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Your Britain: Media and the Making of the Labour Party

Laura Beers

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Understanding the rise of the Labour Party, from its foundation in 1900 as the humble Labour Representation Committee to its landslide general election victory in 1945, is one of the most significant, and most taxing, challenges for historians of 20th-century Britain. A variety of different explanations have been offered in what has become a very extensive literature on the subject: the emergence of class politics, the spectacular decline and fall of the Liberal party, the impact of the world wars, the local activism of the Labour movement. In this stimulating and very readable book, Laura Beers offers a fruitful new line of enquiry: the party's use of the mass media. Labour would not have been able to build an election-winning coalition of voters, Beers argues, without shrewdly employing the technologies of mass communication – above all, national newspapers, BBC radio, and cinema newsreels – to construct an appealing image of the party. 'The party's ability to compete successfully in the new arena of mass media politics' she concludes, 'played a crucial role' in sustaining it after the catastrophic split in 1931 and enabling it to win power after Hitler was defeated (p. 202). This interpretation might initially seem surprising, even counter-intuitive, to many readers. The media has rarely featured prominently in explanations of Labour's rise for the simple reason that historians have assumed that the hostility of the media was one of the greatest obstacles facing the party. It is well known that the popular newspaper market in the opening decades of the century was dominated by staunchly conservative and imperialistic titles such as the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Express*; accounts of the period frequently offer examples of the vehemently anti-socialistic journalism of these papers. The most notorious anti-Labour stunt was the *Daily Mail*'s exploitation of the 'Zinoviev letter' in the run-up to the 1924 election. This forged letter, purporting to be from Comintern chief Grigory Zinoviev, offered financial backing for revolutionary activity by the Communist Party of Great Britain; the fact that MacDonald's Labour Government had not taken any action to counter this unwelcome foreign intervention indicated, in the *Mail*'s eyes, that Labour were beholden to the Communists. This dramatic revelation, the culmination of weeks of stories attempting to associate Labour with extremism, has often been regarded as making a significant contribution to the Conservative party's crushing victory in the election; the heated political atmosphere generated by the claims certainly led to the highest voter turnout of the inter-war period. The only popular paper that could be relied upon to support the Labour Party was the *Daily Herald*, but historians have tended to downplay its importance; here scholars have perhaps been overly influenced by knowledge of the *Herald*'s decline in the post-war period, and its eventual reincarnation as the stridently right-wing *Sun*, under the ownership of Rupert Murdoch.

But it was not just the press that appeared to be working against the Labour Party. Many on the left felt that the BBC, despite its duty of impartiality, enshrined the views of the conservative elites and, by steering clear of 'controversy', offered few chances for speakers to challenge the status quo. These suspicions seemed to be confirmed in the organisation's coverage of the General Strike in 1926, another well-rehearsed episode in histories of the period. For John Reith, the Director-General, there could be little doubt about the BBC's approach to the strike: "Assuming the BBC is for the people, and that the Government is for the people, it follows that the BBC must be for the Government in this crisis" (p. 111). Following this simple logic, pro-government speakers were given easy access to the airwaves, while Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald was refused permission to broadcast; the Archbishop of Canterbury was not even allowed a slot to outline a joint proposal from church leaders encouraging a resumption of negotiations. The BBC's stance was one of the major

reasons why the government won the propaganda battle against the TUC, and maintained widespread support among the middle classes during the industrial action. The Conservatives, in short, seemed to have significant structural advantages in the media arena, as well as having superior financial resources with which to pay for advertising and election propaganda. Several historians have argued that the party exploited this position to the full, noting, for example, the skill with which Baldwin mastered radio broadcasting and was able to use it to convey a vision of Englishness and national stability that proved attractive to many voters.

Beers does not seek to minimise or disguise the advantages enjoyed by the Conservatives, and she gives due weight to the despair and disillusionment of many Labour leaders about the 'poison gas press' and the duplicitous BBC. Indeed, she explains how the left's visceral dislike of the media was given intellectual substance by a wide range of contemporary thinkers, from Upton Sinclair and Hilaire Belloc to Walter Lippman and Norman Angell. These writers all argued, in their different ways, that a profit-seeking and advertising-funded press in a modern capitalist system was always likely to offer its readers a combination of human interest and conservative politics (interpretations which still find much favour in journalism studies today). What Beers demonstrates so persuasively, however, is that there were many other influential Labour politicians, such as Herbert Morrison, Sidney Webb and Ellen Wilkinson, who were determined to try to use the media to Labour's advantage. *Your Britain* tells the story of how this wing of the party gradually became ascendant over the sceptics, so that by the 1930s Labour had developed a sophisticated media strategy that was starting to make a real impact with the electorate. By concentrating so much on the difficulties that Labour faced with the media, Beers suggests, historians have missed many of the party's successes, and have likewise failed to appreciate the contribution that shrewd political communication made to the 1945 election victory.

