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NOUVELLE SOCIÉTÉ HELVÉTIQUE

(London Group)

On Tuesday, November 17th, Mr. Gottfried J. Keller, London correspondent of the "Basler Nachrichten", and a former President of the Foreign Press Association, on the occasion of an "Open Meeting" addressed a large audience — amongst them the Swiss Ambassador and Madame Daeniker — at the Swiss Hostel for Girls, 9, Belsize Grove, N.W.3., on the subject of "The Power of Public Opinion". The excellent and much appreciated *exposé* is herewith reproduced *in extenso* being of general interest.

Some little while ago a guest speaker at a function similar to this one here tonight made what was, even as speeches go, an oration of exceptional length and tedium.

The Chairman began to nod and the toastmaster, to keep him awake, tapped him gently with his gavel. But the speaker still went relentlessly on until the Chairman really fell asleep. The toastmaster then tapped him quite sharply on the head and the Chairman woke up and said, in a loud, clear voice: "Hit me again, I can still hear him."

Well, Ladies and Gentlemen, I sincerely hope that my little talk tonight will not have a similar effect either on our Chairman, or on anybody else in this distinguished audience.

When your President asked me, some time ago, in his most persuasive and suave manner, whether I would agree, once again, to address the N.S.H. I began to wonder what was the motive for this choice. Either, I thought, somebody prominent had just refused and he must be in very real difficulty to fill a gap. Or, Banker as he is, he might, I thought, want to cash in on the fact that for some wartime services rendered this Society had, after all made me a free life member. Why not make a man who anyway does not pay any contributions, perform from time to time? Well, I have accepted the invitation and have done so with mixed feelings, pleasure to come back to old friends on the one hand and a certain apprehension regarding the subject of such a talk on the other. To go back to the old wartime habit of giving you my views on the situation, as it developed, was, of course, out of question, as far too much has happened between then and now. Turning things over in my mind, I thought you might perhaps be interested in a *causerie* — lecture, as used in the "Swiss Observer" announcement is far too grand a word — about something with which you may all be vaguely familiar, but which is intangible and remains somewhat of a puzzle even to many of those, like myself, who in a modest way help to shape it:

Public Opinion.

No practitioner and no theoretician of political life would seriously dispute, that Public Opinion is an enormous power in any democracy. Even in the communist totalitarian states there are signs that those in power have to reckon with public opinion and disregard it at their own risk. In the U.K. the power of Public Opinion is such, that no government could really govern against it for any length of time. If Public Opinion demands — this is an example of present-day history — that the British Prime Minister

should take the initiative for a so-called East-West Summit Meeting, he would find it progressively difficult to resist such a demand, even if he himself would think very little of its chances of success. The demand from Public Opinion could very quickly become a very massive moral pressure. To ignore this for a lengthy period without giving very good reasons to the public would mean that the Prime Minister would, in the view of Public Opinion, put himself into the wrong. This again would mean that one of the most important bases, from which he exercises his power, would start to crumble. His whole position might become insecure.

Now if Public Opinion has such power and influence, the question arises: "What is Public Opinion?" Professor Dr. Siegfried Frey, the Managing Director of the Swiss Telegraph Agency and lecturer in the Universities of Berne and Zürich on Journalism, has given a definition of Public Opinion, which, I think, cannot be improved upon. According to him, Public Opinion in the widest sense of the term is "The General Direction of Thinking of the masses, or The Public." This definition has been formulated in Switzerland, for Switzerland, but there is no doubt in my mind that it applies to the U.K. just as much. This is all the more the case as Professor Frey has added the following sentence to his definition: "It has always been uncertain — and can never be clarified with absolute certainty — whether Public Opinion is to a greater extent expressed in the Press, or whether it is rather shaped by the Press. "I have, during my 25½ years stay in this country, been told time and again that Public opinion is nothing else but published opinion:

Experience has taught me that this sentence, which is current in Fleet Street as well as in many political Clubs, is nothing but a somewhat misleading generalisation. I have seen it time and again that English friends of mine knew the opinion of their particular newspaper about a particular event and had, nonetheless, come to conclusions of their own and formed their own opinion. It would, of course, be interesting to know — but is quite impossible ever to find out! — how many readers of a particular paper habitually form their own opinions and how many, that is, what percentage, accept the one offered by their organ *and make it their own*. It might be, that those who belong mainly to the intellectual, thinking part of the population fall within the first category, whereas the second group is mainly made up by people who are less in the habit of thinking things over on their own and therefore more likely to accept predigested mental food. If, therefore, certain newspapers proclaim from time to time that Public Opinion demands this or that, it is quite impossible to know with any degree of certainty whether public opinion really demands this or whether the papers in question simply attribute their own ideas to Public Opinion. It is worth noting in this connection that a statistical review published some years ago in the weekly paper "New Statesman" showed that less than half of the regular readership of this publication — which has a circulation of approximately 75,000 — shared the Editors' socialist views, and that many were, in fact, true blue Tories. In spite, however, of these rather negative statements, there are nevertheless, a number of possibilities in this country to read the barometer of public opinion.

