

Initial Application for the Editorship of the NEW STATESMAN

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"The New Statesman will remain uncompromisingly a magazine of the whole Left". This statement by the Chairman of the Board is a curt definition of principle and objective. But it poses three issues:

- the notion of "the whole Left"
- whether the paper should be for or from the Left
- the assumption that a general weekly is viable.

a) The notion of "the whole Left"

Is there such a thing as "the whole Left"? Perhaps there was a time after 1945 when the Left was like a loaf of wholewheat bread - a continuous body of opinion. On the right it might have been pro-American, pro-Gaitskell and professional; on the left, pro-Soviet, pro-Bevan and Procrustean. Nonetheless, all belonged to the same single loaf, united by moral concern for the underprivileged, confidence in the British state (something rooted in wartime experience), and an unquestioning belief in progress. The New Statesman grew to its national and international stature as the progressive, English-language weekly during this period.

Today there is no longer such a single body of left opinion, here or abroad. I may have oversimplified the past but it would be hard to exaggerate the confusions of the present. Left-wing and radical views now cut at quite variant angles across the population. A contemporary socialist weekly has to be feminist, for example, to succeed. Feminism is not identical with socialism. Parts of the Labour movement remain obdurately hostile, while there is some real sympathy for feminist aims amongst those who admire capitalism. Similarly, progressive views on questions of race or gay rights often fail to coincide with 'principled' positions on public ownership. "Feasible socialism" endorses the efficiency of the market as a mechanism for expansion. The ecologists deny the possibility of continuous growth. It is difficult to find a word for what is happening. It is not a matter of fragmentation, which presumes that a single body is breaking up, nor is it a simple expansion, which again presumes one thing becoming mechanically or organically larger. Rather, there is a growing diversity of radical approaches and these may conflict as much as overlap.

Yet the New Statesman must provide a common context, of excitement and humour, that makes the paper the radical voice of Britain's anti-Thatcher majority - if the phrase "a magazine of the whole Left" means anything, it means this. A key editorial

challenge, then, will be to ensure that different sorts of socialism and radicalism are expressed in its columns without the paper becoming incoherent.

b) For or From the Left?

Marxism Today and New Socialist have demonstrated a new range and quality in socialist debate. While taking advantage of the contributions the two monthlies have made, the NS should not model itself upon them. They are tied journals of political parties - specialist papers that focus on the Left itself. They are the house organs of its realignment. The New Statesman should be less interested in telling the Left how to rethink and more concerned with telling the country why it should look to the Left. This means being less interested in moving right than are Marxism Today and New Socialist, while not fearing to include voices from the right among the contributors to the NS.

Take the secretive nature of the British state, which is not so much unconstitutional as pre-constitutional. Here the New Statesman has made a notable contribution since the end of the 1970s. It was the first paper to reveal the existence of secret cabinet committees and the way they are organized and coded. It has exposed telephone tapping and the extent of US bases. It has published 'Questions of Procedure for Ministers'. It has not just called for civil liberties, with its unique commitment to investigative reports the New Statesman has actually advanced civil liberties in Britain and constrained the activities of those who threaten them. This is a record to be proud of, and we should celebrate the fact that only a committed Left-wing weekly has had the courage of such convictions.

But we should not be misled into thinking that such convictions are exclusively socialist. On the contrary, the Chairman of the Campaign for Freedom of Information is a Liberal. Legislation for a Bill of Rights has been proposed by Lord Scarman. The Prime Minister's behaviour is driving even Tory grandees towards the realization that the political order which once served them so well is seriously flawed. So by suggesting that the NS should "include voices from the right", I do not mean allowing its pages to be penetrated by Roger Scruton and Ferdinand Mount, as New Socialist and Marxism Today have been, for the purpose of helping us to rethink. This kind of charity we can do without. No, I mean that on issues to which we decide to give radical priority, we can make cause with people who are otherwise against us.

Without this element of surprise, even shock, the NS will not be able to secure its place in the politics and culture of Britain. The magazine's imaginative arena must be the whole country - all the populations of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This will make it more fun to write and edit and, one hopes, to read. The New Statesman has to be written from and not for the Left.

c) Is a general weekly magazine viable?

To demand a "magazine of the whole Left" suggests that it should be a general paper. Yet the sales of the NS have fallen steadily since the mid-sixties. After 20 years of decline, is it possible to turn the paper around? Is the time of the general weekly over?

If I am short-listed I will discuss the question of marketing in a further submission. But the general question has immediate editorial importance and can perhaps be formulated more precisely. There are two initial explanations for the plight of the NS: 1) that the paper has changed and lost readers thereby, which implies that if it returns to its previous excellence it will regain the now lost demand; 2) that the paper is unchanged but that demand has declined, which implies that in order to increase sales the paper needs to attract a quite new set of readers.

Both explanations would be too simple, but there is some truth in each. The New Statesman has changed and this has lost it readers. The great collapse under Richard Crossman was in part a consequence of the way he mucked about with the paper. Bruce Page lost older readers through changes symbolized by the removal of Arthur Marshall, so that although he gained a significant number of new, young readers there was no cumulative increase in sales. However, the New Statesman remains what it was more than it has changed. The innovations were a response to an underlying decline and did not transform the paper's fundamental character. Today, we know the verdict of the readership upon this.