After an introductory chapter outlining the rise of a national media culture in the early 20th century, the core of the book develops a broadly chronological narrative documenting the shifting dynamics of Labour's engagement with the media. Voices within the Labour movement had called for a newspaper since the late 1860s; only in 1912 were these dreams realized when not one but two Labour-supporting publications were founded. The union-backed *Daily Citizen* lasted only three years; the more radical *Daily Herald*, edited by the Christian socialist George Lansbury, would prove far more durable, although it only survived the First World War by becoming a weekly. Beers covers these early experiments briskly, placing them alongside attempts to articulate the Labour brand through election posters (Gerald Spencer Pryse's 'Forward! The Day is Breaking!' from 1910 being the most notable pre-war effort). The main focus of the study, however, is on the two decades from 1918. The most distinctive feature of these early sections is the author's argument that the virulent anti-socialism of the mid-1920s had not fully taken root in the conservative press in the aftermath of the war. Labour's creation of a Press and Publicity department in 1917, and a News Service the following year, quickly paid dividends. Only the *Daily Express* and the Lloyd-George supporting *Daily Chronicle* were 'unequivocally hostile' to Labour during the 1918 election (p. 41); Lord Northcliffe's *Daily Mail*, while continuing to expound its usual conservative position, actually donated space to Labour for a daily column in the eight days before polling day. The party used this platform to make a series of stratified appeals designed to reach a broad national audience – foreshadowing the strategy that would be pursued more forcefully in the 1930s and beyond. Nor was the press coverage of the unions, trying to maintain the position of their members amid demobilization and economic dislocation, as uniformly negative as some historians have suggested. In a detailed study of the 1919 rail strike, Beers demonstrates that several papers became more sympathetic to the National Union of Railwaymen as the strike went on: 'Through skilful publicizing of their case', she concludes, 'the railwaymen managed to win a relatively fair hearing from the

press' (p. 49). If the Labour movement generated little enthusiasm outside the pages of the *Daily Herald*, neither did it face unwavering opposition and rejection. The media's 'anti-Labour turn' during the 1920s was, according to this account, a historically contingent response to the party's growing political prominence and the apparent radicalisation of its policies rather than a simple reflection of an entrenched and unchanging hostility to the left. During the 1920s, the rhetoric of the popular press, and especially the *Daily Mail*, became increasingly inflammatory. Labour threatens 'every man's house and furniture, and every woman's clothes and jewellery', declared the *Mail* in November 1922, '... If the Labour Bolsheviks once get control we shall all be irrevocably dragged along the Russian Road to Ruin' (p. 52). The Zinoviev scandal of 1924 was just one episode in a wide-ranging journalistic campaign to present the party as a front for sinister anti-social and anti-British interests. During this period, moreover, those figures within the Labour party who questioned the attempts to 'permeate' the capitalist press or to work with the BBC became increasingly influential within the party. The refusal to engage with the media was most dramatically, and disastrously, demonstrated during the General Strike. By calling out the printers in the first wave of strikers, the TUC ensured that newspapers would not be able to publish as normal, and this made it difficult for the unions to communicate their justification of the strike to the public. The government was prepared for this eventuality and launched its own news sheet, the *British Gazette*, as a channel of information to the public; the unions' news sheet, the *British Worker*, did not appear until the second day of the strike. The BBC, as we have seen, was always likely to be sympathetic to the government's position, but by failing to make any serious attempt to get any messages broadcast, the TUC missed another opportunity to attract some public support. The unions, in short, 'were slow to recognize the importance of publicity and public opinion to the course of the conflict' (p. 106), and this 'helped to undermine any hopes for a more advantageous outcome to the dispute' (p. 100). The General Strike provides the key turning-point in Beers' narrative. After the failure of the strike, several influential Labour figures became convinced of the need to use the media to reach out beyond the party's core support of male industrial male workers. The second half of the book details the increasingly committed and sophisticated efforts to work with the mass media and 'sell' the party. In the late 1920s the Labour Party and TUC press offices both stepped up their efforts to improve Labour and industrial coverage in the popular press. There was also an acceptance that the hostility to the BBC should not stop Labour politicians seeking to use broadcasting as a platform to reach potential voters. Beers suggests that this shift in approach was starting to have an impact by the end of the decade and may have contributed to Labour's impressive showing in the 1929 general election (a significant argument given historians' difficulties in satisfactorily explaining this result). Perhaps the clearest sign of the party's changed media policy, however, was the sale of 51 per cent of the shares in the *Daily Herald* to the commercial publisher Odhams Press, and the subsequent relaunch of the paper in March 1930. The new *Herald* maintained its commitment to Labour politics while imitating the populist techniques of rivals such as the *Express* and the *Mail*; the relaunch was tremendously successful, and in 1933 the paper became the first daily in Britain to reach the coveted circulation of two million. Often unfairly dismissed as preaching to the converted, Beers makes a strong case that the *Herald* was an important means of disseminating the Labour message to a broad and diverse audience of readers throughout the 1930s. At the same time the party exhibited a new determination to exploit broadcasting opportunities, with figures such as Herbert Morrison and Stafford Cripps demonstrating a particular facility with the microphone. There was also an innovative use of posters and pamphlets: Beers highlights a 16-page illustrated party brochure, *Your Britain* (from which the book takes its title) as having a significant impact on voters in the municipal elections of 1937. In combination, these initiatives amounted to a coherent and dynamic media strategy which enabled the party to recover its support after the electoral disaster of 1931, and provided a platform for victory in 1945.

This is a scrupulously researched and carefully argued book which offers an important new perspective on the political culture of the period. Some will inevitably view with scepticism Beers' bolder claims about the impact of Labour's media and propaganda activities – it is, of course, very difficult to uncover precise evidence about the direct effects on voters of newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, posters and pamphlets – but, for this reader at least, the thrust of the argument is highly plausible. In places the narrative is perhaps a little too neat and tidy, with a well-defined 'anti-Labour turn' and subsequent 'rapprochement' in the 1920s; more room could have been given to critical voices within the movement in the 1930s and 1940s, such as those whose dissatisfaction with the state of the newspaper market led to the establishment of the Royal Commission on the Press in 1947. The reinvention and journey leftwards of the *Daily Mirror* from the mid-1930s also deserves more attention, for there is a strong case that it played a significant role in helping to attract young, non-unionized voters to the party. Overall, though, this is an impressive work of scholarship that will force historians to think afresh about Labour's relationship with the media, and to reconsider conventional interpretations of the party's dramatic rise to power.