Alistair Cook, the well-known Washington correspondent of the "Guardian", formerly known as Manchester Guardian, has recently dealt with the same problem from the American angle. In his article he said that in the U.S.A. one could not do better, with a view to getting to know the trend of public opinion, than to question the members of Parliament. They, he said, were in constant and permanent touch with their constituencies and could not dare to take a different line in Washington than that demanded by public opinion in their constituencies. This may be true for the U.S.A., but it is much less certain whether it applies to the U.K. as much. One must not forget that the British M.P. represents, as a rule, — to which there are, of course, exceptions, — the *Party Line*. Should he, especially in important questions, fail to do so, there is, very quickly, talk of "rebellion" and this might bring the Chief Whip of the Party into action. While it is as interesting as profitable for any outside observer to maintain contact with British members of Parliament, they nevertheless do not seem to be bearers or impersonations of Public Opinion quite as much as their American counterparts.

How then is it possible in this country, to find out what public opinion thinks or feels about a particular problem? To begin with there is the famous "Man in the Street." He may be your hairdresser, your gardener, your milkman, your news vendor, your postman or your petrol pump attendant. As a rule his conversation is about the weather and then about the weather again. He might, possibly, talk to you about the Podola case, the latest cricket score or about the jewel robbery which has taken place in the home of the Duchess of Appleturver. If *he*, however, starts talking to you — and of all people to a foreigner like myself — about a political problem of the day, then you do know that Public Opinion itself has talked to you. You all realise, of course, that it is not considered very good manners in this country to talk about politics. You also realise, no doubt, that, as a rule, an Englishman will only talk politics to persons of equal worth and value, that is to other Englishmen. However, if an Englishman condescends to start talking about political matters to a foreigner, then this is, for me, a clear sign that public opinion is beginning to form an to express itself.

It is said that the *Pub* is another means of finding out how public opinion reacts and where it stands on certain matters. Some of my colleagues — not those present here tonight — attach very great importance to this so-called means of finding out about public opinion. Whether in between downing beer and throwing the occasional dart they really come near to the truth, or whether this is as good or bad an excuse as any to offer their wives, I am not in a position to say, as I have never taken to the institution of the pub very much. It is, in my opinion, quite interesting and worth half an hour or so, to listen from time to time to the public Speakers in Hyde Park or on Hampstead Heath. It is, of course, not so much the sermons and set pieces some of them reel off, which are worth listening to, but the questions which are asked and the way they are put.

Of particular importance, I think, are the Letters to the Editor, which as you know, appear daily in the big national newspapers and equally regularly once a week in the weeklies. The English are much more

industrious as letter writers than the Swiss — it is only a few years ago that the N.Z.Z. and other Swiss newspapers have started devoting a special page at regular intervals to such correspondence — and practically every British paper or publication of standing has a special staff in its editorial offices dealing with this. When King Edward the 8th, the present Duke of Windsor, abdicated in December 1936, it was said afterwards that three men had forced him to abdicate: The then Prime Minister Mr. Stanley Baldwin, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Cosmo Gordon Lang, and — the then Editor of the Times, Mr. Geoffrey Dawson. It was a fact that the Letters to the Editor, as published in the Times, constituted an enormous public pressure on the King to abdicate. Years later it was revealed that Mr. Geoffrey Dawson guided, manipulated and steered the "public opinion", as expressed in his paper, by publishing only such letters, as advocated that the King should either give up Mrs. Simpson or renounce his throne. This is a powerful example with which to illustrate that it is possible to shape public opinion by means of published opinion and this in a way infinitely more subtle than by hammering away on a subject in a series of leading articles. Mr. Dawson may have calculated at the time that his readers might sooner accept the spontaneously uttered opinion of the highly respected Lord X and Lady Z than the one offered by an anonymous leader writer. It is even said that certain editors in Fleet Street, when they desire to guide public thinking into certain channels — for example before an election — are in the habit of employing letter-writers against payment, who, of course, write "spontaneously" under guidance and under different names.

A further means of getting to know something about the status of public opinion are the so-called Brains Trusts, as practiced on the B.B.C., and on both channels of Television. Three, four or five well-known personalities sit together under the Chairmanship of a gifted Master of Ceremonies and answer questions which have either been sent in writing or are asked spontaneously on the spot. Now I am not suggesting that it is the answers of the brains which are representative of public opinion, but I do suggest that the questions often are.

Of particular interest, with a view to finding out the trend of public opinion on specific subjects are, in my opinion, the questions which are asked by M.P.'s at Question Time in the House of Commons. These questions usually are a mirror of the problems touched upon by Constituents in their letters to their M.P.'s. There is, incidentally, no contradiction between this statement and one made earlier on in this talk, according to which M.P.s. usually have to toe the Party Line. The picture, which I suggest emerges from these two statements is this: The M.P. who talks publicly as a rule represents a Party Line, but the M.P. who asks questions in the House or talks privately represents Public Opinion.

