky led a Russian union delegation to Britain in April. Press attacks on the delegation's credentials as working men were met with a story headlined "Who the Russian TU Delegates Really Are: Reply to Dope Press Attacks". It reported that they were "Workers All" come to make "businesslike efforts to clear away, by direct discussion, the difficulties which hamper the solution of the greatest of working-class problems - international unity". (74)

British Labour had no doubt that this unity should include the Bolsheviks and argued for their inclusion in the International Federation of Trade Unionists. The spectacle of a their expelling communists at home while supporting them internationally was too much for the IFTU which in October 1925 attacked its British affiliates for "Asking other countries to do something that she herself, quite rightly, refuses to do". (75)

But the Herald, more at home with contradictions between party and TUC policy, said the IFTU was suffering from a "strange confusion of mind" and that "To suggest that because we do not want civil war in Britain we ought not to have anything to do with the inhabitants of a country which has been through a revolution by force is, still putting it mildly, illogical". (76)

Purcell, president of IFTU, dismissed his European counterparts as "Far too much under the control of politicians of the Social Democratic Parties" and the Herald happily endorsed his line - approvingly quoting British delegates to the Socialist International as "moderating the fervour" of anti-Bolshevik factions. The vote for a single International at that year's TUC - the decision most symbolic of the leftward lurch - was given front-page coverage: "TUC's Great Shout of Agreed" was splashed across six columns and the plea for a united body reiterated in a leader in December. (77)
This enthusiasm was not purely ideological. One reason why Bolshevism had become so acceptable to the habitually hardheaded TUC was the belief, held even by right-wingers, that increased trade with the largest country in Europe could ease the depression and reduce unemployment. The Herald made the connection explicit in a news story under the headline "Ports That Want Russian Trade: Unemployment In The Humber Towns; Position Becoming Worse", and continued the theme in several subsequent stories. These included the discovery that banks were refusing credit for a #5m machinery order in spite of a Russian official's comment that "If we could get it we would prefer British machinery". True to its tendency to be freer with comment on the foreign pages, the Herald story noted "The bankers give credit freely for dealings with other countries. Their refusal in this instance constitutes a blockade against British trade". (78)

It remained an article of faith that western, and particularly British, governments shared this desire to do Russia down. The Berlin correspondent reported that the British government was leading an anti-Bolshevik campaign more intensively organised than at any time in the last two years. (79)

But assumptions of chicanery in British foreign policy were not confined to Russian stories - when Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain showed apparent sympathy to Italy's colonial ambitions, Slocombe reported from Paris that "It is taken for granted that Britain has now become the father confessor of Italian Fascism in Europe, and so sponsor of Mussolini's ambition of an imperialist colonialism". (80)

Such assumptions naturally served to reinforce the Herald's deep-rooted and longstanding anti-imperialism. Ireland, India and Egypt - battlegrounds and priorities throughout the paper's history, continued to command attention. The fight against British rule in Ireland and India was given a neat new combined turn when Indian journalist St Nihal Singh was commissioned to write a long series of features on Ireland, concluding the first "Youth at the Helm" with a comment that was doubtless intended to apply as much to India as to Ireland: "These young, inexperienced men are managing Irish affairs far better than they were conducted by the wiseacres in Whitehall". (81).
Zaghlul Pasha, Egyptian Nationalist Prime Minister, had been a Herald favourite for his robust anti-imperialism since the period immediately after the war. When he was driven out of office following the assassination of Sir Lee Stack, Sirdar of the Egyptian Army, Ewer's front-page story drew an unambiguous anti-imperial message. "Egypt has in fact been compelled to exchange a government headed by a great popular leader, and supported by the overwhelming majority of the elected representatives, for a Government headed by a gentleman acceptable to Lord Allenby". Headlines such as "Back To Policy of Persecution; Egypt Now Virtually Governed By Martial Law", drove home the same line. (82)

v. News and Sport

The Herald continued to be far more at ease with this sort of story than the human interest or scandal story beloved of its commercial rivals. Such stories were seen as not only pointless but downright damaging, diverting the attention of readers from things that matter. This view of the human interest story as an opiate found expression in a leader "Dope - a The Reason Why" explaining its sparse coverage of Lady Cathcart's excursion from the United States for being guilty party in a divorce: "We do not of course, give prominence to the matter. The Capitalist newspapers treat it as the most important news of the day. It is important to them. So long as the British nation can be doped in this way, so long the present system will last. They are getting all the advantages they can from the fact that the Englishman "dearly loves a lord". (83)

