

Anthony Barnett

APPLICATION FOR THE EDITORSHIP OF THE NEW STATESMAN

1/ The New Statesman is confronted by a crisis of survival. In almost all respects the paper is close to bankruptcy. The first task of the new editor will be to save it.

In my initial application I argued why the NS was worth saving and editing. Now I will spell out some of the problems and possible solutions.

But first, there should be little doubt as to the urgency of the situation. For it seems that News on Sunday will be successfully capitalized for a Spring launch. This venture, unlike Today, will have something original to say - and it will be weekly. Among those who buy the NS because they want "alternative news" from the left there may be quite a few who will abandon the New Statesman for News on Sunday, especially if the NS remains editorially incoherent. And when the NS loses a thousand readers it means a drop in revenue of approximately £20,000 pa.

In the last financial year the magazine made a trading loss of £70,000. The current rate of loss is £40,000, and the "Revenue Growth" spread sheet projects a profit of £6,000 but without libel insurance. The disappearance of a further 3-4,000 readers could, therefore, push losses over £100,000 a year.

Such a sharp drop in income might precipitate a rapid collapse. For the New Statesman has a much weaker advertising base than, say, New Society, and would be simply unviable at sales of 20-23,000. But sales of this order are a real prospect not only because the trends point this way, but because even if the paper is changed for the better it is about to lose its monopoly on the Left.

2/ In order to staunch the decline, stabilize revenues, balance the accounts and start growth the New Statesman needs a sense of direction. This phrase - that the paper "lacks direction" - is often used and sums up the widespread dissatisfaction with it. Instead of the feeling of retrenchment that pervades the pages of the NS, readers need - and want - something outgoing and exciting.

But to say that the paper needs "a sense of direction" specifies only the problem, not the solution.

Any discussion of how to turn the paper around must start here. Because until the NS does have a tangible sense of its direction - of its role and purpose - it cannot be successfully sold.

This is NOT to say that content and editorial matter decide everything and that sales, advertising and promotion will follow in their own good time. This traditional, literary approach will prove fatal.

Rather, the marketing and organization of the New Statesman must be integrated into the new conception of the paper.

3/ The NS has sought to change itself before. Nearly ten years ago James Fenton applied for the editorship. He said that the paper's decline was irreversible and that what was important was that it should go down decently. Against him Bruce Page argued, backed up by a massive supply of charts and market research, for an aggressive new style paper. Bruce Page did some tremendously bold and exciting things, and I have a personal loyalty to him. But he had illusions of grandeur about what the paper could take. Now the New Statesman is in far more straightened circumstances. In order to rescue it, it is essential to think small.

4/ Just how small can be seen from the sales figures. It is well known that these have gone down from 91,000 in 1966 to 26,000 today. It is helpful to see this decline in context.

First, historically. In 1936, the NS sold a weekly average of 24,000, and sales rose to 29,000 by 1938. (All figures are approximate, and are taken from Edward Hyams' history of the paper's first fifty years.)

We are now below the level of 1938.

By 1942 sales reached nearly 42,000 and were close on 70,000 by 1945. In some weeks of 1947 they touched 90,000 and averaged 84,000. They fell to 74,000 in 1951 (a significant year in other respects) when the price rose from 6d to 9d, and to 72,000 in 1955, then rose over the rest of the decade.

So while sales may have peaked in 1966 it is not the case that the sales graph of the NS is like a mountain rising and then falling. On the contrary, for twenty years sales held to a high plateau of between 70,000 and 90,000 - two decades, I will suggest below, when the NS stood for something.

Second, comparatively. The odd thing about the fall of the NS is that it began just when its natural constituency - the young, radical and higher-educated population - began to expand massively in the wake of the Robbin's inspired investment in new universities and in polytechnics. The real import of the decline in the NS's sales is even greater than the absolute drop.

In France, for example, the NS's sister paper Nouvel Observateur caught the modern wave of the newly educated. It now sells around 400,000 a week.

Above all the Guardian made ground in sales to this new market. In 1955 sales of the NS were 46% of the Guardian's. In 1966 they were still 33%. By 1970 they were below 25% and they are now just 5%. Thus, while absolute sales are a third of what they were in the fifties, relative to the Guardian they are a ninth of what they were.