How else, one may ask, is it possible to find out what Public Opinion feels or thinks about particular issues? The big political parties, of course, have their own machinery for this. They receive reports from their local agents, who themselves have been talking to people in the pub and in the club, and the Specialists in the Party Headquarters who analyse these reports, often hundreds of them, thus gain a pretty clear

picture of what Public Opinion is. Many newspapers have similar organisations of their own: as you may remember during the recent election campaign the Daily Mail, The Evening News, the Sunday Dispatch The Daily Telegraph all published regular Public Opinion Polls, whereas the News Chronicle carried those of the British Gallup Institute. I would not like to be drawn into making any statement regarding the value or otherwise of these Polls; on the one hand I remember too well how the American Gallup Institute predicted a heavy victory for Governor Dewey when he and Mr. Truman both ran for the Presidency and how Mr. Truman won a resounding victory. On the other hand some of the Polls published in connection with the recent British General Election have come pretty near to the true position.

Public Opinion, even though it cannot be measured accurately in litres, gallons, inches, miles or any other measure, metric or otherwise, is nevertheless an enormous power. It can sweep away Foreign Secretaries — as was the case when the late Lord Templewood, formerly Sir Samuel Hoare, had to resign from the F.O. when the Hoare-Laval deal concerning Abyssinia became publicly known. It can also lead to a premature abandonment of a military operation — as was the case three years ago when the then Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden broke down in health and resolution under the pressure of Public Opinion which condemned his military attack against Egypt over Suez. As you may remember the whole Labour movement, the Trade Unions, the Church, a large portion of the population as well as a number of influential newspapers such as The Times and The Manchester Guardian, (now simply called the Guardian,) were against him and the pressure brought to bear on him by all those factors combined was too much for him to withstand. It is, of course, true, that there was enormous pressure from the Americans too and that Bulganin and Krushchov had threatened to send rockets on to London and Paris in case the campaign continued — but according to Randolph Churchill who has written a book about this and also according to the two French authors Bromberger who have given their version from the French angle, it was first and foremost the pressure of Public Opinion in Britain which caused Eden to break down under the strain. As you know, he himself is now writing his own version about these and other historic events and when it is published, we may well find this confirmed by the former Prime Minister himself. In any case, it is, I think, no exaggeration to say that Public Opinion is something no government, certainly no democratic one, can ignore.

This brings me to a further question. How and how far can Public Opinion be led? This leads me to the problem of Public Relations.

The relationship between Government, Parliament and the Population is, of course, of cardinal importance in the practical everyday working of a democracy. A democracy in which there is a breach between the people and their Government cannot function satisfactorily for any length of time. The question thus arises how such a feeling that there is a gap between those who govern and those who are governed, can be avoided, or if it exists, overcome. Theoretically it is, of course, the Parliament which

ought to provide the bridge between Government and Public Opinion. Its duty, ideally, is to control the government and to ensure by question, debate and decision that the people's will prevails. But the practice looks very different. In practice most of the important executive decisions are nowadays taken by the Cabinet, or even by a small Cabinet Committee, without any prior reference to Parliament whatever. This certainly goes for foreign affairs, where the habit of the so-called personal diplomacy between heads of Governments — or summits, as they are called nowadays — created a situation in which the power to pledge their countries to certain courses affecting whole nations and the future of whole Continents rested practically with three or four men. This is an extremely dangerous trend, but one which is very likely to continue. It is dangerous, because no check whatever exists and no prior consultation of Parliament is possible. The trend has, developed out of the necessity to take swift decisions. This necessity naturally existed in wartime, when for a long time that evil dynamic dictator Hitler continually held the initiative. But the necessity exists to-day too, as the Western democracies are still compelled to deal with an evil dynamic dictator who can do as he pleases and has no need to refer anything to his rubber-stamp parliament. For better or worse, for good or evil democracies simply cannot afford in present times to lay themselves open to the charge that they are incapable of swift action or have no strong executive control. It is also a fact that together with the increase in authority of the Cabinet in relation to Parliament, there has been an increase in the authority of the Prime Minister and two or three of his principal colleagues over the rest of the Cabinet. That this was particularly the case during the last war should surprise no-one, as it is a well-known historic fact that the then Prime Minister, Churchill, exercised an almost dictatorial power in practically all major policy questions, certainly in matters concerning foreign affairs, defence, strategy, and to a great extent home affairs too. Only in certain departmental matters, such as Labour relations, or food, or war transport was policy determined by the Minister in question. Now during the war, there were of course, special circumstances to account for all this, as the then Mr., now Sir Winston Churchill, was the nearly unchallenged War Leader of the country. I say nearly, because one man who could not stand him and whom Churchill could not stand either — Churchill once called him "that merchant of discourtesy" — did challenge his authority from time to time: Aneurin Bevan.

But even to-day the personal power exercised by the Prime Minister is very great. It must be remembered in this connection that it is, constitutionally, the Prime Minister, as a person, — and not the Party which he leads — who is invited by the Crown to form a Government. He thus is the source of all political power and patronage and can appoint to what offices he chooses those he thinks are fit. He can also drop them at any time he likes and it is his personal prerogative to advise the Crown on the dissolution of parliament.

(To be continued.)