Editor Fyfe recognised popular taste for human interest. In early 1926 he told the Postmaster General's committee on broadcasting: "What the mass of newspaper readers required was amusement rather than information of a serious character. They wanted something to occupy their attention, while they were travelling to and from work. "What they liked were the spicy little bits, attractively displayed, which they got on the principle news pages". (84)

And the paper always contained a mass of short items drawn from court reporting and other agencies - a typical news page on 24th April 1926 carried 26 items including coverage of a slander action between an actress and a producer, of complaints at restrictions on women students at Oxford, a honeymoon couple's double suicide, the imprisonment for fraud of a tax inspector and a bulletin on the baby princess. (85)
But it still appears to have regarded non-political news items as fillers rather than important in their own right. It is hard to know what else could account for the extraordinary front page of March 19th 1926. Potential items included a Commons debate on the sweated trades and the aversion of a national engineers lockout. Maidstone Grammar School's production of Macbeth and Swaffield Road LCC School Wandsworth's Twelfth Night may well have merited the front page of the local weekly - their appearance on the front of a national daily is inexplicably bizarre even by the Herald's standards. (86)

What it continued to do was develop human interest-type stories that fitted its political agenda. While few in this period showed the staying power of Wembley or the Vacquier case in 1924, the Herald made copious use of juxtaposition - contrasting for instance the alleged goodwill of Christmas with evictions on Clydeside and the opening of Royal Ascot with a 43,000 increase in the registered unemployed. Ascot pictures were captioned "Evidence that some people, at any rate, have quite a lot of money to spend" and the statement that "While official figures were revealing the increasing suffering of the working class, "Society" was flaunting its wealth, mostly unearned, at Ascot". (87)

Wembley-type pay and conditions inquiries continued - a particular coup was the discovery that the Junior Constitutional Club, a Conservative institution, was a poor payer. An April 1925 series on blackcoated workers under a succession of headlines such as "The Early Start, the Frugal meal and a Long Day's Work" was tied to a push for union organisation and was said to have attracted "widespread interest", although Hicks, the reporter responsible, was sacked for poor work shortly afterwards. (88)

None of the year's murders inspired the excitement of the Vacquier case, but a campaign in Hull for the reprieve of William Smith, rejected by Home Secretary Joynson-Hicks in the face of a 90,000 signature petition, showed that one advantage of being in opposition was the freedom to personalise such campaigns. Henderson's refusal to reprieve Vacquier had been treated as a departmental rather than a personal matter. The loss of Smith's appeal was headlined "Home Secretary Refuses a City" and reported "The news of the decision was received in Hull with incredulity which rapidly gave way to bitter indignation". (89)
But there was interest in "new categories of crime" - notably the exploits of motor bandits. It could be argued that 1925 was the year in which the Herald finally awoke to the existence of the motor car, although not yet as something its readers were likely to own. The success of the Motor Show was quoted as proof that "The comfortable classes of this country are doing very well indeed and are provided plentifully with money". With this in mind the Herald reported the car more as a killer than a creator of freedoms - with consistent coverage of inquests and leaders with headlines such as "The Moloch of the Road". (90)

Air travel was still at the level of scientific progress rather than of consumer goods, so the Herald went on enthusing about fresh exploits - its enthusiasm for the technology going so far as to make its response to Cobham's flight to Australia mildly ungenerous to the aviator: "It is the aeroplane rather than the pilot which is the hero...proves that aeroplanes can be relied upon with vastly greater confidence than could be placed in them a few years ago". Even after the Paris Mail crash in late 1924, which killed eight, the paper was convinced flight would "become commonplace". (91)