5/ Two things follow: first the NS cannot "return" to its old place, even sales of 80-90,000 would mean far less politically and culturally than they did in the 1950s and 1960s.

On the other hand, sales of 40,000 would today be relatively 'specialist' in scale. And quite modest. Not just compared to Private Eye (250,000 plus) but even New Internationalist (31,000 subscription sales a month in the UK alone).

I am convinced that an increase in sales to 40,000 is possible.

But in terms of the NS's secular decline such a reversal would be spectacular. It cannot be denied that there is an major element of risk in such a venture. To underline this, should I be offered the post I would want to tie my editorship to the achievement within two full years of a weekly average of at least 40,000 sales.

For there can be no long term editorial success without an increase in sales. Rising sales will feed directly into the quality and attractiveness of editorial material.

The immediate aim, however, should be an increase in sales of 3-4,000 to bring the average weekly total back over 30,000 by the Spring of 1987.

## 6/ EDITORIAL DIRECTION

The NS should not have an editorial 'line', as if it was Socialist Worker. That said, it needs a number of defining attitudes and priorities, which will differentiate it within the political and cultural marketplace.

For the duration of its 20 years of success from 1945-65, the NS stood in particular for colonial freedom - this was both a domestic and an international question, it was also one that in part defined the paper's relationship to the nation.

Today the equivalent theme is the struggle for a democratic constitution. I enclose as an appendix the text the NS published of my TV essay 'It's time to take the Great out of Britain', as it expresses one part of this general approach. Of course, the NS has 'naturally' made this sort of question its own, but never in a systematic, sustained and uninhibited fashion.

The democratic agenda stretches from support for the European Court of Human Rights, through reform of the judiciary, the democratization of the second chamber, the need for a written constitution, an Act of Rights, equality for women, freedom of information, and regional devolution....the list is less important than the conscious combination of such questions to make the New Statesman the country's tribune for political democracy.

7/ There should be two subsidiary themes through to the next general election:

While ensuring the paper's independence the NS should seek to prepare socialists for power, encouraging both speculative and practical proposals for legislation and policy.

The paper should expose, analyse and denounce the swag years of Thatcherism, in the City especially. This is one area where the paper should build on its investigative reputation. Good, factual yet angry writing is needed here, and there is a great thirst for it amongst readers.

8/ Sales of 40,000 may be relatively specialist, but they will only be achieved if the readership is conceived as a broad alliance of different sorts of people with compatible but not identical interests.

- Traditional Labour Party constituency activists
- New green and peace movement activists
- Celtic independence activists
- Liberal, constitutional reformers
- Feminists who could be any or none of the above
- Local government workers
- Black intellectuals
- Cultural workers in publishing and the media

That's just a start. The point is that they should read the paper for more than their own particular, special reasons. Each grouping needs pegs which hook their interest, but they will be kept as readers, and more important will bring in new readers, only if the New Statesman appeals to them "as a good read".

This means that the 'back half', the coverage of books, ideas, and especially films and television, will be crucial to the successful expansion of the paper's readership. In particular, the New Statesman should challenge the separation of culture from politics, the personal from the intellectual, ideas from experience.

- To sum up the way I wish to change the New Statesman:
- First, it should return to its traditional role, pioneered by Kingsley Martin, as an argumentative and authoritative weekly of the Left. It should thus distinguish itself from Fleet Street, rather than seeking to compensate the public for the failings of the national press.
  - Second, the NS should return to this role in a new fashion, with

a style that is positively anti-elitist.

9/ The craft of editing means shaping policy into a single, weekly product that has a coherent 'feel'.

The paper's potential readers want to take pride in being on Left. This means that they want quality. The NS has to work hard editorially to make its writing clear, purposive and attractive. Will it then command a market? This is the age of life-styles and a well written, neatly designed, NS should gain accordingly.

What is quality in a magazine? Graphic simplicity, a unified design, regular features that draw the reader's subjective identification, clever surprises that make for excitement and novelty...a paper's "layout" orchestrates the alliance of readers and interests, week by week. This is something I would like to discuss in more detail if I go through to the final shortlist.