Why are so few who are educated, employed and committed to the Left, not reading the NS? The new generation, the City Limits readers of London, have not taken to it, while an even larger number of potential readers have stopped buying the paper, or get it very irregularly indeed. The magazine has ceased to be "necessary reading" within the Left. Because of this, those on the Right or in the Centre have also ceased to follow the NS.

The reason for this is that British politics and culture have changed more than the New Statesman. It follows that the paper cannot return to its past glory, certainly not in the same way. For the New Statesman was in its heyday a part of the consensus. It was the left-wing voice of the Palace of Westminster, it was an organ of 'high' politics and culture. It still remains a ghost of itself in this respect. Although it has struggled to break free from the old regime, the NS has so far failed to find a new location for itself. One that retains its adversarial role along with its commitment to good writing and authoritative coverage, but also reflects the new realities. If the NS can reassert its traditional mix - of hostility to capitalism, of intense interest in ideas, of sizzling argument about culture, of the kind of support for Labour that irritates its Front Bench - with a new voice and style, then it will find a general readership.

A National Institution

Why should the New Statesman be the home of this readership? What does the magazine have to offer apart from overheads, losses, decline, demoralization...?

The New Statesman's greatest asset is directly related to its most awful liability: it remains a national institution. We live in a society riven by a particularly chronic crisis of identity. Once the freest country in Europe, Britain is now perhaps the least democratic of the EEC twelve; once the richest country in Europe, now one of the poorer; once the most proud of islands, now the only - and slavish - supporter of Reagan's folly. The core political aspect of this 'decline' is the impasse of Britain's once great institutions, including the New Statesman. The magazine is now as unrepresentative of "the whole Left" as the Houses of Parliament are unrepresentative of the country at large.

This may sound harsh. But the NS should obviously be, to take just one case in point, a weekly read by CND, an organization that currently has a paid up membership of more than 90,000.

Until now, it could be argued, the conditions have not existed for a new style New Statesman. Both the non-conformist tradition of Kingsley Martin, and the cooler, Wilsonite modernism of John Freeman, lost their bite in the mid-sixties. Thereafter, hostility to Westminster politics led to wholesale rejection of Parliament (the hard left), disinterest and ignorance of it (the feminist left), assaults against it (Scargillism). Now a new generation formed outside parliamentary politics may become MPs (eg Blunkett, Hain, Livingstone, Morrell and Ruddock). There is the promise of socialists in the Commons who remain in touch with contemporary attitudes in a way that Wilson and Callaghan did not. The gulf may be bridged between parliamentary politics and socialist arguments and campaigns. It follows that there is an opening for a more coherent and democratic socialist culture - one that needs and is able to sustain a weekly based on combative journalism and good writers.

Precisely because the Statesman has a history and even an international reputation, it is the natural home for such a venture. If we want to debate the nature of terrorism; or argue, say, about how to replace the House of Lords, or the prospects for Britain as a monarchy; or propose a plan for full employment in Europe (given this can no longer be projected on a national basis); or outline what a feminist government might actually look like; or expose the corruption in the City; or sum up British Film Year; or insist upon the retention of public broadcasting...if we want such articles written from a socialist perspective but in language that attracts (even if it angers) anyone interested in these questions, then we need a platform that is at once both our own and national.

This is what the New Statesman offers.

Is it possible?

Can we turn round a national institution so that it represents the future rather than the past? Can we do to the NS what the Labour councillors and their recruits did to the GLC, and transform what is perceived as in the main dull and irrelevant into something that is enjoyable and suprising, hence important?

Among the themes to which the magazine should give priority are Education its values and privileges, now a strategic battleground; Secrecy and nuclear power, or the political aspect of the ecological argument; Europe, the NS needs a contemporary European feel and design; 'Low politics', or the way people create answers locally that may have national significance.

What matters is the paper's coverage of such issues (which may effect the back as well as the front half) and the encouragement it gives, rather than any editorial line. Such priorities need to be thrashed out in rolling editorial discussions, with invited outsiders.

More important, a new overall approach is needed for both the politics and culture of the magazine, so that the former stops seeming Fabian and latter shakes off the legacy of Bloomsbury.

Politically, while it is essential for the New Statesman to publish conflicting arguments, editorial diversity will only be interesting when the paper has its own distinctive approach. This should be to support a socialism that enables rather than directs. The talent, enthusiasm and popularity focused by County Hall has helped to point the way here.

Politics may come first but the paper's cultural coverage is in many ways more important. A transformation of the back half is essential not only to attract new readers but also to give verve, credibility and substance to the paper's role.

Here, too, there is an example and a constituency to draw upon. Channel 4 has successfully demonstrated the vitality and range in our culture. It has shown that it is possible to support new work in a fashion that is not centrist or patronizing, its movies are now part of the cutting edge of British cultural life.

Neither capitalist nor elitist, the GLC and C4 have shown how to attract the young (without being 'for' the young, a notion that is itself paternalist) and the middle-aged alike. A modern, radical approach can command interest, generate ideas, encourage effort, give hope and, not least, will provoke the right enemies. What better inspiration could there be, for a new editor of the New Statesman?