This was a better prediction than its reaction to the new craze of crossword puzzles. The Herald believed "Cross words will pass. We shall be bored by them and seek out new inventions. But the passion for solving puzzles, for unveiling mysteries, for probing the unknown, is the enduring curse and glory of mankind". (92)

This was a matter of preference rather than an absolute principle, and in a spirit of pragmatism the paper overcame its distaste to the extent of providing a more or less regular puzzle from the start of 1925. The first was called "The Swastika", a symbol which had still to acquire its subsequent connotations, and with a typical Herald touch an Esperanto crossword was carried in February 1925. But it clearly did not love its new feature and was convinced it had found a more palatable alternative in "Labour limericks", carrying a political message, in October - cheerfully reporting on the 21st of the month that "Only a few readers regret the passing of the cross-word". That entertaining puzzles were likely to outlasted political messages in popular appeal was a lesson that the Herald had still to learn. (93)
Sport continued in its hermetic way, but two cricket stories broke into the news pages as lead item. Heavy coverage of Jack Hobbs' record 126th century reflected both Hobbs' status as a national institution and the lack of serious political stories in August, but the outburst by Yorkshire president Lord Hawke against the possibility of a professional ever captaining England became a politically-angled news story in its own right. It ran on the front for three days, with a leader pointing up the wider implications that had been invisible to Titwillow in dismissing the possibility of a professional captain a year earlier, noting that while Hawke had "stone-age views", they were no joke as plenty of people with similar viewpoints were to be found in positions of power and influence. Proof that on occasion sports coverage did reflect the rest of the paper, was the letter congratulating the Herald on becoming the first paper to abolish the amateur-professional distinction in cricket scorecards.

vi. A Chorus of Disapproval.

But congratulations were in limited supply from the movement leaders on whose continuing support the paper depended. By the time of the 1925 TUC the movement had owned it for three years, and put in close to $150,000 since the start of 1922. It was no longer in imminent danger of closure, making supporters less forgiving of perceived defects. In consequence the Herald session at the 1925 TUC was dominated by editorial issues rather than previous financial considerations.

Support was committed until 1928, but if the paper wanted to do better than survive, union finance would be needed for development. The mood at the 1925 TUC indicated that it was unlikely to get it. Doubts were summed up by the resolution from the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation to refer back the Herald section of the General Council report, saying "If that is the best effort in Labour journalism, then the sooner the General Council get out of this business and leave it to the amateurs, the better for us."
Even the ultra-loyal Turner, who had defended the paper in correspondence with MacDonald, conceded that the directors were "Not at all satisfied that we have got as good a paper as we ought to have". Bevin had some sympathy with the critics, but was not prepared to see the paper attacked in open Congress, and said "When you tell me it ought to represent Trade Union opinion, perhaps you will have to have a committee to decide what Trade Union opinion is". He argued that the staff had to be trusted to do their jobs, and only checked if they were not carrying out proper policy. Nobody had yet clarified their criticisms, which showed a "nasty pin-pricking attitude" rather than recognition of the paper's difficulties. (96)

Duly flattened, the resolution was voted down. But the issues it raised were already under consideration at Board level. In July a sub-committee of Turner, Bevin, Allen and Ethel Bentham had been set up with the aim, as Turner put it, of "Seeing if we cannot make the policy of the paper fit the party any more than it has done during the past year or two". In meetings before conference they had questioned the quality of industrial coverage, recommended that news and speeches should be reported without running comment and, in a shot across Ewer's bows, called for international policy to reflect General Council and party executive decisions. (97)

The group were asked to produce memos suggesting editorial improvements in the paper - these were written in September though not put to Fyfe until two months later. Bevin was concerned about sensationalism in industrial reporting, comment-larded news reports and an indistinct political line. He commented "If one went away to a place where the DH was the only procurable paper and returned after a period one would be out of touch". (98)