#### 10/ A BUSINESS PLAN

Alongside an editorial plan and a redesign, the paper needs a business plan within which costs and revenues can be measured month by month. I am very relieved to see that the basis for such a plan exists already, in the cash flow prepared by Andrew Ryan. It also provides a definition of the paper's overheads. I am willing to work within its framework.

There are a number of comments and questions which can only be answered on the basis of more detailed information. The plan for growth allows £50,000 for a 4-colour cover against £67,000 for text paper. What would be the cost of dropping the present cover paper but having higher quality paper throughout? Could one increase the number of pages thereby while remaining within a £117,000?

#### 11/ PROMOTION

Very little money has been budgeted for promotion. Nonetheless, there are lots of things the NS can do to project itself and build its readership.

Initially, remember, the aim is an increase of just 3-4,000.

a) The NS must do much more to convert its occasional readers into regular readers. In editorial terms the introduction of good weekly columnists will be essential to such a conversion. In terms of promotion the NS should do much more to convert its own readers into subscribers. Special offers, insert cards (and continuous renewals as pioneered by Which ), offer considerable expansion of the present subscription base. Granta, for example, now has 12,000 UK subscribers. It has found that the card it inserts in the magazine itself the most effective of its different appeals for

subscriptions. On present figures, and allowing for administrative, mailing and postage costs, subscription sales are worth 18 per cent more than trade sales.

b) At this stage 'word of mouth' is perhaps both the most effective and the cheapest way to increase sales. Here again, editorial decisions come first - they will define whether what the paper says - and who says it in its columns - will be talked about. Word of mouth can be encouraged. Every issue of the paper should have one or two well-known personalities writing in it. They, and the lesser known contributors, should be asked to write a brief note of encouragement to their friends and we should ask them for a dozen addresses. A photocopy of the letter, with a letter from the NS saying that the magazine is changing at last, and a special subscription offer should then accompany a free copy of the issue with the contributor's article.

c) A great deal of private, semi-private and public speaking will be needed, to project the New Statesman as a weekly that belongs to and is part of the different scenes on the Left. It will be essential to go and explain what the paper is doing and to ask what others think it should be doing, to groups and organizations across the political spectrum, from the Fabians and Amnesty to CND and Constituency Parties, from university and polytechnic seminars to trade union research officers and local government officials. This means inviting people to lunch or have drinks at the paper, to go and talk to them on a formal or informal basis, working through sector by sector: from the theatre and publishing, to the Haldane Society, the House of Commons and the Edinburgh Festival. Of course it may also be possible to talk about the paper in the media, on local radio especially. But it will be essential to fight for New Statesman on the ground - on the streets of the Left rather than from the 'heights' of the media - and the word will go out that the paper has ended its long period of hurt withdrawal (to borrow a phrase from Neal Ascherson).

d) A small amount of unashamed elitist targeting - backed up by personal contact - will be essential to the re-establishment of the New Statesman's position. Marxism Today has been very shrewd in the way it has sent free subscriptions to people who work in the media. This has helped generate editorial copy and influence. The NS must stop thinking of itself as too important for such measures, as if it were still necessary reading. All editorial staff must be encouraged to send out copies, cultivate contacts, and generally seek to persuade people to read and subscribe to the paper.

e) It has been shown that the way to advertise a general interest paper is to project to those who might buy it the idea that people like them already buy it. The Guardian ran a very successful (and costly) series of television ads which achieved this by showing ordinary people, with occasional celebrities, as Guardian readers. There is one inexpensive way the NS could attempt something similar for the 15,000 target increase of the next couple of years. This is through exchange ads, especially ones in specialist journals. There are a large number of specialist radical journals, such as

Race and Class, History Workshop, END Journal, Chartist, Feminist Review, Radical Philosophy, and so on. Their readers have a definite and strong identification with such specialist journals and if, regularly, the NS is projected as "their weekly" in the pages of such journals, this identification can be expanded to our advantage. Such advertising should be paid for on an exchange basis in the NS's own columns. This will have the additional advantage of increasing the authority and interest of the small-ads pages, and will allow the NS to assume its place as the weekly marketplace for the announcement of left-wing ideas, articles and arguments.

## 12/ TARGET READERSHIPS

The most stunningly successful of recent publications, and one whose editor regards himself as on the Left, is Granta. Its quarterly world sales are now nearly 45,000. Although its promotion campaign is vigorous it does not target readers on a sector basis or adjust copy to cater for specific tastes. Its policy is to publish the good writing it finds attractive and wants to publish.