Turner's disconcerting stream of consciousness consisted largely of suggestions of movement leaders who might contribute while RB Walker wanted a 12 page paper, decent pictures and the maintenance of literary and review coverage. Ethel Bentham shrewdly noted the conflicting demands on the Herald: "A small paper with limited resources has to fulfil two different functions - that of the ordinary daily newspaper and that of the organ of the movement". At the moment it was doing neither well - a problem exemplified by failure to report Sir George Newman's pro-National Health Service speech at the opening of the MacDonald Memorial Clinic, although it had carried Ramsay MacDonald's remarks. She argued that, with other news sources available, it should concentrate on the movement role. (99)
In reply Fyfe argued that most criticisms reflected an undersized and underfunded paper, that comments in reports were an old and intractable problem and in reply to Dr Bentham's complaint revealed one of the constraints on any party editor: "We were bound to report the Leader of the Party and had no room for more, even if the agency had supplied more". (100)

Turner, Bevin, Bentham and Walker all saw the Herald as above all else a Labour paper, and did not question that role. Clifford Allen's seven page diatribe called for an entirely different approach, taking the Herald closer to the style of its commercial rivals.

It is easy to miss the significance of this critique amid Allen’s extraordinary vituperativeness. He was close to MacDonald, who considered the memo "excellent": and he had just lost his battle against the Clydesiders for control of the ILP. Both will certainly have fuelled his venom against leftish influences. (101)

He called the paper "a semi-minority movement conspiracy...ungenerous and unBritish...littered with Communist and minority dodges" - still working in the spirit of former proprietors "Who lifted their eyes to heaven with brotherly love on the tips of their tongues and fraternal hate on the tips of their tongues".

MacDonald's influence was evident in his advocacy of a loyal follower role: "It is its duty to hearten, not to warn; to inspire confidence, not watchfulness". The staff should "give up thinking it is is the conscience of the Movement" and "remember that the elected leaders must be allowed to know best what the Movement wants". Internal movement controversies, giving too much space to minority points of view, should be minimised.

He called for the removal of Communists or "strategically retired Communists" from important positions on the staff - singling out Ewer, another MacDonald bete noire: "Here has been called on the Movement the biggest bluff I can remember. He should be removed at once". (102)
If the political voice was MacDonald’s, the analysis of the paper’s main failings echoed Philip Snowden’s six-year-old critique of Labour press failings—too much overt politics: “We advertise ourselves as a Labour Daily when all the time we want to be considered as an attractive newspaper...there should actually be less inches of Labour matter and less Labour headlines in the DH than in other papers, simply because the public is especially sensitive in thinking of us as a propaganda paper. Labour propaganda and Labour’s point of view should only be introduced into our columns when it is justified on its merits as news...our eyes should always be set on the general reader, who does not want “doing good” but wants a bright general newspaper.” (103)

The tone doubtless contributed to the surprise with which Fyfe reacted—saying that Allen had given no previous indication of his views in board meetings or otherwise and casting serious doubt on his day-to-day knowledge of the paper by pointing out that his demand for the removal of the crowing cock masthead had been implemented more than a year ago.

And he rejected Allen’s main thesis: “It is quite impossible that a paper exists in order that the Labour point of view may be represented in the Press should serve up its news and comments exactly as the Daily News and Daily Mail do. If it did, what need would there be to keep going?” (104)

But the Allen critique, developed here for the first time, was to exert increasing influence as the Herald continued to struggle through the 1920s. So too would Fyfe’s call for an insurance scheme. And even in the short-term this Herald sub-committee would stand out from most such groups by making a difference to the paper, in the form of a picture page funded by an extra #7,000 extracted from the General Council by Bevin. (105)

Launched on 9th February it reflected the Allen critique by being more newsy than political and closer to the traditional style of the popular press than any of the news pages. The first spread included two pictures of the current floods, a fallen pole which had killed a postal worker, the Oxford boat loaded for race trials and a hat from the Paris fashions. The mix of something newsy, something sporty and at least one pretty girl became the norm. Politics obtruded rarely, as when shots of an eroding wall near Lloyd George’s Criccieth home provided the opportunity for pointed comparisons between the wall and Lloyd George’s party. (106)
Chapter Nine: Not At All Satisfied: Nov 1924 to May 1926

vii. The Gathering Storm

It was indeed evidence of the seriousness of the situation in early May 1926, as a General Strike became inevitable, that the picture page should largely have been devoted to pictures related to the crisis. In this it was a reflection of the paper, with only the Home Page and Sport unscathed. Bobby Bear was not on this occasion to be conscripted to the cause. (107)