The lesson of Granta's success is that there is a large general readership to be won. At this stage I would not place too much hope on trying to win readers on a sector basis. This is an important aspect of marketing, but in my view it only begins to come into its own when sales are approaching 40,000 and when, in particular, there is sufficient money to invest in more pages that can be geared to the interests of those you wish to attract.

That said, and looking at last year's Comedia analysis of the readership survey, there are at least four sectors where the NS should be very alert to its role, and where it should be seeking to promote itself actively.

a) There is a relatively dearth of women who buy the paper. In my view feminists are never going to buy anything out of political solidarity that has "man" in its name. But it is essential to publish and to flag on the cover women contributors. The recent article by Marina Warner on Israel was an example of precisely the sort of piece that would entice some women into buying the paper - out of interest in a known feminist addressing an important political subject. Every issue of the NS should have at least one article by a woman that is not on a 'woman's subject'.

b) One-third of the paper's current readership is employed in the education sector, easily the largest single group. This is also an area that has now moved into the stage-centre politically. It should be possible to build on this existing base. It will not be done by generating specialist copy "in support of the teachers" - the most predictable and the most boring approach. It is not clear what proportion of those "in education" are in higher education or in the schools. In both areas the NS should seek to encourage coverage not from the profession but from socialist recipients:

left-wing children, parents, students, employers. There are over 400,000 full-time teachers in England and Wales (of whom the largest number are in the 30-35 group - 75,000), and there are 216,000 members of the NUT. The way the teachers' strike has been conducted is not above left-wing criticism, and it is an angry argument about this, or a debate about teacher/parent relations, that will stir teachers as well as parents concerned about education into reading the NS. Once such an editorial priority has been decided, then it is important to try and generate editorial coverage in the TES, THES, and the journals of the teachers' associations and unions, copy that says the NS is where the Left is defining its public attitudes and arguments.

c) Nine per cent of the paper's readers are in local government. There is a considerable opportunity to build on this readership in terms of issues of general interest to most readers that have special significance for those employed by local authorities. A concerted effort should also pay off here in terms of advertising, including job advertising.

d) Nine per cent of the the readership are employed in media (including printing). This is a very promising area for expansion, in particular in terms of television. People who work in television should read the NS for its discussion of the future of their industry. Comedia found that NS readers didn't think of themselves as watching much television but actually they watch it a great deal. Must it be typical of the 'conscious vanguard' that it should so deceive itself? At any rate, coverage of TV, including previewing forthcoming television, will be very important as a peg to hook readers. Until now the NS's coverage of TV has been lamentable.

### 13/ ADVERTISING REVENUE

It will be important to increase both the amount and range of advertising carried in the NS and the revenues it generates for the magazine. But it is clear that the priority must be improvement in editorial influence and in sales. Advertisers are all too aware of the diminished status of the paper. The first and crucial support that the staff selling space need is the knowledge that the readership is growing.

As important as the quantity of such growth is its quality. In publishing, it is known that NS readers are quite loyal and respond to advertising, but the literary reputation of the magazine is so low there is a reluctance to invest in it. A sharp improvement is possible here. It includes commissioning authors of considerable reputation and asking them to help generate advertising support from their publishers. (This is something authors quite like to do, as they enjoy pressing their publishers to spend money!)

Film and pop music are two valuable sources of advertising revenue as these industries tend to book large space ads if they



place them at all. Such advertising will not be placed in the NS because of its mass appeal. But if films are written about in a refreshing new fashion, and if the NS can cover 'popular culture' in a way that those who play music appreciate, then quite lucrative prestige advertising could be forthcoming. Morrissey used to read the New Statesman. I doubt if he does now, but if he did - and he should - then he could for example ensure that The Smiths' new album is advertised in it.

The Comedia report touched on the question of consumer advertising. 64 per cent of New Statesman readers own their own home, a third eat out at least once a week, they are above average owners of home computers. The readership actively participates in the consumer society and the pages of the NS should reflect this enjoyment. Angela Carter has suggested that we should have a cookery column and I think that if this is interpreted in a generous sense, to include eating out, wines, hot-dogs, mixers and the art of chopping as well as curries and how to make kebabs, and if the column is used to carry star names as well as regular ones, then it could be quite successful. If it is evident from its pages that New Statesman readers eat well, this will provide advertising staff with a peg to seek adverts from companies making consumer durables.

#### 14/ NEW TECHNOLOGY

There is one area where costs may be saved both directly and indirectly in terms of editorial work. The total production costs of £246,000 break down as follows (in £ '000s):

paper	64
printing	60
typesetting	75
cover	47

The largest single item is typesetting. The New Statesman could well be set on its own machine. A Varitype 6400 Comp/Edit digital typesetter with A4 size previewer costs £25,000. According to the quotation I have been sent, it would cost another £5,300 for the setting processor and a communications board (the latter would allow setting to be pulled in from Telecom Gold). On-site maintenance would be £1,200 for the first year and £3,000 pa thereafter. With fonts at £150, total capital costs for the setting machine can be estimated at £35,000.

The programme has already been written that allows Ataris to be used as dumb terminals for the 6400 (and Osbornes could be so used as well). In other words, inexpensive machines - the Atari 1040, with an excellent screen and a megabyte of RAM costs £800 - can send their files direct to the Varityper. The entire editorial staff could be networked for semi-direct input for £15,000.

I have talked to an independent third party who has this

system but I have not yet used one myself, and would not recommend it without further research. But these initial figures are remarkable. If one allows for an operator who will also do setting and £10,000 for additional photographic equipment, the introduction and use of in-house setting could be paid for with the cost of one year's typesetting. Thereafter, direct savings could run at £50,000 pa. In addition there would be important indirect savings, on proofing and in design.

It is these latter savings in which the paper should be most interested. In itself new technology will provide no answer to the main problem facing the NS, but it can allow editorial skills to be concentrated on improving the editorial product as it frees staff from drudgery.

#### 15/ CAN I DO IT?

The task that faces the new editor of the New Statesman is, as they say, "a challenge". In the first place it offers the opportunity of setting a new political and cultural agenda - one that draws on the immense amount of talent and ideas around on the British Left.

But it cannot be over-emphasized that to turn round a small weekly paper involves combining editorial and business decisions. Editorial ideas need to be conceived in tandem with means for promotion and marketing of the magazine.

I feel I am relatively well prepared for this combination of tasks. On the New Statesman I am known for my writing, and the energy which I am willing to dedicate to my views. But more of my life on the Left has been spent looking at figures and discussing commercial matters, than political. I joined the board of New Left Review as its business manager (and transformed its income through the introduction of US multi-user rates). I was the entrepreneur behind 7 Days, raising its capital and organizing its launch, and though it folded it did not fail to teach me quite a few lessons about commercial enterprises on the Left.

In 1974 my colleagues on New Left Review asked me to take over the commercial management of New Left Books, which was threatened with bankruptcy. I drew up the company's first cash flow sheets, oversaw its distribution arrangements and ensured that it turned the corner financially. I then went to the United States where I ended the traditional subservient relationship with the large US houses and later negotiated the 'Humanities deal' on highly profitable terms for NLB, which culminated in the transfer of the company's US distribution to Schocken.

For nearly ten years I was also the director most actively responsible for personnel and I gained considerable experience in the problems of staff management in small companies on the Left.

Today Verso (formally New Left Books - I pressed for the change of name) has a turnover of around £500,000. It is smaller,

obviously, than the New Statesman, but - if I may be allowed some knocking copy - it is much closer to the demands of a small company in the million pound range than the experience of working in large Fleet Street organizations, where commercial policy, advertising staff and editorial matters are separated by the corporate division of labour.

#### 16/ SUMMARY

- The New Statesman faces a crisis of survival.
- It is a single product business, and its survival and future success depend upon the magazine being improved:
  - a) by a sense of direction, political and cultural
  - b) by a new design and layout
  - c) by good journalism, both serious and entertaining
- The immediate aim must be to increase sales to 30,000
- A two year plan should aim for an average of 40,000 a week
- I wish to tie my editorship to this target
- Inexpensive promotion is possible through hard work
- Advertising can be encouraged through editorial flair
- New technology can lighten the workload and save some money.

20 June 1986