Blanket coverage was the logical conclusion of the story that dominated 1926 from its opening day - when Durham MP Jack Lawson set the agenda for the year with a letter enquiring "What is to happen next May?". (108)

Then the subsidy granted on Red Friday by Baldwin would run out - and this time there was to be no evading a collision between Labour and Capital. Having rehearsed its lines in the 1925 crisis, the Herald responded to the threat of a renewed crisis in much the same manner as a year earlier - giving unstinted support to the miners, without ever spoiling for a fight.

Indeed it was explicitly to reject its syndicalist heritage in a leader "The War Mind at Work" commenting on the sinister potential of groups like the privately-organised Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies: "No responsible trade union leader has ever proposed a General Strike, which would hurt most of all the people it was intended to help. The suggestion looks very much like a pretext for raising a force which could be used to support a Dictatorship such as exists in Italy and Spain, and is much talked of in France". (109)

Rejection of an aggressive far left line was made even more explicit in the last few days before the strike, when a Minority Movement statement was roundly condemned: "A godsend to the Mineowners Press...nothing but harm can be done by small and unimportant bodies butting in...Mr Cook may well exclaim "Save me from my friends". (110)
Analysis remained the same as before, blaming the intransigence of owners and government and the system of private ownership for the dispute. Nationalization was the preferred solution - expounded in a January leader that placed the dispute in a firmly ethical context as a Manichean struggle between benevolent progress and blind reaction. This classic exposition of the Herald belief that socialism was not only right but modern was accompanied by a heavy dose of the Herald propensity to emphasize important concepts by initial capitals: "A great Movement, inspired by Faith in the Future, by determination to move with the times, and by the spirit of Comradeship which aims at turning our resources to full account for the benefit of everybody, no longer for the advantage of a privileged few"

The vision of coal under public control was again an expression of the ethical rather than the Marxist tradition - a classless, rather managerial appeal assuming that class conflict was a bad thing and private ownership its sole cause in the industry: "There will be no Bureaucracy, no political conflicts over labour conditions. Management will be by experts".

And it concluded with millenarian fervour: "A great occasion has called forth a great design. Nothing more encouraging to those who follow the Labour Movement, nothing more hopeful for the creation of the New Order, has ever seen the light". (111)

Yet, as a year earlier, reporting was restrained and factual - comprehensive, exhaustive and progressively driving other stories from the most prominent slots in the paper, but reflecting an apparent belief that when the stakes were so high an official paper must avoid rash statements that might make a bad situation still worse. In early April the lead story headlined "Great Coal Crisis Threatens" devoted two columns to a strictly factual report of the owners' position combined with comments from the miners. (112)

Not until the last few days, with the dispute apparently inevitable, did the objective stance slip. The TUC decision to strike was greeted with a leader under the title "Trust Your Leaders!", the Herald again appearing as the voice of the centre addressing the rank and file. (113)

The final issue reflected realisation that no restraints could now retrieve the situation. The lead news story demonstrated the conclusive breakdown of factual reporting under the headline "If IT Be War So Be IT: Blame Rests on the Government, starting: "A struggle is upon us. Nothing can prevent it but a last minute change of attitude by the Government. quote continues next page
"Up to the last the Trade Union Movement has constantly striven for an honourable peace.

"The Government equally consistently, has persistently itched for war, and Labour has been repeatedly rebuffed.

"If war it be, so be it. The whole movement is ready. If, however, wiser counsels prevail at Downing-street Labour is ready with its sound and reasonable way to peace".

Headlines conveyed the mix of exhortation and information for strikers contained in the rest of the paper "Stand Firm and We Shall Win", "How to Help","Stand Fast I Be Loyal To Labour And The Miners" and one story "Beware of Wireless! The Government Controls It!" that was to be the pretext of a police raid on the following day.(114)

The leader page, doubtless with an eye to morale as the movement stepped into the unknown territory of a General Strike, featured an article on the Berlin workers strike of 1920 against the right-wing Kapp putsch "When the Workers of Berlin Folded Their Arms - And won".

The main leader reaffirmed the theme of an appeal beyond class:"The Government has considered not national, but class and party interests". It argued optimistically that the strike would end Toryism as a political force, and, desperate times making for desperate responses, concluded on arguably the highpoint of Heraldmillenarianism during the 1920 "If before victory comes we have to suffer, we must suffer gladly because of our Great Cause. If we must make sacrifices, we shall make them readily, looking to a rich reward.

"Not a reward in personal benefit, but in the knowledge that we have steadfastly borne our part in the eternal conflict between Progress and Stagnation, between the forces which we symbolise as Christ and Satan, between Darkness and Light".(115)

The Herald, temporarily disguised as the British Worker, was indeed to play a steadfast role during the brief drama of the General Strike, but its reward was predictably to be as transitory as ever.
It was inevitable that the Herald would come under greater criticism in the period from late 1924 to mid 1926 than it had previously in its incarnation as a party paper. In the 1922-3 spell mere survival had been achievement enough, while attention and energies were focussed for most of 1924 on the new challenges of government.

In 1925 neither distraction existed, the paper was failing to progress from survival to prosperity and the bitterness of defeat - notably those suffered by MacDonald at the hands of the electorate and Allen in his battle with the Clydesiders - fed into much of the criticism.

The choice of the 'candid friend' identity was a realistic application of journalistic values to the official paper's ever-present risk of predictable monotony. But it was also a role guaranteed to maximise discontent within the movement. Neither the right nor the left wanted a paper to reflect the diversity and debate within the movement - both wanted a loyal follower of their line.

Insofar as the Herald shifted left in this period, it could legitimately argue that it was reflecting a shift within the movement and in particular within its main paymaster, the General Council. The loss of Lansbury removed a significant barrier to the taming of the paper, but in editorial terms was more of symbolic significance - the old editor's feeling that he was already marginalised contributing to his decision to go. The choice of Williams as his successor reflected the paper's true place in the unions order of priorities - important, but not nearly as important as their own activities and political needs. It also clearly contributed to the continuing alienation of editor Fyfe.

The Herald's essential problems remained unchanged during this period. But the emergence in the debates of late 1925 of an alternative model of development - Allen's call for the Herald to cast off pride in its distinctiveness and be more like its rivals combined with Fyfe's advocacy of an insurance scheme - was a significant pointer to debates during the rest of the 1920s.
1. Ewer - Miracle op cit
435
3. GM rep 19.11.25 LPDH 479,22.4.26 LPDH 497 DH 30.1.25
5. RPTUC 1925 p 496. Wilsdon (Upholsterers) to DH 10.4.25, Williams to Bramley
18.6.25 TUC 788.04
to Citrine 16.4,12.8,17.8,10.9,30.12.26,2.8.27 TUC 788.04
7. AM rep 21.1.26 LPDH 490
8. AM rep 16.7.25 loc cit. GM rep 22.4.26 LPDH 497
9. Herald profit and loss accounts to 31.12.24 LPDH 436 TUC 788.21, to
30.6.25 LPDH 480, to 31.12.25 LPDH 498. GM rep 2.1.25 LPDH 390. GM rep to TUCGC and LPEC 26.4.26 TUC 789.2
11. Bramley to Millwood 7.11.24 TUC 788.01 TUCFC 2.1.25 p 71, item 22
12. TUCFC 9.2.25 p 79, item 38. GM rep 15.10.25 LPDH 472
13. Lansbury to Millwood 3.1.25 LPDH 391. DH 30.1.25. Fyfe to sub-committee
19.11.25 LPDH 481 TUC 789.1 NW 7.2.25
14. TUCFC 2.1.25 p 71 item 22
15. Lansbury - My Life op cit p 195
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109. DH 15.1.26
110. DH 29.4.26
111. DH 26.2.26
112. DH 3.4.26
113. DH 3.5.26
115. DH 4.5.26
END